Chapter 11

Invisible children

Inequalities in the provision of screen content for children

Jeanette Steemers

Focusing on industry responses and structures, this chapter looks at how inequalities occur in the provision of screen content for children. Part one, drawing on McQuail's (in this volume) discussion of the different strands within media equality research (consolidated ownership; media flows; representation), asks where and how inequalities have arisen in children's screen content in Europe, and what the implications are. The second part considers what type of interventions, either positive or negative, have been used to tackle apparent inequalities in provision, and with what effect in terms of benefits (that may not always be easy to specify or quantify). In light of the shift from national policy landscapes that have concentrated on children's broadcast television to other children's screen content, distributed on-demand and online, the chapter concludes with thoughts about what type of policy is needed to address inequalities in the provision of screen content in an age of digital communication.

Shifts in the distribution of screen content, from broadcasting to on-demand online services, are clearly impacting the production and consumption of television-like services across Europe. These shifts are particularly resonant for children's screen content where we are seeing distribution across a proliferation of platforms, targeting both global and local markets (Potter & Steemers, 2017). In this respect, the children's audio visual market provides preliminary insights about future developments generally, drawing attention to both the risks as well as the opportunities of technological change.

At face value, children around the world have never before had so many viewing choices, including more than 400 dedicated children's channels (Westcott and Stuart, 2015), new subscription video-on-demand services (SVOD) such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, and the ubiquity of Youtube and its free children's app Youtube Kids, in some territories. In 2017, UK children between 5 and 15 years of age watched about 14-15 hours of TV a week on a TV set, but growing numbers are watching even more on-demand on other devices (phones and tablets), mostly Youtube (Ofcom, 2017a,

Section 1). Nevertheless, in spite of swathes of free content and numerous paid-for options, the children's market still exhibits many pre-existing and emerging challenges that reinforce concerns around economic, social or political inequalities.

Elsewhere in this volume, the late Denis McQuail draws our attention to the slipperiness of defining inequality, equality and related concepts such as access and freedom – concepts which are often contradictory, if one part of society's quest for equality (adults) impedes the freedom of another section of society (children) (McQuail, this volume). These are relative terms, after all, defined by the different contexts of changing political, economic and social landscapes, that defy a one-size fits all definition. Yet there is a case for arguing that, within the children's screen content industries, there are a slew of existing and emerging inequalities that are reinforced by both traditional (largely national) and evolving (largely transnational) industry models, that nationally-oriented policy and regulatory systems seem ill-equipped to tackle.

The overarching question for this volume centres on the ways and the extent to which media and communications in different European countries contribute to or even reduce social inequalities. This is a pertinent question to ask in relation to screen content for children, as children's status as minors means they have little or no input into the policies, regulations and media that are made for them. So, their voices and experiences are rarely considered in debates that tend to focus on adult preoccupations about protection rather than provision of content or active participation, a situation that has not improved with the Internet (Pugh, 2014).

A subordinate question of this volume asks what role digital technologies play in the process of creating or reducing social inequalities. Again, the question is valid for children's screen content as new forms of digital distribution are often presented as liberating for children, allowing them the freedom and agency to produce and post their own video content without adult intervention. Yet, this ignores strong evidence to the contrary, because not all children are "digital natives" or necessarily competent about creating their own digital content (Wilson & Grant, 2017), as opposed to accessing and viewing it on Youtube.

A final sub-question of this volume asks to what extent social and economic inequalities lead to digital inequalities. Again, this is germane to children, because some children may not have access to subscription video services or even online access, for a variety of reasons including caregiver choice, lack of financial resources or simply lack of access where they live. However, industry narratives at forums like the last Children's Global Media Summit in Manchester in 2017, tend to foreground universal access to technologies, that herald a "digital future … without limits or end, an unlimited resource with unlimited possibilities for an unlimited generation",[1] taking little account of children in emerging economies or children with more complex needs (see Alper & Goggin, 2017).

