

THE INFLUENCE OF COMMUNITY RADIO IN DISSEMINATING HEALTH INFORMATION AND PROMOTING BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE IN SOME SELECTED RURAL AREAS IN ENUGU STATE

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ABSTRACT

Health information access and dissemination pose a significant challenge worldwide, especially in developing countries like Nigeria. This study was carried out to investigate the influence of community radio (Solid 100.9 FM Enugu and Dream 92.5 FM, Enugu) as a vital communication channel for disseminating health information and promoting behavioural change in some selected rural areas in Enugu State. Residents of 5 selected communities in Enugu State constitute the population of the study. A mixed method of research design was used. The agenda-setting was used as its theoretical framework, and it explores how the community radio's emphasis on certain health issues shapes the public's agenda. The study found an increase in health knowledge among community radio listeners in the selected rural areas compared to non-listeners, particularly regarding health topics such as maternal health, malaria prevention, and drug abuse. The study recommends that community radio stations should prioritise community involvement in all stages of program development, from needs assessment and content creation to program evaluation. This will ensure that programs are relevant, culturally appropriate, and address the specific health needs of the underserved communities.

Keywords: Community Radio, Health Information, Agenda-Setting, Rural Areas, Enugu State, Health Communication.

Introduction

Effective dissemination of health information is pivotal in promoting positive health behaviors and improving health outcomes, especially in rural communities. These areas often face challenges such as limited access to healthcare facilities, lower health literacy levels, and cultural practices that may impede the adoption of healthy behaviors. Community radio has emerged as a significant medium in these settings, offering localized content that resonates with the target audience's cultural and social contexts. Community radio serves as a powerful tool for disseminating health information in rural settings. Its accessibility, affordability, and ability to broadcast in local languages make it an effective medium for reaching underserved

populations. For instance, an evaluation of a community-oriented radio station in rural Bali, Indonesia, demonstrated that community radio could positively impact health and socioprogramsl needs by adopting community development and health promotion strategies (Panggabeian et al., 2011). A study by Lawrence (2012) highlighted that community-based radio stations have the potential for significant positive impacts on community health by providing important information and serving as platforms for community engagement.

Community radio has played a significant role in promoting health-related behavioral change in rural areas. Mtuze, (2023), noted that by broadcasting that address prevalent health issues, these stations have raised awareness and encouraged the adoption of healthier practices. For example, a study on the effectiveness of Mdantsane FM community radio in health promotion found that community radio plays a significant role in disseminating health information and promoting behavioral change among rural residents (Mtuze, 2023).

In Uganda, Kigozi et al., (2022), a radio program intervention showed potential to change healthcare-seeking behavior for mental illness and decrease mental illness stigma in rural areas Despite the effectiveness of community radio in disseminating health information, several challenges hinder its optimal impact. These include limited resources, technological constraints, and the need for capacity building among community radio personnel (Mtuze, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including improving infrastructure, developing targeted content, and enhancing community engagement.

A research by an NGO (Strengthening Partnerships, Results, and Innovations in Nutrition Globally, SPRING) noted that opportunities exist to leverage community radio further by integrating it with other communication platforms, such as mobile health (mHealth) initiatives, to expand reach and interactivity. They further noted that training community members to participate in content creation can also ensure that programs are culturally relevant and address the specific health needs of the community. Community media allows for the sharing of stories that are both interesting and compelling, while also conveying appropriate health and nutrition information (SPRING, 2017).

Literature Review

Community radio has emerged as a pivotal medium for disseminating health information and promoting behavioral change, particularly in rural and underserved regions. Its localized content and accessibility make it an effective tool for health communication. This discussion explores the role of community radio in health information dissemination, its impact on behavioral change, and the challenges and opportunities it presents.

Health Information in Nigeria

Health information is pivotal in shaping public health outcomes, influencing behaviors, and guiding health policies in Nigeria. Access to accurate and timely health information is essential for preventing diseases, promoting wellness, and ensuring effective healthcare delivery. However, the dissemination and utilization of health information in Nigeria face various challenges, including sociocultural diversity, the complexity of the health system, and the impact of social media (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). According to Akande (2021), effective health information management plays a crucial role in improving public

health outcomes, but issues such as inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, and poor coordination among stakeholders continue to hinder progress.

