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An Island of Reliability in a Sea of Misinformation? Understanding PR-Journalists Relations in Times of Epistemic Crisis

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ABSTRACT

With technologies making sources more accessible than ever before, journalists' prime concern is no longer obtaining data; but rather sorting information out – undermining the traditional role of information subsidies. This study exposes for the first time a unique form of "epistemic subsidies," suggesting a new explanation for PR-journalists' paradoxical relations. Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative reconstructions, in which Israeli news reporters from national news outlets accounted for the sources they used (N = 1,147), this paper reaffirms the persistence of the paradox, while shedding new light on it, showing that the relationship is based on reliability rather than trust. Information from PR sources is communicated to journalists in a significantly more reliable way than from non-PR – making reliance much safer. Analyzing the findings with a framework that is based on social epistemology and the intereffication theory, the paper suggests that the epistemically-virtues practices of PR act as "inductions," which could result from an "adaptation" to journalists' increasing epistemic needs. Findings also reopen the normative debate about the implication of reliance on PR, indicating that such reliance reduces vulnerability to factually incorrect messages, while not defending journalists from misleading messages or "spins."

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Amongst the numerous studies investigating the relationship between public relations and journalists, none seemed to have focused on the epistemic nature of their interaction, although as knowledge professionals, one of journalists' prime objectives is establishing knowledge about the stories they report (Donsbach, 2014; Nielsen, 2017). Scholar concerns regarding the quality of journalists' knowledge recently peaked with the spread of fake news and post-truth politics, accumulating to an "epistemic crisis" (Steensen, 2019).

At the same time, a traditional challenge that journalists faced, obtaining data, seemed to almost dissipate in the age of information overload (Himma-Kadakas, 2017). Instead, professional journalists in legacy media struggle to sort the reliable, credible newsworthy information from the rest, verify it and report in a manner that will help retain audiences' trust (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011; Reich & Barnoy, 2021a). This is especially true for hard news beat reporters, who are even expected to hold some level of expertise in their beat domains (Reich et al., 2021). Information subsidies (Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1985) may no longer explain by themselves the paradoxical relations between journalists and PR, manifested in journalists' willingness to rely on PR, though they evaluate them as inferior, non-credible sources (Macnamara, 2014). It is incomprehensible that journalists will systematically compromise their professional values and publish prepacked, unverified materials, simply because they lack access to information.

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Based on the intereffication model of journalists-PR relations, we could expect journalists' new challenges to trigger changes in PR practitioners' practices, who would adapt to fulfill these needs (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008). To be able to identify and understand the epistemic factors in play, the analysis and discussion in this paper rely on a framework that combines the intereffication model with epistemic literature. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the concept of knowledge (episteme is the ancient Greek word for knowledge, contrasted by Plato with Doxa – an opinion) – its definitions, how is it established, what does it take for a person to know, and so on (Coady, 1992). We adopt Godler et al.'s (2020) recommendation to focus on "social epistemology" literature. This relatively young branch explores how knowledge is established in a social context, and provides measurable criteria to evaluate and weigh the quality of specific practices, especially regarding reliance on others as sources of information (ibid). These measures would test whether we can find evidence for "epistemic subsidies"; an effort by PR to provide information that is ready-made for publication since it is considered more reliable, defendable and requires less verification, and not only because it fulfills journalists' production needs.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the unique epistemic characteristics of journalist-PR relations and test whether they can explain the relationship's paradoxical nature in our current age. We focus on hard news beat, professional reporters in legacy media. Four specific objectives were set: to provide up-to-date empirical evidence that will either support or disprove previous studies' findings of the paradoxical relationship (journalists' heavy reliance on PR, who are evaluated by them as non-credible); to juxtapose journalists' interactions with PR and non-PR sources, exploring the epistemic characteristics of these interactions; to test which factors can predict reliance on PR; to explore journalists' own explanations for their decisions regarding reliance on PR.

To overcome popular methods' shortcomings, such as the blindness of content analysis to the involvement of undisclosed sources or the focus of surveys on perceptions and attitudes, rather than on practices and actions, this study relies on quantitative reconstruction interviews (Reich, 2009), a method uniquely designed to study newsmaking, which was acknowledged as "probably the best" method for analyzing news sourcing (Van Hout & Van Leuven, 2016, 123). The method's quantitative format, memory-based approach and breakdown to minute details, ensure a much more reliable reporting.

