

**Border News Media Coverage of
Violence, Organized Crime, and the War on Drugs,
and a Culture of Lawfulness**

A Content Analysis and a Discussion of Possible Policy-oriented Measures

by

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I. Introduction

This research paper aims to describe how eight newspapers in Mexico and Texas are covering organized crime, violence, and the Mexican government's war on drugs on the border between Texas and the states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León. Specifically, we seek to analyze the role of the news media in the strengthening or weakening of a "culture of lawfulness" on the U.S.-Mexico border. We also suggest some possible public policy-oriented measures to reinforce and consolidate knowledge of, respect for, and belief in the rule of law.

Contemporary news media outlets (daily newspapers, television and radio news programs, magazines, Internet news sites) have a decisive impact on the perception of, and attitude toward, any social, cultural, or political topic. Due to its ubiquity in the daily lives of children, youths, and adults, the news media have an influence equal to, or sometimes greater than, traditional socializing institutions like the family, the school, the church, or peers (Morgan 2010; Perse 2001; Scheufele 2007). Because of the importance of the news media, and in particular newspapers, in socialization and informal education processes, it must be taken into account in any effort to promote and reinforce values related to a culture of lawfulness among the Mexican population—in particular the population living in states bordering the U.S., which are suffering from unprecedented violence and insecurity due to the activities of drug traffickers and organized crime.

II. Culture of Lawfulness

A culture of lawfulness means that "the dominant or mainstream culture, ethos, and thought in a society are sympathetic to the rule of law" (Godson 2000, 92). The rule of law implies that all people in a society are involved in the process of making and enforcing the laws. The term emphasizes a necessary agreement by all sectors of society on what laws are important, why, and how best to uphold them. A society with a culture of lawfulness "would be characterized as one in which the average person believes that legal norms either are a fundamental part of justice or provide the gateway to attain justice and that such a

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crime” was launched in late 2006, 47,515 people have died in acts of violence (Muédano 2012). Besides the death toll, there are countless instances of shootings, abductions, car robberies, decapitations, and a general instability and fear in many cities and small towns in the country. The need to look for structural, long-term solutions beyond the use of institutional force is of paramount importance. As Schultz, Godson, Hanlon, and Ravich have argued (2001), a vital strategy in response to irregular conflicts like those experienced in Mexico is to strengthen civil society and promote the culture of law (Schultz et al. 2001, 89). Without a culture of lawfulness, according to Godson (2004), there would almost certainly be more crime:

Most people act in a manner consistent with the law because of the expectations that others will behave similarly and that this is best for everyone. In the absence of a culture of lawfulness, many will be freer to satisfy their immediate needs and preferences, even in the presence of elaborate laws (Godson 2004, 2).

This seems to be happening in Mexico, where in addition to organized crime groups and cartel members, thousands of persons are getting into illegal activities, convinced that there is no need to, or use in, respecting the law, although in this case social factors seem to be in place. According to the Global Peace Index (Institute for Economics and Peace 2011), Mexico in 2011 was 121st in a list of 153 countries ranked from least to most violent; in addition, it was a level 4 (out of 5) in perceived criminality and the number of deaths per 100,000 people, and a level 5 in violent crime. According to Irvin Waller, a criminal expert from the University of Ottawa, Mexico has the fifth-highest incidence of organized crime in the world and the 13th-highest incidence of local, nonfederal crimes due to the decomposition of the country’s social structure (Garduño and Méndez 2009).

Paradoxically, different experts assert that the average Mexican citizen is not that far away from embracing the principles of the culture of lawfulness (Crespo 1990; Cortés 2006; Salazar 2006). According to Cortés, surveys of the Mexican population show that citizens believe in the need to respect the law and in the legitimacy of legal order, reflecting “at least at the level of their mentality, an incipient culture of lawfulness [...] genuine and adequate for democratic consolidation, although still deficient in the actual practice”

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country, ranking only below universities, the Church, and the Army (Hernández 2009).

