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INFORMATION CONTROL 2.0:

The Cyberspace Administration of China tames the internet

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Drastically intensified internet censorship.
New type of propaganda.
IT-backed authoritarianism.

Main findings and conclusions:

- Information control is an essential part of the CCP's conceptualization of the term national security. The Chinese leadership views the strategic handling of cyberspace as a matter of political life and death. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) was founded in 2013 with the clear mission of streamlining overlapping internet control structures.

- Rather than warding off hackers, cyber criminals and cyber terrorists, the CAC focuses on devising effective digital information control mechanisms. Taming the internet without jeopardising the economic opportunities of the digital age is a formidable challenge which the CAC is still struggling with.

- The CAC has not succeeded yet in significantly widening its competences beyond internet censorship and digital propaganda. Xi Jinping's vision of a grand strategy for the cyberspace has not materialised yet. Ministries, like the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology or the Ministry of Public Security, are still responsible for large areas of cyber policy.

- The CAC has radically stepped up China's internet censorship regime. Mandatory real-name registration as well as a new accreditation system for online journalists are but two examples of the CAC's regulatory work.

- The CAC is a major player in the Party-wide effort to adapt the propaganda system to the digital age. By using animated videos and cartoons the Party is trying to reach out to China's 700 million netizens. The CAC also champions new digital magazines, like The Paper and its English-language sister publication Sixth Tone. Such digital outlets have a lighter tone and content than traditional Party-state media.

- The CAC is internationally advocating the concept of cyber sovereignty. According to this notion, each country should have the right to draft and enact its own internet regulations however it sees fit. The notion of cyber sovereignty has already attracted the attention of leaders in authoritarian countries.

- The CAC's first director, Lu Wei, laid down the foundation for an agile and adaptive information control body. His successor Xu Lin is continuing the hard-line policies of his mentor.

In the Name of National Security
China's Cyberspace under Party Control

Central Leading Group for Cyber Security and Informatisation

Chairman: Xi Jinping

Deputy Chairmen: Li Keqiang, Liu Yunshan

19 more members

Cyberspace Administration of China

CAC Director: Xu Lin

3 Vice-Directors

9 Offices

网络评论工作局 Office of Internet Commentary	网络社会工作局 Office of Internet and Society	移动网络管理局 Mobile Internet Management Office	网络安全协调局 Office of Internet Security Coordination	国际合作局 Office of International Cooperation	政策法规局 Office of Politics and Law	网络信息服务管理局 Office of Digital Information Management	网络新闻信息传播局 Office of Online News Dissemination	信息化发展局 Office of Informatisation Development

3 Subordinate Centres

网络安全应急指挥中心 Cyber Security Emergency Centre	违法和不良信息举报中心 Complaint Centre for Unlawful and Inappropriate Content	互联网新闻研究中心 Research Centre for Online News

31 Provincial-Level Cyberspace Administrations

1. THE CYBERSPACE ADMINISTRATION OF CHINA IS DEVOTED TO CONTROLLING INFORMATION IN CYBERSPACE

China's censors see the internet as a source of potential dangers. Officials like Lu Wei and Xu Lin recognise the empowering potential of modern information and communication technologies. They understand how these technologies enable ordinary citizens to put out ideas that could transcend borders and boundaries, infect hundreds of thousands, even millions of people, and, potentially, spur them into action. For loyal servants of a political system that equates the stability of its hold on power with national security, the spectre of mass mobilisation is horrifying. Thus, **Party devotees like Lu and Xu view information control not as an infringement on the freedoms of the Chinese people, but as an indispensable guarantor of national security**. Without it the virtual world would descend into chaos and this chaos would spill over into the real world.[1]

Since December 2013, the CAC – first led by Lu and currently by Xu – has strived to redefine China's system of digital information control. By improving censorship regulations, strengthening oversight over digital content providers, and promoting new propaganda formats, the CAC has been using information technology tools to underpin the Party's authoritarian rule.

