

AN ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE MEMBERS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM PARLIAMENT IN THE BRITISH PRESS

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Abstract

This study analyses the media discourse of the British press on female politicians in the UK deconstructing the language used to depict them as political candidates, aiming at identifying recurrent patterns and stereotypical frameworks. Main aim of this research is to argue that the media discourse plays against the targets set by the Europe2020 strategies to achieve gender equality, perpetuating gendered media constructions of women. To carry out this research project, the newspapers have been chosen with mind to a balance between broadsheets and tabloids from the conservative and liberal side. A mixed methodology of content analysis and some framing mechanisms has been used to test the argument. Findings suggest that the British press depict female politicians through a number of stereotypical frameworks that involve physical appearance, emotional status, their family role as mothers or wives, or their association to the so-called 'compassion issues'. Although there are evidence of differences due to affiliation to different parties, or to different political roles, the UK newspaper media actively – although it cannot be said whether this is consciously or subconsciously – re-attaches women political leaders to communal gender stereotypes, ensuring that the public are reminded that a female political leader is 'always a woman, sometimes a politician'.

Keywords: Women politicians, leaders, British press, media studies, gender equality, gender studies

Introduction

In recent times the General Election of 2010 in the UK represented the greatest opportunity for female politicians at Westminster to enhance their representation in Parliament and to achieve greater gender parity. Many party leaders had made public commitments to select a greater number of women candidates to enhance the modernisation of their respective parties. Opportunities for women to increase their Westminster representation had also been enhanced by the large number of MPs standing down following the parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009. Despite these suppositions and although 'an unprecedented 142 women MPs were elected to the British House of Commons' (particularly from the Labour side), the election has been defined as a 'missed opportunity' for women (Childs, 2010:109). Yet female representation in Parliament reached less than one quarter of the total number of politicians in the House of Commons, while

... the UK ranks joint 52nd in the global league table, behind countries as diverse as Rwanda (56 per cent); Sweden (46 per cent); South Africa (45 per cent); Argentina (39 per cent) and Portugal (27 per cent). The overall increase in the number of women MPs at Westminster since the last general election in 2005 is also tiny – a net gain of only 2.5 per cent (Childs, 2010:109).

This is certainly not the hoped result among those who seek gender sex parity at Westminster and who wish to fight gender discrimination in leadership roles. Less than a quarter of MPs in the House of Commons today are women, while female members of the House of Lords make up about a fifth of the total membership. Overall there are currently 147 female MPs, out of a total 650 members of parliament. Why is there such a disparity in the representation of women and men in the British Parliament? ‘Women executives are clearly not drawn disproportionately from any one cultural region, type of society or category of regime. This leaves theories of modernisation and cultural explanations as somewhat implausible’ (Murray, 2010: xv). It remains difficult to grasp the exact reasons for why representation of women executives appears to be so scarce. While any other explanation appears to be inconclusive, the cultural factor and the media narrative, either at local or national level, appear to play an increasingly important role.

The gender-media discourse has historically framed women and politics as an antithesis, representing politics as a ‘dirty business’ from which women should better ‘stay away’ (Sreberny and van Zoonen, 1996:1). Literature, the media, popular genres such as Hollywood movies have traditionally represented politics as an ‘odd’ place for women, drawing on an antithesis between femininity, as a symbol of purity and innocence, and politics, as a ‘cesspit of dishonesty in which everyone is after his own interest’ (Sreberny and van Zoonen, 1996:1). By and large the representation of femininity through the media places an emphasis on a set of characteristics generally associated with female individuals, such as compassion, empathy, politeness and passivity; whereas men are associated with antagonistic behavioural traits, such as ambition, selfishness, toughness, aggressivity, competitiveness, all characteristics that are perceived as “most adequate” features for ideal candidates for presidential roles. There has been extensive research in social psychology to examine the role of gender stereotypes and the impact that they produce on the public perception of a political candidate during the period of an election, through the typical association of characteristics related to women and men, as well as through the ‘ideological perception’ of a candidate in relation to his/her sex (Murray, 2010:xvi). However, the existing literature on the area remains limited; one of the plausible reasons for the limited literature available could be because of the limited number of female politicians at a national executive level, and even fewer in number are the women who run for presidential roles. The role of women in politics often remains of ‘secondary’ importance, at any level. Re-engagement with the gender/politics relationship is very much needed in order to challenge traditional gender stereotypical roles and to develop a better understanding of the power of the local and national media in driving the audience towards one direction or the other. Research on the media discourse in shaping public perceptions of female politicians and leaders raises awareness of the inequality and the disproportion of women and men in leadership roles and therefore improves cultural identities and, more generally, democracy.

