



Journalist deaths spike in 2012 due to Syria, Somalia

A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists



Committee to Protect Journalists

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Syrian violence contributed to a sharp rise in the number of journalists killed for their work in 2012, as did a series of murders in Somalia. The dead include a record proportion of journalists who worked online.

A CPJ special report



A journalist dodges gunfire in the Syrian city of Aleppo.
(AFP/Tauseef Mustafa)

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The number of journalists killed in the line of duty rose sharply in 2012, as the war in Syria, a record number of shootings in Somalia, continued violence in Pakistan, and a worrying increase in Brazilian murders contributed to a 42 percent increase in deaths from the previous year. Internet journalists were hit harder than ever, while the proportion of freelancers was again higher than the historical average, the Committee to Protect Journalists found in its yearly analysis.

With 67 journalists killed in direct relation to their work by mid-December, 2012 is on track to become one of the deadliest years since CPJ began keeping detailed records in 1992. The worst year on record for journalist killings was 2009, when 74 individuals were confirmed dead because of their work—nearly half of them slain in a massacre in Maguindanao province, Philippines. CPJ is investigating the deaths of 30 more journalists in 2012 to establish whether they were work-related.

Syria was by far the deadliest country in 2012, with 28 journalists killed in combat or targeted for murder by government or opposition forces. In addition, a journalist covering the Syrian conflict was killed just over the border in Lebanon. The number of fatalities related to the Syrian conflict approached the worst annual toll recorded during the war in Iraq, where 32 journalists were killed in both 2006 and 2007.

Paul Wood, a BBC Middle East correspondent who covered Iraq and numerous other wars, said the Syrian conflict “is the most difficult one we’ve done.” Bashar al-Assad’s government sought to cut off the flow of information by barring entry to international reporters, forcing Wood and many other international journalists to travel clandestinely into Syria to cover the conflict. “We’ve hidden in vegetable trucks, been chased by Syrian police—things happen when you try to report covertly.”

With international journalists blocked and traditional domestic media under state control, citizen journalists picked up cameras and notepads to document the conflict—and at least 13 of them paid the ultimate price. One, Anas al-Tarsha, was only 17 years old. At least five of the citizen journalists worked for Damascus-based Shaam News Network, whose videos have been used extensively by international news organizations.



An image from a video published by the Shaam News Network shows smoke rising from buildings in Homs destroyed by government shelling. (AP/Shaaam News Network)

“This feels like the first YouTube war,” Wood said. “There’s a guy with a machine gun and two guys next to him with camera phones.” Local journalists, he said, have faced risks from all sides. “We’ve seen pro-regime journalists targeted by rebels—it is well known. But opposition journalists say the regime is intent on targeting them as journalists.”

Among those murdered was Ali Abbas, head of domestic news for the state-run SANA news agency, whose shooting in Damascus was claimed by an Islamist group linked to Al-Qaeda. Mosaab al-Obdaallah, a reporter for the state-owned daily *Tishreen*, was shot point-blank in his home by Syrian security forces; colleagues and friends said he was targeted after the authorities learned he was sending news and photos about the conflict to pro-opposition websites.

Worldwide, the vast majority of victims—94 percent—were local journalists covering events in their own countries, a proportion roughly in line with historical figures. Four international journalists were killed in 2012, all of them in Syria: American Marie Colvin, who wrote for the U.K.’s *Sunday Times*; French freelance photographer Rémi

Ochlik; France 2 reporter Gilles Jacquier; and Japan Press journalist Mika Yamamoto.

Deaths attributed to combat represented a higher proportion of the toll than in past years. Combat-related crossfire was responsible for more than one-third of journalist fatalities worldwide in 2012, about twice the historical proportion. About half of the deaths in 2012 were targeted murders, less than the 69 percent average over the past two decades. The balance of the 2012 fatalities came during dangerous assignments, such as coverage of street protests.



Somalis carry the body of journalist Abdisatar Dahir Sabriye, who was killed in an attack at a Mogadishu café in September.
(AFP/Mohamed Abdiwahab)

Murder accounted for all 12 deaths in Somalia in 2012, the deadliest year on record for a country that has a long history of media killings. Not a single journalist murder has been prosecuted in Somalia over the past decade, CPJ research shows. Local journalists say this perfect record of impunity can be attributed to corrupt and weak institutions, a situation that encourages more killing. The first victim in 2012 was Hassan Osman Abdi, known as “Fantastic,” director of the Shabelle Media Network. The slaying prompted then-Information Minister Abdulkadir Hussein to pledge a thorough investigation, but Shabelle lost three more staff members to murders during the year.