Yet children, as a sector of the population, have always experienced media and communications inequalities shaped by adult understandings of their immaturity

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1. http://cgms17.com/

and apparent lack of agency. These inequalities sit alongside other inequalities that may stem from their ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, inequalities that take on new dimensions with digital media. Adult concerns have long become manifest on the one hand in "moral panics and knee-jerk regulation" (Bulger et al., 2017: 752) in response to the perceived risks to children from media; risks that may be overstated and through which adults seek to take control of children's lives (See Drotner, 1999). Or children's communications needs may be subordinated to adult concerns about safeguarding adult rights to communicate, curtailing children's participation rights as agents or citizens, and burdening children and young people with "excessive responsibility" to protect themselves and their peers, and to behave better than adults under the banner of "digital citizenship" (Livingstone & Third, 2017: 661). This has become a key part of the agenda around digital rights and children, which extends beyond screen content to embrace social media and other forms of digital engagement. For example, the European Union's 2016 General Data Protection Regulation requires those under sixteen to get parental consent to access social network and gaming sites.

Children's place within discussions about rights and equality is further complicated by how childhood is defined in terms of age. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as anyone under the age of eighteen (UN, 1989). This is a fluid category where industry responsibility for older children is rarely recognised in the same way as responsibilities for younger children (see House of Lords, 2017: §298). For example, most European public service broadcasters are required to serve children, but many of them have ceased to cater specifically for children over the age of twelve because it is not deemed economic to do so. Social media, including Youtube, who barely regulate video content targeted at children at all, prohibit children from accessing their sites before the age of thirteen, but this is difficult to verify or regulate. At the same time the tech industry, according to one recent report, is resistant "to providing services which incorporate the support and respect for rights that would enable a better internet experience for all children as they explore the wider internet". (House of Lords, 2017: §298).

Inequalities also arise from industry resourcing of children's content and services. In terms of practical and positive interventions, children's population share has rarely been matched by equivalent production expenditure and resources. For example, children under fifteen represent 17.8 per cent of the UK's population, but UK public service broadcasters spent just under three percent of their first-run UK originated programme spend on children's content in 2016 (Ofcom, 2017b: 23). This disparity in resourcing is replicated throughout Europe, where children under fifteen made up 15.6 per cent of the EU's population in 2016 (Eurostat statistics explained, 2017). In spite of the significant proportion of children living within the EU, their media and communications needs are fairly marginal and subordinate to the policy priorities of national governments, the interests of corporate profit targets, and adult audiences. Children do not vote and therefore do not have to be courted as stakeholders by

politicians. For media businesses, children's limited economic power is rarely worth chasing unless they function as a lure for parental expenditure. For advertising-funded broadcasters, children have become an even less attractive audience after wholesale bans on advertising targeting children (as in Scandinavia) or bans on advertising food and drink high in sugar, fat and salt during children's broadcasts (see ITV, 2018). No such restrictions exist in the online world (House of Lords, 2017).

Focusing on industry responses and structures, this chapter looks at how inequalities occur in the provision of screen content for children. Part one, drawing on McQuail's (2018) discussion of the different strands within media equality research (consolidated ownership; media flows; representation), asks where and how inequalities have arisen in children's screen content in Europe, and what the implications are. The second part considers what type of interventions, either positive or negative, have been used to tackle apparent inequalities in provision, and with what effect in terms of benefits (that may not always be easy to specify or quantify). The gradual shift from national policy landscapes, that have concentrated on children's television programming for a broadcast audience, to other forms of children's screen content that are distributed on-demand and online but with far fewer regulatory interventions, are of particular importance throughout the chapter. The chapter concludes with thoughts about what type of policy is needed to address inequalities in the provision of screen content in an age of digital communication.

Media equality issues in children's screen content

Consolidated ownership

Research about equality is often concerned with the consequences of concentrated, or even monopoly ownership structures. In the case of mass media broadcasting and the press, this resulted in fears that powerful ownership interests would not only have an undue influence on content, but also on public opinion (Herman & McChesney, 2001). However, as many, including McQuail in this volume, have pointed out, evidence of influence on public opinion has been difficult to prove. Nevertheless, these concerns are being replicated in debates about "fake news" online and the extent to which platforms like Google and Facebook have responsibilities to society, and indeed children. In a recent response to concerns about inappropriate children's video content featuring favourite children's cartoon characters (Bridle, 2017), Youtube culled several popular channels targeted at children, removed advertising from unsuitable content aimed at families, and announced that it would be strengthening its guidelines for children's content, and be employing more moderators to ensure that animated content for adult audiences did not end up being viewed by children (Youtube, 2017). However, there are limits to these interventions, because Youtube continues to see itself as a technology provider rather than a content provider, and there is little to stop children watching Youtube.com over the children's app Youtube Kids.

