

A Look, Back and Forth: Media Advocacy and Public Opinion over Oil Subsidy Removal in Nigeria

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Abstract- The oil-subsidy removal, so called, has been a pertinent issue in Nigeria's political economic space. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, many have touted that subsidy removal in any form did not arise, were it not for successive government's failure to fix the nation's four refineries and the resort to importation of petroleum products for local consumption. The announcement of the subsidy removal in the maiden broadcast on 29th May, 2023, by the new government, seems to be too hasty, sudden and not in the best interest of an impoverished populace, still grappling with the harsh realities of the immediate past administration's ludicrous economic policies. It was this announcement that jolted a shell-shocked nation into a new frenzy of oil subsidy debate, which many have variously described as ill-timed. This paper intends to do a post-mortem on the controversy surrounding this issue, from a potpourri of media comments for and against oil subsidy removal. Using content analysis approach and congruity theory as well and other frames that conceive a set of dimensions in unbalanced communication, the paper believes that such a crucial decision would have needed an overview by all stake holders due to its implications on the generality of the citizenry.

Keywords: media, advocacy, media advocacy, public opinion and oil subsidy

I. INTRODUCTION

Nigerians are gradually approaching Thomas Hobbes's society; a society he describes in *The Leviathan*, 1660, as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" until the advent of governance. If care is not taken, this fastening economic crisis due to oil subsidy removal may be the tipping point of the long awaited unrest as the situation seems to be getting out of hand. Hobbes's famous avocation speaks to governance ideals, democratic tenets which should

not degenerate to its lowest ebb. What is troubling is the posture of Nigerian government and the political class in the entire drama (Hobbes, 1660).

Since the intervention of organized labour and failure to achieve the relief sought to stave and curtail the rising cost of living in the country by cushioning the effect of 'subsidy', there have been serious concerns about the nation's immanent failure. How long Nigerians can cope or live with this situation if they have decided to accept the anomaly as a given with no options left is the concern. This is where Prof. Pat Utomi's statement about 'state capture' makes a lot more sense. Much more also with the aversion to norms of decency in values and behaviours by the Nigerian political class and reports of public treasury lootings by politicians and government officials, including the Legislature (both national and state) jostling for mouth-watering allowances at the expense of the poor and vulnerable in the society (Utomi, 2023,p.3).

The extravagant claim by architects of subsidy removal according to a section of opinion seems like a joke taken too far. And without advocating for any radical overturning of the nation, there is a strong public opinion that the proclamation of subsidy removal by Bola Tinubu in his maiden broadcast, when it is common knowledge that facts aren't there at the time to support this decision is not right. One would have expected a new government coming into the picture to sit first, and then think of how to handle the extreme poverty and hardship in the land, caused by the ludicrous economic policies of the immediate past regime and APC as a party. This makes it imperative to be wary of anything that could escalate an already tensed socio-economic situation. As

tongues are still wagging over the national currency change amid election season, to now add that smuggling of petroleum products across the nations porous borders amounts to such a huge threat to the national economy has no rhyme or reason. Although Nigerians are used to such anti-people belt-tightening and no-result-yielding measures, this tend towards being flimsy and rather superfluous (Aluya, 2023, p.5).

Thus, the study's intent is to investigate how the media impacted on the subsidy debacle against the background that the greedy political class are the ones behind the schemes to mop-up resources for themselves. Since the subsidy "theory" is not clear or understood as the case may be, it becomes necessary to find out the true situation of things, considering the role media should play as advocates of the masses and where they are not doing so it leaves the object of good governance without any chance (Aluya, 2023, p.3).

II. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

From the above introduction, the main objective of the study is to establish the extent to which media advocacy was deployed to achieve stakeholder understanding of the subsidy imbroglio based on public opinion. Specifically, it is the interest of this study to: find out if the public is aware of subsidy on petroleum importation in Nigeria, understand how the media covered the stories and ascertain if public opinion was sought in both the process of obtaining and withdrawing of the subsidy. The following three questions were also used to under guard the study: how aware is the public about subsidy on petroleum products? What level of advocacy was inferred from news stories? And to what extent was subsidy advocacy, before and after removal?

III. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE STUDY

The study adopted two theories which are: Congruity Theory by C. Osgood and P. Tannenbaum (1955), and Strategic Silence Model proposed by Des Wilson in 2012. Congruity Theory deals with psycho-

dynamics and socio-cultural imperatives of public opinion. It is somehow related to Value Change and Cognitive Consistency and Symmetry Theory, which deals with attitude change as in where the need to restore cognitive balance becomes crucial.

The more contrasting a set of information, agreement or opinion is, the more one of the sides of the arguments seeks to reach a balance due to pressure of opinion. And where two sets of information are similar or congruent, there will be no pressure but pressure will arise if opinion differs. The theory also holds that incongruity cannot be avoided and therefore, the premise remains the need to determine the level of congruence between two sides of opinion, information and messages (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955, p.266).

As a scientific theory, it presents a model of how a third party, say the media will react in an argument either by taking sides or being in opposition depending on the pressure of congruity on both sides. The theory does very little; however, to explain why people do what they do in certain situations rather, hinging its point on how their actions and views might change due to emerging opinion or viewpoint. As it affects the present study, while the media as a third party with more information and views can bring desired harmony of thoughts, what determines that is the pressure that is exerted by information on the situation for good or bad (Aneto, Onabanjo and Osifeso, 2008, p.127).

The Strategic Silence Model on the other hand, is the brain child of Des Wilson (See page p.45), and is found to be predominantly used by most Nigerian political leaders in their dealing with issues of national controversies. It differs from the Spiral of Silence Theory, where the dominant opinion causes those in the minority to lapse into silence. Chiefly, the model is used to douse public opinion and it is strategic in the sense in which virtually all the regimes in Nigeria have used it, from the Second Republic down to the present. Wilson is not clear whether it is consciously or unconsciously used as in the case of the rumoured death of Muhammadu Buhari in a London hospital which the Government continues to cover up in silence (Nwodu, 2012).

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Advocacy and Sustenance of Democratic Systems

Media advocacy refers to the art of news reporting that supports the society for its good. It involves burning issues which the authorities may want to suppress in order to prevent public reaction. It is expected that the media should play advocacy roles as watchdog over government activities and decisions to ensure freedom of expression, which can guarantee convivial political atmosphere for all to thrive (Isika, 2021). Media advocacy supports robust debates for better understanding of issues. This was why Iredia (2019) says that, whilst public reaction to investigative reports helps in putting the government of the day on its toes, the need for advocacy becomes glaring where high level complaints are glossed over by the government as well as the media, showing some sort of compromise. This could mean that the media may have buckled in due to pressure.

According to Igwebuike (2019, p.152) “media advocacy is where socially responsible media speaks in public interest in order to uplift institutions of power that could be weakened by political manipulations”. Isika, (2021, p.154) in turn maintains that while participation of an informed and rational citizenry is necessary for the growth of democracy and wellbeing of the state, it is only “where strict adherence to the core values and principles of journalism exists that advocacy can be found”. This is why developed societies depend on advocacy as a push factor in societal ethics. The thought on media advocacy is certainly inexhaustible and for want of space, let’s look at Public opinion. To Ojo, (2010), opinion is a stance, viewpoint, judgement, belief and disposition of the mind which is expressed over a matter or issue. Benson-Eluwa (2003) also sees opinion as two or more inconsistent views which are capable of being accepted by a rational mind as true. Sambe (2005.p.177) says that “it is a product of a process that can take place only within the human mind, involving conscious choices among possible alternatives. This means that opinion does not lend itself to a proof that can be verified because it often

represents a value judgement”. Public opinion is not also an entity with a tangible form which is why it is a bit tricky to conceptualise. It is rather seen as either the sum of individual opinion, comprising of contrasting viewpoints often influenced by groups (MacBride et al 1997, Edeani, 1993, Osuji, 2015).

Since people relate to issues according to interests, it may be necessary to go with Niltkopt’s (1991, p.2) contention being that public opinion is “the aggregate view of private opinions taken into account in determining official actions”. This being so, the excuse for taking the subsidy initiative without due assessment of its implications on the economy as it relates to the burgeoning opinion may not be tenable. This is the bone of contention here. Cutlp and Center quoting Bryce (1986) shines some light further on the complexity of public opinion that; public opinion is a congeries of all sort of discrepant notions and fancies, prejudices and aspirations; it can be confused, incoherent, amorphous, varying from day to day but in the midst of this diversity and confusion, every question as it rises into importance is subjected to a process of consolidation and clarification until they emerge and take shape. Such view when held by an apparent majority is public opinion (see Lord Bryce, 1986 page 45).