Somalia’s high death toll was due in part to a complicated and sensitive political transition and in part to Al-Shabaab militants, who were largely ousted from the capital, Mogadishu, in 2011, according to Mohamed Odowa, deputy director of the independent station Radio Kulmiye. Several of the station’s journalists were seriously injured in attacks in 2012. “Al-Shabaab was losing ground and it was forced from large areas, so the group wanted to send a message to the outside world that they were still in the capital,” Odowa told CPJ. Al-Shabaab claimed involvement in at least four of the killings in 2012, CPJ research shows.

Journalists who worked online made up more than one-third of the 2012 toll, a sharp rise from the one-fifth proportion in 2011 and the largest segment CPJ has documented for online journalists. In parallel, the proportion of print journalists who died in the line of duty fell to a record low of 31 percent. Over the past two decades, print journalists have accounted for more than half of those killed. Television and radio journalists constituted the balance of the 2012 toll.

Twenty-eight percent of journalists killed in 2012 were freelance, in line with 2011 but twice the percentage that freelancers have represented over time. Freelancer Mukarram Khan Aatif, a Pakistani who contributed to the private TV station Dunya News and to Deewa Radio, a Pashto-language service of the U.S. government-funded Voice of America, was shot outside a mosque in Shabqadar, about 15 miles north of Peshawar. Although the Taliban claimed responsibility for the January slaying, Aatif's in-depth coverage of conflict along the Pakistan-Afghan border had made him numerous enemies.



Pakistani journalists protest the murder of Abdul Haq Baloch, a TV reporter killed in Baluchistan. (AFP/Banaras Khan)

Pakistan, the deadliest place for journalists in 2010 and 2011, dropped two notches this year, but the number of fatalities held steady at seven. Four of those killings took place in Baluchistan, Pakistan's poorest region and a scene of protracted violence between separatists, anti-separatists, various tribes and ethnic groups, Pakistani security forces and intelligence agencies, and groups aligned with the Taliban. Among the victims was Abdul Haq Baloch, a correspondent for ARY Television, who was shot in September as he was leaving the Khuzdar Press Club, where he served as secretary-general. The authorities have held no one accountable in the killing, which is the near-universal result in media murders in both the region and across the nation.

"The fact that journalists are targeted so frequently in Baluchistan has to do with the nationalist movement," said Malik Siraj Akbar, founder and editor of *The Baloch Hal* and a native of Baluchistan who now lives in the United States. "There is a revolt across the entire province of Baluchistan against the government. As one journalist gets killed in Khuzdar, and the government takes no action, it promotes a culture of impunity and emboldens the targeting of journalists elsewhere."

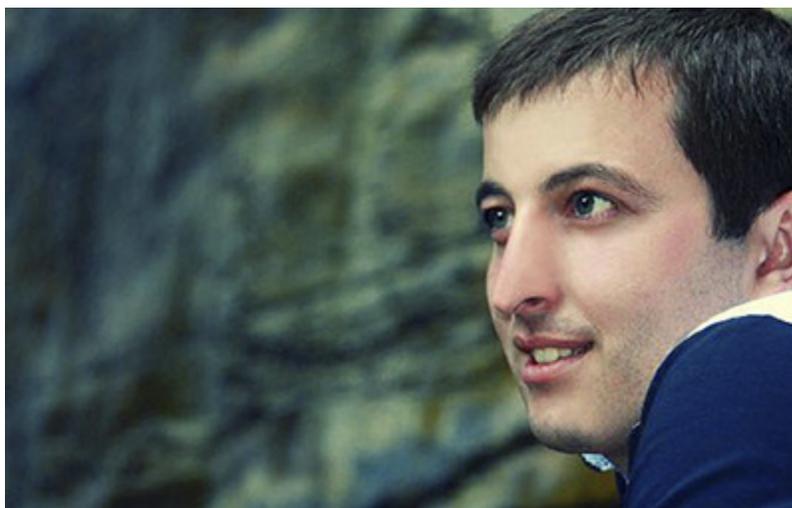
In Brazil, four journalists were killed in direct relation to their work, representing the country's highest annual toll in more than a decade and bringing the total number of fatalities over the past two years to seven. CPJ is investigating four other killings during that period to determine the motive. Brazil, historically one of the most dangerous places for the press, had seen few fatalities in the years 2005 through 2010, making the recent spike especially alarming to local journalists.

"In small cities, bloggers and writers for small newspapers and web portals who are calling out corruption are being targeted," said Gabriel Elizondo, a correspondent for Al-Jazeera in São Paulo. "The profile is usually the same: It's a small-town journalist, working for a small outlet, who gets gunned down."