1.1 CHINA'S CONTROL OF THE INTERNET TO DATE: A CASE OF TOO MANY COOKS SPOILING THE BROTH

The internet represents a double-edged sword for China's leaders. On the one hand, they want to take advantage of the digital economy, but on the other, an open internet with freedom of speech would threaten the Communist Party's hold on power.[2]

The Chinese leadership particularly fears snowball effects, which in other countries have resulted in protests and uprisings such as those that took place during the Arab Spring and the Maidan revolt in Ukraine. Intense criticism of the Chinese authorities voiced on social media in the wake of the Wenzhou train accident in 2011 caused considerable uneasiness among Party leaders.

Unlike his predecessors, **President Xi Jinping takes information control in cyberspace very seriously**.[3] Xi believes that effective information control requires clear-cut regulatory responsibilities. However, regulatory responsibilities for the cyberspace were in the past divided up among 15 Party and state authorities.[4] Xi once compared the situation to a sea dominated by nine dragons: if too many authorities are involved, it becomes difficult for them to make effective political decisions. **The CAC's mission is to put an end to regulatory chaos in cyberspace**.[5]

1.2 THE CAC DERIVES ITS AUTHORITY FROM THE CENTRAL CYBERSECURITY AND INFORMATISATION LEADING SMALL GROUP

Formally, the CAC is the general office of the Central Cybersecurity and Informatisation Leading Small Group (中央网络安全和信息化领导小组). A central leading small group of the CCP is a taskforce staffed with high-ranking Party leaders and usually led by a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo.[6] The Central Cybersecurity and Informatisation Leading Small Group is one of only four central leading small groups personally chaired by Xi Jinping himself.[7] Its 22 members are the most senior decision-makers whose portfolios touch in some way on network security, fighting cybercrime, cyber warfare, cyber diplomacy, propaganda, censorship, digital economy and IT infrastructure. The group includes, for example, Central Bank Governor Zhou Xiaochuan, Chief of the Joint Staff Fang Fenghui, and Head of the Propaganda Department Liu Qibao.

At the inaugural meeting of the Central Cybersecurity and Informatisation Leading Small Group in February 2014, Xi Jinping stated: **"Cybersecurity and informatisation go hand in hand. There is no national security without cybersecurity and no modernisation without informatisation"**. The CAC was to take on the role of developing and enacting a comprehensive strategy for China's cyberspace.[8] The CAC was also expected to take a leading role in promoting the digital economy and combatting cybercrime. At present, the CAC is a long way from accomplishing these goals, and works first and foremost on the area of information control. It lacks the institutional capacity and personnel to compete with already established ministries such as the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) or the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in the aforementioned areas.

2. THE CAC'S ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE IS TAILORED TOWARD CENSORSHIP AND PROPAGANDA

The CAC certainly knows how to catch the public's attention: Xu Lin and his leadership team comment on matters of internet policy in the media; they appear at conferences and workshops and meet up with foreign politicians and businessmen. And yet the CAC is very tight-lipped about its internal structure. However, a look at the CAC's job advertisements sheds ample light on the focus of its work: **the cyberspace administration searches primarily for candidates with at least two years of solid experience in propaganda work**. Successful applicants get assigned to, for example, the Office of Internet Commentary or the Complaint Centre for Unlawful and Inappropriate Content.[9]

By analysing official Chinese Party-state media reports on the CAC, we can discern at least nine CAC offices (see the organigram on p. 2). Although the exact areas of responsibilities cannot be deduced from media reports, the names of the individual departments give us some clue about the nature of their work. Take, for example, the Office of Online Commentary, the Office of Internet and Society, or the Office of Online News Dissemination. The Mobile Internet Management Office is responsible for regulating text-messaging services such as

WeChat. **These offices are clearly in charge of censorship and propaganda tasks**.

On the subnational level the CAC is supported by an intricate network of cyberspace administrations. As in the Beijing headquarters, experienced propaganda officials occupy leading positions in the CAC's subsidiaries on city and provincial level. Their task is to enforce the rules and directives issued by the central CAC in Beijing. The local press reports regularly on their work. In 2015, for example, the cyberspace administration of Shandong Province removed approximately 7,600 "illegal" online postings, deleted 110 blogs and closed 760 digital user accounts.[10] The cyberspace administration of the city of Changsha, in turn, closed a "rumour portal" called Voice of Changsha (长沙说).[11] The cyberspace administration of Anhui Province organised a workshop in February 2016 to pass down new restrictive propaganda guidelines.[12]