To truly be able to explore the nature of the relationship, one more innovation is presented in the study. The quantitative reconstructions are complemented with qualitative follow-up interviews, yielding a mix of data that provides both insights about frequencies and correlations between different factors, as well as a deeper understanding of what is happening "inside journalists' minds" (Zhong & Newhagen, 2009, 589).

This study explores the relationship between Israeli journalists and PR. The Israeli news media and the local PR industry have many similarities to those in other western democracies (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Lahav and Ruth Cohen 2017; Sherwood et al., 2019). However, some particularities regarding journalistic values and their perceived normative roles are worth mentioning. The finding of an interview-based survey of Israeli journalists demonstrated a familiar tension between objective values and interventionist ones (Reich et al., 2016). On the one hand, the role that received the highest support among interviewees was to "report things as they are," with 93% of the interviewees rating it as very or extremely important. On the other hand, three of the following four roles do not represent objectivity, but rather a commitment to advancing agendas: "advocate for social change" (80%), "Influence public opinion" (80%) and "promote tolerance and cultural diversity" (72%). Only half (50.9%) marked "Being a detached observer" as a very or extremely important role.

Hanitzsch et al. (2019) published an international comparison based on the same dataset. They grouped the different roles that participants were asked to grade their agreement with (on a 1–5 scale, with five indicating they see them as "extremely important"), and labeled them as indicating "monitorial roles," "interventionist roles" and so on. Israeli journalists graded the monitorial roles (3.4) lower than the interventionist role (3.83). They graded the monitorial roles similarly to journalists in other western democracies, somewhere between the UK (2.99) and the USA (3.97) for example. Yet, in the interventionist roles, the Israeli journalists tended to give higher scores (UK – 2.57, and USA – 2.38), indicating a more proactive, agenda-driven approach.

Two other findings from the survey might have particular relevance to this study. First, only 62% of the Israeli journalists described access to information as something that influences their work. Second, more than a third (36.6%) reported having other paid jobs outside the field of journalism, which might indicate potential conflicts of interest.

The following section starts by explaining the paradoxical relations between journalists and PR. This will be followed by the presentation of the epistemic framework and how it will be implemented to juxtapose the interaction of journalists with PR and non-PR sources. The literature review will end with a presentation of two leading approaches, found while analyzing the scholarly work that aims to explain the complexity of the relations.

The PR paradox

The depiction of the relations between journalists and PR as paradoxical is based on two arguments: first, that journalists rely on PR sources very often; second, that journalists perceive PR as inferior sources: “liars,” “spin doctors,” “manipulators” and other superlatives that undermine their credibility (Davies, 2011; Macnamara, 2014; Sherwood et al., 2019). Are both arguments supported by empirical findings?

The first argument, according to which journalists rely on PR sources very often, is reinforced by numerous studies (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008; Reich, 2010; Sherwood et al., 2019). Studies in several western democracies found that 40%-75% of news items originate from PR sources (Lewis et al., 2008; Reich, 2010; Sherwood et al., 2019 etc.).

However, frequencies alone are not enough to determine the depth of the reliance, and on this, scholars seem to remain at odds. On the one hand, according to studies representing a determinist approach, PR’s influence runs deep and dramatically affects the newswork. Three decades ago, Turow (1989) argued that researchers often overlook PR’s substantial impact on televised news or fail to acknowledge how “problematic” their influence is. Lewis et al. (2008) determined that PR sources “set agenda” instead of only assisting. Recently, Jackson and Moloney (2016) expressed concern about the “growing influence of PR professionals in the newsgathering and reporting process, and the consequent diminution of editorial independence” (12). Based on a theoretical analysis, Salter (2005) argues that a “good PR agent” simply cannot be “fair” (100) and that their involvement inherently alters the news. The depth of PR’s impact can also be evaluated by their contribution per-item. Reich (2010) found that when PR sources are involved in the newsmaking, reporters invest less effort in collecting information – working shorter hours on the items, contacting fewer sources, and verifying information less often.