Be that as it may, under a democratic dispensation, the mass media makes it possible for people with differing views to aggregate such views and express them unanimously. This is what Sambe (2005,p.178) meant by the media acting as the voice of the common man because they pay attention to messages and interpret them in line with perceived public notion and reaction. While it is possible for the media to act on people’s reaction to messages, it becomes increasingly clear where messages are modified through informal social contacts or some compromise as Mayers (1986) contends.

Aside from performing these functions of educating, informing, entertaining, including surveillance of the society through T.V/Radio programmes, movies, newspapers and magazines, it has also been found that the mass media serves to reinforce existing values. At times they use carefully designed propaganda messages as news stories, pictures, films,

photographs, posters, wireless signals, rumours, billboards and advertisements, depending upon what they aim at and in some cases to unleash outrageous lies on the hapless society.

Controversies Surrounding Subsidy Removal

Nigerians are not new to controversy in whatever sense. The fact that Nigeria actually started from what seems a 'coded' business venture under 'The Royal Niger Company' makes it incontrovertibly so. The manner the leaderships and civil society overlook certain acts of impropriety is so alarming and telling - like snake swallowing huge amount of money! In the oil and gas industry for example, sharp practices such as artificial scarcity, sales of sub-standard petroleum products, arbitrary increases in pump prices (particularly kerosene mostly used by the common man), inaccurate record of petroleum sales and diversion of same, oil windfall falsification among others involving public officials exists, which is suggestive of absence of governance and national ethos (Edeani, 1990).

Coming to the downstream where fabulous diversion of tonnes of crude oil is perpetuated under the watch of the nation's security operatives as accomplices, reports of private modular refineries dotting the creeks abound. These are the people pilfering the pipelines and causing oil spillage destroying aquatic lives in the area. Foreign oil companies are doing their own illegal exploration that contributes majorly to depleting the total oil output of the industry and it would not be surprising if Nigerians wake up to the shocking discovery that the crude has exhausted. To give the reader a sense of what the situation had been for some time, here is Uche's (1999, p.3) graphic details:

the shocking revelation made by two American journalists, Peter Truel and Larry Gurwin in their book BCCI; The inside story of the World's most Corrupt financial Empire - "even as far back as the 70s, corruption has actually engulfed the oil industry; Nigerian officials and international operators were stealing oil, loaded into tankers with no bills of lading issued, making it impossible to tell the cargo aboard and they pocket the entire proceed. The authors quote an estimate showing that 20 percent of

the country's oil revenues from 1979 to 1983 were diverted through smuggling and fraud, some of it to South Africa.

It becomes more concerning when this was reported and what this systemic rot can be today. Whilst the oil and gas sector seems to suffer underreporting, it goes without saying that both foreign and local journalists might be afraid of colluding security personnel. Unlike in the mid-70s when the oil and gas was the hub of reporting, unearthing series of allegations of improprieties among British and French companies in crude oil deals, without any payment of a dime to the Federal Government. It was, indeed, the golden era when backhand deals worth N2.8 million went viral under Col Muhammadu Buhari's watch as Petroleum Minister (Nwodu, 2012).

The sharing of Nigeria's oil wells to friends and cronies of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida is said to be the capping of this anomaly, which the media did very little or no advocacy against at the time, which escalated the level of crude theft to this present level or stage. According to Umoru (2021, p.9). this singular action created the monsters feeding on our collective estate, albeit legitimately; it introduced unprecedented level of corruption that influenced the turn of events and decisions of succeeding regimes to the extent that when Olusegun Obasanjo took over from the military in 1999 and found that the four existing Refineries were dead, he was unable to do anything. The unscrupulous importers and the government were making a lot of profit not refining the crude oil in the country- the truth be told.

