

Evaluating Kenyan News Media Strategic Responses to Digital Disruption: A Case Study of Nation Media Group and Standard Group

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Abstract

This study evaluates the outcomes of strategies adopted by Kenyan news media to respond to digital disruption and their implications for editorial independence and long-term sustainability. It focuses on two leading news organisations, namely, Nation Media Group and Standard Group, adopts a qualitative approach and employs a multimethod research design consisting of in-depth interviews and document analysis. A total of 20 participants selected through purposive sampling were interviewed while key documents such as annual reports and financial statements and editorial policies were analysed. The study found that the media firms have adopted a digital-first approach to news production and distribution, created integrated newsrooms to enhance efficiencies, recruited new talents such as engineers, data analysts, and audience engagement experts to drive newsroom transformation. The media firms have also adopted new business models, restructured their operations and implemented cost-containment measures to stem financial declines. Despite implementation of the strategies, the study found that the companies continued to record persistent revenue losses that impact on their editorial operations and financial stability and ultimately undermine their capability to produce journalism that serves the public interest. The study concludes that the success of the news publishers depends on striking a balance between editorial innovation and commercial explorations on one hand, and on the other, adherence to normative journalistic principles to serve the public interest goal. The study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on media's strategic responses to digital disruption and implications for good governance, economic viability and socio-cultural dynamics.

Keywords:

Cost-containment, digital transformation, human resources, media innovation, organisational culture

Introduction

This study evaluates the outcomes of the strategies adopted by Kenyan news organisations to survive digital disruption and their implications for independent journalism and long-term economic sustainability. Focusing on two news organisations, Nation Media Group and Standard Group, the study builds on previous scholarships such as Chiridza and Mare (2025), Madrid-Morales and Ileri (2021) and Nkomo and Ndlovu (2025), which highlight the tensions facing African newsrooms in adopting digital transformation and the impact on economic viability and independent journalism. It also extends the discussions by scholars such as Makwambeni et al. (2023), who contend that whereas digital transformation, including adoption of Artificial Intelligence in African newsrooms, have advanced journalistic practice and opened opportunities for increasing revenues, it has simultaneously fostered new challenges such as audience fragmentation, labour precarity and ethical concerns on editorial content.

Underpinning the study is the fact that independent journalism is fundamental for safeguarding citizens' rights and insulating them against the vulnerabilities of partisan socio-political discourses that mask dictatorship (Schia & Gjesvik, 2020). Yet, when faced with financial pressures, news publishers resort to short-term measures such as reducing editorial budgets, using third party content, and implementing commercial strategies such as native advertising and content marketing, which collectively undermine journalism quality (Chiridza & Mare, 2025; Ulsan & Ozejder, 2024). Moreover, in an environment where independent journalism is constrained by socio-economic, political and technological challenges, the diversity of perspectives is reduced and robust public debate is circumscribed.

These challenges underscore the critical need for more scholarly explorations, particularly in African contexts, where democracy is persistently under threat and requires consistent monitoring to preserve the citizens' well-being. However, studies investigating strategies adopted by African media transformations are limited. This study fills the gap by investigating editorial and commercial strategies from institutional and localised contexts, thus generating deep insights into the digital transformation and the impact on journalism and economic viability of the media organisations. It deepens the discourse by evaluating how the strategies adopted by the Kenyan media impact on newsroom practices, editorial decision-making process, organisational restructuring and commercial and the corresponding impact on quality of journalism and business performance. In the respect, it provides depth and context based on African experiences and contributes to the growing scholarship on digital transformation with perspectives from the Global South. Thus, the study contributes to journalism studies, industry practice and policy.

Literature Review

Strategic Response to Digital Disruption

Christmann et al. (2024) advance the view that digital transformation reshapes how media content is created, distributed, and monetised. It also determines how media organisations execute their other responsibilities such as promoting political democracy, social and cultural

wellbeing and environmental conservation. Authors such George & Schillebeeckx (2022) add that strategic responses to digital disruption entails utilisation of appropriate technologies to improve content, create diversity and engage audiences. It involves leveraging digital technologies to develop innovative storytelling formats, streamline production models, and institutionalise data-driven engagement practices. Thus, the authors contend that digital capabilities enhance the quality of media outputs and deepen audience engagement. Newman and Cherubini (2025) support this assertion, citing the examples of the New York Times and Financial Times as media organisations that have made successful progress through adoption of digital and sustainability transformations.