On the other hand, studies representing the contextualized approach seem to point out PR’s limited ability to influence the news and suggest their involvement is not necessarily damaging. In response to Turow, Shoemaker (1989) argues that most claims about PR’s impact are (or were then) based solely on correlations and cannot justify a claim of influence. In a study based on in-depth interviews and a nationwide survey, Curtin (1999) provided evidence of the limited scope of PR’s influence, as the study found that in most cases, “public relations materials help fill holes” (87) and their materials were used as supplements, often resulting in “building public agendas that run counter to the goals and objectives of the sponsoring organizations” (87). So, journalists do rely on PR sources very often, yet the effect of the reliance on the actual news remains debated.

What about the second part of the equation – is the argument that journalists perceive PR sources as non-credible supported? The answer seems to be yes. Back in 1975, Aronoff already found that PR sources were ranked by journalists as the least credible professionals, from a list of 16 professions, even less credible than politicians. More recently, Fredriksson and Johansson (2014) showed that Swedish journalists distrust PR so much that 73% of them agree that working with PR threatens the trustworthiness of journalism itself. The British investigative journalist Nick Davies describes in his book *Flat Earth News* how PR "fabricates pseudo-evidence – surveys, polls and specially commissioned research" (2011, 172). Macnamara (2014) detailed common labels given to PR by journalists, including "spin doctors," "liars," "fakers and phonies," "propagandists," "flacks," etc., in a systematic sourcing study. PR practitioners feel this too: when asked to rate their prime strategic concerns, communication professionals from 46 countries (primarily European) rated "building and preserving trust" first (Zerfass et al., 2019), with more than half testifying they regularly experience a lack of trust by journalists. So distrust is evident too and acknowledged by all involved actors.

To explore to what extent the PR paradox persists, we present the following research questions:

RQ1 – To what extent do journalists rely on PR sources?

RQ2 – Do journalists evaluate PRs' credibility differently than non-PR sources?

Though we explore the extent to which the paradox persists in RQs 1&2, its mere existence is a premise of the study due to the compelling evidence presented by the literature so far.

This study focuses on mainstream beat reporters. Previous studies suggest that patterns of PR reliance might differ in different beats: Testing whether journalists in soft vs. hard news beats perceive the effect of PR on their work differently, Obermaier et al. (2018) found no significant results and rejected the hypothesis that PR effect reporters in soft news beat more than hard news beats. However, Reich (2010), who focused solely on hard news beats, did find differences between what he defined as "political," "economic" and "territorial" beat reporters, with 33, 40 and 38% of their sources being PR respectively. In a later study, Reich (2014) found again that PR's involvement varies for reporters from different news beats. But in both cases, no data was presented about the perceived credibility of PR, with respect to reporter's beat. To test whether reliance and credibility evaluations are related to the beat of the reporter, we present the following research question:

RQ3 – Does the PR paradox manifest differently for journalists in different news beats?

The epistemology of journalism and the intereffication approach

Some recent technological and political developments have reignited journalism scholars' interest in the epistemology of newsmaking (e.g., Barnoy & Reich, 2022; Ekström et al., 2020; Godler et al., 2020; Reich & Barnoy, 2021b). Epistemology is a branch of philosophy, which is dedicated to the study of "knowledge." According to most epistemologists, the primary conditions for knowledge are "true, justified belief" – meaning that for someone to know that *p*, she must believe that *p*, have a justification for believing that p, and *p* must be true (Coady, 1992). While some epistemic literature discusses the validity of the "true" and "belief" conditions, most of the discussions about the definition revolve around the "justified" condition, and about additional conditions that might be required for knowledge (ibid). Since most of what we know about the world we learn through the testimonies of others (parents, teachers, friends, journalists, scientists, etc.), and not our own faculties, a large share of the epistemic literature is devoted to asking when it is and when it is not justified to rely on other's testimonies (Godler et al., 2020), or more precisely, what it takes for adopting a true belief based on another's testimony, to be considered knowledge.

It is crucial to understand journalists' epistemology as the primary mediators of knowledge about public affairs. Journalism was even labeled the "new knowledge profession" (Donsbach, 2014). While early literature about the quality of journalistic knowledge can be dated back to Lippmann (1922), since the 1980s it seemed to focus on journalists-source relations, and recently Godler et al. (2020) suggested that the philosophical branch of social epistemology provides an ideal framework to studying newsmaking and sourcing. Unlike social and psychological epistemic studies, which usually describe what people claim to know, or how they perceive knowledge, epistemic philosophers also argue about virtuous traits and good practices, providing researchers with "formal criteria to determine when it is justified to trust someone" (Clément, 2020, 205), in order to form knowledge.

