

IS KMEL THE PEOPLE'S STATION?



A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT OF 106.1 KMEL

Fall 2002

A community survey authored by the
Youth Media Council

INTRODUCTION

WHY 106.1 KMEL?

“When stuff goes down in our communities, young folks are listening to KMEL, not watching the news. If it doesn’t get air on KMEL, we don’t know it’s happening.”

—Mindzeye Member

106.1 KMEL is the primary radio station for Bay Area youth and people of color, listened to by more than 600,000 people. Though it calls itself the “People’s Station,” a 2002 community assessment of KMEL content led by youth organizers, community groups and local artists found otherwise. While KMEL claims to provide access, accountability, and voice to Bay Area communities, the assessment shows:

- KMEL content routinely excludes the voices of youth organizers and local artists,
- KMEL neglects discussion of policy debates affecting youth and people of color,
- KMEL focuses disproportionately on crime and violence, and
- KMEL has no clear avenues for listeners to hold the station accountable.

This new report offers specific recommendations for KMEL station managers and on-air hosts, and presents a framework for KMEL to build strong relationships with youth, community organizers and local artists to increase media access and accountability. Pursuing these recommendations would give Bay Area youth of color the opportunity to speak for themselves about issues that impact their communities and lives, and would allow KMEL to live up to its “People’s Station” claim.

The National Association of Broadcasters has recognized KMEL for outstanding community service, stating that, “KMEL has invested more time, money, and manpower towards Bay Area communities by teaming up with local organizations throughout the cities of SF and Oakland.” This partnership may have been achieved with large, moneyed non-profits like the Omega Boys Club, but smaller grassroots non-profits that use organizing as their primary social change strategy have been excluded from the station’s “teaming up.” Strong relationships between organizers, local artists and KMEL are central to building strong communities and promoting social justice for youth and their families.

We hope this report will be used as a tool to promote a partnership between KMEL and local youth artists and organizations. We hope to increase access for youth and youth organizers, improve accountability mechanisms, open a more balanced and thorough debate on youth policy issues on the Sunday talk show “Street Soldiers,” and increase KMEL’s acknowledgement of the vibrant social justice work being led by youth and young artists in the Bay.

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BACKGROUND

According to a 2001 study of local news, youth are “more likely to be depicted in the context of crime and violence than through issues such as health, education, family and community life”¹ – leading the public to support policy solutions that endanger youth and their communities. This assessment will demonstrate that content on entertainment station 106.1 KMEL is consistent with this trend.

Despite dramatic decreases in juvenile crime, leading to the lowest rate of juvenile crime and victimization in 25 years, 80 percent of respondents to a 1998 Los Angeles poll said the media’s coverage of violent crime had increased their personal fear of being a victim². From 1990-1998, the national crime rate dropped by 20 percent, but news coverage of crime increased by 83 percent³. In this context, the yet-unformed Youth Media Council with We Interrupt This Message began challenging biased media debates about youth and youth policy by organizing youth and community organizations to analyze newspaper coverage. A team of homeless youth examined the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1997, and in 2000 a team of young researchers performed a content analysis of seven newspaper outlets across the state of California. A year later, we analyzed content of KTVU Channel 2’s “10 O’Clock News” show. In all three studies we found similar results:

- Messages promoting punishment policy controlled the debate
- Most stories focused on crime and violence
- Police, prosecutors, and politicians were quoted at more than twice the rate of youth, and more than three times the rate of youth of color
- Youth were portrayed behind gates and bars, in handcuffs, or in courtrooms
- Solutions and root causes to problems raised in coverage were invisible, youth poverty was rarely mentioned in conjunction with youth crime, even though it has been proven repeatedly that poverty is the primary indicator for youth crime.