Ajibade and Alabi (2024) noted that community radio has emerged as a vital medium for disseminating health information, especially in rural areas. Community radio programs focus on a range of health topics, including maternal and child health, hygiene, and disease prevention. Unlike digital media, radio reaches populations with limited internet access, making it an essential tool for health communication. Ojebuyi and Salawu (2019) pointed out that community radio stations, by featuring interactive health programs, have successfully influenced behavioral change in many rural communities. They further argued that radio is an effective medium for bridging the health information gap, especially in areas where literacy levels are low.

Health literacy is another fundamental determinant of access to and utilization of health information in Nigeria. As Olumide (2023) observed, limited literacy levels hinder many Nigerians, particularly those in rural areas, from understanding and applying health information effectively. This is particularly evident in the context of vaccination programs, where misinformation has led to vaccine hesitancy and public distrust in medical interventions. Ezeah (2020) highlighted that social media has contributed to the rapid spread of health misinformation, which significantly affected COVID-19 vaccination campaigns in Nigeria. In response, health authorities have intensified efforts to counter misinformation through fact-checking initiatives and community-based health education programs.

Olajide (2022) emphasized that health education through mass communication is key to increasing awareness and improving health outcomes. He pointed out that countries with effective public health communication strategies experience higher compliance with health guidelines and lower disease burden. In Nigeria, partnerships between government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international health bodies have played a significant role in promoting health awareness. According to WHO (2022), risk communication strategies, including targeted campaigns and grassroots engagement, have been essential in combating public health crises, such as the Ebola outbreak and COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the progress made in health information dissemination, challenges remain. Olumide (2023) noted that inadequate funding, lack of standardized data management systems, and limited training for health information officers continue to hinder the effectiveness of health communication in Nigeria. He further argued that without sustained investment in health information management, Nigeria may struggle to achieve its public health goals. However, Akande (2021) suggested that adopting digital health technologies, such as mobile health (mHealth) applications and telemedicine, could significantly improve access to health information and services.

Role of Community Radio in Health Information Dissemination

According to Olajide (2022), community radio stations serve as vital platforms for broadcasting health-related information tailored to the specific needs of their audiences. In Nigeria, for instance, stations like ABU 101.1 FM have been instrumental in airing programs focused on adult health, children's health, personal hygiene, maternal health, and general

health education. These programs are designed to raise awareness about prevalent health issues and educate listeners on preventive measures and available treatments. A study conducted by Ajibade and Alabi (2024) on ABU 101.1 FM revealed that 85.5% of respondents believed the station's health programs promoted good health conditions and environmental hygiene, underscoring the station's role in community development through health education.

Similarly, in Numan Local Government Area (LGA) of Adamawa State, community radio has been utilized to bridge the communication gap between health institutions and the public. As noted by Ojebuyi and Salawu (2019), this approach fosters awareness and encourages behavioral change, particularly in regions characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity. The localized nature of community radio allows for the dissemination of public health information in local languages, making it more relatable and understandable to the target audience.

Impact on Behavioral Change

Community radio not only disseminates health information but also influences behavioral change within communities. Olumide (2023) pointed out that by providing consistent and culturally relevant health messages, community radio stations encourage listeners to adopt healthier lifestyles and practices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Nigeria's integration of social and behavior change communication (SBCC) strategies, which included community radio, highlighted the importance of effective community engagement in achieving positive behavioral outcomes. According to Akande (2021), these efforts contributed to building resilience among individuals and communities, promoting adherence to public health guidelines, and supporting scientific recommendations.

Furthermore, community radio has played a significant role in combating malaria in Nigeria. As Ezeah (2020) observed, radio programs have been particularly effective in spreading malaria prevention messages, making stations an influential channel for behavior change communication on malaria and other health topics within the community. This demonstrates the importance of radio as a medium for targeted public health interventions.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite its effectiveness, community radio faces several challenges that can hinder its potential. Olajide (2022) noted that limited funding, infrastructural deficits, and regulatory constraints are significant barriers to the establishment and sustainability of community radio stations. Additionally, in areas with low literacy rates, there may be challenges in ensuring that health messages are appropriately designed to be easily understood by the target audience.