Among the 2012 victims was Décio Sá, who wrote about politics for the newspaper *O Estado do Maranhão* and delved into political corruption on his widely read blog, *Blog do Décio*. The authorities in Maranhão have arrested several suspects, including the alleged gunman and mastermind, who are awaiting trial, according to news reports. Sá had been threatened repeatedly in connection with his coverage; roughly one-third of murder victims worldwide had reported receiving threats.

CPJ documented the death of one media support worker in 2012. In Pakistan, Mohammad Amir of ARY TV was killed while driving a news crew to cover violent protests in the northwestern city of Peshawar.

CPJ began documenting the deaths of media supporter workers such as translators, drivers, and fixers in 2003. The toll reached as high as 20 in 2007, when 12 media workers were killed in Iraq. The absence of media worker deaths in Syria, despite so many journalist fatalities, reflects conditions particular to the conflict and the changing nature of news. International reporters have not been able to work openly in the country and have been forced to rely on activists and smugglers, rather than traditional fixers, for assistance. At the same time, local individuals have stepped up to do their own front-line reporting, starting websites and uploading videos online.



Russian journalist Kazbek Gekkiyev was killed on December 5.
(AP/VGTRK Russia)

Here are other trends and details that emerged in CPJ's analysis:

- With two weeks remaining in the year, the 2012 death toll is already the third-highest CPJ has recorded. Along with the 74 deaths recorded in 2009, CPJ documented 70 deaths in 2007, a year marked by a high number of fatalities in Iraq.
- War, politics, and human rights were the three most common beats among the 2012 victims.
- About 35 percent of those killed in 2012 were camera operators or photographers, a proportion considerably higher than the 20 percent they have constituted in the death toll over the past two decades. About two-thirds of those killed in Syria carried a camera.
- In Mexico, where criminal violence has posed extraordinary dangers to the press, one journalist—freelancer Adrián Silva Moreno—was confirmed killed for his work in 2012. However, CPJ is still examining the motive in five other murders during the year. The Mexican government's failure to carry out basic investigations in many cases makes it extremely difficult for CPJ to determine a motive.
- One journalist was confirmed murdered for professional reasons in the Philippines, the lowest number

since 2007. In Russia as well, one journalist was killed: Kazbek Gekkiyev, news anchor for an affiliate of state-owned broadcaster VGTRK, was shot in the North Caucasus city of Nalchik. Both countries rank poorly on CPJ's Impunity Index, which spotlights countries where journalists are murdered regularly and killers go free.