THE GOALS OF THE CAMPAIGN TO BUILD A PEOPLE’S STATION

As local youth organizers and artists, we understand radio to be a necessary tool for improving the conditions in our communities, holding corporations and policy-makers responsible for those conditions, and increasing access to information and analysis for young people of color and other marginalized communities. Therefore, the “Build a People’s Station” Campaign hopes to:

- Build strong relationships between 106.1 KMEL and social justice youth organizations in the Bay Area
- Increase the access of youth, youth organizers, and local artists to 106.1 KMEL

- Amplify the civic voice of youth and broaden the youth policy debate on 106.1 KMEL’s talk show “Street Soldiers”
- Increase the accountability of 106.1 KMEL to its audience, which is overwhelmingly made up of young people of color

We also hope this assessment will encourage hosts and announcers at 106.1 KMEL to join the hundreds of Bay Area youth organizations in increasing access and accountability. We need KMEL to give our communities better access to information and analysis, and to allow marginalized youth, youth organizers, and artists to speak, sing, and rap for ourselves about issues and policies that impact us most.

BACKGROUND CONT.

Repeatedly, the Youth Media Council has found that when outlets cover youth or youth policy their content criminalizes and silences youth – particularly youth of color – and creates a climate supportive of ineffective, unfair, unbalanced, and dangerous public policies.

We hope this unique report will serve as a springboard for young people to continue raising their voices and to reclaim the media as a tool for social change.

Many studies have focused on the impact news coverage has on public opinion and policy, while others have looked at the way entertainment television and movies breed a popular culture thick with racial stereotypes and misinformation. But initial online searches found no studies focused on the role and responsibility of entertainment radio in urban communities. We, specifically, looked for studies that had been conducted by members of the communities most impacted by biased or misleading content, and found nothing.

We hope this unique report will serve as a springboard for young people to continue raising their voices and to reclaim the media as a tool for social change.

METHODS

Last year, following the firing of popular KMEL host Davey D, a group of concerned community members met with KMEL to discuss its coverage of community issues, the “war on terrorism,” and the exclusion of local artists and organizers from airtime. A year later, youth from local community organizations launched a media-accountability campaign focusing on KMEL and conducted a community-based assessment of one month of content.

Our primary research questions were:

- Whose voices are heard and whose are excluded?
- What are the primary themes raised in content?
- Who is held responsible for problems raised in content?
- Are policies, root causes, or solutions mentioned in content?

Ten youth and young adult researchers listened to 24 drive-time broadcasts (6am-10am and 3pm-6pm), beginning September 10 and ending September 30, 2002; and four broadcasts of KMEL’s nationally-syndicated weekly talk show, “Street Soldiers,” beginning September 15 and ending October 6, 2002.

Because we were most interested in the messages and themes promoted by KMEL’s spokespeople, we did not directly monitor the content of KMEL’s music, except to identify whether local artists are being played on the station.

The first survey of its kind, we hope this community assessment of local entertainment radio will advance a discussion among KMEL’s listeners, improve relations between local artists, social justice advocates and KMEL, and provide a model for community groups nationwide to monitor the media and organize for real media justice and democracy.

CONTROL THE AIRWAVES, STRENGTHEN A MOVEMENT

Radio is the medium that has been most affected by government deregulation. Before 1996 a company could only own 28 stations in the entire country⁴. Since the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Clear Channel Communications, KMEL's owning corporation and the world's largest entertainment promoter, has purchased more than 1200 stations.

Radio, more than any other form of media, has the potential to be a grassroots tool for information and action. Radios are inexpensive to own, and you can listen no matter what you are doing. In the most impoverished parts of the United States, where literacy and cost make newspapers inaccessible, radio reaches into people's homes and communities.

Though radio is the medium most affected by deregulation, it provides important openings for audience participation. The call-in format of radio programs offers opportunities for the public to respond immediately to concerns with content and interact with hosts in a way that local television and newspapers do not. Unlike other media formats, urban entertainment stations like KMEL often have Street Teams that are visible in local communities. And because the public still technically owns the airwaves and it is relatively inexpensive to produce radio content, there are increased opportunities for communities to participate in improving and developing broadcast content.

It is because of the potential radio offers the youth movement that youth organizations must take up the challenge of confronting broadcast outlets that claim to provide youth voice and access, but instead, often silence and criminalize poor and working class communities of color.

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CLEAR CHANNEL & CORPORATE CONTROL OF OUR COMMUNITIES

KMEL is one of ten radio stations in the Bay Area owned by the multi-billion dollar corporation Clear Channel. Based in San Antonio, Texas, Clear Channel also owns the majority of concert venues and billboards in the Bay Area, as well as the overwhelming majority of radio stations, concert venues, and billboards across the United States.