If drug-related violence in Mexico causes citizens to read and watch the news closely to find out what is going on and how to proceed, then the potential for using information to reinforce a culture of lawfulness is very high. On the other hand, if news stories about shootings, armed robberies, kidnappings, and violence make no reference to the need to enforce the rule of law and to principles associated with a culture of lawfulness, the news media may end up eroding or obstructing the formation or reinforcement of—or the change in attitude favorable toward—the application and respect of the law. As the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) acknowledges, the mass media is made up of powerful institutions [that] can send strong messages that support a culture of lawfulness and the rule of law. “The media can...expose corruption and provide a forum for the population to express their views on the rule of law by covering related issues or topics and by providing a forum for national discussion” (USIP 2012).

However, our optimism about the contributions of news media ought to be curbed considering that most news media in the border region have been silenced by powerful criminal organizations that operate in each city, from Matamoros to Tijuana. There is no shortage of stories about abductions of reporters or threats against news outlets by cartels. In one particularly violent incident, heavily armed cartel members attacked the daily *El Mañana de Nuevo Laredo* on February 7, 2006, firing indiscriminately and throwing a grenade that destroyed the facilities and left one reporter badly injured. In fact, the first semester of 2006 was particularly perilous for journalists in the Mexican states that border the United States. According to the Centro para la Apertura y el Desarrollo de América Latina (Ruiz 2006), among the worst and most dangerous places to be a working journalist in Latin America at that time were Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, and Tamaulipas. Some years later, the situation had not improved. After the killing of one of its photographers, *El Diario de Juárez* published an editorial on September 19, 2010, entitled “¿Qué quieren de nosotros?” (“What do you want from us?”), addressing the ruling cartels of Ciudad Juárez openly, and demanding that they make explicit their expectations regarding news coverage.

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instrumental in fostering, reinforcing, and legitimizing attitudes favorable to the rule of law among Mexican residents on both sides of the border.

IV. Agreement Regarding the News Coverage of Violence

In this context, in March 2011, more than 40 of the most important news media outlets in Mexico signed the “Agreement for the News Coverage of Violence,” which established 10 editorial guidelines they agreed to follow when reporting violent acts related to organized crime. Most of the points are in complete agreement with the principles of the culture of lawfulness: to be unambiguously against violence, to avoid turning the news medium into an involuntary spokesperson for organized crime, to attribute responsibly and explicitly, to presume the innocence of the accused, to consider and protect victims and minors, to promote the involvement of the citizenry, to avoid interference with law enforcement, and to protect journalists. The degree to which the signatory parties are complying with these guidelines is, however, questionable. After one year of monitoring the news produced by Televisa and TV Azteca (the leaders of the initiative), the Observatory on Media and Culture of Lawfulness did not find evidence of compliance with most of the principles included in the document.²

V. Assessment of the Culture of Lawfulness in News Coverage

The Observatory on Media and Culture of Lawfulness (2012) has been monitoring several national and local newspapers and television news programs to find out if culture of lawfulness principles are included in their coverage of violence and organized crime. The Observatory starts with eight principles derived from the concept of the culture of lawfulness, and then checks if news stories about violence, drug trafficking, organized crime, and corruption reference or call attention to them. For example, one of the principles derived from the concept is the need for citizens to know the specific laws and regulations related to organized crime, violent acts, abductions, aggravated assaults, and the like as a

² The monthly reports of the Observatory are available at its website: <http://www.mediosyculturallegal.com>.

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The 15 editions were drawn from the period of October 26 through November 18, 2011. Only weekday editions were included in the sample. The unit of analysis was a news story referring directly and explicitly to criminal events related to drug cartels, insecurity, drug trafficking, and the like in Mexico or that involved Mexican nationals, or proposals about, reactions to, or criticism of any of those topics. News stories about common delinquents or organized crime in other countries were not included. Opinion or editorial articles, political cartoons, or columns were not included, either, even if they referenced Mexican crimes.

The coding instrument included a section designed to determine the degree to which the news story referenced any one of the eight principles derived from the culture of lawfulness concept. Coders identified whether the news story omitted any explicit mention of the norms or laws violated during crime or that should be applied to punish it, whether the story mentioned them in an insufficient or sufficient manner, or whether the principle did not apply to the coverage in question. See Table 1 for the list of the eight principles and the way they were examined in the news story.

