

Analysis of Media Influence on Military Decision-Making

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Abstract: Information warfare challenges, including the "CNN Effect," are increasing in quantity and complexity as the internet saturates modern life. Media communications, reliable or not, are constantly injected into American life, affecting opinions, decision-making, and actions—which may result in terrifying and permanent consequences when the media influences military members and government leaders. This research focuses on the immersive learning environment—an engaging, simulation-based educational experience with realistic conflict scenarios where students apply lesson objectives through hands-on activities. Instructors conduct immersive learning in the US Air Force Academy's (USAFA) Multi-Domain Laboratory. Traditionally, students were taught military strategy in a classroom where they engaged in wargaming by rolling dice using a board game. Now, the Military & Strategic Studies (MSS) Department uses hands-on, real-time wargaming with unique hardware and software to teach future leaders how to apply classroom concepts using experiential learning. Wargames are critical for meeting the priorities of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—specifically, preparing leaders to conduct joint operations in all domains by integrating experiential learning. The guidance explains that "curricula should leverage live, virtual, constructive, and gaming methodologies with wargames... to develop deeper insight and ingenuity." The wargame with media provides external influences like news and information from various sources, which may influence students' decision-making process, resulting in "The CNN Effect." "The CNN Effect" is a short-hand way to explain how news reports drive government leaders' responses, including military decision-making. This project builds upon existing research uniquely because this study examines decision-making from multiple leaders based on the same simulated media in USAFA's immersive learning environment. This research uses mixed methods analysis to explore how students act based on the wargame media inputs and compare course outcome differences after receiving enhanced Information Operations education or when exposed to different quantities of broadcasts. The Information Warfare (news literacy) module enhances education on the media's influence on decision-making and trust for students. Students learned to identify and research information sources, analyze biases, opinion versus fact-based reporting, and compare news reports from various outlets.

Keywords: Media, Disinformation, Information Warfare, News literacy, Propaganda, Wargaming

1. Introduction

This paper covers information warfare and media influence research conducted with cadets and military members in a US Air Force Academy (USAFA) wargame. The project meets two primary goals relating to wargame media broadcast influences on decision-making. These goals are to analyze the effects of:

- Different quantities of simulated media broadcasts.
- Additional information warfare/news literacy lesson materials.

1.1 Goal 1: Investigate Effects of Varied Quantities of Fictional Media Broadcasts

This project investigates the effect of fictional media in the Military and Strategic Studies (MSS) immersive learning environment. There are realistic media injects in the immersive learning environment of USAFA's core course, "Airpower & Joint Operations Strategy," MSS 251. The MSS immersive learning environment is an engaging, simulation-based educational experience with a realistic conflict scenario where students apply lesson objectives through hands-on activities, including encounters with fictional media broadcasts related to the wargame. The wargame occurs in USAFA's Multi-Domain Laboratory (MDL). This immersive learning environment is critical for meeting the priorities of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who stressed the importance of developing practical warfighting skills for future wars, stating that leaders must be cognitively prepared to conduct joint operations in all domains, integrating experiential learning. Specifically, the guidance explained that "curricula should leverage live, virtual, constructive, and gaming methodologies with wargames and exercises... to develop deeper insight and ingenuity" (Milley, 2020). The desired deeper insight and ingenuity will develop by adding more realistic elements to the wargame. For one variable of this study, additional media broadcasts were added for a test group, revealing different wargame behaviors.

The wargame included four more news broadcasts for one section of students in the fall semester of 2022. The wargame typically contains four newsreels in standard MSS 251 sections, including three social media posts and two recruiting videos. These media injects create a backdrop for the wargame scenario and play on large video screens inside the MDL.

Existing research indicates that the media may compel policymakers to decide to take (or not take) military action during widely publicized humanitarian crises, violent conflicts, and other warfare events. (Doucet, 2018.)

In the unique environment of USAFA's wargame, participants make decisions similar to strategic actions from leaders as they choose to move military units, engage in kinetic or non-kinetic attacks, play defensively, work with state and non-state actors, and make other joint military decisions. This environment provides a unique opportunity to observe participants acting in a controlled setting, examining decision-making from multiple leaders (in this case, future military officers) with realistic, simulated media.