Historically, the children's television industry has been heavily globalised through distribution, but by content providers who ensured that these channels were safe spaces for children. Global channels are dominated by three large US corporations: Disney, Viacom (through Nickelodeon) and Time Warner (through Cartoon Network). Building on their success in the US, these companies were able to grow businesses on the back of animation series and children's sitcoms that had already succeeded financially in the US market. It was simply cheaper for many overseas broadcasters to buy ready-made US or Japanese cartoons to fill their schedules, than investing in original content for small child audiences that are highly differentiated by age (pre-schoolers, 6-8, 9-11, 12-14) (See Sakr & Steemers, 2017 for the Arab situation). Later, with the advent of cable and satellite broadcasting in the 1990s, the big three simply extended their businesses by offering localised versions of their US channel offerings. These channels repeated and repurposed the animation and sitcoms that had already been produced for North American children (D'Arma & Steemers, 2012; Lustyik & Zanker, 2013). As children's content became more focused on dedicated channels, many free-to-air European general commercial broadcasters simply stopped including regular children's slots in their schedules (e.g. ITV in the UK, TV2 in Denmark) because catering for children was not deemed sufficiently profitable (Steemers & Awan, 2016).

The entry of powerful new online players such as Youtube, Netflix and Amazon Prime into the children's video market, promises further disruption. As subscriber services, the last two are beginning to make an impact on children's content, commissioning some new content and clearly targeting international child audiences to attract adult subscribers (Potter, 2017). However, it is freely-available Google-owned Youtube, and its associated app Youtube Kids, which are most popular, affording children more opportunities to access and post content online, generating millions of views. In the UK in 2017, older children aged 12-15 were more concerned about losing access to Youtube (48%) over Netflix (19%) and the BBC (6%) (Ofcom 2017a: 81). However, Youtube is not subject to the same regulations as broadcasting on matters like advertising and inappropriate content. This has raised concerns about offence and harm as well as consolidated power in the marketplace. Concerns around consolidation have also focused on the close relations with toy manufacturers (Hasbro, Mattel, Lego), as advertising and marketing blurs with editorial content. This is a practice that has become prevalent on Youtube through vlogging and unboxing videos, often hosted by children, who open toys and confectionary products on screen (See Craig & Cunningham, 2017).

Consolidated ownership in the digital sphere, involving the likes of Google and Facebook, raises serious questions about the commodification of both child and adult users through greater "datafication and dataveillance"– in spite of the benefits for children of online participation (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). The application of algorithms by platforms, ostensibly to optimise children's choices for example in recommendations for screen content, can serve to limit children's choices to a narrow range of mainstream pre-set options (Livingstone & Third, 2017). This benefits

corporate rather than children's interests, with little transparency and accountability about how those algorithms work (Livingstone & Local, 2016).

Flows of children's media

Closely linked to concerns about consolidation in the digital sphere, are anxieties about where children's content is being sourced. A great deal of children's screen content has traditionally been developed for US audiences because this is the most lucrative market. So, the flow of children's content to other markets is, according to McQuail (this volume: 33), "essentially second hand" surplus that can be "sold off" below the cost of production. Japan is another major source of animation.

To children's advocacy groups and policy stakeholders, this appears to generate inequalities: Children rarely get to see their own culture represented on screen, although online provision of screen content is blurring these distinctions and laying bare poor provision for older children by European broadcasters. Earlier research indicated that 70-90 per cent of children's content in Europe on the localised TV channel offerings of Disney, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network was US material (D'Arma & Steemers, 2012). When asked in 2017 about the TV programmes they watched, over a third of UK children aged 8-14 said there are not enough TV programmes that show children that look like them. 41 per cent of 12-15 year olds thought there are not enough programmes that show children that live in their locality, compared to 45 per cent that do (Ofcom, 2017a: 97). However, for older UK children (12-15), who go online and have little content directed at them by broadcasters, Youtube is considered to be best at showing people that live in their locality (36%) or showing people that look like them (31%), suggesting that Youtube is better at reflecting their lives (Ofcom, 2017a: 95), e.g. with short-form music and prank videos. Within Europe, it is primarily European public service broadcasters, many of whom are struggling both financially and politically, who are commissioning limited amounts of home-grown children's content.