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VI. Findings

Knowledge and respect of the law. Ideally, if news stories about delinquency, violence, or corruption frequently mentioned in an explicit manner the laws that were broken or that need to be applied to punish the particular incident, readers would be reminded constantly about the existence and characteristics of the pertinent laws or norms. If, in addition, these news stories emphasized the need to apply and respect the law in order to successfully confront violence and threats to society, they would increase the legitimacy of attitudes favorable toward the rule of law and would perhaps motivate readers to be more vocal about the need to enforce the law and to act in accord with it. If a condition for the presence of a culture of lawfulness is that the majority of the population know the basics of most of the essential norms and laws and hold positive attitudes toward their existence and enforcement, then this approach by the news media would help readers to strengthen their knowledge and keep it top-of-mind. Of course, it would not be possible or advisable to keep mentioning the laws that were violated or that may apply, or the need to respect and enforce the law in every news story, but without systematic and frequent references to them, the news media may not exert the influence they potentially have as supporters of a culture of lawfulness.

Table 2 shows that among the eight newspapers, two seriously contextualized their coverage with the first two principles derived from the culture of lawfulness (*El Mañana de Reynosa* and Monterrey's *El Norte*), three provided some attention to these factors (*Noreste Matamoros*, the *Brownsville Herald* and McAllen's *The Monitor*), and the remaining two seemed to be unaware of the need to mention explicitly the laws connected to the particular incident at hand (*El Diario de Nuevo Laredo* and the *San Antonio Express-News*). *El Mañana*, *El Norte*, and *Noreste* appeared to be more concerned about reminding their readers about the norms violated in the criminal act (or the laws that could be applied to punish it), and about the convenience of respecting the law, than the other six newspapers surveyed. *El Diario*, despite the high incidence of violence related to organized crime in Nuevo Laredo, was a newspaper with few references to the principles of the culture of

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² Variable was measured as “1: There is no explicit mention of the condition;” “2: The condition is explicitly mentioned but in an insufficient manner;” and “3: The condition is present in a sufficient manner in the news story.” This table presents only the values for the latter.

Concerted action by different political and social actors. The third principle derived from the concept of culture of lawfulness involves considering dialogue and discussion as the preferred methods for conflict resolution, and wanting political and civil society actors to make a concerted effort to find solutions to criminal problems.

Table 2 shows that, in general, the newspapers surveyed did not include references useful for the reinforcement of this principle. Seven of the dailies published just one to five news stories every two weeks that mentioned this principle, clearly a very low number, and not enough to make an impact on readers. Proportionately, with 12 stories mentioning this principle in the same number of editions, *El Mañana de Reynosa* did a much better job reminding readers about the need for political and social actors to make a concerted effort to support the rule of law. The rest of the newspapers surveyed did not help to put this need on the public agenda, and did not encourage citizens and public officials alike to get their act together and act as one against delinquency and violence.

Condemning impunity. Most of the eight newspapers in the survey did not provide their readers with regular mentions about the need to combat impunity and make sure sanctions were applied when the law was broken. Only two newspapers, *El Mañana de Reynosa* with 19 mentions and *The Brownsville Herald* with 10, seemed to be interested in referring to this need; the other six newspapers included references against impunity in only four or fewer news stories during the two sampled weeks (see Table 2). It may seem unnecessary for U.S. newspapers to reference Mexican laws, a need for sanctions, concerted efforts among political players, and the like. However, as we have argued above, their inclusion of these principles could be useful for the high number of Mexicans from Tamaulipas and Nuevo León living on the Texas side of the border to escape the risks associated with the violence of the cartels, and for the residents of Mexican border towns turning to the Texas news media for information that is not in their own dailies and broadcast programs. Both groups would benefit greatly from references that may reinforce their attitudes and the perception of the feasibility of the rule of law in their country. In addition, if efforts and pleas to uphold the law in Mexico are left out of U.S. newspaper stories about Mexican

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Table 2 shows that references about the need to assist victims, or criticism about the government's failure to do so, were indeed not very common at all six newspapers. In 51 news stories mentioning victims, only 10 made any reference to financial, material, or emotional assistance to them. Not even *El Mañana de Reynosa* included enough references in relation to this principle: only seven of its 17 news stories mentioning victims had any mentions about providing assistance to them.