In 2001, Clear Channel grossed over \$8 billion. Clear Channel's corporate model has resulted in homogenized content, downsized station staff, decreased access for local artists and social justice organizers, and movement further and further away from the local communities stations claim to represent.

This has had devastating effects on the diversity of information and music at Clear Channel stations. In a drive to maximize profits, the company has eliminated most local news and public affairs programs from their stations. In many cases, meaningful local programming was replaced with syndicated shows, including a stable of "Shock Jocks" who are increasingly under fire for racist and sexist content⁵.

To make problems worse, Clear Channel and other media mega-corporations have done away with avenues for listeners to hold local stations accountable. As a result, at KMEL in the Bay Area and in cities across the country, the public interest and community demands for meaningful local programming is taking a back seat to corporate interests.

"Sensationalized crime coverage... lays the groundwork for grotesquely punitive criminal justice measures"

—Barbara Ehrenreich, journalist

THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA BIAS AT 106.1 KMEL

More than 50 percent of KMEL's listeners are people of color. Though crime, violence, education, and poverty were all discussed on KMEL during the period of this assessment, racism was never mentioned as a factor in any of these conditions. This has a devastating impact on local policy fights impacting communities of color.

This Fall, Oakland residents challenged Measure FF, Mayor Jerry Brown's ballot initiative to hire 100 new police as a solution to the recent rise in homicides. Citizen organizers and criminal justice groups warned that the costly measure was ineffective, unbalanced, unfair, and dangerous to youth and civic peace.

While KMEL's "Street Soldiers" devoted the majority of monitored broadcasts to recent homicides in Oakland, its hosts overwhelmingly supported increased policing and punishment as a solution to social and economic problems. They never mentioned Measure FF by name, and never once mentioned the growing number of community members opposed to Measure FF.

WHAT IS MEDIA BIAS AND ACCOUNTABILITY?

News and entertainment media shape our perceptions and influence the policy choices of decision-makers on a local, national, and international level. Media outlets are centers of information. Whether they are television news or local hip-hop and R&B stations, all media outlets have a responsibility to deliver accurate, balanced, thorough, and relevant information to their audience.

Media Bias

The Youth Media Council defines media bias as unbalanced, inaccurate, and unfair portrayals of a person, community, or issue.

Media outlets like 106.1 KMEL are guilty of media bias when they focus on problems instead of causes and solutions, and blame the most vulnerable members of our society instead of holding institutions and decision-makers accountable for policies and conditions they create in our communities. Clearly, outlets that tell youth stories from only one perspective and don't back up their stories with real statistics or social context, promote unbalanced, unfair, and dangerous youth policy.

Media Accountability

Media accountability for youth occurs when young people build enough power and relationships with local and national media outlets to influence content, production, and ownership.

The goals of media accountability for youth organizers are to:

- Shift the balance of power between outlets and youth
- Amplify the public voice of those youth most marginalized by current media policy and content
- Expand the increasingly narrowed debate on youth policy
- Shift that debate from personal responsibility to institutional accountability
- Increase youth access to journalists, hosts, announcers, and all those whose voices and choices shape content
- Work with outlets to design and implement internal policies that work to hold the outlet accountable for their content decisions.

WHAT WE FOUND

Youth Organizers and Artists Locked Out

We found that representatives from the hundreds of local, grassroots youth organizations in the Bay Area using organizing or political education to address social problems were not heard on KMEL *at all*. As well, the Bay Area's strong community of popular local artists was virtually unheard. Although KMEL claims to invest in our communities, this community assessment revealed that the voices of young people working on local organizing campaigns and emerging local artists are still waiting to be heard on the "People's Station."

Lack of Access & Accountability

After listening to KMEL's content and researching KMEL's policies, we found that KMEL currently has no viable methods of achieving meaningful listener feedback. KMEL only encourages audience participation through on-air contests and games. While there is an informal advisory board, its role in increasing KMEL's accountability to youth is unclear at best. Stacy Cunningham – who replaced Davey D, the former Community Affairs Director and progressive host – is now working under the title of Promotions Director, leaving the job of building relationships with community organizations unfilled. During the period of this community assessment, no Public Service Announcements from any organization working on local organizing issues were heard. In fact, KMEL ignored a PSA sent by youth organizations working against Oakland Measure FF, and never returned several phone calls offering youth perspectives on Measure FF for "Street Soldiers."