Even so, studies show that digital and sustainability transformations present complex, multi-layered and systemic challenges that redefine how organisations function and create value (Christmann et al., 2024). Picard (2020) argues that adopting an integrated twin approach does not necessarily translate to improved performance. They postulate that without sufficient resources, alignment of organisational culture and commitment to long-term investment goals, such strategies may constrain news organisations, diverting focus from core journalistic functions and leading to fragmented or unsustainable outcomes. More specifically, Makwambeni et al (2023) argue that most African newsrooms face chronic revenue pressures, skills gaps and technology challenges, which undermine their capabilities to carry out major transformations.

Financial and Business Model Adaptation

Pickard (2020) states that digital transformation presents multiple challenges to journalism because it undermines the economic pillars that sustain the profession. Whereas the media business model has traditionally been predicated on advertising and circulation revenues, the digital transformation has opened the media market to multiple players, leading to audience and advertising fragmentation and stiff competition for revenues. Kawashima (2020) observes that the digital transformation has changed the value chain with emphasis on multiplatform content production, direct connection with the user and collaboration with other networks for distribution and marketing.

However, the challenge for legacy media organisations is lack of capability to transform their operations because they have operated in historically stable environments where change was gradual, predictable and navigable (Küng, 2020; Perreault, 2022). Yet, in the era of digital disruption, change is so profound and fast, requiring news organisations to rapidly activate the interlocking elements of leadership, talent and structure to remain vibrant and competitive. Evidence from Africa shows that newsrooms have adopted multiplatform business models and transitioned to new content monetisation strategies such as paywalls, subscription and membership, but with marginal returns, signifying the inadequacy of some of these initiatives (Chiridza and Mare, 2025; Nyarko, 2023).

Contrasting view shows that digital transformation, including application Artificial Intelligence and cloud computing, creates opportunities for content innovation and business explorations (Lusiana & Parastry, 2025). It also enables agility and equips organisations with capabilities to understand consumers, prioritise their needs and offer better and targeted services. Notably,

though, successful business models in disrupted environments entail synchronisation of corporate culture and technological innovations, extending beyond mechanics to understanding consumer values and preferences (Deep, 2023). It requires a digital-ready culture that prioritises collaboration, innovation, and constant organisational learning. According to Villi and Picard (2020), the digital business success of news publishers such as *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Guardian*, have largely been driven by a deep and strategic focus on customers, prioritising their needs, co-creating and customising content to serve their interests. However, as observed by scholars such as Ogola and Cheruiyot (2023), African newsrooms face hurdles transitioning from the legacy path dependency to complete digital platforms due to structural and economic conditions, thus undermining their chances of benefitting from the affordances of the online media business.

Talent Management Practices

The transformations in the media industry have precipitated profound changes in media work and the profession characterised by greater diversity and hybridisation of careers (O'Donnell and Zion (2020). According to the authors, newsrooms have evolved from platform-based entities to converged and integrated establishments, where news workers operate as a community of professionals producing content across all platforms. Scholars such as Splendore Brambilla (2021) note that news organisations no longer just recruit journalists but also other professionals such as data scientists, social media managers, podcast producers and engineers.

In addition, journalists are expected to adopt a commercial mindset, developing content that creates advertising opportunities while supporting marketing and brand awareness initiatives. Scholarship further indicates that beyond shifting professional roles, the working conditions of media practitioners have changed considerably. Journalists are now expected to operate within a 24-hour news cycle and undertake tasks such as content aggregation and curation, metrics analysis, audience mapping and engagement, and content marketing - all of which contribute to a precarious work environment (Springer & Rick, 2025). Moreover, a significant portion of journalistic work occurs outside traditional, institutional newsrooms (Gollmitzer, 2024). A study of African newsrooms by Cheruiyot et al. (2022) highlight the emergence of “peripheral actors” including fact-checkers, data scientists and algorithm experts, demonstrating the expanded roles of media workers and the impact on journalism.