3. TAMING CYBERSPACE: A CLEVER BLEND OF CENSORSHIP AND SELF-CENSORSHIP

In essence, **the CAC is a revamped version of the former State Internet Information Office** (SIIO, 国家互联网信息办公室). In April 2013, shortly after taking office as President of the PRC, Xi Jinping appointed Lu Wei director of the SIIO. Known for his zealous work style, Lu began his tenure by targeting the regime's most outspoken critics on Twitter-like microblogging platforms, especially Sina Weibo. Lu initiated a large-scale campaign with the specific aim of silencing critics with a large following on Weibo. Some of those opinion-makers had hundreds of millions of followers. Lu also met informally with the most influential ones and urged them to toe the Party line. In addition, Lu stepped up the surveillance and censorship of Weibo posts. Hundreds of micro bloggers were arrested. The 500 million Weibo users got the message: crossing the red line is no longer tolerated. A few months later President Xi established the Central Cybersecurity and Informatization Leading Small Group and promoted the SIIO to act as its General Office. Thus, Lu Wei's boss was no longer the head of the State Council Information Office, but Xi Jinping himself in his capacity as Chairman of the Central Cybersecurity and Informatization Leading Small Group.

The CAC is continuing the censorship work of the State Internet Information Office. The CAC ensures the suppression of digital "rumours", i.e. online comments that touch upon sensitive issues or engage in organised dissent. Censored material also extends beyond politically sensitive topics to include a wide-range of issues that the Party regards as "harmful". This includes pornographic content, illegal drugs advertisement and content that glorifies violence. The CAC also cooperates with communication firms such as China Mobile to filter spam texts. It requires digital platforms to take steps to limit online bullying. And it closes web portals that facilitate extramarital affairs.

The CAC understands that no bureaucratic machine can ever control the digital output of China's 700 million netizens. Thus, **the bulk of the CAC's work focuses on two aspects: strengthening the existing system of outsourced censorship and increasing self-censorship**. The CAC is also responsible for deleting "undesirable" Chinese websites and blocking foreign websites.

Leadership Team of the Cyberspace Administration of China (as of September 2016)

Name	Position	Previous positions
Xu Lin	CAC Director	Propaganda Department of Shanghai
Wang Xiujun	CAC Vice Director	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology
Ren Xianlang	CAC Vice Director	Propaganda Department of Shaanxi
Zhuang Rongwen	CAC Vice Director	High-ranking government engineer

Source: http://www.cac.gov.cn

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3.1 THE CAC HAS STRENGTHENED THE POLICY OF CENSORSHIP DELEGATION

The number of websites blocked in China has risen by 14 percent in the first two years of the CAC's existence.[13] **The CAC's endeavour to tame China's cyberspace has been largely successful**. As Rogier Creemers, an expert on China's cyberspace, has observed, political satire still exists on the internet, but social media are no longer as politically active as they

were before.[14] The CAC's outsourcing of censorship tasks to digital platforms and placing restrictions on online journalists, introducing real-name online registration and imposing harsher punishment on offenders are all factors that contributed to the taming of China's internet.

Online platform and social media providers were under obligation to monitor and delete "undesired" content long before the CAC came along, and they usually conduct the bulk of censorship work. However, **the CAC increased the scrutiny of the way online platform and social media apps, like WeChat, conduct their censorship duties**. In extreme cases, the CAC can order any digital platform in China to delete the user account of a troublemaker. In February 2016, the CAC made headlines for ordering the deletion of the social media accounts of real estate mogul Ren Zhiqiang. With 37 million followers, Ren was one of the best-known voices in China's social media, and he used his voice to criticise Xi Jinping's media policy.

With the aid of local cyberspace administrations, the CAC can take firm action against online platforms whose providers fail to meet their censorship obligations. The CAC has even introduced rules and regulations for platforms that do not fully co-operate. One of these regulations, **the "Ten Admonition Rules"** (约谈十条)**, obliges local cyberspace administrations to summon representatives of online platforms who neglect their censorship duties for a talk with local CAC officials**. During the talk, CAC officials present the respective censorship team with its alleged "errors". Punitive action directed at the company is also possible.[15] The whole process is modelled on Propaganda Department practices in dealing with traditional media outlets that crossed the red line.