1.2 Goal 2: Investigate Impacts of Added Information Warfare/News Literacy Education

The second aspect of this project includes investigating the impact of a robust Information Operations module, enhancing education on information warfare's influence on decision-making and trust for students at USAFA in the spring semester of 2023. The lesson plan included instruction on media literacy and trust, current news and social media trends, and additional information warfare concepts. Media literacy helps people understand and judge information sources' credibility (GCF, 2021). Cadets learned to identify and research information sources, analyze biases, distinguish opinion versus fact-based reporting, and compare news reports from various outlets. Cadets also learned about echo chambers and polarization in the added module.

An echo chamber is an environment where people only encounter information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own. This can distort a person's perspective; they have difficulty considering opposing viewpoints and discussing complicated topics. Confirmation biases partly fuel these perspectives, which is the tendency to favor information that reinforces existing beliefs (GCF, 2021). The USAFA environment may create a small-scale echo chamber and polarize student beliefs (and subsequent decision-making). Partisan echo chambers or "homogenous clusters" may exist in USAFA because students are a unique population—cadets of similar ages living in close quarters for years. Cadets may cling to their beliefs and confirmation biases, polarizing their trust (more extreme trust or distrust) of sources with additional media exposure to media from the wargame adversaries. (Guess, 2020). The cadets view simulated media that may be propaganda or information from suspicious sources.

Additionally, cadets learned in the information operations module that some influence operations deliberately mislead adversaries and cause them to make decisions or take actions based on falsehoods. The definition of "influence" includes the power to change or affect someone or something, and the data are considered by the influenced when making decisions.

Furthermore, they learned that media is created with different production values; production value includes the technical elements of a production, such as lighting, décor, speaker skills, and audio/visual qualities that increase audience appeal. These topics fall under the umbrella of information operations.

2. Literature Review

Wargaming is defined as "Wargames are representations of conflict or competition in a synthetic environment, in which people make decisions and respond to the consequences of those decisions. The Course of Action wargaming is a conscious attempt to visualize the flow of the operation, given joint force strengths and dispositions, adversary capabilities and possible courses of action, the operations area, and other aspects..." (Munsch, 2020). Wargaming stimulates students' thoughts about military operations, ideas, insights, and more.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education and Talent Management stresses the importance of developing practical warfighting skills for future wars. Warfighter skills include cognitive preparation to conduct joint operations in all domains, incorporating experiential learning. Specifically, the guidance explains that "curricula should leverage live, virtual, constructive, and gaming methodologies with wargames and exercises... to develop deeper insight and ingenuity" (Milley, 2020).

Wargames are essential for the education and development of leaders and military personnel. Learning objectives can be accomplished in a hands-on, experiential learning environment where students apply classroom concepts in an engaging, real-time environment for deeper learning. Wargames are employed in professional military education and for higher learning in numerous subjects, particularly social sciences.

Leaders must transform their learning and teaching to meet future national security challenges in the strategic competition environment. Though challenges exist for assessment strategies for educational wargames, growing research explores design, growth, testing, and more (Kuehn, 2021). Department of Defense leadership prioritizes the service members' education and skill development. They stress that experiential learning, leveraging live, virtual wargaming, and exercises develop the insight and ingenuity needed for joint operations in multi-domain warfare (Milley, 2020).

Modern challenges include information warfare, where friends and foes consistently send messages, push their narratives, have biases, and appear in social media, television, newspapers, radio, and more. Sometimes, information operations are used as open-source intelligence and may affect leaders' decision-making, leading to different actions and effects. The internet has amplified the use of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. People base many decisions on the internet instead of professionals and experts, allowing open-source media to alter their opinions and influence choices by impacting decisions (Power, 2011).

Awareness of propaganda and trust levels of media sources are essential for students to understand. JP 3-61, Public Affairs (PA) stresses that public affairs reporters tell the truth. "PA personnel will release only accurate, fact-based information. The long-term success of PA activities depends on the integrity and credibility of officially released information. Deceiving the public undermines the perception of legitimacy and trust in the Armed Forces. Accurate, credible presentation of information leads to confidence..." (JP 3-61, p. 1-7.) Media trust is based on legitimate/authentic, *reliable*, credible, fact-based, and accurate news. Media perceptions become a person's reality and may lead to decisions and actions. Military deception information operations can deliberately mislead adversaries and cause them to make decisions or take actions based on falsehoods.