There has been a long view that if politics is to serve the national interest, then it should firstly be more representative of the society it serves. Equal representation in political institutions signifies a greater connection between the public and the political world and increases public confidence in politicians. Primarily, the scope of this paper is to provide an overview of the existing studies on the gender-politics relationship through the media discourse, and more specifically, on women candidates for presidential roles. Secondly, it aims at presenting the findings of a research project conducted on newspaper articles through the use of content analysis and a deconstruction of the language adopted in the press, using some framing analysis for a more in-depth research to highlight evidence of gendered stereotypical constructions of women politicians.

A critical introduction to the gender-politics relationship as represented in the Media

The supposed antithesis of women and politics is a common recurrent theme in the traditional media-gender discourse. Previous studies of female candidates in political elections indicates that women's characteristics are perceived by the electorate as 'not adequate', odd, or negative in executive office, where strength is perceived as the most necessary quality of the ideal candidate. In earlier studies of female politicians' successes as leaders, scholars have often argued that the characteristics usually attributed to men, such as toughness, decision, strength and ambition, are generally seen as 'more adequate' in the political context. In Huddy and Terkildsen's work in 1993, the scholars have pointed out that women are more likely to succeed in political careers when they manage to convince voters that despite their femininity they possess masculine attributes, such as strength and ambition (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993:504). At the base of their work there is an assumption that voters 'stereotype' candidates by taking into consideration their gender as a factor, and assuming that women are associated to qualities as warm, gentle, empathic, kind and passive, while men are seen as assertive, tough, aggressive and ambitious. Their interpretations are based on previous studies of presidential figures where critics pointed out that masculine personality traits are usually associated with the idea of the "ideal candidate" for presidential roles, while feminine personality traits are often seen as more appropriated to lower on non-executive levels, especially the judiciary, where attributes such as empathy and compassion can be seen of benefit to the society. However, to assume presidential office, these characteristics are not predominant; areas such as economics or the military, where male personality traits are prevalent, are perceived as more important for leadership roles, rather than areas such as healthcare, where female attributes are perceived as more beneficial (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993:505). Their research stated that

... based on the 1972 Virginia Slims national survey, Mueller (1986) found that voters were less willing to back women for the presidency and vice-presidency because they were perceived as less competent to handle traditional male issues (war, economy, big business), while the perception that women were more competent on typical female compassion issues neither helped nor hurt their electoral chances (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993:505).

If the media helps in representing the stereotypical image of women as more capable in coping with issues such as healthcare, education and welfare, that will ensure that women are in a disadvantageous position when running for senior leadership roles. The same assumption concerning masculine personality traits in the public view has been observed by scholars in more recent times. Schwindt- Bayer, in her 2011 study theorised, in line with Huddy and Terkildsen's interpretation of the status of women who succeed in political careers, that women who win office in Latin American legislatures are more similar to than different from the traditional male political leadership elite, having learnt how to play the male-defined political game (Schwindt-Bayer, 2011:29). Women who succeed in leadership roles did not challenge gender stereotypes, but rather adopted male attributes in order to demonstrate more similarities than differences to men. McKay's 2011 research, *Having it all?: Women MPs and motherhood in Germany and the UK*, provides evidence that it is easier for female politicians to break through the glass ceiling in political contexts when they can fit into the male-dominated political game, when proving themselves as possessing male attributes, rather than challenging gender role stereotypes. According to McKay, even at local levels, in both countries the political context is largely dominated by outdated notions that recall gender roles and are shaped by traditional male behaviours (McKay, 2011:18).