However, these problems also present opportunities for innovation and partnership. Akande (2021) suggested that developing community media toolkits, such as the one published by the Nigeria Community Radio Coalition, can empower communities to establish and manage their own stations effectively. Furthermore, Olumide (2023) pointed out that integrating community media into social and behavior change strategies allows for the sharing of compelling stories that convey appropriate health and nutrition information, thereby enhancing the impact of health communication efforts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Agenda-Setting Theory was selected to anchor this study. The Agenda-Setting Theory, introduced by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972, posits that mass media have a significant influence on what topics audiences perceive as important. This theory suggests that while the media may not dictate what individuals think, they play a crucial role in determining what individuals think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

McCombs and Shaw's seminal study during the 1968 U.S. presidential election investigated the correlation between media coverage and public opinion. They analyzed the content of news media and surveyed undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to assess the issues voters deemed most important. Their findings revealed a strong correlation between the prominence of issues in the media and the public's perception of issue importance, thereby highlighting the media's role in setting the public agenda.

The core idea of agenda-setting is that the media's emphasis on certain topics leads the public to perceive those topics as more significant. The Agenda-Setting Theory highlights the media's ability to influence public perception by emphasizing certain topics, making them appear more significant. This process operates on two levels. First-level agenda-setting focuses on issue salience, where increased media coverage leads the public to perceive an issue as important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Second-level agenda-setting, also known as attribute agenda-setting, extends this influence by shaping how people think about an issue through the emphasis on specific attributes or aspects (McCombs, 2005). Over time, extensive research has validated the theory across various contexts, reinforcing its role as a foundational concept in mass communication studies (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). Ultimately, agenda-setting underscores the media's power in shaping public discourse and influencing societal priorities. Another aspect of the Agenda-Setting Theory is the distinction between first-level agenda-setting and second-level agenda-setting. First-level agenda-setting focuses on issue salience, meaning that the more coverage an issue receives, the more likely the public is to perceive it as important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This explains why certain issues, such as climate change, healthcare, or economic policies, become central topics in political campaigns or public discussions. Second-level agenda-setting, also known as attribute agenda-setting, goes beyond issue salience to examine how media shape public opinion by emphasizing particular attributes or perspectives on an issue (McCombs, 2005). This means that media not only determine what people should focus on but also influence how people interpret those issues. The Agenda-Setting Theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for examining the influence of community radio in disseminating health information and promoting behavioral change in Enugu State. The theory posits that while the media may not dictate what individuals think, they play a crucial role in determining what individuals think about. This means that the media, including community radio, can shape public perception of health issues by emphasizing certain topics, making them appear more significant. Community radio stations, which serve as primary sources of information in many rural areas, can leverage this agenda-setting function to raise awareness about critical health concerns such as maternal health, infectious diseases, and sanitation practices.

A key aspect of agenda-setting is its two levels of influence. First-level agenda-setting focuses on issue salience, where increased media coverage makes certain topics more prominent in public discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the context of health communication,

community radio can enhance the visibility of health-related issues by repeatedly broadcasting programs on disease prevention, immunization campaigns, and hygiene practices. This consistent emphasis can lead rural audiences to recognize these health issues as priorities, thereby encouraging greater engagement with preventive measures. Additionally, community radio's ability to use local languages and culturally relevant messages strengthens its effectiveness in shaping public awareness and concern for specific health topics.

Second-level agenda-setting, also known as attribute agenda-setting, extends beyond issue salience by influencing how people perceive and interpret those issues (McCombs, 2005). In health communication, this means that community radio not only draws attention to health issues but also shapes the way they are understood. For instance, a radio program on malaria prevention may not only stress the importance of using mosquito nets but also frame it as a cost-effective and life-saving intervention. By consistently highlighting specific aspects of health behaviors—such as the benefits of antenatal care or the risks of self-medication—community radio can contribute to behavioral change among rural populations.

