The Influence of Emotion in Humanitarian Journalism: The Perspective of Portuguese Photojournalists in Ukraine
A Influência da Emoção no Jornalismo Humanitário: A Perspetiva dos Fotojornalistas Portugueses na Ucrânia

https://doi.org/10.21814/vista.4660
e023009

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Immersed in a context of social emergency, the concept of humanitarian journalism (Bunce et al., 2019, 2022) currently takes on new contours that give it a hitherto neglected pertinence and vitality. This article examines humanitarian journalism's significance by exploring emotion's impact in constructing humanitarian information. Our investigation is based on a survey conducted with a group of 12 Portuguese photojournalists deployed to Ukraine in the first months of the conflict, between February and April 2022. After their return, they showcased part of their work in the initiative Diakuyu — Obrigado, promoted by the Sociedade Portuguesa de Autores and the cultural association CC11. The
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Imersos num contexto de emergência social, o conceito de jornalismo humanitário (Bunce et al., 2019, 2022) reveste-se, na actualidade, de novos contornos que lhe conferem uma pertinência e vitalidade até agora negligenciadas. Neste artigo analisamos o seu significado, indagando a influência da emoção na construção da informação humanitária, o que fazemos através de um inquérito aplicado junto de um conjunto de 12 fotojornalistas portugueses, enviados à Ucrânia, nos primeiros meses do conflito, entre fevereiro e abril de 2022, e que, aquando do seu regresso, expuseram parte do seu trabalho na iniciativa Diakuyu — Obrigado, promovida pela Sociedade Portuguesa de Autores e pela associação cultural, CC11. A exposição foi aberta ao público a 20 de maio na Galeria Carlos Paredes, com a curadoria de Alexandre Almeida, a partir de uma seleção de fotografias de Adriano Miranda, André Luís Alves, Daniel Rodrigues, Eduardo Leal, João Porfirio, Miguel A. Lopes, Miguel Manso, Nuno Veiga, Paulo Nunes dos Santos, Rui Caria, Rui Duarte Silva e Tiago Miranda. Partindo da premissa que a emoção desempenha um papel controverso e labiríntico no jornalismo, o estudo reflete a complexidade em torno do lugar que deverá assumir a emoção no contexto da reportagem jornalística, bem como a admissibilidade do fotojornalista reconhecer o seu ponto de vista perante a realidade observada.

Palavras-chave: emoção, fotografia, fotojornalismo, jornalismo humanitário, Ucrânia

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, an armed conflict commenced between two historically intertwined countries: Russia and Ukraine. The "Russian invasion of Ukraine" or as per the Russian government's official version, the "special military operation in Ukraine", erupted abruptly in Europe, escalating to a significant intensity with yet-to-be-determined consequences. Given the geographical context, the
events' brutal nature, and abruptness, newsrooms swiftly mobilised to cover the ongoing situation. Consequently, this has sparked an unavoidable public debate (Mesquita, 2003). While humanitarian journalism is not widely recognised or established as a distinct specialisation in news reporting, the current study delves into the discourse surrounding this concept, as developed by Bunce et al. (2019, 2022), within the framework of news coverage of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with a specific focus on photography. The objective is to examine the impact of emotions, particularly in conveying humanitarian information. For this purpose, we conducted a survey questionnaire among a group of Portuguese photojournalists deployed to Ukraine during the initial months of the conflict. After their return, they showcased part of their work in the Diakuyu initiative, promoted by the Sociedade Portuguesa de Autores and the cultural association CC11.