Condemnation of delinquency and corruption. When criminal acts and corruption are uncontrolled and seem to be the rule, temptation to take them for granted and even praise perpetrators for their skill, ability, or boldness may be present among many members of society, especially the disadvantaged. News stories of delinquency and corruption that condemn and explicitly denounce criminal acts by quoting trusted sources or by presenting relevant facts might be very helpful in avoiding this deviance from a culture of lawfulness.

Table 2 shows that with respect to this principle, the only newspaper that provided frequent and abundant references supporting this principle was, again, the Mexican newspaper *El Mañana de Reynosa*, with 20 mentions. *The Monitor* and *The Brownsville Herald* were the only other dailies paying moderate attention to this factor, with between eight and nine mentions each. The other newspapers, especially *El Diario* and *Noreste*, may have a policy of avoiding any criticism of organized crime, fearing a violent reaction from the cartel members in their cities. That, however, does not explain why, in a very similar context, *El Mañana de Reynosa* managed to include 20 mentions in its coverage. The scant number of references by *The Laredo Morning News* and *The San Antonio Express* was perhaps a consequence of their low number of news stories, or a lack of awareness about the possible contribution they could make in reinforcing attitudes and perceptions consistent with a culture of lawfulness. In general, however, readers of most newspapers surveyed, with the exception of *El Mañana's*, did not receive sufficient reminders that delinquency and corruption should be rejected and condemned.

Modification of laws. New circumstances and changes in the way criminal acts are committed frequently make prevailing laws inadequate. Instead of citizens ignoring the law

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Table 3. Number of news stories related to violence and drug trafficking in border newspapers (two weeks: October-November 2011)

Newspaper	f	%
<i>El Diario de Nuevo Laredo</i>	5	4.1
<i>El Mañana de Reynosa</i>	36	29.8
<i>El Norte de Monterrey</i>	9	7.4
<i>Noreste Matamoros</i>	4	3.3
Total, Mexican newspapers	54	44.63
<i>Laredo Morning News</i>	15	12.4
<i>McAllen Monitor</i>	30	24.8
<i>The Brownsville Herald</i>	17	14
<i>San Antonio Express News</i>	5	4.1
Total, Texas newspapers	67	55.4
TOTAL	121	100%

The relatively thin coverage of violent incidents and the Mexican government's war on drugs in Texas newspapers, on the other hand, may be explained by differing priorities that include a focus on U.S. local, regional, and national issues relevant to their readership, and a local context that is not experiencing the violence of their Mexican counterparts. However, as we pointed out before, it may be in the Texas newspapers' interest to increase border coverage and include references to a culture of lawfulness in their news stories for several reasons: 1) To increase their readership by catering to the information needs of thousands of Mexican residents, living on both sides of the border, desperate to get more information about what is happening in their native towns and the risks for their relatives still living on the Mexico side; 2) To be a contributing factor in the decline of violence on the Mexican side of the border, which may help reinvigorate the economy of Texas border towns that have suffered a decrease in the number of tourists from the interior of Mexico, and the weakening of the purchasing power of Mexican border residents; 3) To help in the promotion and reinforcement of a culture of lawfulness, which will remind U.S. citizens living in a porous border region where they may end up participating in illegal activities,

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Local and national news media were unprepared for the intensity, frequency, and consequences of the violent acts perpetrated by organized crime, and Mexico's fight against them, in the last few years. The media therefore had no clear precedents on how to provide readers not only with information about daily events, but also with news and commentary that reinforced, and reminded readers of, the values and attitudes needed to strengthen civil society and the rule of law. Suddenly, newspapers and television news programs were forced to report on shootings, extortions, kidnappings, armed robberies, and the like without appropriate editorial policies, codes of ethics, and self-regulation experiences.