To adapt the epistemic framework to the specific study of journalists-PR relations, we also integrate the intereffication model (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008) into the framework. According to the theory, PR's influence on journalists and news content is not one-sided, and there is also a reverse effect. The needs of journalism, either on the institutional (journalistic system), organizational (editorial office), or personal (media actor) level, affect PR, prompting them to adjust their own practices (on one of three complementing levels: PR-systems, PR-departments, and PR-actors).

The theory suggests these relations include two key factors – inductions and adaptations (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008). Inductions are different incentives or stimuli which benefit the respective professionals. PR's primary incentive to journalists was traditionally considered the access to information, or "information subsidies" (Gandy, 1982). Adaptations are the changes each system, organization, or professional, make to their practices and routines, to fulfil the changing needs of their respective professionals. In a way, the adaptations make it, so the everyday interactions include more inductions. So if indeed journalists' epistemic challenges are mounting, we can expect to see PR professionals' practices characterized in a way that will resonate with journalists' needs in this regard.

Based on the epistemic literature, we will now set a series of five measures that will be used to compare journalists' interactions with PR and non-PR sources, and evaluate their "epistemic virtues" (Sosa, 2007). We obviously do not cover every criterion mentioned in the philosophical literature, but only those most relevant to the communication between journalists and their sources. After presenting the philosophical stance regarding each criterion, we will review what previous studies of journalism have found.

Textual vs. oral communication

Textual messages, delivered in digital or traditional formats, are generally considered a better source of knowledge than messages delivered orally (O'Neill, 2020). Centuries ago, Plato explained why oral communication is more reliable, but philosophers today tend to agree that "[W]riting supports intelligent judgment of the truth" (O'Neill: 24). Plato's justification for preferring the oral was that text is detached from the speaker and cannot be questioned. Yet, in today's world, this seems no longer relevant. First, since the author of a textual message can actually be questioned, with a return e-mail, for example. This is especially true in our context, as journalists still tend to rely on personal communication with different types of sources (Reich, 2018) and not books, for example. Second, since oral communication can become detached from the speaker today, if it is delivered in a digital format (e.g., a video or audio recording). In addition, textual communication has its own epistemic merits, which need to be considered: writing a message indicates commitment as it leaves tangible footprints; the ability to store and sort textual information more efficiently than oral leaves the receiver with lasting evidence.

In journalism research, we see a shift in recent years – while in the past, most interactions with sources were oral, in recent years, there is evidence that the textual methods of communication – mainly digital-based – are becoming the primary ones (Reich, 2018). Reich suggests this gives reporters a wider epistemic bandwidth to receive more information and evidence from their sources.

Familiarity

Messages from familiar sources are generally considered a better source of knowledge than messages from non-familiar sources. Familiarity with a speaker is one of the best predictors of trust, and for a good reason – it means the hearer has evidence, from past interaction, to evaluate not only whether the source is sincere, but how competent she is to provide specific information (Corriveau & Harris, 2009). Studies found that reliance on the source's familiarity is so inherit that three-year-olds already know to rely on it as a justification for belief (Clément, 2020).

In journalism, too, familiarity was found to be one of the best predictors of trust in sources (Barnoy & Reich, 2022; Wintterlin, 2017). Journalists tend to work with regular, returning sources, and they rarely access new ones (Reich, 2014). However, reliance on familiarity also has a social dysfunction, as it can lead to an unjustified exclusion of non-familiar sources (Alcoff, 2001; Fricker, 2007), which in journalism means strengthening the elite's dominance at the expense of marginalized actors.

Authoritativeness and governmental institutions

Messages from authoritative sources are generally considered better sources of knowledge than messages from non-authoritative ones (McMyler, 2020). Authoritativeness of source might differ depending on the issue at hand, as any person is an authoritative source to describe how she feels, for example, (ibid). Yet, in society, we have authoritative institutions that receive their authoritativeness not only since we, as a society, grant them this status, but also since institutions have access to the most reliable public information. Authoritativeness is also considered a good criterion since it is distinguishable, clear, and less instinctive (McMyler, 2020).