The Concept of Humanitarian Journalism

Over the past 30 years, numerous journalistic movements have emphasised the significance of media in highlighting social proximity, advocating for humanitarian causes, and promoting human rights. One may contemplate development journalism, a concept that emerged in the 1960s, which defines a journalistic approach wherein "reporting on significant national and international events should adopt a constructive stance, aiming to contribute positively to the development of a particular country" (Kunczik, 2022, p. 131). Another significant movement is peace journalism, established in the 1970s by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung. Peace journalism focuses on addressing the why? in news coverage of wars and conflicts, advocating for "conflict analysis and transformation to update the concept of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting" (McGoldrick & Lynch, 2000, p. 3). Public journalism itself, which originated in the United States in the 1980s and "represented a decisive moment in the emergence of a new movement in journalism" (Traquina & Mesquita, 2003, p. 10), also advocated for a more active and interventionist role of the media in improving the quality of life of the community. It is also worth mentioning human rights journalism, a current advocated, for example, by researcher Ibrahim Seaga Shaw (2012), who presents it as "a more radical alternative to mainstream journalism", assuming "a more proactive approach in prioritising the deconstruction of indirect structural and cultural violence as the best way of preventing or minimising the incidence of direct political violence" (p. 14). A description that aligns it closely with the concept of cause-driven journalism — a possible concept, however, controversial and risky, considering the principles of the craft. According to Adelino Gomes, a journalist and researcher quoted by Fernandes (2007), "to do cause-driven journalism is to walk on the razor's edge of deontology" (p. 13).

The concept of humanitarian journalism, which holds central importance in this article, arises within a global emergency context. While the topic is not new and is often referred to as humanitarian news, defining the concept of
humanitarian journalism itself proves to be remarkably challenging, as the key concepts — "humanitarian" and "journalism" — are debatable, as they have evolved, across cultures and organisations (Bunce et al., 2019, p. 4). Aware of the debate and controversies surrounding the concept, Martin Scott, Mel Bunce and Kate Wright, a team of researchers based in the United Kingdom, have undertaken comprehensive research since 2015 to explore the production, content, and funding of humanitarian news. They aim to foster a deeper comprehension of the subject and contribute to its significance. According to the researchers, humanitarian journalism can be defined very broadly as "the production of factual accounts about crises and issues that affect human welfare" (Bunce et al., 2019, p. 5). However, they also present an alternative interpretation of the concept by defining humanitarian journalism as "an act of communication that aims to alleviate suffering and improve human welfare" (Bunce et al., 2019, p. 5). In this perspective, they propose that journalists adopt an interventionist and purposeful role, aligning it with the principles of advocacy journalism. This approach to the concept naturally polarises positions: on the one hand, some consider journalistic neutrality and objectivity as crucial, believing that taking a specific agenda or part is unacceptable; on the other hand, some argue that objectivity in traditional journalism is unattainable, defending, as fundamental criteria, "transparent and factual conduct" (Bunce et al., 2019, p. 5). In a recent endeavour to update the concept, the same team of researchers further asserts that, nowadays, the most pressing concern in humanitarian journalism lies in analysing its relationship with politics and the influence of power — within the broad spectrum of global governance — and in the content, production and reception of humanitarian news (Bunce et al., 2022).

We suggest, therefore, the definition provided by these authors as a starting point for contemplating the contribution of the photographic image within humanitarian journalism, scrutinising the potential influence of emotion in the photojournalist’s activity, through the analysis of the data collected from the first Portuguese professionals deployed in Ukraine, in the context of photo reporting.

Photojournalism — Photography at the Service of Information

"The history of photojournalism is one of tensions and ruptures, ( ... ) a history of oppositions between the pursuit of objectivity and the assumption of subjectivity and viewpoint" (Sousa, 1998, p. 8).

Photography, as highlighted by researcher Jorge Pedro Sousa (2004), was initially adopted by the press due to its positivist roots, with the perception that it served as "the visual record of truth" (p. 9).

The earliest signs of photojournalism can be traced back to 1842, when "photography enthusiasts started pointing the camera to an event, aiming to share that image with a public, as a form of testimony" (Sousa, 1998, p. 27). Thus,
the Crimean War, 1854 to 1855, is regarded as its birthplace. Roger Fenton, deployed to Crimea by the British editor Thomas Agnew, according to Marie-Loup Sougez, quoted by Sousa (1998), "was the first photojournalist in History" (p. 27). However, James Robertson is credited with the authorship of the photographs of the fall of Sebastopol, depicting the first deaths in combat. Indeed, Fenton's photographs will forever be remembered for their lack of harshness and the composed demeanour of the soldiers away from the front line.