The resort to importation of products, therefore, might have its own undertones which a section of the society and the media believe to be a script which some interests are acting. The true situation of the nations' crude may remain unknown until the refineries start working if at all. Aside from Government officials enjoying patronages from marketers, Adesina & Wahab (2021), maintain that petroleum products importation is less demanding on the leadership. And if importing oil products does not sit with the policy of the Federal Government, it would have long been discontinued. Ngozi Okonjo-

Iweala further connects this to her ordeal during her mother's kidnap;

I knew that the largest vested interest that I had offended in my anticorruption work was an unscrupulous subset of the oil marketers...I had convened a taskforce that audited their fiscal accounts detecting fraudulent claims for oil payments that I, with President Jonathan backing me, had refused to pay... Okonjo-Iweala (2018, p.3).

Okonjo-Iweala's findings were outrageous claims of products supplied by the marketers that did not tally with amount of supplies warehoused, indicative of how frivolous the system had become.

Information on Landing Cost of Petroleum

While a section of opinions maintain that subsidy is a hoax, from what is said to be valid indicators such as actual landing cost which is the benchmark used by oil markets for right-pricing, if net-back method applies, revenue obtained from Domesticated Dump Price (DSDP) partners say in the Netherlands is the gross revenue of a refined barrel of crude times the sum of the volume yield (fraction) of each refined product multiplied by the price, the expected gross of the DSDP would be (12958'0222+ 303780'011860'1667. Therefore, based on records of 2022, crude volume of 184.74 million barrels imported by suppliers is at the cost of \$ 619 million i.e. volume received by NNPC, was \$13.793MT. This comes to a value of \$ 56,666.00 to realise a profit of \$490,573 million. In light of intricacies above, NNPC's 2022 25.9 billion oil swap and N13.9 trillion subsidy payment made on June 11, 2023 might have been orchestrated to present the notion that fuel subsidy was actually made (Agbon, 2023).

State Capture, Civil Society and the Media

Since much breath has been wasted in comprehending the concept of subsidy, what is state capture? State capture is where the rights of persons are taken by some powerful individuals or institutions within or outside the state. It means taking advantage of the entire system gradually and insidiously in a deliberate and sustained manner - the citizenry finds that everything connecting them with the state is no more. The institutions that took several decades to

build no longer exist for them but belong to some set of individuals (can you spot Nigeria Airways, NEPA, NITEL and so on). Also, rights to decent living become threatened; the choice of who governs is no longer through a determined process but only the choice of a clique. Under this situation, the ordinary citizen finds his rights are no longer respected in his society (Utomi, 2023); it is not a matter of one section against another- some of the states in the Northern parts of the country which are solid minerals base are being invaded also by thieves who are alleged to be government agents taking advantage of the nation's porous borders. This insecurity everywhere is state terror and its part of the scheme by the political class to capture the State.

To connect the above to the foregoing, where a Government is involved in not only the theft of both crude and refined oil but foisting economic hardship on the citizens, high Naira to dollar exchange, shying away from fixing the nation's ailing or dead refineries, proposing to build special coastal roads where alternative roads exists, etc, it is state capture. Aghalino (2009, p. 181) says that "where government institutions have 'transformed' to siphoning public funds, and taking huge loans everything is reduced." Even where the right calibre of people was (sic) placed in the right positions, the agencies were grossly underfunded and this is the aberration that governance has come to represent..."

And there is a direct connection where official wrongdoings such as brazen misappropriation, conscientious public funding and wanton official abuse... where the state becomes unsafe and uses violence to whip the citizenry into line, becomes an outlaw and a Lord unto itself... (Aghalino, 2009).

Media Freedom in a Captured State

Again, the promise to uphold media freedom which appears to have been jettisoned just few months into this administration taking charge of affairs is another serious issue. Sunday Vanguard indicates that between 2023 and 2024, media freedom have been routinely violated and it boils down to the struggle to resist public opinion on the one hand and to serve governments' interest on the other. Such a situation

where both the media and civil society are under threat is dangerous (Kumolu, (2024, p.7).