Some leaders respond to media pressures, while others resist external pressures. Specific agendas may be pushed through open-source media outlets to sway decision-makers on public policies and politics. (Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). "Fake news" and other propaganda found in social media posts and other media may affect decision-making regarding political elections. (Guess, 2020). Digital media literacy can help people understand the source of media and biases and judge the credibility of sources. (GCF, 2021).

The variable factor tested in the course is the "CNN Effect," described by Lyse Doucet's article. Lyse Doucet's article explains the CNN effect and its application in recent international conflicts. It also explains how the extent to which people are affected by the media varies based on environmental factors, individual decision-makers, and more (Doucet, 2018). Robinson's book, "The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy, and Intervention," explores the history of the CNN Effect and the relationships between media and decision-making related to armed military intervention. The book describes multiple conflicts in recent history and their media coverage, exploring how the CNN Effect may have influenced government leaders to act. Robinson's study also includes the 'policy-media interaction model' that contributes to understanding media-state relations and influence (Robinson, 2006).

3. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

3.1 Research Questions (RQ)

To what extent do fictional media injects influence student decision-making (The CNN Effect) in the immersive learning environment?

To what extent do additional wargame news transmissions affect cadet trust in fictional media sources?

How does the added Information Operations module affect student decision-making?

3.2 Hypotheses

There will be evidence that the CNN Effect exists in the MSS 251 immersive learning environment and affects students' wargame decision-making and actions. (RQ 1)

There will be evidence that additional fictional news media transmissions (included only in the fall 2022 semester) will polarize students' trust (more extreme trust or distrust) of wargame information sources. (RQ 2)

There will be evidence that the robust Information Operations module will improve students' self-reported understanding of information warfare compared to standard student groups who do not experience the module, leading to more informed trust or distrust of media communications. (RQ 3)

4. Materials and Procedures

All questionnaires and other data collected were anonymous, voluntary, and provided during standard MSS 251 class meeting times at the end of academic semesters. Questionnaire feedback typically took less than five minutes to complete. Instructors sent links for the Google Form questionnaire out over email, Microsoft Teams messaging, or provided during class time. Bonnie Rushing (PI (Principal Investigator)) was the only person accessing the questionnaire data, ensuring submissions contained no personally identifiable information and

were saved securely. This study permits only one questionnaire submission per student. The solicitation text for the questionnaire stated, "This is an anonymous and voluntary questionnaire based on your experiences during MSS 251. Your personal data will not be collected. The questionnaire responses are for academic research purposes only. This questionnaire takes less than five minutes to complete. Thank you." Two or more class sections completed all questionnaires to increase validity. All data collected from all sources were used (full sample size).

4.1 Spring 2023 Participants

In the spring 2023 semester, cadets responded to a questionnaire indicating how fictional media influenced wargame decisions. The PI compared feedback from two groups: a *Control Group* and an *Information Module Group*.

Control Group (n = 40): Standard MSS 251 course content. No additional Information Operations module was provided. *Information Module Group* (n = 35): These students received the additional Information Operations module and the original MSS 251 content.

The Information Operations module provided greater detail on media influence for the test group. This module was added to MSS 251's standard information operations lesson. The module was a 20–25-minute addition within already approved contact hours.

Module content included news literacy, current news sources, narrative comparison, details, and history of "The CNN Effect," confirmation bias, open-source intelligence in contemporary government operations, Public Affairs guide to media, fact-based, trustworthy communications, and examination of some wargame media materials.

The PI collected and assessed control and Information Operations Module group participant reflections. This questionnaire solicits student feedback regarding wargame decision-making, information warfare influences, and trust. It also asks students about what makes media sources trustworthy or not trustworthy.

Students received the questionnaire near the end of the 2023 spring semester. The questionnaire data collected was saved in different link versions for each group. The rest of the course and wargame remained the same.

4.2 Fall 2022 Teacher Archival Course Feedback

Archival course data from the 2022 fall semester contains teacher perceptions on wargame media injects. Teachers also described the impacts of open-source intelligence on decision-making for military leaders.