The symbiosis between photojournalism and war becomes increasingly apparent over time. A seductive, graphic, visual and symbolically impacting theme, embellished by the aura of courage, fairness and audacity. As photography is considered evidence and testimony of reality, its significance in monitoring war themes is understood precisely because photography in journalism serves the purpose of "providing context, generating knowledge, educating, and clarifying perspectives" (Sousa, 2004, p. 12). This latter function — clarifying perspectives — aligns with the insightful perspective put forth by philosopher and essayist Susan Sontag (1977/2012), who qualifies photography as an educational element that influences our way of seeing, arguing that "in teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing" (p. 11).

Nevertheless, the presumed authenticity of photography, which grants it authority, should be examined in light of the photojournalist's role, which is inherently subjective and influenced by personal factors, including moral imperatives and other considerations. As Sontag (1977/2012) states, "in a world ruled by photographic images, all borders (framing) seem arbitrary. Anything can be separated, made discontinuous, from anything else: all that is necessary is to frame the subject differently" (p. 31).

The analysis of the sample under study will be supported by the principles above, acknowledging various perspectives and encouraging fresh interpretations — possible and advisable.

The Role of Emotion in Humanitarian Reporting

Addressing the topic of emotion in journalism inevitably opens the door to the ongoing debate surrounding the controversial ideal of journalistic objectivity. The advent of the concept applied to journalistic work is closely related to the ideals of "independence, exemption and accuracy" (Martins, 2005, p. 144).

Thus, the endeavour to prompt the professional class to rethink its contours becomes undeniably challenging. The principle of objectivity, established (even if indirectly) in the media's editorial guidelines, is widely regarded as a means to attain truth (Amaral, 1996). However, over time, a growing number of scholars and professionals insist on the inevitability of assuming the journalist's inevitable subjective perspective in their reporting. They contend that in the world of
journalism, as with scientific knowledge, facts are not dissociated from those who perceive them (Mesquita, 2003). Disregarding the discourse on subjectivity does not invalidate the argument that posits that "the concepts of truth and objectivity are questionable ( ... ) since the significant and indelible influence of the observer and the instruments of observation on the phenomena being observed has been established" (Pina, 2000, p. 88).

As the Portuguese neuroscientist António Damásio (2020), dedicated to the study of the human brain and emotions, states

> while the history of cultures and even the history of science has rendered the role of emotions not only mysterious but also impossible to understand, the answer is obvious: Feelings assist the management of life. More concretely, feelings act as sentinels. They inform the mind ( ... ) and go further: feelings prompt the mind to respond according to the information they provide. (p. 141)

Feelings (and emotions) are an inseparable part of the human being, an integral element that shapes individuals’ decision-making processes. Thus, the debate around its influence in the journalistic context becomes crucial, assuming an even greater significance and immediacy when addressing humanitarian issues.

Disregarding the contribution of emotions in the journalistic process and all other processes is unfathomable, and there is a growing but relatively inconspicuous emergence of studies exploring this issue. Through analysis, two dimensions are highlighted: (a) the role of emotion in shaping the relationship between the public and the journalistic content; (b) how journalists perceive and manipulate emotions within the journalistic process (Gadret, 2016). It appears implausible to legitimise journalism by completely disregarding the influence of emotion. It is worth considering the research conducted by Wahl-Jorgensen (2013), who examined Pulitzer prize-winning reports and demonstrated that news discourse employs strategic rituals of emotionality to captivate the audience’s attention. To conclude, we reflect on the irony and controversy of the concept by invoking the philosopher and communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, who concluded that "the debate surrounding objectivity is essentially a discussion about subjectivities" (Pina, 2000, p. 88).

Methodology

The initial approach to exploring the concept of humanitarian journalism was the documentary research technique and the critical analysis of the literature, which allowed for synthesising key research proposals as benchmarks. In the empirical study, we conducted a questionnaire survey among a group of Portuguese photojournalists to gain insights into the influence of emotion within humanitarian journalism. Data were collected through a quantitative approach to analyse "observable facts and phenomena and measure or assess behavioural and socio-affective variables that could be quantified, compared, and related
during the research process” (Coutinho, 2002, p. 26). The questionnaire was structured around four dimensions: (a) the photojournalist's profile; (b) their understanding of the relevance of humanitarian journalism; (c) their perception of the influence of emotion in their work; and (d) their understanding of the role and conduct of a photojournalist.