After the UK General Election of 2010, in their study on media's representation of female politicians, Mavin, Bryans and Cunningham analysed newspaper articles and the worldwide web to detect recurrent media constructions of women in the British Parliament

that contributed to the stereotyping and trivialisation of women and which framed leadership in masculine styles, and as more suitable for men. In their recent study conducted immediately after the 2010 Election, the scholars argued that women in politics face a key dilemma, whether to represent their femininity, thereby meeting non-leadership role stereotypes and to not be considered as credible as leaders, or to fail to match up with the feminine, communal and traditional stereotypes of women. However, the authors argued that even when women politicians match male traditional characteristics they are still perceived in a far more negative way than their male counterparts, tending to be associated with negative attributes such as ‘bitter, quarrelsome and selfish’ (Schnurr, 2008:310), and being perceived as more ‘masculine’ than men (Mavin, Bryans and Cunningham, 2010:556). In the authors’ words, their dilemma is ‘whether they should be feminine or “business like”, babies or bitches’ (Mavin, 2009), female politicians’ gender is seen as a negative factor that disadvantages them *a priori*. In other words, as the association between masculine and leadership persists, women who refuse to match themselves with their feminine and traditional roles are seen as refusing the established gender order and consequently as odd, atypical, ‘abnormal’, perceived negatively and inadequate as potential leaders (Mavin, Bryans and Cunningham, 2010:556). One of the issues at stake is Parliament’s ‘misrepresentation’ of the society it intends to serve, and as a consequence there is a lack of trust by the public towards politics. Some researchers have claimed that ‘while equal opportunities may not rest on equal numbers, the Parliament should be more representative of the society it serves and political parties need to connect with the public by understanding and sharing their experiences and concerns’ (Mavin, Bryan and Cunningham, 2010:552). Previous studies have furthered a common view between researchers and politicians that female politicians would change dominant views and values in politics; women’s interests are generally seen as much more protected and promoted by elected women in parliament.

Gender stereotypes play an even more important role in presidential elections, an office which is overwhelmingly associated with men. In her 2010 study of women’s presidential election campaigns, Rainbow Murray argues that ‘presidential capacity is gendered to the masculine’, as so many characteristics associated with the role of president are perceived and associated with men and masculine attributes (Murray, 2010:9). In her very recent work, Murray found that the association of women with the so-called ‘compassion issues’ was particularly problematic for female executive candidates, and it placed them in a disadvantageous position in the public mind when they were asked to decide who could be seen as a competent president, as they are not identified with the tough leadership skills expected in that role. In contrast, men’s association with issues such as the military and the economy made them more likely to rise to higher levels of office (Murray, 2010:10). The study also researched evidence that the media reinforced gender stereotypes of candidates in a number of ways. First and most important was the under-reporting of female candidates during elections. Heldman et al reported the significantly poorer media coverage received by Elizabeth Dole, in comparison with her counterpart John McCain, during the 1999 Republican presidential primary, although polls initially saw her as the more favoured candidate (Murray, 2010:11). Secondly, the news media generally promote candidates in a stereotypical way, endorsing the view of men’s campaigns as represented by their policies, whereas women were perceived

... in terms of horse-race coverage (that is, coverage of the candidates’ relative leads). This can make it harder for voters to become sufficiently well informed about a woman candidate’s policies. Additionally, negative horse-race framing (‘losing her head’, ‘catching her up’, ‘falling behind’ and out of the running’) can all be highly detrimental to a campaign, and this is accentuated if it is not accompanied by sufficient issue coverage (Murray, 2010:11).

There are many stereotypical ways in which the media frames women. We can start listing some of the most typical frameworks, which will be further analysed in the next sections. Firstly, the media gives an overwhelming attention to women candidates' appearance, family status, personal life, and emotional attitudes. They often label women candidates as the "first woman" running for a particular executive office, no matter how many women came before her; this still perpetuates the view of politics as an unnatural, odd place for women (Murray, 2010:14). The use of first names also has a damaging effect, rendering the candidate too familiar to the public, thus diminishing her authority, or, in conjunction with the surname, also perpetuates the perception of the candidate as unknown by the public, and needing to be newly introduced by the media. In addition the usual attribution in terms 'wife of' or 'mother of', contributes to the impression of a woman candidate as an individual dependent on someone else, or as important in relation (and only in relation) to her family role. Another stereotypical message conveyed by the media is that while men usually benefit from the public demonstration of their family role, associating them with the right values to pass down to a younger generation, a woman candidate with her family and children is seen as the one who would 'bring [along] the burden' of domestic obligations on her shoulders (Murray, 2010:14), and would be unable to dedicate herself enough to the heavy workload required of politicians. Female candidates will be seen as 'too dedicated to the family' or 'too dedicated to the job'; moreover, women are often constructed in the news media discourse in terms of 'dichotomies': attractive or smart, saint or sinner, too young or too old, too feminine or too masculine... they are simply never right. The culturally produced masculinity of the executive office as portrayed by the news media discourse slows up the progress of women working in the political environment, and contributes to the maintenance of male dominance over the executive office. An analysis of British press content, in the next section, will help in demonstrating the hypothesis outlined here.