3.2 ENDING DIGITAL ANONYMITY HAS INCREASED SELF-CENSORSHIP TENDENCIES

The CAC's ultimate goal is to make censorship unnecessary by enticing netizens to self-censor their digital output. To this end, **the CAC issued the real-name online registration regulation** (互联网用户账号名称管理规定). CAC officials reckon that if netizens were forced to provide their real names online, they would then become more cautious in what they write and share. The task of ensuring that the real-name regulation is enforced was then relegated to the online platform providers. The CAC has toughened this system by making websites and app developers liable for the digital output of their users.

Netizens are still allowed to use a public pseudonym. However, pseudonyms may not imply any connection with government entities or famous individuals. Pseudonyms such as "China Daily" or "Barack Obama" are not allowed for that reason.[16]

3.3 NETIZENS WHO OVERSTEP THE RED LINE ARE LIABLE FOR LEGAL ACTION

The CAC lobbied hard for the criminalisation of online rumours. Its efforts were fruitful. **According to the Ninth Amendment to the PRC Criminal Law, which became effective on 1 November 2015, the spreading of online "rumours" carries a prison sentence of up to seven years.**[17] The CAC can prosecute anyone proven to have "knowingly" disturbed the public peace by disseminating rumours. Whether or not the CAC will make use of this provision remains unclear; the discussion in the Party-state media indicates that this will only happen in serious cases. Without doubt, the ninth amendment has a deterrent effect.

In addition to ordinary internet users, online journalists are under particularly close scrutiny by the CAC. **In accordance with a new system launched in November 2015, only accredited online journalists are allowed to publish online news**. The accreditation must be renewed annually. Anyone who fails to meet his or her "journalistic duties" is blacklisted. These duties include propagating and spreading the Party narrative.[18] This system has extended even further as non-accredited websites will not even be allowed to publish news from accredited sources without a special licence.[19]

4. CAC PROPAGANDA: THE PARTY'S VOICE "SHOULD BE THE LOUDEST" IN CYBERSPACE

Censorship – however efficient – is only one aspect of information control. The other aspect is propaganda. The aim of censorship is to weed out undesired information. The purpose of propaganda is to define the narrative. **In the long run effective propaganda is a more reliable tool of information control**. Lu Wei and Xu Lin – who spent a good deal of their career working for the Propaganda Department – understand that.

Prior to the Xi Jinping era, digital propaganda work was limited to drawing from the printed content of the Party's offline media and posting it online. For a long time there was hardly any difference between propaganda material earmarked for online use and for print media. However, the Party realised that members of the younger generation have no use for the stilted language employed by the Party-state news agency Xinhua and the *People's Daily*. That is why Xi Jinping set himself the task of revamping the propaganda system, which in his view was obsolete and ineffective.[20] "The struggle for public opinion must be won online", he stated in August 2013, making the new Party line clear.[21]

It is precisely this struggle that the CAC is carrying out in the name of the Party. **The CAC is one of the major players who are adapting China's propaganda apparatus more closely to the internet age**. Others include the CCP's Propaganda Department as well as the Xinhua News Agency. The ultimate aim is to reach out and win over China's 700 million netizens. The country's digital propaganda landscape looks far different today than it did just a few years ago. The personal-