Focus on Crime and War, Not Social Change or Peace

Crime and violence were the primary themes found in content. In one month of radio programming during KMEL drive times and Sunday evening talk shows, KMEL did not mention anti-war activities even once in announcements or commentary. Hosts did, however, overwhelmingly discuss crime, drugs, and violence.

Individuals Are Blamed, Policy and Root Causes Ignored

After listening to four segments of the Sunday night KMEL talk show "Street Soldiers," community members found that although Bay Area crime and violence were the primary subjects of discussion in the month prior to the November 5 election, not one policy related to crime and violence was mentioned. Solutions to problems raised in content were limited to individuals making better choices, getting "new game plans," and changing personal behavior. Root causes were completely ignored.

SPOTLIGHT ON STREET SOLDIERS STORIES

“Street Soldier’s” hosts chose to focus the discussion on individual incidents of crime and violence pulled from news coverage, specifically the increased homicide rate in Oakland. Other headlines included the story of a young mother witnessed beating her child, a grandmother in Vallejo accused of selling drugs from her home, and a man that was beaten and murdered by a group of youth. By capturing these sensational stories from news coverage without simultaneously discussing how policies create social and economic conditions, looking at alternative policy solutions, or mentioning accurate statistics about the declining rate of juvenile crime and the relationship of crime to poverty and access to education, “Street Soldiers” echoed the criminalizing content of many mainstream, corporate-sponsored news stations.

Although we clearly have work to do, the Youth Media Council congratulates “Street Soldiers” on tackling tough issues and hopes to work together to transform the show into one that promotes youth voices, identifies root causes, and examines institutional solutions.

STORY ONE: For example, on one segment (10/6/02) hosts described the beating of a man by seven youth, one of whom was 10 years old. Rather than accurately informing the listening audience that juvenile crime has been declining for 25 years, that rates of violent crime in the Bay Area are not on the rise, or that incidents of young children committing violent crimes are rare, the hosts focused instead on whether the behavior of this child was “normal,” and whether the child or his parents were to blame. The only question raised during this segment was whether kids are out of control – a frame used consistently by the media to promote fear of youth, particularly youth of color among adults.⁶

STORY TWO: Other segments included a similar focus on personal responsibility. Although “Street Soldiers” claims to be “revolutionary radio,” in all four segments we found that hosts avoided any discussion of corporate or governmental accountability for conditions in our communities – and even steered callers away from mentioning the need for government programs, more jobs, or better schools. Instead, they blamed conditions on bad personal choices and “bad coaches (parents)” (9/29/02). They described poor communities as “losing the game because they can’t see clearly,” and suggested repeatedly that the only solution was to find a new game plan (9/15/02) and change individual behavior.

STORY THREE: In another segment (9/22/02), the hosts focused on the story of a grandmother accused of selling drugs out of her home in Vallejo. The hosts were not only inaccurate (the grandmother was accused of having drugs sold from her home, not of selling them herself), their headline for that story was, “Drug Dealing Grandmother in Vallejo,” and their solution was to back a policy of taking away the homes of elderly, often African American, people as a solution to the proliferation of drugs in poor communities. The hosts also suggested that the grandmother move, kick her children out, or do her time. This neglect of the root causes of drugs and crime in poor communities of color, and the over-simplification of punishment-oriented policy echoes the script of Right-Wing personalities such as Rush Limbaugh or Bill O’Reilly, who focus only on individual blame and consistently misrepresent or ignore the facts.

STORY FOUR: When a caller said on one segment (9/22/02), “You have to look at every aspect of a person’s life... let’s get to the bottom of the whole thing, let’s look at the root,” the hosts responded that, “We cannot permit ourselves to excuse anyone in a life of crime. The bottom of the whole thing is individuals and personal choices and personal responsibility and that is something we have been lazy about when it comes to our people. What’s happening is our people are colluding in their own destruction.”

While KMEL blames individuals and ignores poverty as a cause of crime and other social conditions, their parent company, Clear Channel, simultaneously locks Bay Area and political artists out of economic opportunity.