Content and framing analysis mixed methodology

According to its scope, this research project utilises both a qualitative and a quantitative approach, in its use of frame codes to enable the researcher to collate the data for the framing analysis. The primary aim was to narrow down the focus of the research. To do so some filters have been used to reduce the number of articles analysed and the number of MPs taken into consideration by this research. The first filter was used in order to focus on some British newspapers as representative examples of the wider British press. After careful consideration, two broadsheets and two tabloids have been selected, namely *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, *The Sun* and *The Mirror*, some representatives of a conservative and some of a liberal viewpoint. The focus of the research has been narrowed down to a single four month period, from the 1st April 2012 to the 1st August 2012, which allowed to undertake the research in more depth. After typing in the 119 names of female Members of Parliament at that time from both the Conservative and Labour parties, using *Lexisnexis* as a database system, I have strategically included in the research the three MPs from each party that have received the most substantial coverage by the four newspapers previously mentioned, as there were more probability that their analysis will have shown the widest media coverage as possible. According to *Lexisnexis*, on the Conservative side there is no doubt that Theresa May has received a disproportionate amount of coverage compared to every other female Tory politician according to our time frame and the newspapers chosen, followed by Caroline Spelman and Louise Mensch. For the Labour Party, Yvette Cooper, Harriet Harman and Rachel Reeves have been selected as the "most covered" female politicians in that period of time and in the four papers chosen. The result comprises 148 articles, according to the database, which have then served to the scope of this analysis.

After having analysed a wide body of the existing literature, I have drawn on a set of frameworks which has been this research project's foundation. Firstly, the use of a politician's first name rather than the last results in some clear consequences. Female politicians called by first names or nicknames appear to be more accessible to the public, diminishing the authority associated with being an MP. The use of their first and last name together, however, can create the sense that the person is still relatively unknown to the public, and so they need to be introduced again. The use of their husband's surname can have another negative impact on the public as it appears that the female politician counts only in terms of her family status more than for her political views. Finally, naming a politician by her political role (Home Secretary, Minister for Equalities, etc) can have a positive effect as it can provide authority to the politician by ignoring her/his sex, not considering it as part of the issue. The second set of frameworks used here aims to reveal the presence of stereotypical attributes for describing female politicians in the language commonly used by the media. The set of frameworks identified can be found in references to their appearance, their family role (the recurring description of a female politician is as a wife or a mother), the reference to female politicians as 'emotive' persons, which can undermine their authority and trustworthiness in the public's perception, and, finally, the repeated assumption of women as more inclined toward liberal political viewpoints, while men are seen as more conservative. The frameworks have been used to draw a number of tables for quantitative analysis of the data collected. A face to face interview with Louise Ellman MP has been personally conducted and analysed to the scope of this project, and findings are included in the presentation below.

Contours of coverage: presentation of findings

Media constructions of female politicians present some clear differences from woman to woman, depending on her political role and party affiliation; however, in the analysis conducted on the six British politicians, it appears clear that women in politics are represented mostly with reference to their gender. These gendered stereotypical representations presented as thematic frames are this research project's foundations.