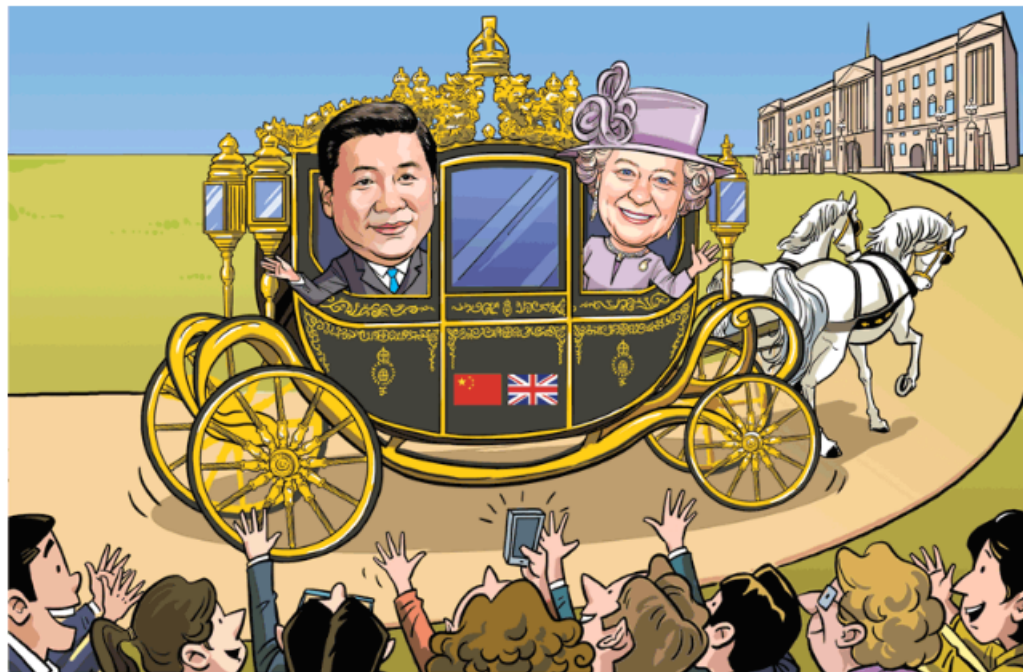**Diplomatic success depicted in comic-strip style**
Screen shot of Xinhua's report on Xi's visit to the UK in 2015

Cartoon commentary on President Xi's UK visit 2: High-level welcome ceremonies show Sino-British relations' importance

English.news.cn | 2015-10-24 13:18:36 | Editor: An

High -level welcome ceremonies show Sino-British relations' importance.(Source: CNTV.cn)

ity cult surrounding Xi Jinping, for instance, is being promoted using modern internet tools. Added to this is an effort towards playing down the authoritarian power structure by using animated propaganda videos and cartoon figures. The end game is to present the Party narrative in an entertaining fashion. Three to five minute long cartoons about the PRC's anti-corruption campaign, the current five-year plan or market reforms have become a trademark of the new propaganda strategy. This manner of presenting the Chinese leadership would have been unthinkable before Xi Jinping came to power; it would have been perceived as ridiculing the country's top leaders.[22]

Local Party media are also taking the initiative in the development of new digital formats. From the Party's viewpoint, the Shanghai United Media Group sets a good example for others to follow. In July 2013, it launched the online newspaper The Paper (http://www.thepaper.cn/), which has become very popular since then. The CAC supports such initiatives. In fact, Lu Wei visited the editorial office of The Paper in July 2014 to demonstrate his support for its work. Today the internet magazine stands for a growing number of online portals that present the General Secretary as the friendly "Uncle Xi" and his wife, the singer Peng Liyuan, as "Aunt Peng".

In February 2016, Xi Jinping called on the Party-state media "to fan out into the world and tell the China story". Heeding this call, *The Paper* launched an English version called Sixth Tone in April 2016 (www.sixthtone.com). The Paper and Sixth Tone intentionally refrain from publishing the usual stiff political reports and focus on human-interest stories and light-weight journalism instead.

5. CHINA STILL DOES NOT HAVE A GRAND STRATEGY FOR CYBERSPACE

The CAC can claim several successes relating to its core responsibilities of censorship and propaganda, and yet it failed to deliver on one of its central missions. Xi Jinping established the Central Cybersecurity and Informatisation Leading Small Group to work towards a grand cyber strategy for the country. He entrusted its general office, the CAC, with facilitating that aim.[23] The CAC still has a long way to go to become the most influential actor in shaping China's cyber strategy. This does not keep it from creating the impression – both in discussions with foreign guests and on its website – that it bears responsibility for China's overall digital strategy. The reality is quite different: industrial policy on information and communication technology (ICT) lies in the MIIT's hands. The National Development and Reform Commission is primarily responsible for implementing the Internet Plus strategy. In sectors such as big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence and robotics, CAC activities are primarily restricted to posting reports on its website.