These dimensions are based on four underlying premises: (a) journalistic coverage of humanitarian issues requires specific training; (b) journalism in a disaster scenario requires certain journalistic skills; (c) emotion influences the photojournalist in the act of photographing; and (d) photography is an absolute value in the journalist's work.

We applied this instrument to a non-probabilistic sample based on typical cases, selecting individuals from the population based on predetermined criteria. Considering it not only convenient but also representative, we selected a sample of Portuguese photojournalists who, working for the national media, were deployed in Ukraine during the initial months of the conflict. These photojournalists participated in the solidarity initiative Diakuyu — Obrigado, promoted by the Sociedade Portuguesa de Autores and the cultural association CC11, where they showcased part of their work. It is important to note that our analysis focuses specifically on the photographic image rather than the moving image.

The survey was developed using the Google Forms platform and applied by direct administration (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1995/2005, pp. 188-190). We obtained 11 valid surveys out of the 12 possible ones. The results were treated using descriptive statistical analysis. As Black (as cited in Coutinho, 2022) points out, "the function of statistical analysis is to transform data into information" (p. 151), which is why its methods will be used to "obtain an initial analysis that provides an overview of the distribution's dispersion, shape, and structure" (Coutinho, 2022, p. 132).

Discussion of Findings

The conflict, commonly referred to as the "war in Ukraine", has promoted noticeable changes in journalism. While in the past humanitarian issues were not extensively covered in the Portuguese media, there has been a noticeable shift in the media's commitment to thoroughly report the conflict in Ukraine, emphasising its human dimension. It should be noted that the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine has characteristics that align with the traditional criteria of newsworthiness, once listed by Traquina. The event's permanent news status is determined by the geography of the event, the unpredictability of its outbreak, and the continuous and persistent brutality displayed in all actions. It is, after all, a war in Europe — our home. That is why we believe the changes we are witnessing should not be seen as permanent or structural transformations but as necessary adaptations that align with the current reality.

From February 24, 2022, when the invasion of Ukraine commenced, numerous
national media outlets allocated significant human and financial resources to provide extensive journalistic coverage of the conflict. Contrary to previous years when journalists were sent to war or humanitarian crisis zones with caution and reluctance, this time, despite the financial crisis, certain newsrooms made a remarkable effort to cover the events unfolding in Ukraine and its neighbouring countries. Hence, it is relevant to study the opinion of a group of professionals who, due to their roles, directly witnessed and reported on the events transpiring in Ukraine during the initial months of the conflict (February and March 2022).

In the survey, our initial objective was to gather information about the photo-journalists’ profiles, to observe their experience/inexperience in covering humanitarian issues and their opinions regarding the significance of preparation for such assignments. It should be noted that 45.5% of the respondents said they cover humanitarian issues frequently, 36.4% very frequently and 18.2% rarely. The results regarding specialised training in humanitarian issues are revealing, with 63.6% of respondents considering it necessary, while 36.4% view it as an added value but not necessary. Of the respondents, 54.5% indicated that they had already taken a course in preparation for war scenarios.

It is evident from the outset that the selected professionals were those who, in some capacity, particularly because they have attended specific preparation courses, demonstrated an aptitude for journalism in a disaster scenario. The professionals themselves stress the importance of specific training. We should bear in mind that humanitarian issues should require from the professional — journalist or image reporter — not only familiarity with security protocols but also agility, emotional resilience, and a profound ethical perspective on their work.

Although not formally admitted, humanitarian journalism as a speciality of the profession that is best suited to reporting disaster events was also a guiding principle in our questionnaire. When asked about their assessment of the potential investment in the field of humanitarian journalism, 54.5% of the respondents considered it fundamental, 36.4% believed it necessary, and 9.1% deemed it unnecessary.