Thus, regarding for that usually occupy news – public affairs – representatives of authoritative institutions, primarily governmental organizations, are considered the most competent sources of information (Reich, 2009; Wintterlin, 2017). In fact, even the introduction of innovative technologies that can potentially grant journalists access to new types of alternative sources, rarely changes journalists' habits to rely mostly on governmental sources (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016). Finally, the rise in anti-institutional bias in many western countries and in Israel in particular (Hermann et al., 2020) could have led reporters to trust authoritative institutions less. However, there are a few reasons to doubt its effect: first, since reporters' unmediated interactions with these sources are likely to reduce the effect of such public trends; second, since reporters in mainstream media are themselves part of an institution, suffering from the same problem; and third, since the news reporters are not a representative sample of the population, and differ from the average on measures such as religious level and political orientation – measures that are related to the anti-institutional bias (ibid).

As with familiarity, authoritativeness leads to the exclusion of alternative voices. Yet it remains a good criterion to assess credibility most of the time and to reflect journalists' attitudes and practices (Barnoy & Reich, 2022; Wintterlin, 2017).

Identification as an indication of assurance

People willing to be disclosed are considered a better source of knowledge than those demanding anonymity. The assurance approach in epistemology suggests it is justified to trust a speaker, since by merely asserting something, the speaker takes responsibility for its veracity (O'Neill, 2020). Yet unidentified sources take no such responsibility and hold no account if the information turns out to be false.

To apply this to journalistic sourcing, and the willingness of the source to be identified in the item – "go on the record" – we also consider the audience and the benefits journalists gain from explicitly identifying the sources. Audiences can perceive too much use of anonymous sources as a lack of transparency (Rom & Reich, 2020). For journalists, disclosed sources mean lower levels of risk, because if it turns out the information was false, they share the responsibility with the source (Barnoy & Reich, 2019).

Pragmatic encroachment

Unlike the previous criteria, the epistemic theory of pragmatic encroachment suggests focusing on the information and not the source or method of communication. The theory suggests that the higher the risk of adopting a false belief, the more evidence one needs to establish knowledge (Ross & Schroeder, 2014). If we translate this into the journalistic realm, we can claim that publications with greater stakes require sources that are more trustworthy, while in other stories, journalists might be more justified in relying on less credible sources.

This notion is in line with Tuchman's typification paradigm, according to which journalists first typify the type of story at hand, and then decide how to process it and which sources to contact (Tuchman, 1978). If indeed PR sources are perceived as less credible, a justification for reliance on them might be that they are usually involved in simpler stories that are less interesting and less important, that journalists perceive as less risky and do not include a factual disagreement or leaked information (Reich, 2014; Reich & Barnoy, 2016).

To test whether the epistemic framework can explain the relationship between journalists and PR, and to explain the paradox, we present the following research questions:

RQ4 – Are interactions with PR sources more epistemically virtuous than interactions with non-PR sources, being more often (i) textual (ii) with familiar sources (iii) with representatives of governmental institutions and (iv) with sources which are identified in the item?

RQ5 – Are interactions with PR sources more common in news stories with lower stakes, perceived by journalists as (i) less important (ii) less interesting (iii) involving lower levels of risk (iv) fewer factual disagreements between sources, and (v) are not based on leaks?

Questions 4 and 5 can be seen as contesting hypotheses: do journalists rely on non-trustworthy PR sources since these sources deliver information in a more reliable manner, or is it because they are involved in stories with lower stakes? Each factor will be tested separately, but a regression model will juxtapose the two options.

For lack of longitudinal data, or the accounts of PR professionals, the finding will not be able to indicate whether indeed there were changes in PR's behavior, which would demonstrate "adaptation" to journalists' increasing epistemic needs, according to the intereffication model. However, if RQ4 corroborates that PR employ more epistemically virtuous practices than other sources, it would be an indication of a new form of epistemic "induction."

Explaining reliance on PR in their own words

Finally, we also wish to understand journalists' own explanations for their decisions to rely on PR sources in different cases. An analysis of former studies, which do not include direct questioning of journalists regarding the paradox, yields two main explanations for the paradox. The first explanation suggests journalists compromise. According to some scholars, journalists indeed rely intensively on PR sources, though they do not trust them, and they do it since it saves them time and resources. Journalists either compromise since they are lazy (Davies, 2011; Saridou et al., 2017), or, as most scholars suggest, simply because they are unable to withstand the time pressures and resource limitations, as their employers are asking them to "do more for less" (Lund, 2012, 203).