Ideological concerns about consolidation, the dominance of US interests and inequalities of representation within children's content are of course certainly not new (see Dorfman & Mattelart, 1984). Doubts about US-owned enterprises and content have never receded, but a more nuanced view might be to consider inclusion and whether children ever "see themselves reflected in the media" in respect of "race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, geography, age", particularly in situations where limited representations could promote "a limited and discriminatory world view among children", impacting how they see themselves and others (Unicef, 2011: 11-12). However, like the impact of concentrated ownership on public opinion, it is difficult to empirically evidence the beneficial impact of children seeing themselves on screen (Buckingham, 2009). This is in part due to a lack of research, but also reflects the growing difficulties of researching platforms and devices where data is proprietary and closed for further examination (Livingstone & Local, 2017).

Whether such one-sided flows amount to "cultural imperialism" in children's content is a moot point because it is difficult to gauge what the effects of just watching US or other non-domestic content might be. Yet, concerns about asymmetric flows go to the heart of the right of smaller territories and distinctive regions "to maintain their language and culture" (McQuail, this volume: 33). Within Europe, extra support for children's services in minority languages is evident in Wales (S4C), Scotland (BBC Alba), Flanders (Ketnet) and Ireland (TG4). Yet, same languages are also an issue (Lowe & Nissen, 2011): German-language channels, based in Germany, for example, have arguably undermined smaller German-speaking markets, such as Switzerland. In Switzerland, German-speaking public broadcaster, SRG, has largely dispensed with German language broadcast TV services for children because it cannot compete with services based in Germany, either in producing its own material or in acquiring rights, purchased for the German-language region. In this case it is not just about volumes of content. It also concerns programme range in an international marketplace, dominated by cheap and easily repeated animation series, that contribute to *industry lore* that suggests that only certain types of children's content appeal to children (see Havens, 2010).

Representation – "Children need to see themselves"

Equality is also linked to representation and the capacity of minorities to influence how they are represented, either through access to their own media sources and outlets, or through employment within those organisations that commission, produce and distribute media content (See McQuail, in this volume). For children, as a minority within the population, this means seeing themselves on screen, but also rests on assumptions that content produced by adults should be child-centred and that adults should work *with* children rather than simply for them (Unicef, 2011; Steemers, Sakr & Singer, 2017: 19). Here, equality involves children having access to diverse screen portrayals that reflect ethnicity, gender, class and locality, that are not stereotypical (Goetz & Lemish, 2011).

However, within Europe, there is only limited screen content that depicts children from ethnic minorities. The vast majority of these are commissioned by better-funded public service broadcasters in a small number of countries including the UK (BBC), Germany, Scandinavia and the Netherlands. For example, the recent arrival of Arab children in Europe as a result of forced migration has been covered by German and Scandinavian public broadcasters as a response to changing demographics (Steemers et al., 2017). However, few of these commissions are in popular drama or animation formats as opposed to factual shows, a genre that struggles to get funding or distribution within a more commercialised children's screen environment, where children are viewing less scheduled output (ibid.).

The availability of children's content online does little to dispel concerns about representation on the digital realm, because there is no regulation to achieve this. There are indications that some content providers in the online world of multi-channel

networks (MCNs) do not always adhere to the standards of ethics and diversity that prevail within European broadcasting (Bridle, 2017). There is even disturbing evidence of racism by digital companies that distribute children's content on Youtube. According to some reports, this is evident in "a general white-washing of entertainment", with minimal representation of ethnic minorities, and the avoidance of non-white hands in "unboxing" or "how to tutorials" (Steemers et al., 2017: 18).

Interventions for equality for children

Although equality plays only a minimal role in industrial policy, it has been important in tackling anomalies in the children's marketplace; widely recognised as a market failure genre (Steemers, 2017). Interventions are usually driven by an acknowledgement that children are a "vulnerable" section of the audience, and that children deserve access to content that will help them develop as citizens. In broadcasting, this acknowledgement has been reflected in negative interventions to protect children from harm (e.g. restrictions on advertising, screen violence) and positive approaches that seek to promote children's content (e.g. through production and transmission quotas, or policies that seek to promote diversity in respect of ethnicity, locality etcetera).