Considering the cruelty and harshness of humanitarian emergency scenarios, we sought to determine whether emotion influences photojournalists when taking photographs. Regarding the specific influence, most respondents acknowledged that emotion manifests to varying degrees in capturing photographs. None of the professionals stated that emotion never influences their work. However, regarding the attribution of value, whether beneficial or detrimental to the photojournalist, the respondents’ answers are more varied and dispersed.

Although none of the respondents stated that emotion never benefits their performance, it is important to note that the distribution within the sample was uneven. Although 36.4% believe emotion often benefits the photojournalist, and 27.3% argue that it is very often a positive influence, 36.4% of the respondents consider it rarely beneficial to their performance.
Regarding the potentially harmful nature of emotion, the trend is the same. Most respondents admit that emotion is very frequently or frequently harmful to their work, while 36.4% believe that emotion only rarely hurts their performance.

Most respondents acknowledge the influence of emotion during the act of photographing. However, it expresses itself in a unique way in each individual, giving in each case a different experience. The unavoidable need for exposure to human suffering is the inherent requirement in reporting during conflicts, catastrophes, or other humanitarian emergencies. It is not rare for professionals to witness human rights violations, acts of raw injustice, hardship, torment and indignity. The survey participants were asked whether the principle of impartiality should be upheld in such circumstances. Of the respondents, 54.55% unequivocally replied in the affirmative, providing justifications such as: 'to expose the problem and show the news, the photojournalist has to be impartial. Otherwise, the problem will never be reported as it truly is. Especially today, when there is more and more fake news' (Participant number 2, December 2022); 'the journalist must always be impartial, striving to report the reality of each situation. Whatever it may be' (Participant number 3, December 2022).

However, 45.45% were less certain, contemplating the issue in these terms:

a journalist must make an effort to weigh subjects impartially, but at the moment of reporting, impartiality is no longer an absolute obligation. There are themes and contexts in which a journalist should not refrain from taking sides. This does not mean that, in these situations, one stops having truth as the ultimate goal. Regardless of which side that truth may benefit or harm. (Participant number 4, December 2022)

'The fog of war, it's actually hard not to pick a side when you work close to the battle. Let's look at Hemingway' (Participant number 5, December 2022).

In photography, I prefer the word truth over impartiality. I think that impartiality in photojournalism does not exist. The choice of the photograph's framing is already personal, influencing who will see it. Essentially, whoever sees a photograph is seeing the photojournalist's perspective. What I think is that photography has to show the truth. (Participant number 7, December 2022)

Recognising the boundaries of subjectivity and accepting the photojournalist's role as an active participant is not straightforward — as the ongoing debates surrounding the objectivity/subjectivity controversy suggest. When reporting, the professional will inevitably have to decide what to show. Every decision suggests the influence of variables and personal factors. In her essay first published in 1986, Sontag reflected on the unavoidable choice of framing and the repercussions and interpretations that this choice would have for the observer.

Determining the existence of limits and criteria when photographing human suffering is less controversial. For 72.72% of the participants in the study, there
are limits to consider. For example, we can mention the following perspective: "the criterion should always be denunciation rather than exploitation. Sometimes, the limits lie in the identification of individuals" (Participant number 1, December 2022).

Visual shock is sometimes important to force the audience to reflect on the photographed theme. However, when it involves images of victims, it is crucial to assess whether what is shown compromises the dignity of the individual photographed. (Participant number 6, December 2022)

"Showing respect for the other, refraining from exploiting people's suffering or taking away their dignity" (Participant number 10, December 2022).

Even though some 27.28% acknowledge that there are no limits, some express reservations and considerations: 'at the outset, considering the need to report this suffering, there are no limits. However, this rule should not be rigid, and each case is a case' (Participant number 4, December 2022).

'There are no limits if we want to inform, but we must know: why, how, and for what purpose? What is shown can never be gratuitous' (Participant number 5, date).