Data was collected at the end of the fall semester of 2022 from four teachers in MSS 251. In this archival questionnaire, teachers provided examples of both "good" and "poor" wargame decisions and to what extent they perceived media influence on students' decision-making during the wargame.

4.3 Spring and Fall 2022 Student Archival Data

Archival course data contains student feedback after adding more wargame media for one group. Test group (n = 22), control group (n = 64).

Intervention: Three additional media injects were added to the wargame for one section. In standard MSS 251 sections, fictional media exists with fewer transmissions. The transmissions included fictitious social media posts, military and insurgency recruiting videos, and newsreels. The added media corroborated the original materials.

Procedure: Both groups completed MSS 251 with the same course content in 2022, but only the test group received additional media transmissions. Cadets responded with perceptions on wargame media injects, reflecting on the extent to which they trusted different media sources' content and how media affected their decision-making.

5. Results

5.1 RQ 1. To What Extent do Fictional Media Inject Influence Student Decision-Making (The CNN Effect) in the Immersive Learning Environment?

Wargame media influenced student decision-making, according to reflections from both teachers and students. As trends developed for this *grounded theory* research, data revealed the extent to which fictional media influenced participant decision-making.

Quantitatively, ~87% of students (of 86 cadet responses) reported that media injects affected their decision-making during the wargame.

Instructor participants explained that students should consider all information available (including media) and identify disinformation when making decisions. Data indicated that all instructors (4 of 4) perceived media influence on cadet wargame decision-making. One teacher indicated that media completely affected the students' decision-making during the wargame.

Cadets believed foreign media revealed other actors' capabilities, motivations, and objectives. 35% of cadet responses indicated that foreign media broadcasts could aid decision-making by analyzing foreign government communications as a data point and open-source intelligence. For example, one participant stated that foreign media provided "...an opportunity to gain perspectives of the adversary and their motivation for fighting. It helped with understanding how the adversary would fight and gave an insight into their capabilities."

Cadets indicated they used American and allied media as intelligence sources 30% more often than foreign media. They stated that they relied on American and allied media as open-source intelligence or data points for their decision-making in the wargame, that they trusted the American news broadcasts, and that these media broadened their situational awareness and used its information to prioritize military operations. Cadets believed that the US and allied media contained biases, but gave participants insight into the local conditions, created concern for the Japanese people (simulated humanitarian crisis), motivated them to work hard to help their partners, and caused confirmation bias by positively reinforcing their thoughts and decision-making. A participant stated, "The American and allied media affected my decision-making, especially HNN, because I made decisions that responded to the events unfolding in the news channel and believed most of them to be true."

Students questioned the trustworthiness of foreign communications and narratives. 36% of student responses highlight that foreign media broadcasts in the wargame were false, propaganda, and disinformation. An example remark stated, "Most of the foreign media was taken as false and used to discern motive reasoning for propaganda."

Cadets noted that American and allied media can also be used as propaganda to steer the narrative in favor of democratic values. 5% of students believed that media is essential for the promotion of American values, support for military operations, building alliances, and combating adversarial information operations. Only 19% of participants commented that foreign media had no influence, and 16% stated that US/allied media "did not influence" them in any way.

This data also revealed that the foreign media influenced 6% of cadets to operate more aggressively in the wargame. These cadets indicated that the adversarial media caused them to make bolder decisions, trigger an emotional response to retaliate, and employ military offensives against the opponent. "...The foreign media influenced me to want to fight back more and make stronger/bolder decisions." The adversary's media broadcasts "strengthened my resolve against the [adversary] forces and liberating [allies] from their propaganda [expletive.]" American and allied media did not have this effect.

5.2 RQ 2. To What Extent do Additional Wargame News Transmissions Affect Cadet Trust in Fictional Media Sources?

Grounded theory explored emerging themes from students' comments regarding media influence, with and without additional fictional media transmissions. (Table 1).

Test Group: Students who received extra corroborating media broadcasts in addition to standard content (n = 22). *Control Group:* Students who received only standard MSS 251 wargame content; no additional media (n =

Table 1: Statistical analysis of cadet responses based on quantity of media transmissions.