Conversely, while digital technologies have sparked newsroom transformations, enhanced efficiencies and creating new opportunities, literature also shows that the changing journalistic practices have redefined routines, workflows, organisational structures, and editorial roles in ways that negatively affect journalists (Splendore & Brambilla, 2021). Those changes increase workload, demand a broader range of skills, and heighten job precarity, creating significant challenges for talent management, staff retention, and the maintenance of professional standards (Springer & Rick, 2025)

Audience Engagement and Consumption Patterns

The advances in digital technology have empowered audiences by providing vast choices and granting them control of when, how and where they consume content (Harcup, 2023; Örnebring

& Rowe, 2022). Accordingly, they have fostered editorial innovations with newsrooms experimenting with flexible, appealing and interactive news formats to reach wide audiences. Notably, news publishers deploy data analytics to understand audiences and develop content that serves their interests. Authors such as Collier (2025) and Temmerman and Mast (2021) contend that this dynamic has implications on content strategies and editorial decision-making processes. Among others, newsrooms are compelled to renegotiate news values and prioritise content that generates high clicks and pageviews and consistently respond to audience feedback and preferences.

Although audience engagement has become integral to contemporary news production and distribution processes, evidence suggests that it also poses challenges for the media. Scholars such as Dodds et al. (2023) have questioned the practicality of measuring and accurately responding to audiences needs when the metrics largely give quantitative data that may not capture the cognitive and emotive concerns of consumers. In addition, studies show that excessive focus on metrics and audience engagement undermines journalism, as it leads journalists to prioritise content that attracts consumers over issues of broader public interest (Møller, 2022). The foregoing discussions illustrate the tension playing out in newsrooms as they seek to deepen audience engagement while pursuing public interest journalism. The present study found that although Kenyan newsrooms have enhanced editorial practices and commercial operations through adoption of new strategies, their financial performance remains weak, underscoring the different innovations outcomes across different geographies.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the political economy theory, which enables an analysis of the structures processes and democratic functions of media in society (Salamon, 2025). According to the author, the theory examines power relations that determine the production, distribution and consumption of content across multiple platforms. Scholars such as Fuchs (2021) add that media are techno-social systems where technological structures interact with political, economic and social dynamics to determine communication and subsequent consumption and value creation processes. The theory was suitable in analysing the outcomes of strategies adopted by NMG and SG to respond to the digital transformation. It was used to analyse media's content production processes, digital labour practices, audience participation and commodification and commercial strategies. Drawing from the works of Nkomo and Ndlovu (2025), the political economy also enabled analysis of structural and financial inequalities that determine access to information and citizenship participation in democracy in the Global South.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research used a multimethod approach, which combines two or more methods to generate deep insights and allows a researcher to examine the social structure of a phenomenon, its setting and constituent social processes, to generate rich data (Wellman, et al, 2023). Nevertheless, the approach has shortcomings, among them, potential overlaps of the methods resulting in duplication of findings or prioritising one method at the expense of the other. The

study used a case study design, which allows for an in-depth, open and flexible investigation of a phenomenon (Halkias et al., 2022). It also allows a researcher to gain experiential knowledge of the context and issues being studied. However, a case study has shortcomings, including lacking scientific rigour and the findings may not lend themselves to generalisation. To mitigate against these shortfalls, this study used two data collection methods, in-depth interviews and document analysis, to help in cross-checking facts and guard against biased responses.

A purposive sampling technique was used, whereby participants were selected because they could provide crucial information required for the study. Two media companies, the Nation Media Group and the Standard Group Limited, were selected because they are listed in the stock exchange, operated multimedia platforms and had wide circulation. A total of 20 respondents were interviewed, 10 from each of the two media houses, selected on the basis of their roles, knowledge and insights into the issues being investigated. In-depth interviews and document analysis methods were used for data collection. In-depth interviews were used because they provide deep, rich, individualised and contextualised data vital for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Secondly, the research used document analysis method, which provided deeper insights and context into the issues under investigations (Sankofa, 2023). This study examined the following documents: annual reports that provided financial statements used for business performance analysis, editorial policies and guidelines that contain professional and ethical principles and newspaper reports for observable media trends.