The eight principles derived from the culture of lawfulness concept may provide the news media, on both sides of the border, with the necessary compass to navigate the complex and difficult times Mexicans in the northeastern part of the country are living. Adopting editorial policies regarding, and training reporters to include, systematic and explicit references to the law, the rights of victims and suspects, the need for political actors at different governmental levels to work together in the search for solutions, and the desirability of modifying and adapting prevailing (but ineffective) laws to avoid the temptation of ignoring them, will help newspapers be part of a long-term solution to a problem that otherwise will affect and destroy their own commercial survival and editorial independence.

Policies for journalism and media studies undergraduate and graduate programs in the border region

The best long-term approach to a permanent and adequate inclusion in news coverage of references that reinforce a culture of lawfulness on the U.S.-Mexico border is through formal education. Most current journalists working in the region's news media are graduates of the multiple undergraduate and graduate journalism and communication programs offered by universities on both sides of the border. Making sure that the syllabus, course objectives, and reporting exercises explicitly and thoroughly include the whys and the hows of news coverage compatible with a culture of lawfulness will be the most productive strategy in the long-term.

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These talks would help to make more salient the need for references to a culture of lawfulness not only in the news, but also in any other media content, either fictional or factual. The references would help put this need on the public agenda and help legitimize the introduction of these topics in regular courses in the curricula.

Policies for the continuing education of journalists and media practitioners

In order to achieve a more rapid, short-term impact on current news coverage, several actions are needed to promote among journalists and personnel in the media and public relations departments of government and law enforcement agencies the adoption of editorial policies and guidelines that reinforce a culture of lawfulness in the public at large.

1) Workshops for journalists and personnel in the media and public relations departments of government and law enforcement agencies on both sides of the border. At these workshops, instructors will explain the need for references to a culture of lawfulness in news media coverage of organized crime, violence, and the war on drugs. Instructors would also describe and show specific examples of editorial policies and guidelines useful for reinforcing each and every one of the principles of a culture of lawfulness.

The workshops may be organized with the help of local universities to provide a neutral platform and to avoid friction between the different news organizations. At least one workshop of one to two days per semester is needed in each city, since moving journalists or media personnel from one town to another may not be feasible due to their daily work.

2) Publication of a booklet that includes the rationale for references to a culture of lawfulness in news media coverage of organized crime, violence, and the war on drugs. It will also describe specific editorial policies and guidelines useful for reinforcing each and every one of the culture of lawfulness principles.

This booklet should be widely distributed in all newsrooms of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television news programs and at all press and public relations

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Table 4. Summary of specific recommendations for the inclusion of references to the eight principles of culture of lawfulness in press releases and at press conferences, and in news stories and journalism courses