In my opinion, the photojournalist should ask himself if the photograph will really change something or not. If it doesn't help, I think there should be a limit. If it does, I think that limit can be exceeded. (Participant number 2, December 2022)

The impact that photography has on humanitarian journalism stems from its ability to serve as evidence, enabling the denunciation of injustices, awakening consciousness, and shedding light on atrocities that were previously concealed. However, as some respondents suggested, weighing, common sense, critical judgement, and ethics should prevail, traits closely tied to the person behind the professional.

Regarding images portraying horror, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing discussion about their capacity to effectively evoke emotions and prompt action in those who view them. For Sontag (1977/2012), an essayist who has dedicated part of her life to reflecting on photography and on human suffering, "to suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them ( . . . ). Images anesthetize" (p. 28). The author also states, "the shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings, just as the surprise and bemusement felt the first time one sees a pornographic movie wear off after one sees a few more" (p. 29). This interpretation is also examined in the concept of compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999). When considering the effect or repercussion of the publication of suffering images, it should be noted that their publication's moment/context/location are also fundamental elements. Not least because 'a photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone
of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude" (Sontag, 1977/2012, p. 25). We see images of death, pain, misery, and suffering regularly. However, only some of these images gain a differentiating status. Only some are used by the media as symbols. Let us recall the image of the lifeless body of two-year-old Aylan Kuri, lying on a beach on the shore of the Aegean Sea after the boat taking him and his mother and brother sank on their way to Greece. The image that elicited shock and outrage in the international community was circulated tirelessly by the media and became a symbol of the Syrian migrant crisis. This focus does not happen randomly because "without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal" (Sontag, 1977/2012, p. 27).

Finally, participants were asked to consider the possibility of choosing to take a photograph instead of assisting a human life.

Most photojournalists surveyed admitted prioritising human life, justifying: "human life is paramount. A photojournalist should never choose otherwise" (Participant number 1, December 2022).

Photographers and journalists do not stop being humans when they are working. When faced with a situation where another's life may depend solely on the photographer/journalist's intervention, there is a moral obligation to act to save a life. (Participant number 6, December 2022)

"A photograph is never worth a life" (Participant number 9, December 2022).

Among the participants, 36.4% consider it admissible to decide to capture the photograph, which aligns with Sontag's (1977/2012) assertion that: "photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention ( ... ) comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph" (p. 20). For these respondents, detachment towards the photographed object is advisable to fulfil their roles.

Society needs to understand that our work is our way of helping. Photographing and showing the world the existing problems. We are not doctors; we are not nurses. Sometimes, choosing photography can save millions of people. If we don't take that photograph and save a life, we may not save millions. For this, journalism has to be impartial and, above all, cold. It is not easy, but it is necessary. (Participant number 2, December 2022)

Given the initially outlined premises, we are now able to confirm the first and second ones ("journalistic coverage of humanitarian issues requires specific training" and "journalism in a disaster scenario requires certain journalistic skills"), put some nuances on the third one ("emotion influences the photojournalist in the act of photographing") and disprove the fourth one ("photography is an
absolute value in the journalist’s work").

Conclusions

Humanitarian journalism aims to report with accuracy and proximity the humanitarian atrocities and scourges, and photography plays a crucial role in conveying humanitarian information. Recognised for its positivist characteristics, which give it testimonial status and serve as proof of the events, photography stands as a primordial vehicle in disseminating what will always be sensitive and thorny information. Based on the findings of the empirical study, it can be concluded that while the principles of humanitarian journalism may not be fully apparent to the respondents, there is a certain consensus regarding the influence of emotion in the act of photographing, despite the differences regarding the level of its intensity. The study confirms the complexity surrounding the role of emotion in journalistic reporting and the admissibility of the photojournalist to acknowledge their perspective about the observed reality.

Permeable to social, political, economic, cultural and technological changes, it would seem appropriate that, within its framework of values, journalism should adapt to society and play an active role in the public interest, allocating human and financial resources towards the effective investigation and dissemination of humanitarian issues, even if we are currently going through a period of profound crisis. Furthermore, the professional class should engage in a renewed debate on the legitimacy of expressing their subjective, personal and non-transferable perspectives in the content they produce.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P., under the project UIDB/00736/2020 (base funding) and UIDP/00736/2020 (programme funding)

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