	Control Group (standard content)	Test Group (additional injects)
Injects did not affect their decision-making	10.9%	18.2%
Trusted American/allied social media	75%	77.2%
Trusted American/allied social media	59.4%	63.6%
Distrust in foreign newsreels	65.6%	86.3%
Distrust in foreign social media	75%	81.8%

5.3 RQ 3. How does the Added Information Operations Module Affect Student Decision-Making?

This research compared data from the two groups of students, detailing the extent to which trust (JP 3-61, p. I-7) and decision-making are influenced by media—with or without exposure to enhanced information operations education.

Compared to the control group ($n = 35$) of students who completed the standard MSS 251 course, the *Information Operations module (test) group*, $n = 25$ reported that they “*thought about media injects*” 32.6% more often, “*discussed the media with classmates*” 44% more often, considered “*the trustworthiness of each media source*” 34.9% more often.

The additional Information Operations education impacted the following student responses, specifically to the wargame. The *control group* “*did nothing*” related to the media 17.7% more often. The *Information Operations module group* “*conducted simulated humanitarian assistance/disaster recovery*” 30.3% more often and “*decided to work with the fictional rebel group*” 37.7% more often.

Humanitarian assistance, disaster recovery, and security force assistance operations are taught as “military operations other than war” in the MSS 251 course. Students were more likely to simulate these operations >30% more often after receiving a robust information operations module than their control group counterparts.

Tables 1 and 2 represent the discovered trends in support of qualitative grounded theory from the test group (extra Information Operations module) and the control group students.

The first qualitative prompt asked cadets, “What made media seem trustworthy?” 40% of both groups of students, regardless of added Information Operations education (test group), reported that the reputation of media sources added to the trustworthiness of its communications. Examples of these comments included “lead with reputable source name” and “official, major news network.”

Table 2: Statistical Analysis of hand-coded cadet trend comments on media trustworthiness

What made the media seem trustworthy?		
	Control	Test - Extra IO Module
Source reputation	40%	40%
Production quality	11%	12%
Data-based/unbiased	20%	32%
What made the media seem NOT trustworthy?		
	Control	Test - Extra IO Module
Source reputation	17%	40%
Production quality	26%	24%
Not data-based/biased	17%	36%

The test group’s remarks revealed that they believe *media trustworthiness relies on unbiased, data-driven reporting 12% more often than the control group*. Some examples of these responses included “factual information rather than political rhetoric” and “research and statistics that reduce bias.”

The second qualitative prompt asked, “What made media seem NOT trustworthy?” *Both groups were similar (+/-2%) in their reporting of production quality* for this question. Some responses coded this way included “disconnected transmission, sounded spotty,” and “anything spoken or written that sounded like broken English.” The control group responses (26%) and the test group (24%) almost doubled for this prompt. This result reveals that *cadets felt more strongly about poor production quality as an indicator of suspicious media*.

The *test group reported the source reputation 23% more often as the reason to NOT trust media*. Examples include “if the platform was uncertain (Twitter, social media) or the source was Chinese,” “communications from the adversary – propaganda,” and “when it came from just individuals or those who held no reputation.” The

control group's responses only revealed this data in 17% of the responses, lower than their data for production quality (26%). This result shows that *without added Information Operations education, students were more concerned about poor production quality rather than considering the source of suspicious media communications*. There was a 9% statistical variance between these trends.

In contrast, the test group considered the source reputation at the same frequency (40%) in both trustworthy and untrustworthy media; *the test group considered the source reputation more so than any other trends for both prompts*.

The test group's remarks revealed that they believe *media seems untrustworthy if biased and not data-driven, reporting this trend 9% more often than the control group*. Some examples of these responses included "lack of statistics, or vague, unsupported studies," and "if they were clearly biased one way or another instead of taking a neutral stance."

6. Conclusion

Information warfare challenges, including the *CNN Effect*, are growing as the internet saturates our lives. Americans are increasingly exposed to social media and other broadcasts with the expansion of smartphones and available network venues. Media communications, reliable or not, are injected into our lives and can cause psychological manipulation by swaying our opinions, decision-making, and actions. These influences could have terrifying and permanent consequences when military members are affected.