Suffice also is the growing list of media infractions beginning with the gruesome murder of Hamisu Dangiba, a reporter with the Voice of Nigeria in Zamfara State, whose body was found in a soak-away in September last year. That of Segun Olatunji, First News Editor and Daniel Ojukwu of Foundation of Investigative Journalism FIJ, both abducted by Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) and forcefully taken away at 6: 00 pm in their homes without any explanation is another of the many cases that were reported. These gentlemen were held for 10 days till when a protest was held at the Police Force Headquarters, Abuja, forcing the authorities to release them. Apparently, they and several other journalists were linked to revealing alleged corrupt practices by government officials (See p.7).

Although these acts of state terror violates civil space and negates the provisions of Session 22 and 39 of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended, freedom of the press and freedom of expression remains the touchstone of democracy which should not be abused. It matters that from the identities of the named victims, tribe, religion etcetera was not the issue which further supports Utomi's earlier assertion that all that seems to stoke violence in the country are political manipulations by an elite class of mindless individuals exerting their ownership of the nation. It is from the forgoing that the narrative of this study can be placed in perspectives that;

It is the citizenry that are actually indulging the government; exploitation remains a weapon and it is common knowledge that Nigeria has been through subsidy jargons for long, overstating pedestrian divisiveness with controversies as part of the game (See Peters 2019):

V. METHODOLOGY/APPROACHES

Analysis was carried out with newspapers gathered between 29th May - 31st Nov, 2023). 184 editions of five national dailies were collected and read. They

include: The Guardian, Vanguard, Punch, Sun, and The Nation newspapers selected for the study. After poring to sift opinion from divergent comments regarding the subsidy imbroglio, the editions were content analyzed to elicit the trend of comments for only six months of the present administration's commencement of subsidy withdrawal. The researchers agree that the period was adequate enough and coding was done by a team of two who were undergraduates. They went through some training arranged by the investigator and after the training session, some trial coding was done for purposes of computing inter-coder correlation coefficient. The formula suggested by Akpan (1990, p.312) was used to arrive at a score of .85 as follows:

$$C.R = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$

Where C.R = Co-efficient of reliability

2= Number of codes

M= Total number of items with inter-coder agreement

$N_1 - N_2$ Total numbers of items to be categorized in as many places as there are coders.

The paper on which the test was applied had 30 items in all out of which the two coders were agreed on 35 items. It was therefore calculated as follows:

$$C.R = \frac{2 \times 30}{35 + 35}$$

$$C.R = \frac{60}{70} = \frac{6}{7} = 0.85$$

C.R=0.85

Analysis:

A total of 1,268 subsidy items (SI) were found but since the numbers was rather large, the investigator decided to adopt Wimmer and Dominic's (1997) 45% minimum sample size as adequate which came to 571 sample size.

Table 1: Various Genres Used for the Subsidy Items

Subsidy Items	News	Features	Editorial	Pictorials	Columns	Total
Newspapers						
The Guardian	69	46	13	19	15	162
Punch	37	25	3	22	11	88
Vanguard	45	39	7	28	22	141
Sun	28	44	4	19	7	102
The Nation	38	12	5	23	-	78
Total	217	166	32	111	55	571
%	38.00	29.91	5.60	19.4	9.63	100

Source: 2024 Content Analysis

The above distribution shows that News was more (38%) followed by Features (30%), and pictures (19% 7 %.). In the same vein, editorial which is

highly opinionated was only 5%. 30% features suggests that opinion on subsidy was not given much attention.

Table 2: Distribution of Items into News and Features

Newspaper	News	Features
The Guardian	69(31.79%)	46(27.87%)
Punch	37 (17.05%)	25(22.42%)
Vanguard	45 (20.73%)	39(23.63%)
Sun	28(12.90%)	44(26.66%)
The nation	38(17.51%)	12(7.27%)
Total	217(100%)	165 (100%)

Source: 2024 Content Analysis

Table indicates that The Guardian had more coverage of the subsidy stories compared to the rest of the papers (31% news and 27% Feature). Following of course, is Vanguard, while The Guardians' 31% as spot news of events that have happened, are happening and are about to happen, is not an advocacy since it does not lend support to the issue at hand. It is for information of the reading public or 'to whom it may concern'. On the other hand, Features

do exactly the opposite. Sun with (12.9%) news almost equalled The Guardian with 26.66% to come second due to its opinion articles and features, meaning that there was advocacy at that level. 17%, news and 7% feature for The Nation means that in terms of advocacy as well as news (information) it took the least position of the five newspapers, paying little attention to subsidy issue as it were.