Data generated through in-depth interviews and document analysis were analysed separately and thereafter integrated to address the research objective. The data was organised according to themes for systematic analysis and the findings presented in narratives and tables. The study adopted theoretical and methodological triangulation, and rich and thick description to ensure validity. To ensure reliability, the researcher recorded the interviews, transcribed them and analysed the data. The researcher fulfilled all the research protocols and ethical considerations, including obtaining all the required approvals and abiding by the principle of confidentiality.

Study Findings

Digital First Strategy

Nation Media Group and Standard Group have adopted a digital-first strategy that entailed developing content and distributing it first through mobile and digital platforms and then repurpose it for broadcast bulletins and newspapers. Most respondents reported that digital-first strategy enabled the media companies to disseminate content fast enough to meet the needs of online audiences. Equally, it enabled the media houses to provide regular updates and keep audiences informed in real-time on developing stories. However, the respondents noted that the strategy diminished content differentiation across platforms and hindered effective audience targeting.

The push to be first with news is working in terms of quick outputs but I'm afraid it is a disservice to the print outlets. We pick content from one basket but it is merely the same stuff that had been posted online. Since we are under-staffed and many journalists can't

develop differentiated content, we end up publishing the same stories already posted on the website. (NMG Respondent 1)

We have to give the audiences value and that means creating different content for every platform. My role as an editor, is to work with the reporters to cast stories in form and format that would appeal to my audiences through the platform they use. However, this does not happen every time for various reasons and on many occasions, we end up publishing the same story on the website and on print. (SGL Respondent 4)

The second editorial strategy was the reader revenues approach which involved providing audience-centric content in a timely manner and in form and shape they wanted it. Study also established that the media houses deployed audience metrics to track audience consumption patterns and in turn, used that for content planning, development and placement. However, evidence from the interviews showed that the reader revenue strategy had not achieved the desired objectives. For example, in October 2024, NMG's had 3,105,639 online users but only 10,875 subscribers. Table 1 shows subscription trends in 2024-2025.

Table 1

NMG Users and subscribers' projections, 2024 - 2025

Publication	Users Oct 2024	Subscribers Oct 2024	Users Oct 2025	Subscribers Oct 2025
Nation.Africa	3,105,639	10,875	3,726,767	70,000
Business Daily	1,165,329	1,910	1,398,395	15,000
The EastAfrican	522,760	879	627,312	3,000
Daily Monitor	944,976	2,131	1,133,971	22,679
Mwananchi	347,659	39	588,000	11,760
The Citizen	226,982	256	505,000	10,000

Source: NMG

Similarly, the respondents reported that the push for audience-centric content had proved counter-productive as it compelled journalists to concentrate on attracting audiences to increase revenues at the expense of quality journalism. Although the companies publicly expressed commitment to investigative and in-depth reporting to give value to consumers, the interviewees stated that rarely happened in reality. Thus, there was concern, especially among the journalists, that the strategy risked dumbing down journalism and eroding trust and credibility of the mainstream

Newsroom Integration

The respondents affirmed that the media houses had adopted an integrated newsroom approach that entailed bringing together all journalists from the various platforms – print, broadcast and digital – to work together in the same space. Consequently, the newsrooms were reorganised so that editors from different platforms worked side by side, enabling more effective planning, rapid response, and coordinated deployment when major stories broke. Both NMG and SG annual

reports affirmed newsrooms integration as a critical pillar in their journey of transformation from traditional to multimedia companies. Whereas the respondents agreed that the integration had created efficiency, enhanced productivity and versatility and fostered teamwork, it has simultaneously increased workload for journalists as they were required to produce content for multiple platforms, which affected productivity and content quality. Some of the respondents stated as follows:

Newsroom integration has great potential but was poorly implemented in our place. People were brought together without addressing issues such as cultures among print and broadcast newsrooms. We're still not sure how it should work but we hope we'll be to adjust and co-exist with those from other units. (SGL Respondent 3)

Newsroom integration looks good on paper, but it has come with some challenges. We find it difficult to differentiate content because many journalists have not mastered how to prepare content for various platforms. We also have a challenge meeting deadlines because reporters sometimes get overwhelmed when they try to multitask. (NMG Respondent 2).

Human Resource Management Practices

Study findings show that both NMG and SGL had instituted staff reduction strategies to reduce costs due to declining business performance. The companies had frozen recruitment of new employees, promotions and salary increases. While it was noted that staff reduction was inevitable, it had resulted in low employee morale, job uncertainty and reduced productivity.