USAFA's cadets will be the nation's leaders. Analyzing their decision-making and wargame actions based on media makes it possible to reveal information warfare's influence on the next generation. In 2022, roughly 87% of cadets reported that media injected affected their decision-making during the wargaming scenario, and four out of four instructors perceived media influence on their students' actions. Social media and news broadcasts undoubtedly influence the thoughts and decision-making of military officials to varying degrees.

Participating instructors explained that media communications and open-source intelligence might reveal truths and serve as data points. However, leaders must understand and think critically about source reliability, disinformation, and possible adversarial information operations. Similarly, 35% of cadet responses indicated that foreign media broadcasts could aid decision-making by analyzing foreign government communications as a data point and open-source intelligence.

One participating instructor warned that foreign media should not be used to drive major decisions. This warning may only be apparent to some cadets. About 6% of participants reported that the media *totally* affected their decisions. If media influences 100% of a participant's decisions, there is a vulnerability to malicious influences and exploitation. Persuasive messages can originate in both foreign and domestic media.

Data also revealed that the fictional foreign media influenced 6% of cadets to operate more aggressively in the wargame. These cadets indicated that adversarial communications triggered an emotional response to retaliate, causing them to make bolder decisions and employ military offensives against the opponent.

Participants stated, *"...The foreign media influenced me to want to fight back more and make stronger/bolder decisions,"* and that the adversary's media broadcasts *"strengthened my resolved against the [adversary] forces and liberating [allies] from their propaganda [expletive]."* Therefore, social media posts, radio transmissions, and news broadcasts may play a decisive role in wartime morale, aggression, and emotional conduct on the battlefield. Examples of emotional and aggressive conduct in the wargame included careless attacks on the enemy without first gathering supporting forces or intelligence, resulting in needlessly lost lives, ships, and aircraft. This is a simulated result of adversary information operations.

Data varied when members consumed increased amounts of news and social media. Participants exposed to more media broadcasts reported *more extreme trust or distrust* in all types of fictional communications, causing a *polarizing* effect. Added iterations of foreign news and social media destroyed the trust of students who saw more of it. They reported higher trust in American and allied news (2.2%) and social media (4.2%) and were more suspicious of foreign news (20.7%) and social media (6.8%).

Higher levels of news consumption created a polarizing effect; cadets felt more extreme trust or distrust of the sources than the control group. They trusted the information that fit their beliefs (US/allied) to higher levels upon exposure while rejecting alternative views such as foreign media. Media source trust levels plunged (polarized) further into extreme directions after consuming higher quantities of news content.

Similarly, data revealed that media literacy lesson materials affected media influence on participants. When populations learn about propaganda through experiential methods, they should be better equipped against harmful external influences.

Information warfare education was tested in this project to analyze its effects and possible benefits for enhanced critical thinking, mitigating adversarial psychological operations through media literacy, and for use in the MSS 251 course. Cadets who experienced the added module (test group) revealed that they believe media trustworthiness relies on unbiased, data-driven reporting 12% more often than the control group. Additionally, they thought about media injects 32.6% more often, discussed the media with classmates 44% more often, and considered the trustworthiness of each media source 34.9% more often. They actively engaged with the presented news, discussing the information sources in class and the lab more often.

The test group also conducted simulated humanitarian assistance/disaster recovery 30.3% more often and decided to work with the non-state actors 37.7% more often. These actions in the wargame require more coordination among the team and a deeper understanding of the operational environment. The test group's unique information warfare education, media literacy, and communication engagement may correlate with these human-centered missions, simulating these operations >30% more often.

The control group "did nothing" related to the media 17.7% more often and was more often concerned over poor production quality than the media source (by 9%) when considering the trustworthiness of communications. Without media literacy education, populations may trust fake news with Hollywood-level production (smoke and mirrors) value without considering the source's reputation and legitimacy. Since production quality is a proxy for lower suspicion of media and communications, adversaries may produce high-quality content to gain influence.

This evidence shows the possible benefits of the Information Operations module. Students with the added lesson material did not take all media at face value or place a high value on the smoke and mirrors of production quality over fact-based content. For competitive advantage in the growing information warfare landscape, leaders must be critical thinkers and engage with the media appropriately. Media literacy lesson materials better prepared the test group for simulated warfare, reducing the potential influence of disinformation and other external communications.

Disclaimer: *The views expressed in this document are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the USAF, DoD, or the US Government.*

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