The second explanation is a gap between journalists' perception of PR practitioners in general and their feeling toward specific PR practitioners, who they actually know and work with. Jeffers (1977) and others (e.g., Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Sallot & Johnson, 2006) demonstrated how journalists who work with PR practitioners more often, and for longer time periods, evaluated them as more credible. In some cases, the personal relationship leads them to stop addressing certain practitioners as PR, and hold them to be expert sources (ibid). This is also felt by the practitioners themselves, who evaluate that journalists are primarily critical to the PR industry, then to specific organizations, and least critical to specific people (Zerfass et al., 2019).

However, both explanations do not rely on journalists' own accounts. To better understand our quantitative findings from the previous questions, we present the final questions:

RQ6 – How do journalists explain their decisions to rely on PR sources?

This question is based on the qualitative part of the study, where interviewees were asked to reflect on their decisions to rely on specific sources they themselves ranked as non-credible, and their answers were analyzed so they might also contextualize the quantitative findings. This is where evidence of adaptations can emerge, albeit still indirect, strengthening the case for a new form of epistemic "adaptations" to be considered in the intereffication model.

Method

Investigating journalists' relations with different types of sources without any reliance on involved actors is bound to yield incomplete results. Journalists' relations with different types of sources tend to be unobservable – both due to source confidentiality considerations, and since they usually entail a mix of formal and informal interactions, utilizing a mix of communication platforms (Malling, 2019). On the other hand, to investigate practices, as opposed to perceptions or attitudes, we should prefer a method that reduces dependency on the testimonies of the actors involved in the process, as they are very likely to be unreliable due to different self-reporting biases (Thomas, 2017).

The solution provided here is a mix of quantitative and qualitative "reconstruction interviews" (Reich & Barnoy, 2020). The study includes interviews with a representative sample of Israeli news reporters from national news organizations, who were asked to recreate the newsmaking process behind a specific sample of items they published in the days preceding the interviews, accounting for all their sources – both PR and non-PR.

With their own items in front of them, the interviewees were asked to detail each of their sources and their respective characteristics, including how these sources were evaluated and treated and their contribution to the published item. This method was acknowledged as "probably the best method for analyzing news sourcing in a quantitative manner" (Van Hout & Van Leuven, 2016, p. 123).

After a series of 6 pilot interviews in which 17 items were reconstructed both quantitatively and qualitatively, the two main stages of the study were commenced:

Quantitative reconstructions

The interviews were preceded by comprehensive preparations, to ensure the list of sampled participants represented the Israeli mainstream media as well as possible. First, the list of organizations to be included was chosen. These include the country's national, daily, print or online news organization, based on existing circulation and reach surveys (using the Israeli Ifat/TGI annual report for print media and Similarweb's ranking for online news sites). This list does not include alternative and local news organizations, but rather national mainstream outlets only. Broadcast news organizations were also excluded for methodological limitations, considering the need to sample and present interviewees with their published items during the interviews. The final list includes the following organizations: Yedioth Ahronoth (print only), Walla news (online), Ynet (online), Israel Hayom (print and online), Globes (print and online), Ha'arezt (print and online), Maariv (print and online) and NRG/Makor Rishon (print and online). We also included the financials of Yedioth Ahronoth (Calcalist) and Ha'aretz (The marker). Two of these organizations could be labeled "partisan," though not hyper-partisan (Ha'aretz representing a leftwing political approach and Israel Hayom a rightwing).

Second, a list of all the news reporters from these organizations was compiled using a month-long by-line survey. All of the publications in the daily news sections of these organizations were surveyed, excluding soft news beats such as fashion, lifestyle sports etc. A list of every reporter and their respective beat was prepared based on their publications. The list was verified and amended with the help of a senior Israeli journalism researcher and a senior PR person, as well as based on the researcher's own acquaintance with the news industry. This list included 299 reporters. The list only includes daily reporters, not investigative ones (though some also do investigative work alongside their daily reporting), so as not to bias the result. Freelancers were included if they regularly wrote in a specific beat covered by the study.

The original list was reorganized under three primary beat clusters, in order to test the share of reporters in each beat and prepare the sampling scheme. 33% of the reporters belonged to the first beat labeled "political affairs," which also included government, parliament, national security, etc.; 30% of the reporters belonged to the second beat labeled "domestic affairs," which included crime, health, municipal and so on; 37% of the reporters belonged to the third beat labeled "financial affairs," which included macro and microeconomics, banking, statistics bureau and so on. Based on these results, it was decided to randomly sample ten reporters from each news organization: 3 from each beat and another random reporter (samples were all done using an online randomizer, after each reporter received a serial number). Three additional reporters were pre-samples randomly as "spares," to be next in line in cases of refusals to participate.