As fewer corporations own a greater number of outlets, multi-billion dollar companies like Clear Channel maximize profits by decreasing staff, variety, and accountability at local stations like KMEL.

The result: local artists are sentenced to limited visibility and the hip hop generation is denied the opportunity to claim local beats that belong to their streets.

The record labels provide the pay off. “Most listeners don’t know it, but virtually every song they hear on FM commercial radio has been paid for – indirectly – by five major record labels. The labels pay millions of dollars each year to the independent radio promoters, universally referred to as ‘indies,’ who in turn pass along money to radio stations whenever they add new songs to their playlists.”⁷

Wendy Day, founder of the Rap Coalition explains, “It corrupts the art form, because instead of radio playing what people want to hear, they’re playing music that’s backed by the deepest pockets.”

“As a result many new and independent artists, as well as many established artists, are denied valuable radio airplay,” says a national coalition of artists in their statement to the FCC. “Whatever form ‘pay-to-play’ takes, these ‘promotion’ costs are often shared by the artists and adversely impact the ability of recording artists to succeed financially.”⁸

According to the artists involved in this report, the payola phenomenon leads to a cycle of continued economic disenfranchisement for popular local artists who just want to bring the music heard on stations like KMEL back home.

PASS THE MIC: HOW LOCAL ARTISTS ARE LOCKED OUT OF COMMERCIAL RADIO

...The payola phenomenon leads to a cycle of continued economic disenfranchisement for popular local artists who just want to bring the music heard on stations like KMEL back home.

RADIO WARS

The anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was included in the period of this community assessment. At the marker of this one-year anniversary, we heard new recruitment advertisements for INS inspectors, as well as recruitment ads for other branches of military. KMEL chose to honor the dead in New York, D.C., Pennsylvania and Afghanistan through celebrity spots responding to the question, “Where were you when the towers were hit?” KMEL announcers did not mention the impending war with Iraq, did not air comments about war or terrorism, and at no point raised any questions about the recurrent violations of civil liberties or the changes in laws and policies since 9/11/01 and their impact on young people or communities of color.

106.1 KMEL effectively silenced the anti-war efforts of the entire hip-hop community by failing to promote the hundreds of peace efforts marking the anniversary of 9/11, the enormous political changes and impacts on the lives of everyday people, and the economic recession deepening the poverty of young people everywhere.



WHAT WE WANT

WHAT KMEL CAN DO:

Six Steps to Media Accountability at 106.1 KMEL

- 1) **Promote the voices of local youth organizers.** KMEL should sponsor an on-air roundtable discussion on youth organizing co-hosted by “Street Soldiers” hosts and youth organizers from around the Bay, as well as a series of youth-produced radio spots about the issues impacting Bay Area youth and their families.
- 2) **Support Bay Area youth organizations.** KMEL should work with grassroots youth organizations like the Youth Media Council to increase the number of public service announcements about actions and events for peace and justice.
- 3) **Amplify the voices of local artists.** KMEL should agree to a series of meetings with local artists to hear and respond to their concerns about exclusion from the airwaves. KMEL should work with Mindzeye Collective and other groups representing local artists to increase the rotation!
- 4) **Build sustained relationships with local youth organizations and local artists.** KMEL should meet on a regular basis to establish methods to carry out the recommendations presented in this report.
- 5) **Create an advisory board.** KMEL should create a board that represents a range of opinions and can truly advocate for the issues and concerns of KMEL’s audience, who are overwhelmingly young people of color.
- 6) **Increase accountability mechanisms.** KMEL should set up an accountability hotline where audience members can call and have their complaints and concerns recorded. KMEL should work with members of the Youth Media Council to implement this accountability mechanism.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KMEL HOSTS FROM THE YOUTH MEDIA COUNCIL

- Balance discussions about crime and violence with dialogue about economic conditions, education, and youth organizing.
- Provide a policy context for problems raised in content.
- Highlight root causes like racism and lack of access to services.
- Let youth speak for themselves in shows about youth and youth policy.
- Balance coverage of youth by giving airtime to youth organizers and advocates.
- Examine solutions other than increased punishment, incarceration, and “better personal choices.”
- Challenge the myth of rising youth crime and violence.
- Link social problems to public policy solutions and examine the impact of ineffective policies that are hurting local communities.