The high staff turnover witnessed at NMG in recent years has caused so much instability and weakened our ability to create new products and compete effectively in the market. It is even bad that when people leave, they are not replaced, which means the few remaining have to take up the workload. Our concern is to keep the ship afloat but nothing beyond that. (NMG Respondent 4)

I am happy that I started as an intern and later got employed and rose through the systems to where I am within a period of six years. I can therefore say that the company has a system for identifying, recruiting and retaining talent. (SGL Respondent 2).

However, the documents reviewed presented a different picture, highlighting the companies' focus on staff retention and development through training and provision of conducive working environment.

Revenue Generation Strategies

The study found that had adopted diverse strategies to raise revenues, including a 360-advertising initiative that involved selling space across print, broadcast and digital platforms. Second, the companies focused on social media, influencer marketing and programmatic advertising. Third, was native advertising and sponsored content. It was reported that these advertising approaches had enabled the media companies to offer creative and innovative adverts, cultivate customer intimacy and generate incremental advertising revenues. Despite

these initiatives, evidence from the financial reports showed minimal financial increases, signalling that the strategies were not achieving the desired objectives.

In addition, the media houses had diversified into events, sponsorship and partnerships. In its 2022 annual report, SGL stated that it was embarking on aggressive revenue growth through expanding into new products, diversifying revenue sources, including setting up vernacular radio stations and monetising existing assets. Even so, the study did not find evidence to demonstrate the contribution of those other revenue sources to the companies' overall financial performance and therefore, it was difficult to determine their strategic viability.

Structural Adjustments

The study established that the companies carried out structural changes to align their operations, minimise cost and enhance productivity. First, both NMG and SGL had reduced newspaper editions, pagination and television news bulletins. The study found that the reduction of pagination undermined the companies' goal of providing depth, diverse and contextualised content that would give them a competitive edge. Similarly, the media houses had reduced broadcast programmes, among others, limiting news bulletin to just 30 minutes.

It is true that we have been forced to reduce the number of pages for various products, but what we have done is to take most of the content to our digital platforms. We hope that with time, the audience will begin to appreciate this and adjust to this mode of content distribution. (NMG Respondent 3).

The company was forced to reduce the pages for newspapers and this has come with some challenges. The length of stories has been reduced to an average of 400 words except for the main story of the day. I feel this denies our readers depth that they require to make sense of the news around them. (SGL Respondent 2).

Another area of structural adjustment was in newspaper circulation and distribution. Both NMG and SGL reduced the number of distributors and vendors, implemented joint distribution strategies, and outsourced newspaper transportation on select routes.

Discussion of Findings

Digital First Strategy

The first key finding was that NMG and SGL had adopted a digital-first strategy for news production as a response to digital disruption. The digital first strategy aligns with the new information ecosystem characterised by news abundance over a 24-hour day cycle and which prioritises speed and visibility (see, Elsheikh, et al, 2024, Christin, 2020). Furthermore, the companies had introduced paywalls for premium content to drive reader revenue that was being pursued as another avenue for generating income. However, although the transformations had enabled the media firms to deliver content first and aggregate audiences, they have generated sufficient revenues to stem their financial decline.

The findings represent what happens elsewhere across the world as highlighted by studies such as Degen et al (2024) and Picard (2020), which indicate that media organisations were struggling with monetising online content. Significantly, the findings align with studies such as Chiridza and Mare (2025), Nyarko (2023) and Ogola and Cheruiyot (2023), which demonstrate the challenges facing news publishers in the Global South in evolving digital-first news operations.

Using the political economy framework, the digital-first strategy has implications for editorial decision-making, newsroom work practices, routines and norms, precarity of news labour, and audience behaviour. In adopting digital-first strategy, the media firms prioritise speed and visibility to survive in the attention economy, create structures and systems that promote efficiencies, and align with content with business objectives.

Newsroom Transformation

The study finding that both NMG and SGL had created integrated newsrooms to facilitate seamless news production demonstrates ongoing transformations among Kenyan news organisations. The findings corroborate other studies such as George and Schillebeeckx (2022) and Hendrickx and Picone (2020) that posit that the demands of digital media had necessitated newsroom integration to facilitate quick turnaround of content production and distribution and also empowered journalists through acquisition of multiple skills to serve multimodal news outlets. The urgency to publish fast for online audiences required an agile and flexible newsgathering and production structure, which was best served within an integrated newsroom set up.