Before each interview, 10 of the interviewees' recently published items were randomly sampled out of their publications in the 14 days preceding the interview. Only 6 to 7 items were then reconstructed during the interviews themselves, with the rest reserved for cases the journalist refused to talk about. All in all, 480 items were reconstructed.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face. The journalists were asked to reconstruct one news item at a time, sitting across the table from the interviewer. The journalists had a sample of their recent publications, and the researcher had the questionnaires, which were filled out according to the interviewee's replies.

The questionnaire included two sections: (1) Item specific questions: the same questions were asked about each item reconstructed in the interviews, such as "how much time did you spend working on this news item?," "please rank how important you evaluate this item to be" and so on. (2) Source-specific questions: at a certain point during the interview, the reporters were asked to detail the specific sources used to gather information for the news item in front of them. Each source was given a number, and then a set of repeating questions were asked for each source, such as "which sector does this source belong to?," "how credible did you evaluate this source to be?" and so on. Interviewees were not asked to expose the identity of the sources to the interviewer for ethical considerations.

After a few general questions about the items, reporters were asked to detail all the sources that contributed to the respective item presented to them (N = 1,147). Then, a set of repetitive questions were presented about each source: their sector, their role, their communication method, etc. All interviews were meant to last about one hour, though some were shorter and some longer. Out of 81 reporters asked to participate, 70 agreed (86.4% response rate).

Qualitative reconstructions

The second stage included the follow-up interviews. Reporters' samplings for this stage were purposive (Ritchie et al., 2013). A sub-set of interviewees was chosen, out of those who participated in the first wave, in order to reconstruct some of the same items that were already reconstructed quantitatively, this time using an open-end qualitative questionnaire. Interviewees were chosen for the second wave if they: (1) reconstructed at least one simple and one complicated item in the first quantitative interview; *and* (2) had adequate verbal skills; *and* (3) they agreed to participate in the second interview. Two news items for each interviewee were then reconstructed, based on a variance sampling strategy (Ritchie 2013): one simple item with fewer sources and another one, complicated, in which the reporters relied on various sources (N = 50).

The qualitative interviews were very similar in their physical setting: conducted face-to-face, with items in the journalist's hand and questionnaires in the interviewee's hand. However, rather than writing down answers, they were recorded and later transcribed. Before each interview, the items were studied by the interviewer – their format and the quantitative answers to prepare for the interview.

Most interviews were carried out during the month following the quantitative interview to avoid memory difficulties. However, a few interviews were delayed due to reporters' unavailability, and in some cases, new items had to be sampled. The interviews lasted between 45 and 146 minutes. Out of 33 reporters who were approached, 25 agreed to participate (76% response rate). The relatively high response rates in both stages were achieved using the "middleperson" technique. A person familiar with the researcher and each potential interviewee is asked to approach the interviewee ahead of time, prepare them that they are about to be invited to participate in a research, and encourage them to agree to the request.

Data analysis

Combining quantitative and qualitative methods in one study can be done in several ways (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). Since this is not an exploratory study, the quantitative analysis takes the lead, with comparable data that can support or refute findings from previous studies. We chose the explanatory investigation scheme, in which the qualitative data is used to explain the quantitative results and provide further insight or context.

Correlations between reliance on PR and different factors were tested with Pearson's 2-tailed analysis; percentages are presented in the tables for illustration purposes only. To juxtapose the two hypotheses represented by the second and third research questions, a logistical regressions model was built, including all the factors that the previous analysis found significant. Non-binary variables (see measurements) were recoded only for this illustration in the tables and the regression.

The qualitative analysis was performed based on the seven-stage thematic analysis model of Kacen and Krumer-Nevo (2010), p. 1. A holistic reading of each qualitative interview transcript; 2. Organization of data and reduction to initial categories, such as "reliance on a PR source," "considerations for source selection," and so on; 3. Breakdown into specific themes such as "reliance and trust," "epistemic and logistical needs," and so on; 4. Rebuilding the themes and adjusting the phrasing (specific names of themes, for example, "reliance without trust"), according to the study's theoretical framework. 5. Additional holistic reading of the entire data in its original raw form. 6. Reexamination of themes to verify and adjust them once again; 7. The writing stage.