These interventions connect with children's media rights, outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), and ensure that nation states heed those rights, which facilitate children's participation in public communication and provide them with the entitlements they need for citizenship, such as the right to free speech. As a normative baseline for children's rights, the UNCRC recognises children's agency (the right to inform themselves and be heard). It does not however address the diverse contexts of children and childhood, shaped by disparities in culture, location, and the differentiated power of the state, family, and commercial organisations (Asthana, 2017).

Article 17 of the UNCRC gives children the right to access information from a variety of national and international sources, but with the proviso that adults should ensure that the information children receive is not harmful. Other UNCRC articles give children the right to express their opinion and be listened to (Article 12), the right to privacy (Article 16), and the right to find out information and share it, unless it harms or offends other people (Article 13). There are then significant caveats (e.g. the protection of national security or public order or morals), and issues of enforceability.

These rights give children some equality with adults to form and express their ideas from widely available information sources, and are reinforced by children's right to education (Articles 28 and 29). Yet, equality is not guaranteed, because there are important restrictions and tensions linked to perceptions of children's maturity and vulnerability. In practice, concerns about protection (negative interventions) have always taken priority over positive interventions that seek to empower children and allow them to participate and take full advantage of their rights (Macenaite, 2017). Regardless of these contradictions, the Convention does recognise children as rights

holders to whom the nation state has a responsibility for creating legal and policy frameworks which allow these rights to be implemented (Bulger et al., 2017).

However, digital and online media present new challenges for policy-makers. Previous approaches that concentrated on broadcast media, and children's television in particular, can no longer be dealt with separately from the other types of online services and content that are now available to children. Although interventions themselves do not guarantee equality of provision and participation, policy-makers have intervened at different levels to secure screen content for children in the past. As screen content for children becomes less of a broadcast appointment to view, and more of an opportunity for online engagement, national policy initiatives, shaped by cultural and regional priorities, are proving much less effective in dealing with potential emerging inequalities.

Public service broadcasting

Traditionally, Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) has been the most important intervention for children's screen content in Europe. The PSB principle of universality (appealing to different sections of the child audience) has supported the notion of a mixed diet of genres and formats that counters inequalities in representation. Yet, this notion is under threat from reduced funding for European PSBs, stagnant or declining advertising revenues for commercial channels, and the rise of online on-demand providers.

In most European countries, PSBs are required to serve children. However, they have an uneven ability to produce and distribute children's content. The ability to sustain domestic production of children's screen content depends on: (1) the size of national markets (2) the availability of funding and talent (3) regulatory structures that support children's content. There are sharp divisions between for example the UK, Germany, the Nordics, and Benelux, where comparatively well-funded PSBs are adapting to children's changing consumption of screen media, and countries where PSB enjoys less political and financial backing, and are unable to provide a diverse range of content that either meets local demands or competes effectively with commercial media online, namely in southern, central and eastern Europe (D'Arma & Labio, 2017). As children's screen content develops, new approaches are necessary, but not all PSBs are in a position to respond. This has knock-on effects for domestic producers, who have access to few alternative commissioners.

Alternative funding mechanisms

Having identified funding as a major source of inequality in the provision of children's screen content, some countries have pursued policies that set aside additional funding

to help subsidise home-grown production (Steemers & Awan, 2016). France applies broadcaster levies and tax breaks to support animation. Denmark and Ireland operate competitive contestable funds, financed from funds designated for public service broadcasting, that support children's content alongside other threatened genres. This route is also being pursued by the UK since the British Film Institute was given the task of administering a separate contestable fund for public service content in December 2017. However, there is little agreement on whether the outcomes of contestable funding are beneficial for children's content, or simply redistributing existing funding (Pact, 2018)

Approaches to the funding of children's production remain resolutely national even in the face of globalization. Disparate regulatory structures and support mechanisms (subsidies, quotas, training) are also predominantly nationally orientated (with limited financial support from the EU), while the main challenge comes from transnational operators who agglomerate audiences across borders.