Physical appearance

Primarily, the findings reveal that the politicians analysed received largely different types of coverage and attention from the newspaper media. It appears clear that one of the most common and notorious aspects is the overwhelming attention journalists pay to female politicians' physical appearance. Through this analysis of a sample of articles it can be argued that women's physical appearance and sexuality, as it has always traditionally been, attract more attention in terms of the media and it is more appealing to the public than male physicality. An interpretation of the data shows that if a male politician is coping with issues of national interest, nobody pays attention to his unattractive outfit; in the case of female politicians, such as Theresa May and others, it is acceptable in the press to be spotlighted and labelled as 'an ugly bunch' (*The Sun*, June 2012). In analysing the media constructions of Louise Mensch, it seems even more difficult for the public to gather any information about her as a politician and to look at her as a serious candidate for political elections, when she has been treated as a celebrity/beauty contestant with overwhelming attention paid by the press to her photo shoot and interview published by GQ in the last few months. In June 2012 an article in *The Telegraph* titled 'The MP who's taking on Twitter has too many talents to Menschn', reported some comments left by the public on the news that the MP Mensch was about to launch her social network Menschn, which defined 'Louise Mensch [as an] an attention-seeking, self-adulating nobody' (*The Telegraph*, June 2012). Another comment read 'Let's hope this is the only Menschn it gets' and a final one, 'Not this tedious woman again. Get back to Corby!' Different is the media discourse on Theresa May, Home Secretary. May

represents an exception in her construction by the British press, as she is treated as one of the 'most high-profile exceptions' to a Cabinet 'mainly filled by white men educated at public schools and Oxbridge' (Morris, 2010). The press construction of Theresa May is almost entirely reflective of her 'exceptional' status, treating her as a serious and reliable candidate for leadership positions. Most of the articles analysed covered her for her job and political role, treating her as a politician that clearly 'knows her stuff'. Apart from occupying one of the most senior positions in the Cabinet, May seems to display credible and accepted behaviours to treat issues of national importance such as foreign affairs, therefore not often framed as other female MPs, associated to their family role, personal affairs, covered for their appearance or made invisible. She displays agentic 'leader-like' behaviours, therefore not associated with traditional feminine characteristics. However, for those reasons it seems that May causes some problems to the British press in terms of her representation, being one of the few female politicians in a male dominated environment and in displaying accepted and reliable leaders' behaviours. Therefore, it appears that journalists may have felt the need to re-attach her image to a gender stereotype by a renewed emphasis of her femininity, in a series of articles that focused on her shoes, outfits and makeover.

Personal and family affairs

Another typical gendered media construction is that one that covers female politicians for their family role, as faithful wives and mothers. The Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has received a considerable amount of coverage during the timeframe of this research; however Mrs Cooper has generally been covered when standing for other members of Parliament or when contrasting her opposite number, Theresa May. Although a great number of articles quoted Cooper's political roles, she is by and large presented when she stands in for Ed Miliband, and as his 'best political friend and protégé', and in contrast with Theresa May's political decisions, and as either reinforcing or discouraging May's positions. One possible interpretation when reading articles about Yvette Cooper, is that the press intends to highlight Theresa May's role in the political debates, using other political figures to challenge or emphasise her decisions; and in this role-playing game Yvette Cooper, as her direct opposite number and one of the most visible politicians in the Labour Party, suits the role perfectly. This impression is reinforced as Cooper, different to May, is not seen as showing masculine and, therefore, agentic behaviours; the Shadow Home Secretary is portrayed in her feminine capacity, as demonstrated by the number of articles where she is presented in her family role, as the faithful wife of her political partner in the Labour Party, Ed Balls, and as the mother of three.

Association to women's issues, compassion issues or women's rights

In the articles analysed Harriet Harman has never been associated with common feminine stereotypes and behaviour, and no particular attention has been paid to her physical appearance or her family status. It is noticeable that the Labour Deputy Leader has constantly been associated with 'compassion issues', as defined by Huddy and Terkildsen and as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Apart from her role in the Leveson Inquiry, Harman appeared in newspaper articles exclusively in relation with social mobility, helping the disadvantaged, political campaigns, anti-race and sex discrimination, equality laws, the phone hacking scandal and the freedom of press, and others issues such as these. Harman's representation by the British press conveys a complex message. Although she is not depicted as a beauty pageant or as a celebrity, and although her image as a politician is presented as credible, she is clearly often associated with what have been defined 'compassion issues' (Mavin, Bryans and Cunningham, 2010:560). As argued before, the association with 'compassion issues' denies women of their political credibility as leaders, as these issues are not perceived as holding value and significance in national governmental policy, in contrast to military, budgetary and economic and foreign policy issues.