Nonetheless, the finding that newsroom integration had created other structural and professional challenges such as increased workload leading to burnout, declining productivity and low content quality confirm experiences elsewhere as highlighted by scholars such as Maares et al. (2023). Second, the study finding that the structural changes created cultural challenges in the newsrooms corroborate the perspectives by Küng (2020) and Perreault (2022), which highlight the tensions that arise in newsrooms when print, broadcast and digital journalists are brought to work together. The tension results from the conflict of cultures and news philosophies among newspapers, broadcast and digital journalists. This dynamic represents a professional and organisational culture challenge that newsrooms overlook in implementing digital transformation.

Within the context of political economy theory, newsroom integration is an organisational structuring initiative aimed at achieving efficiency, optimising productivity and maximising revenues, representing the commercial and capitalist orientation of news production and consequential outcome on normative principles of journalism.

Human Resource Management Practices

The study findings that NMG and SGL prioritised recruiting youthful and digitally savvy employees to drive the digital first strategy demonstrate a strategic shift towards upskilling newsrooms to address emerging industry needs. However, the finding that the companies did not provide adequate training to employees demonstrate a strategy gap because the highly competitive industry requires constant skills upgrade to enable them to deliver quality content

and guarantee long-term survival. Notably, the finding that the companies carried out regular staff retrenchments to cut operational costs represents a short-term strategy that undermines productivity and creating a precarious labour environment that compromises talent development and sustainable business operations. These findings corroborate other studies, such as Rick and Hanitzsch (2024), which indicate that journalists were increasingly finding themselves in a distressful situation where their employment contracts were being redefined and work opportunities drastically reduced. From the political economy perspective, the findings demonstrate media's capitalist orientation, where the focus is to maximise productivity at a minimal cost, signalling the precarity of media work.

Cost-Containment Strategy

The study findings that NMG and SGL had adopted cost-containment measures as a strategy to reduce expenditures and stem the spiral decline illustrate a common practice among media business around the world, as highlighted by Pickard (2020). However, that strategy is fraught with risks because it leads to reduced content depth and diversity, undermines journalistic autonomy and precipitates a rise of news deserts, all of which undermine democracy and citizens' wellbeing. This corroborates the findings of scholars such as Collier (2025) and Ulasan and Ozejder (2024), who argue that reduced budgets for editorial operations leads to content homogenisation and weakens public interest journalism. Likewise, Pickard (2020) posits that such a scenario cultivates a discursive capture that privileges market ontology at the expense of democratic principles. From a political economy perspective, whereas cost-containment is a viable strategy for managing business operations, it also leads to financialisation of the media production and distribution, thus negating the normative principles of journalism.

Conclusion

The study concludes that digital technology has significantly impacted on Kenyan news media, transforming editorial practices and commercial models, with negative consequences on their financial performance. Although the companies have adopted new strategies for newsroom performance, including prioritising digital publication, packaging content for different platforms and leveraging audience engagement for content monetisation, they continue to record persistent financial declines. Whereas the digital affordances elevate journalism through innovative and immersive storytelling formats and data visualisation, they have opened up the industry to multiple players, creating a stiff competition that threatens the survival of the legacy media. Notably, professional challenges such as content homogenisation, fake news and trivial content have emerged that create trust deficit and consequential audience declines. Likewise, revenues have fallen drastically compelling news publishers to reduce operational costs, impacting on editorial content and public interest journalism.

Declining revenues has created vulnerabilities that are being exploited by news sources, especially the government and powerful advertisers, to influence news content with undesirable outcomes on independent journalism. The study concludes that the success of Kenyan news publishers depends on striking a careful balance between new business models such as newsroom innovations, product diversification and cost-containment on one hand, and on the other, adherence to normative principles of journalism.

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David Aduda – conducted interviews, wrote sections of the article

Prof Silas Oriaso – contributed sections of the article and conducted quality checks

Dr Wairimu Gichobi - contributed sections of the article and conducted quality checks

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