Furthermore, extensive research has validated the agenda-setting function of media across different contexts, reinforcing its relevance in health communication (Shaw & McCombs, 1977). In rural communities, where access to other forms of media is limited, community radio serves as a vital platform for health education and advocacy. The repetitive and strategic framing of health messages can gradually lead to changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practices, ultimately improving public health outcomes. Therefore, applying the Agenda-Setting Theory to this study helps explain how community radio can effectively prioritize health issues and promote behavioral change among rural populations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted cross sectional survey design. The survey research design has been perceived as the total views, opinions, attitudes and interests of the research respondents on a given research issue at any point in time using such research tools as the questionnaire, interview (Obikeze, 1990). The study area is Enugu State, which is located in Southeastern Nigeria, is one of the five states in the region and serves as a major political, cultural, and economic hub. The state, created in 1991 from the old Anambra State, consists of 17 local government areas, with Enugu city as its capital. It is predominantly inhabited by the Igbo ethnic group, who engage in various occupations, including agriculture, commerce, and civil service. Enugu State is historically significant as a coal-mining center, earning it the nickname "Coal City State." The National Population Census conducted in Nigeria in 2006 recorded the population of Enugu State at 3,267,837, with 1,596,042 males and 1,671,795 females (National Population Commission, 2006). Enugu, being one of the Southeastern states of Nigeria, has experienced steady population growth, driven by urbanization, economic activities, and the presence of key institutions such as the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and Enugu State University of Science and Technology.

An in-depth interview was adopted to get a more detailed information from respondents on the topic of discuss. Purposive sampling technique was applied to select radio stations based on their proximity to each other (Solid 100.9 FM, Enugu and Dream 92.5 FM, Enugu). Qualitative method of data collection was employed in this study. In-depth Interviews were

used as the instrument for quantitative data collection. The questions guiding the interview was divided into four sections representing the research objectives. An electronic gadget (cell phone) was also used in recording the various responses from the various respondents in the interview. The views of the respondents were analyzed using thematic analysis. It was useful in analyzing data collected from interviews and observations.

RESULTS

The data for this study was collected from staff members of two community radio stations, Dream 92.5 FM Enugu and Solid 100.9 FM Enugu, through in-depth qualitative interviews. These stations play a crucial role in disseminating health information and influencing behavioral change, particularly among rural audiences. Although neither station has a dedicated health program, they integrate health-related discussions into their program, ensuring that vital health messages reach a wide audience.

The Role of Community Radio in Educating the Public on Health Issues

Findings from the study indicate that community radio plays a crucial role in educating the public on health issues by integrating health discussions into general programming. Through interactive shows, expert interviews, and listener call-ins, radio stations such as Dream 92.5 FM Enugu and Solid 100.9 FM Enugu provide essential health information on topics such as maternal health, malaria prevention, drug abuse, immunization, and mental health. By using local languages and culturally relevant content, these stations ensure that even rural audiences with limited access to formal healthcare receive accurate health education.

In line with this, a staff at Solid 100.9 FM noted that

"At Solid 100.9 FM, we take health education seriously because we know that many rural dwellers rely on our station for information. One of our most popular programs, Health for All, airs every Wednesday evening, and we use it to address various health concerns affecting our listeners. On February 10th, we brought in a nurse from the University Medical Centre at UNN to discuss malaria prevention. She explained the importance of using mosquito nets and avoiding stagnant water near homes. Many of our listeners called in to share their experiences, with some admitting that they had never taken malaria prevention seriously before. After the program, we received feedback from villagers who started using treated nets and keeping their surroundings clean. This is the power of community radio—it changes behaviors by making health messages simple and relatable." (Programme Coordinator, Solid 100.9 FM, Enugu)

In the same vein a presenter at Dream FM noted that

"We have a program called People's Assembly, where we discuss various social issues, including health-related matters. On February 28th, we invited a medical practitioner to talk about drug abuse and the dangers of buying medication from unlicensed shops. During the discussion, the doctor emphasized that many counterfeit or expired drugs are sold in local markets, and consuming them can lead to serious health complications. We had multiple callers asking how to identify licensed pharmacies, and by the end of the show, people were sharing their plans to be more cautious with their drug purchases. It was clear that the program had an immediate impact, and it reinforced

the need for continued health education on the radio.” (Presenter, Dream 92.5 FM, Enugu).