Underrepresentation: 'her-story' often made silent or invisible

Other politicians appear to be underrepresented in the British press, either on personal affairs or political talent. Findings about Rachel Reeves show that in most of the articles analysed the politician is mentioned as a 'secondary actor' in articles that have as their 'main actor' other politicians, such as Ed Miliband, Ed Balls and Chloe Smith. Reeves has often been quoted as 'Chloe Smith's opposite number' in a number of articles. She is also named as 'the rising star' of the Labour Party. Reeves has never been covered for her personal affairs, and her family status never attracted attention. However, her case is a clear case of underrepresentation by the press. This is demonstrated by her appearance in the newspaper articles only in conjunction with other 'principle' politicians (the ones I mentioned above, for instance), and there are no direct quotations of her words as reported by journalists. As argued in the previous paragraph, her name on newspaper articles appears many times, but it seems to be used as a token, to back someone or contrast someone else, rather than to attract attention on her political talent. Another case of underrepresentation by the press is the case of politicians covered on a single 'story', generally a personal story. Caroline Spelman, former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has been largely covered by the British press but only regarding her parental role, as her son has decided to become a bodybuilder, a decision that his parents did not approve. The data collected demonstrates that she has been portrayed as a 'mommy' and covered as an emotional individual in the articles printed in the last few months, especially from the left-wing press and, as expected, even more by tabloids, who are always keener on personal drama and affairs. The 'emotional' frame is often mentioned when spotlighting female politicians. In the case of Spelman, *The Mirror* stated 'it must have caused distress to Environment Secretary Mrs Spelman, who'd battled at huge expense to keep Jonny's drug use out of the headlines to protect him' (*The Mirror*, June 2012).

Discussion and conclusion

Through the content and framing analysis of the media constructions of the MPs Louise Mensch, Theresa May and the others, this project intends to provide the readers with some illustrative examples of stereotypical images communicated by the press to the public regarding female politicians at Westminster. The evidence presented in this study suggests two main conclusions. Firstly, that women in politics are still perceived 'always as women, sometimes as politicians'; stereotypes and typical expectations based on sex categories play a role in political elections contributing in undermining women's contribution to politics, thus trivialising their image and limiting their chances, sometimes in an irredeemable way, to become leaders. Women at Westminster have to contend with prejudice and discrimination as perpetuated by the press; they carry the burden of competing with male politicians in an environment already largely determined by out-dated notions of gender roles and by practices shaped by traditional male lifestyles. Secondly, not all the women politicians are seen as playing gender-expected roles in the same way. The way they present themselves to the public and the media – the characteristics they display, whether they match expected female behaviour and roles or not – can make a difference in the way the media present them, as shown by the antithesis between Theresa May and Louise Mensch. Also, women who win in the political game by and large have adopted the rules of a male-dominated environment, avoiding displays of their femininity and their feminine characteristics, competing with men by learning how to play the traditional, male-defined, political game. In short, the evidence suggests that female politicians face additional challenges than their male counterparts when entering politics; the same challenges that, as it can be argued, are faced by all women in leadership positions, managers, businesspeople, in the newsroom media, etc., as the main issue is that feminine traditional characteristics are seen as affecting their leadership potential

and their credibility in senior positions. As supported by the evidence collected through the press discourse, women politicians represented by the media industry sometimes follow the destiny of all the women represented in news media: they are made silent or invisible, represented by stereotypical frameworks, following a marginal pattern. In spite of these obstacles, women in Parliament have achieved senior and leadership positions, as demonstrated by the example of Theresa May and Harriet Harman; nonetheless having to play by male-defined rules, displaying accepted agentic behaviours, or being judged on the basis of their appearance, family status, and emotional status, etc, also damages them. Many steps have already been taken in the right direction to achieve gender parity at Westminster, however, many are still to be tackled. This study wants to argue that to achieve the targets set by the Europe2020 strategies for gender equality there is a need of a cultural shift which stems from the media discourse on the gender-politics relation. This research supports the feminist argument that an increase in the representation of women in parliament, and women in leader positions in society in general, would not only support democracy in symbolic terms but would also transform democracy in substantive terms.

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