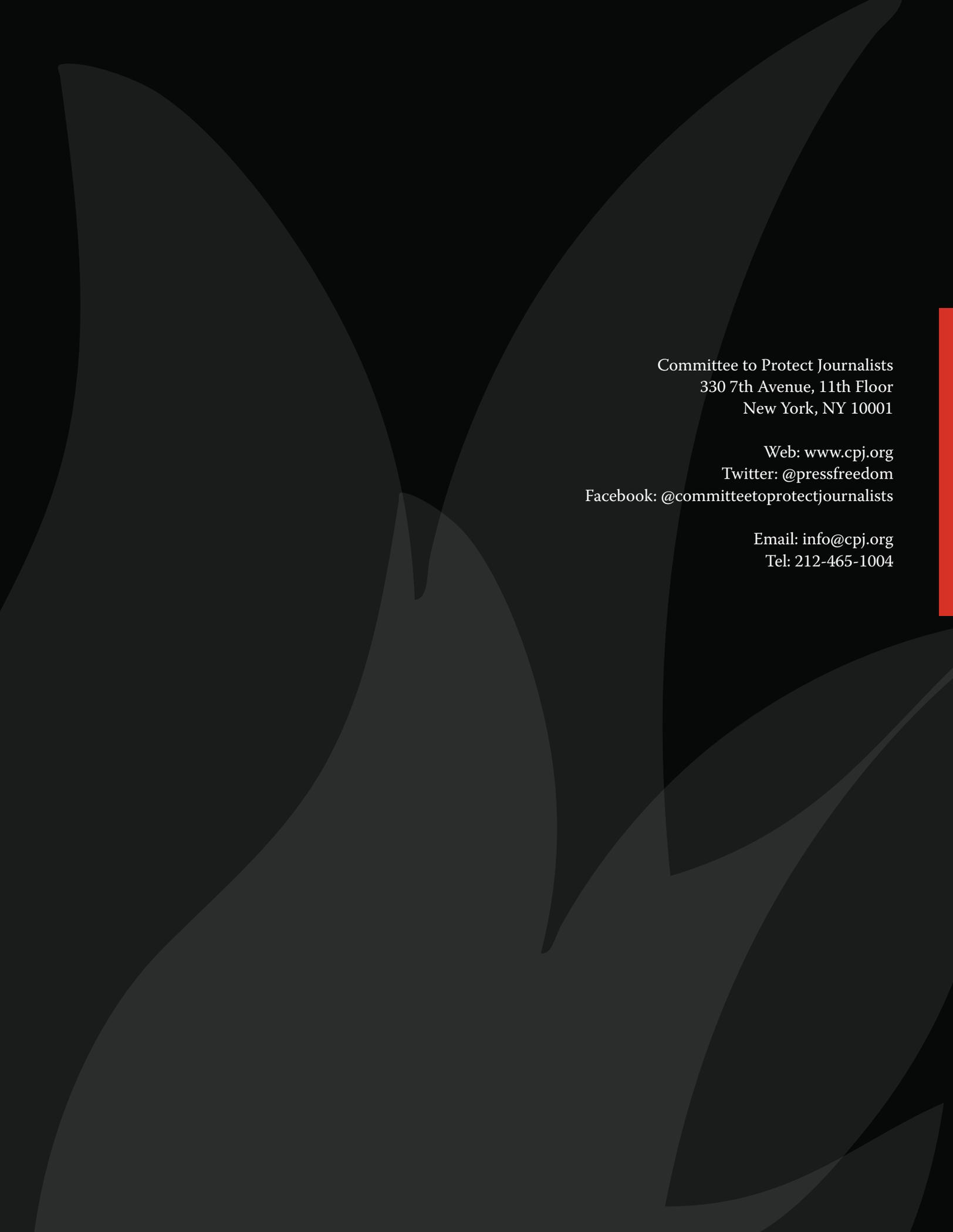
- In addition to the 28 work-related deaths in Syria, CPJ has documented the cases of four other journalists whose deaths in Syria came in unclear circumstances. CPJ is also examining the reported deaths of a number of individuals described by local groups as citizen journalists. In these cases, few details beyond the identities are known as yet.
- Outside Syria, fatalities declined in the Middle East and North Africa. Two work-related deaths were reported elsewhere in the region. In Bahrain, freelance videographer Ahmed Ismail Hassan was shot after filming a pro-reform protest. In Egypt, newspaper reporter Al-Hosseiny Abou Deif died after being struck by a rubber bullet fired by person whom witnesses identified as a Muslim Brotherhood supporter.
- For the first time since 2003, CPJ did not confirm any work-related fatalities in Iraq. A total of 151 journalists have died in direct relation to their work in Iraq, most of them during the years 2003 through 2008. CPJ is still investigating the deaths of three Iraqi journalists in 2012 to determine whether their work could have played a role.
- Tanzania recorded its first work-related fatality since CPJ began keeping detailed records in 1992. Daudi Mwangosi, a reporter with the private television station Channel Ten and chairman of a local press club, was killed during a confrontation with police over the arrest of another journalist.
- CPJ documented the deaths of one imprisoned journalist and one reporter under arrest. Critical Iranian blogger Sattar Beheshti died four days after being arrested on allegations of "acting against national security." Fellow prisoners said he was tortured while being held at Evin Prison. In Colombia, freelance reporter Guillermo Quiroz Delgado died after being hospitalized for injuries suffered when he was arrested by police while covering a street protest.
- Other countries where CPJ documented work-related fatalities were Nigeria, India, Ecuador, Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Cambodia.

CPJ began compiling detailed records on all journalist deaths in 1992. CPJ staff members independently investigate and verify the circumstances behind each death. CPJ considers a case work-related only when its staff is reasonably certain that a journalist was killed in direct reprisal for his or her work; in combat-related crossfire; or while carrying out a dangerous assignment.

If the motives in a killing are unclear, but it is possible that a journalist died in relation to his or her work, CPJ classifies the case as "unconfirmed" and continues to investigate. CPJ's list does not include journalists who died of illness—such as *New York Times* correspondent Anthony Shadid, who suffered an apparent asthma attack while traveling covertly out of Syria—or were killed in car or plane accidents unless the crash was caused by hostile action. Other press organizations using different criteria cite higher numbers of deaths than CPJ.

CPJ's database of journalists killed for their work in 2012 includes capsule reports on each victim and a statistical analysis. CPJ also maintains a database of all journalists killed since 1992. A final list of journalists killed in 2012 will be released in early January.

This report was compiled by CPJ staff with additional reporting by CPJ Steiger Fellow Sumit Galhotra and CPJ East Africa Consultant Tom Rhodes.



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