Moreover, the CAC cannot yet fulfil the task conceived for it by Xi Jinping of ensuring network security and fighting cybercrime – topics which Western governments regularly raise with China. The Ministry of Public Security continues to bear responsibility in these areas; in the cyber dialogue between the United States and China, it was Guo Shengkun, Minister for Public Security, who represented the Chinese side, not the CAC.

The term cybersecurity has a different meaning in China than it has in the West. While some Western countries place particular emphasis on data protection, it is information control that is the key issue for China. For Chinese decision-makers more than anything else, ensuring cybersecurity means averting hazards to political stability that originate in cyberspace.[24] It is cybersecurity in this narrow sense that is currently the focus of the CAC's work.

Nonetheless, in the months and years ahead, the CAC will continue its endeavours to expand its scope of influence. It will further strive to assume a leadership role when it comes to regulating and promoting the information and communication industry. For the time being, though, the CAC only occupies niches: in January, the CAC founded a committee dedicated to developing Chinese technical standards of network security.[25] The draft laws for cyber security and e-commerce also include provisions for a secondary role for the CAC in addition to other players such as MIIT and NDRC.[26] The State Council's strategy paper on the Internet Plus initiative grants the CAC a voice in matters including the digital economy and digitisation of the healthcare sector.[27]

Nevertheless, for the time being it would be an illusion to believe that the Cyberspace Administration of China will soon evolve into the central steering entity that Xi Jinping envisaged. The CAC still does not have the personnel or the competence to dislodge existing power structures and curb the influence of the other actors.

6. THE CAC IS PROMOTING THE CONCEPT OF CYBER SOVEREIGNTY ABROAD

As the Chinese leadership sees it, control over cyberspace is a matter of national security, and effective censorship and propaganda are two very important ways of guaranteeing that. Efforts by Western countries to undermine China's censorship system have been a thorn in the side of the Chinese leadership. The US State Department, for example, invested approximately 100 million dollars (about 88 million euros) in the development of software tools to circumvent internet censorship between 2008 and 2010.[28] China criticises such actions as constituting unlawful interference in its own affairs.

This is why the CAC wants to gain international acceptance for China's information control regime. Propagating the principle of "cyber sovereignty" (网络主权) is an important aspect of its cyber diplomacy efforts. The notion of cyber sovereignty conceives of cyberspace as being comprised of the "internets" of different countries. Each country would have a right to regulate its own internet at its own discretion.[29] To enforce this claim, the CAC also involves successful domestic IT companies such as Baidu and Tencent in its efforts.[30] Where leading American companies such as Apple and Google advocate internet freedom, China's national champions are expected to propagate the Party line of internet censorship and information control.

Up to now, however, the CAC has had little success in its struggle for international acceptance. Not only do Western countries reject the concept of cyber sovereignty, but so do emerging economies such as Brazil and India. At this point in time, the idea of a free internet is in the lead internationally. The situation is different in countries under authoritarian rule, though. In matters of internet control, Lu Wei met with Russian and Iranian officials to advise them.[31]

The CAC is an important pillar of China's IT-backed authoritarianism, i.e. the state's use of newest information technology to sustain China's one-party rule.[32] In time, the CAC could become a viable export model for other authoritarian states.

7. CHINA'S AMBITIOUS INTERNET STRATEGY: OUTWARDLY ISOLATED, YET INWARDLY INNOVATIVE

- With the CAC as the central steering body, internet censorship in China is likely to be intensified. The Party leadership under Xi Jinping is determined to tame the perceived threat potential coming from online dissent.
- To be able to operate at all in China, foreign companies and non-governmental organisations will have to adapt to tighter censorship regulations.
- Stricter censorship does not hamper economic development of the internet in China, since the Party is pursuing dual objectives in matters of cyber policy: politically sensitive content is blocked, whereas regulatory and financial support of the ICT industries is being expanded.
- For the foreseeable future, the CAC's competence will continue to be mainly limited to propaganda and internet censorship. In spite of support by leaders at the highest level, it will be difficult for the CAC to become a dominant player in areas such as regulating the internet economy. These areas will remain the responsibility of MIIT, NDRC, and subnational governments.
- China's efforts to assert the notion of cyber sovereignty on the international stage will remain unsuccessful for the time being. On the other hand, in countries under authoritarian rule, Chinese concepts of internet control are viewed quite positively.

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