CONCLUSION

KMEL has effectively silenced the social justice work and homegrown talent of “the people” it claims to represent. As young people of color and youth in general living in the Bay Area, we deserve access and accountability from local media outlets that profit from our vibrant youth culture. Bay Area youth and our families are tired of being scapegoated for the conditions in our communities. Local artists are tired of being invisible on the airwaves. We are tired of the stereotype of rising youth crime. We are tired of hearing that violence is the only thing worth talking about in our communities, and that we’re the ones to blame. We are tired of the deafening silence from KMEL when we gather in hundreds – often thousands – to demand peace and justice from one another and our government.

Corporations like Clear Channel and local stations like KMEL have a responsibility to represent and reflect their audience. KMEL says they want to know, “What’s Poppin’ in YOUR community.” Well, this is our answer. We’re being locked out and locked up. Youth and our parents are being blamed, while institutions, public policies, and social conditions that desperately need to be examined are never mentioned.

What’s poppin’? We need a radio station that truly represents the hip hop generation. We invite the hosts, announcers, and staff of KMEL to join Bay Area youth and communities to build a real people’s station.

WHO WE ARE

Report Team: Malkia Cyril, Ying-Sun Ho, Nicole Lee, Jeff Perlstein, and Amy Sonnie

KMEL Monitoring Team: Saron Anglon, Justin Bojorquez, Olivia Ford, Samantha Hynes, Patricia Ong, Judy Talaugon, Tyger Walsh, Aryeetey Welbeck, and Youth Media Council staff

Community Leaders: Tony Coleman, Ameen, Plex, Jahi and Mindzeye, Emil Dupont, Rocio Nieves, and the KMEL monitoring team

Thanks to Aliza Dichter, Davey D, Seeta Peña Gangadharan, Janine Jackson, Taj James, Eva Paterson, Prometheus Radio Project, and We Interrupt This Message

Cover Art by Zack Johnson, Christine Wong, Oscar Araujo Jr., Antoine Lagarde, Min Lee, and Tiffany Sankary, courtesy of Mandela Arts Center

Illustrations by Yoly Stroeve

THE YOUTH MEDIA COUNCIL AND OUR PARTNERS

The “Building a People’s Station” media accountability campaign grew out of increasing community concern around KMEL’s content and commentary, lack of voices promoting social justice and community efforts, and inaccessibility to local artists. The Campaign’s lead partners include the Youth Media Council, a youth media coalition representing 12 Bay Area youth organizations, the youth organizing group Let’s Get Free, the media advocacy group Media Alliance, and local artists collective Mindzeye. Local hip-hop and spoken word artists, Bay Area high school students, community members, and journalists have joined the Campaign.

LEAD PARTNER INFORMATION

The Youth Media Council

Since April 2001, the Youth Media Council has been working with more than ten Bay Area youth organizations to build their media skills and capacity, strengthen the youth movement, and amplify the public voice of youth in debates that shape life and death issues for our communities. We believe that youth from marginalized communities need the tools, resources, strategies, and skills to become strong and effective media spokespeople and advocates for social justice.

Let’s Get Free

Let’s Get Free is an organization of working class youth of color fighting to protect and defend their communities from unfair attacks by the criminal justice system. Combining organizing and hip hop culture, LGF is pioneering a new model for organizing and mobilizing urban youth. LGF is currently working with Books Not Bars and Youth Force Coalition on the Campaign to Stop the Superjail in Alameda County, and with People United for a Better Oakland on the recent fight against Measure FF on the Fall 2002 ballot. A project of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, LGF has worked for the last two years fighting for police accountability in Oakland, and in 2001, LGF helped lead the campaign against California’s Prop 21.

Media Alliance

Founded by journalists in 1977, Media Alliance is a nationally-recognized media resource and advocacy center that fosters media in the interests of peace, justice, and social responsibility. The organization works to meet the media needs of community-based organizations, media workers, and the broader community.

CONTACT US

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For additional copies of this assessment, or copies of the Youth Media Council's *Media Accountability How-To Guide* (forthcoming), email: info@youthmediacouncil.org

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