Quotas

Some European countries have applied quotas to promote domestic production or particular types of content. France has used quotas across all channels to support domestic animation. In the UK, quotas on children's content for commercial PSBs were removed in the 2003 Broadcasting Act. Under an amendment to the 2017 Digital Economy Bill, UK regulator Ofcom can re-impose quotas on commercial PSBs if it detects a lack of range and diversity. Ofcom has however declined to do so because it does not believe this would be an "effective approach" given "the changing viewing habits of young audiences" (Ofcom, 2018: 4).

However, quotas on broadcasters do nothing to tackle the greater challenge of online distribution and the shift by children to online platforms. Nor can quotas achieve a more equal representation of different sections of society. Regulation beyond "restrictions on forms of discrimination that are illegal or clearly harmful for the public as a whole" (McQuail, in this volume) is difficult to apply and industry dislikes regulation that might limit flexibility. Beyond quotas (for example on amounts of content produced), there has to be some reliance on the media themselves to commit to more equal representation and tackle issues related to gender and ethnic minorities.

Stakeholders, such as children's advocacy bodies and parental campaigns, can exercise some influence (Steemers, 2018). Yet, success in securing representative content for children also involves a struggle with financial and political realities that are difficult to overcome. First and foremost, commercial companies do not want to invest in children's content unless they can see clear profits that are more likely to be generated by a more limited range of content.

Rights-based approaches

In terms of policy approaches, it is increasingly difficult to regulate screen content on broadcast television separately from content and services available to children online (Livingstone & Local, 2016). This convergence raises issues of competing rights of children, highlighting the tensions between the adult wish to protect children from potential harm, and the wish to provide content for children with the aim of allowing them to participate and benefit from online engagement in their own right (Bulger et al., 2017; Macenaite, 2017: 767). Greater equality for children that contributes to their empowerment and participation as individuals, sits alongside concerns connected with data protection, privacy, commercial exploitation and the distribution of harmful images and videos (Livingstone & Third, 2017). These considerations also affect adults, but in the case of children the controversies are often caused by adult exploitation or adult failure to take children into account.

However, society's desire to protect children can prove inhibitive to children's rights of expression and participation, requiring a careful balance between the opportunities and benefits afforded to children by online participation, and concerns about risks and safety that require protection. Rights-based approaches to children's media engagement seek to achieve this balance, taking account of the competing interests of children and adults in the digital realm. According to Livingstone and Third (2017), instead of thinking about children's rights in exceptionalist terms (as a special case), which limits their ability to participate, there are opportunities to open up a space for diverse representations and the exercise of communicative rights that contribute to children's selfhood and identity (Lupton & Williamson, 2017: 786) rather than "a single normative voice" (Livingstone & Third, 2017: 661). This means paying more attention to the provision and participation aspects of children's rights and giving children space to exercise their voice in society as living rights, rather than focusing on a normative universal rights discourse defined by international bodies and institutions (Asthana, 2017). Without this space, children may have "few opportunities to challenge the inferences and predictions that are made by algorithmic calculations" that may come to determine their life chances (Lupton & Williamson, 2017: 786).

Conclusion

Children's access to screen content represents only one part of their developing engagement with digital media. Nonetheless, their consumption of screen content represents a substantial part of their media activities across a variety of devices. In terms of policy approaches to screen content, there are strong arguments to protect children from harm. This has to be done in ways that do not limit children's rights to access content and inform themselves from a variety of national and international sources.

There are equally strong arguments for policy measures that create a financial and structural basis for the provision of screen content that fairly represents the diversity of the societies in which children find themselves. Such provision requires adequate financial resourcing that takes account of growing public concern about advertising and the use of children's data to target advertising, as well as concerns about the in-equalities of subscription funding (e.g. Netflix, Amazon). This suggests that publicly funded content will continue to play a role, particularly for younger children.

Policy, regulatory and practical interventions also need to move away from top-down professional practices that focus on making content for children as opposed to with them, and enhance children's participation and engagement through consultation and co-creation alongside children's own creative efforts. A clearer focus on children's participation and agency can also provide the basis for children's later participation as citizens in society. This requires new approaches to children's media that take account of the varied ways in which children find and consume screen content, but also rein in the industry's reliance on technological justification for online services, which take little account of children's rights from the outset.

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