Principle	Public officials and law enforcement spokespersons	News media editors, news directors, and journalists	Schools of journalism and media studies
A majority of the members of society know the basics of most of the essential norms and laws.	Adopt a policy of routinely including in your press releases, press kits, news conferences, and interviews with journalists explicit references (in the incidents that are suitable) about the laws that were violated, that apply or need to be applied, and the specific penalties prescribed.	Adopt an editorial policy (and add it to your stylebook) of including in at least one or two news stories per day references to the specific laws or provisions related to the incident at hand; the information could also be in sidebars or teasers.	In reporting and news writing courses, review provisions in the law for the most common crimes and violent incidents making the news, and have the students practice writing about them by including them in their stories or features.
A majority of the members of society are convinced of the need to respect the norms and laws, and to act in accordance with them.	Adopt a policy of routinely including in your press releases, press kits, news conferences, and interviews with journalists explicit references (in the incidents that are suitable) about the need to, or convenience of, respecting the law as a way of avoiding the spread of violence and criminality.	Adopt an editorial policy (and add it to your stylebook) of including at least one or two news stories per day that reference the need to respect the law as a way of avoiding the spread of violence and criminality; or that mention the lack of will and interest in public officials, law enforcement officers, or the general public to respect the law.	In reporting and news writing courses, emphasize the importance of including in the news coverage of violence and organized crime references to the need to respect the law as a way of avoiding the spread of violence and criminality; or the importance of including mentions about the lack of will and interest in public officials, law enforcement officers, or the general public to respect the law.
A majority of the members of society consider dialogue and discussion as the preferred methods for conflict resolution and believe in the need of political and civil society actors to get together to find solutions to criminal problems.	a) Pursue aggressively a policy of consulting, sharing, and working together with other agencies, public offices, the media, and civic organizations to look for ways to take concerted actions against organized crime. b) Inform the community and the mass media about these efforts.	Adopt an editorial policy (and add it to your stylebook) of including in the body of the copy or in the sidebars of at least one or two news stories per day references to the need for different political and/or social actors to work together in the fight against crime, or criticism about the lack of concerted efforts among them.	In reporting and news writing courses, emphasize the importance of including in the news coverage of violence and organized crime references to the need for different political and/or social actors to work together in the fight against crime, or the importance of including criticism about the lack of concerted efforts among them.
A majority of the members of society believe in the need to have laws and apply legal penalties to any violation of them.	Adopt a policy of routinely including in your press releases, press kits, news conferences, and interviews with journalists explicit references (in the incidents that are suitable) about the penalties imposed on convicted felons by the courts.	Adopt an editorial policy (and add it to your stylebook) of doing follow-up stories about the trials and final verdicts of all detainees mentioned in regular news stories about violence and organized crime; emphasize in the body copy or in sidebars of these follow-up stories references to the penalties imposed on convicted felons, or criticism about the lack of them.	Teach journalism students or professional journalists taking continuing education courses to always do follow-up stories about persons charged of being members of organized crime, making sure to report the final ruling of the judges and to mention the penalties imposed on convicted felons.

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<p>A majority of the members of society believe that when existing laws are not useful or adequate enough to tackle delinquency, the answer is to develop and adopt new laws or to change or modify them.</p>	<p>Adopt a policy of routinely including in your press releases, press kits, news conferences, and interviews with journalists explicit references (in the incidents that are suitable) about initiatives and attempts to modify laws to respond more effectively to the threats and conditions posed by criminals.</p>	<p>Adopt an editorial policy (and add it to your stylebook) of including in the body copy or in the sidebar of at least one or two news stories per day references about the need to change or modify laws, or current proposals to do so, to respond more effectively to the threats and conditions posed by criminals. Include criticism regarding the authorities' lack of will to make the changes despite the need for them, if that is the case.</p>	<p>Teach journalism students or professional journalists taking continuing education courses to include frequent references about the need to change or modify laws, or current proposals to do so, to respond more effectively to the threats and conditions posed by criminals. Include criticism if authorities lack the will to make the changes despite the need for them.</p>
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Policies for increasing the number of news stories on both sides of the border that reference the principles of a culture of lawfulness

If the number of news stories published about organized crime, violence, and the war on drugs is low, references to a culture of lawfulness may not make a real difference in the public's perception and attitudes. Steady mentions and abundant coverage are needed to address the individual agendas of readers and viewers,³ and to "cultivate" long-run attitudes toward the reinforcement of a culture of lawfulness (Gerbner 1998; Morgan and Shanahan 2010; Nabi 2001).

Policies for evaluating improvement in border news coverage of organized crime, violence, and Mexico's war on drugs

In order to measure the degree to which news coverage of organized crime, violence, and the war on drugs is in tune with the principles of culture of lawfulness, and also to make medium and long-term evaluations of the impact of the policy actions implemented to improve the coverage, a permanent and reliable monitoring of news coverage is needed. By reviewing periodically the number of references to each principle of the culture of lawfulness in all news stories about drug-related crime, it will be possible to determine the success of the efforts undertaken to improve coverage, and to refine the strategies to achieve the reinforcement of the principles.

³ For discussions on agenda setting and the first- and second-level effects of media on audience members, see Escobar, Llama, and McCombs 1998; McCombs 2004; McCombs and Bell 1996.

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