Table 3: Placement of Items Coded Par Newspaper

Newspaper	Front Page	Inside Page	Back page	Total	%
<i>The Guard</i>	55(35%)	73(22%)	34(38%)	162(28.37)	
<i>Punch</i>	30(19%)	49(15%)	9(10%)	88 (15.41)	
<i>Vanguard</i>	40(25%)	84(25%)	17(19%)	136(23.81)	
<i>Sun.</i>	26(16%)	62(19%)	14(15%)	102 (17.86)	
<i>The Nation</i>	6(3.85)	57(17.5%)	15(16.8%)	78(13.66)	
Total	157	325	89	571 (100)	

Above analysis shows that The Guardian placed 35% of its entire stories on the front page and 38% on the

back page; Vanguard 25% and Punch 19% while The Nation was only 4%.

Table 4: Coded Items Par Newspaper According to Slant of the Story

Newspaper	Support Subsidy	Object. to Subsidy	Indifferent to Subsidy	Total	%
The Guard	34(20%)	89(31.6%)	39(23%)	162	(28.37)
Punch	49(29.5%)	10(3.5%)	29(17%)	88	(15.41)
Vanguard	20(17%)	81(28.8%)	35(20%)	136	(23.81)
Sun.	7(6%)	82(29%)	13(7.6%)	102	(17.86)
The Nation	6 (5%)	19(6.7%)	53(11%)	78	(13.66)
Total	116	281	169	571	(100)

Above indicates that 30% of The Guardians' news holes objected to existence of subsidy in the first place, while 20% supported that there was subsidy. The rest 23% indifference could not ascertain this fact. Punch 3.5% news hole objects to subsidy, against 29% that supported subsidy. Similarly, Vanguard news hole was 29% in objection, 17% in support and 20% indifferent. Again, the Sun 29% objection and only 6% in support and finally The Nation 5% support and 11% indifference.

VI. RESULTS

Based on the questions posed i.e. public awareness of subsidy, extent to which public opinion was sought before and after removal and Level of advocacy inferred from items analyzed, the following are the highlights:

1. The Guardian had the highest coverage of subsidy items but only 28% news holes. This speaks to the awareness level of the subject as seen from newspaper reports. (See The Guardian, Thursday, June3, 2023).
2. From analysis, average level of awareness is not robust enough for serious civic engagement, The media ought to be more proactive.
3. There was far less advocacy as one would have expected on such a topical issue 56.8% news holes is averagely topical
4. Stake holder 31% objection in Table 4 indicates that subsidy is preponderantly pro-government.
5. 29.59% indifference (see table 4) indicates that the media, civil society and members of

the public not being committed. This supports our notion that the state has been captured.

6. In the edition of Vanguard of Wednesday August 2, 2023, on page 9 with the title Subsidy: 'Lift ban on fuel supply to border communities- Senate to FGN, it became glaring by the Government contradicting itself as there is lack of synergy even among the arms of government (Umoru, 2023, p.9).
7. Some newspapers stance such as The Nation with serious dearth of information on subsidy issues can be a compromise paper..

VII. CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS

In the preceding pages, we considered several issues bordering on our subject and contentions were that subsidy was underreported and so it's remote existence. The paper holds that since the nation's return to civil rule in 1999, media advocacy has also been on a steady decline and maintains that wrong decisions such as entitles some individuals to oil wells at the expense of other Nigerians would not have been allowed in the first place, were the media up and doing. It also frowns at the notoriety of the political class and crass corruption that prevented the economy from thriving with the vast resources available to the nation, urging the civil society to overcome its present docility, roll up its sleeves and brace up for a fight against rapacious elements and narratives of so-called subsidy theorists.

While insisting that the present cost of fuel should be revised and product made available to the citizenry, the paper chides oil marketers for selling a dummy to Nigerians as subsidy as a result of failure of

governance by successive administrations. It further urges the youths to recover the loots and used them for the good of all Nigerians. The use of strategic discusses review mechanism to determine the scale of public opinion and media advocacy was adduced. However, it still behoves the media to ensure corresponding internal cohesiveness through advocacy journalism.

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