Another respondent noted that

“Another area we have focused on is security-related health concerns, especially gender-based violence. During one of our recent discussions, we talked about the link between rape, sexual health, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A legal expert and a doctor joined us to discuss the physical and psychological effects of sexual violence and where victims can get help. Many people called in to share their experiences or ask about support services. Some even confessed that they had previously dismissed rape survivors’ trauma as ‘not serious,’ but after the program, they understood the lasting impact of such experiences. That is what makes radio so powerful—it changes perspectives and attitudes, not just by telling people what to do, but by making them understand why it matters.” (Co-Host, Otigba, Solid 100.9 FM Enugu)

Changing Health Behaviors Through Radio Programs

Findings from the study reveal that community radio programs play a significant role in influencing health behaviors by raising awareness and correcting misconceptions. Through expert interviews, real-life testimonies, and interactive discussions, stations like Dream 92.5 FM Enugu and Solid 100.9 FM Enugu have encouraged positive changes such as improved maternal health practices, increased immunization rates, and reduced drug abuse. By making health information accessible and relatable, these programs empower listeners to make informed decisions about their well-being, demonstrating the effectiveness of radio in driving behavioral change.

“One of the most rewarding moments in my work is seeing how our programs influence behavior. Last year, during a Maternal Health Awareness Week on our station, we ran a series of discussions on safe pregnancy practices, antenatal care, and the dangers of home delivery. We brought in experienced midwives and mothers who shared their stories. One caller from a remote village in Nsukka shared that after listening to the program, she convinced her sister to give birth in a hospital instead of at home. She later called back to thank us, saying that the doctors had detected complications during labor that could have been fatal if she had delivered at home. Stories like these show that radio is not just a source of information—it saves lives.” (Health Program Producer, Solid 100.9 FM , Enugu)

This finding aligned with a finding from a News Editor from Dream FM

“One of the most alarming health issues we’ve tackled on our station is drug abuse among youth. In January, we hosted a rehabilitation expert on Let’s Talk Health, a show dedicated to public health discussions. During the episode, the expert detailed the dangers of tramadol and codeine abuse, and we featured a recovered addict who shared his personal journey. Many young listeners called in to ask questions about addiction and how to seek help. A few weeks later, one of them sent a message saying he had decided to enter a rehab program after hearing the show. That moment reaffirmed our belief that community radio can be a powerful force for behavioral change.” (News Editor, Dream 92.5 FM, Enugu)

Respondents also noted the Need for Community Engagement in Health Programming; *"We have seen that our health programs are more impactful when we involve the community in the planning process. In December, we held a meeting with local health workers and community leaders to ask them what health issues should be prioritized on our station. Many of them mentioned typhoid and poor sanitation, so we created a special segment where local doctors provided practical advice on water purification and proper hygiene. Because the topics were suggested by the community itself, listeners paid more attention, and we received numerous calls from people asking where to get affordable water treatment solutions. We believe that involving the people we serve in content creation ensures that our programs remain relevant and effective."* (Station Manager, Solid 100.9 FM, Enugu)

A host at Dream FM also noted that:

"One challenge we face is getting young people to actively engage with health content. Many of them prefer entertainment shows, so we decided to blend health education with entertainment. We launched Healthy Vibes, a program where we discuss health issues in a fun and engaging way—using storytelling, skits, and music. When we addressed HIV awareness last month, we brought in local artists to perform songs about safe sex and prevention methods. The response was amazing. Young people called in, shared their opinions, and even suggested topics for future episodes. We are proving that health education does not have to be boring—it can be entertaining and impactful at the same time." (Talk Show Host, Dream 92.5 FM, Enugu)

Another respondent noted that:

"I remember when we did an episode on drug abuse among young women. It was an emotional discussion because we had a guest, a young woman who had struggled with codeine addiction, share her personal experience. She spoke about how she got into drugs without realizing how addictive they were and how it nearly destroyed her life. Many listeners called in, some even in tears, admitting that they or their loved ones were battling similar issues. A mother called to say she had been suspecting her teenage daughter was using drugs, and after listening to the program, she knew exactly what signs to look for and how to approach the issue. This is why I love working on this platform. We don't just inform; we touch lives and make a difference." (Presenter, Soul Sisters, Solid 100.9 FM Enugu)

Integrating Health Education into General Programs

Findings from the study show that community radio stations effectively integrate health education into their general programs to reach a wider audience. At Solid 100.9 FM Enugu, programs such as Soul Sisters and Otigba incorporate health discussions alongside cultural and societal topics. By featuring medical experts, real-life testimonies, and interactive discussions, these programs educate listeners on critical issues like female genital mutilation, drug abuse, immunization, kidney disease, mental health, and gender-based violence. Many listeners, including parents and young women, have reported changing their perceptions and behaviors after hearing expert advice and personal stories on air.

In line with this, the producer of the soul sisters show noted that:

"At Solid FM, we believe that health education should not be limited to just one specific program. That's why we incorporate health discussions into our existing shows, ensuring that we reach a diverse audience. On Soul Sisters, which is mainly a program

about women's issues, we don't just talk about relationships and family matters; we also address serious health concerns affecting women. For example, on February 15th, we had a gynecologist on the show to talk about the dangers of female genital mutilation (FGM). Many women called in, shocked to learn that some of the traditional practices they once considered normal were actually harmful. One caller even admitted that she had been planning to allow her daughter to undergo circumcision, but after listening to the program, she changed her mind. That moment reinforced my belief that the radio is a powerful tool for changing lives." (Producer, Soul Sisters, Solid 100.9 FM Enugu)

In line with this, the host of Otigba in Solid FM noted that:

"We understand that some people don't intentionally tune in to listen to health programs, so we use every opportunity to educate them within our regular shows. Otigba is mostly a cultural and societal discussion program, but we make sure to include health topics whenever possible. Last month, during one of our episodes, we talked about immunization and vaccine hesitancy. A doctor from the Enugu State Ministry of Health was invited to explain the importance of childhood vaccinations. We had callers expressing concerns about vaccine safety, and the doctor patiently addressed their fears with facts. By the end of the program, some of them admitted they would take their children for immunization. This is why we do what we do—so that even those who wouldn't normally seek out health information can still benefit from it in the programs they already love." (Host, Otigba, Solid 100.9 FM Enugu).

This corresponds with the view of a news editor in Solid FM Enugu, thus:

"The respondent noted that one of the most striking health discussions we've had was about the rise in kidney diseases due to the misuse of painkillers and herbal concoctions. Many people in rural areas don't understand the long-term effects of self-medication. We ran a special segment where a medical expert explained how excessive use of painkillers and unregulated herbal mixtures can damage the kidneys. After that program aired, we received messages from listeners saying they had stopped taking certain medications indiscriminately. One man even called to say he had been experiencing back pain and thought it was just a normal issue, but after hearing the symptoms of kidney problems on our program, he went for a medical check-up. Turns out, he was already in the early stages of kidney disease, and he was able to start treatment early. That is why we continue to push for more health education on the radio." (News Editor, Solid 100.9 FM Enugu).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings from the study highlight the significant role of community radio stations, such as Dream 92.5 FM and Solid 100.9 FM Enugu, in integrating health education into their general programming to reach a wider audience. By embedding health discussions into popular programs like Soul Sisters and Otigba, these stations ensure that vital health messages reach even those who may not actively seek health information. Programs address a variety of issues, including female genital mutilation, drug abuse, immunization, kidney disease, and gender-based violence, often featuring medical experts and real-life testimonies to make the content relatable. The impact of these discussions is evident, with listeners reporting changes in perceptions and behaviors, such as mothers deciding against circumcision for their daughters, individuals recognizing the dangers of self-medication, and parents overcoming

vaccine hesitancy. Moreover, interactive formats, including call-ins and expert Q&A sessions, facilitate community engagement, allowing listeners to seek clarification and share their experiences. This approach underscores the power of radio in not only informing but also transforming public attitudes and behaviors toward health, demonstrating its effectiveness as a tool for behavioral change in rural communities.

Conflict of interest statement

There is no conflict of interest

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