Measurements

Public relations sources

Any source the interviewees described as PR, including in-house spokespersons, regardless of who or what the practitioner represents.

Source's contribution to the item

The share of the information about a story (out of 100%) supplied by a particular source, as divided between sources by the reporter.

No. of sources per item/single source item

The average number of sources interviewees reportedly contacted while working on a news item/number of items that were based on information from only one source.

Working time on the item

The time spent gathering information and writing, until the item was submitted to the editor.

Source/message credibility

Interviewees' evaluation of each source and its message, on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all credible) to 6 (extremely credible).

Textual interaction

Primary interaction between source and journalist was in a textual format, such as text messages, e-mails, IM apps, etc., as opposed to oral communication methods such as phone calls, face-to-face conversations, press conferences, etc.

Governmental sector

Sources who either directly work for or represent a governmental organization or role holders, such as ministers, governmental offices, police force, army and other government-owned and -managed agencies.

Familiar source

Sources who, according to interviewees, contribute to their news items regularly, at least once a month on average.

Identified sources

Sources who, according to our interviewees, were mentioned in the news item, either by name, role, or organization, in a way that directly attributes information or quotes to them. This measure does not indicate whether the source's identity was unknown to the reporter (anonymous source), rather only if the source was not identified in the published items for any reason (confidentiality, lack of relevance, etc.).

Factual disagreement

Cases in which, according to reporters, different sources provided contradicting or significantly different accounts of events.

Item's level of interest/importance/risk

As ranked by interviewees on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all interesting/important/risky) to 6 (very interesting/important/risky). Risk refers to professional or reputational risk, not personal safety.

Leak-based item

Unauthorized and unofficial delivery of information.

Findings

Research questions 1 and 2 explore whether the PR paradox still exists: Do journalists heavily rely on PR sources, while evaluating them as less credible than non-PR sources?

Findings provide new compelling evidence for the persistence of the paradox. In answer to RQ1, high levels of reliance are demonstrated in five different ways: (a) a PR source is involved in the making of 73% of the items in the sample, which is similar to findings in previous studies (Reich 2010); (b)

Table 1. Journalists' levels of reliance on PR and credibility evaluations.

Factor	PR	Non-PR	Correlation
Source's informative contribution to the item	40%	34%	.105**
No. of sources (per-news item)	3.41	4.12	−.137**
Working time on the item (minutes)	134	185	−.168**
Source perceived non-credible	33%	23%	−.133**
Source's information perceived non-credible	21%	18%	−.056NS

**r < .001/NS-not significant.
N = 1,147.

Table 2. Beat analysis of journalists' levels of reliance on PR and credibility evaluations.

Factor/correlations[a]	Politics	Domestic	Financial
Informative contribution	−.016NS	.091*	.240**
No. of sources	−.059NS	−.182**	−.166**
Working time on the item	−.084NS	−.224**	−.066NS
Source's perceived credibility	−.085NS	−.136**	−.093NS
Source's information perceived credibility	−.05NS	−.018NS	−.091NS
N	311 (30% PR)	518 (44% PR)	311 (33% PR)

[a]Correlations between the factors and the cases where sources are PR compared to all other type of sources.
*r < .05 **r < .001/NS-not significant.

more than one-third of the sources in the sample overall are PR (37%), followed by senior organizational sources (15%), non-human sources such as websites or databases (12%), non-senior organizational sources (9%), experts (9%), reports in other media (8%), citizens (6%) and journalists' own observations (4%); (c) a comparison of PR and non-PR sources' contribution to the items shows that on average, PR sources provide more information than non-PR sources. As can be seen in Table 1, when the journalists were asked to divide the sum of information they had gathered about each news item between the sources who provided it, PR were given an average estimation of 40% compared to 34% for non-PR, which is a significant difference ($\chi_s = .105$; df = 1; r < .001); (d) as can further be seen in Table 1, when PR sources are involved, the average number of sources is significantly lower (3.41) than when other types of sources are involved (4.12; $\chi_s = .168$; df = 1; r < .001); (e) finally, also in Table 1, when PR sources are involved, journalists invest less time on average gathering information about the story (134 min.) than when other sources are involved (185 min.; $\chi_s = .168$; df = 1; r < .001).

So, reliance is frequent and meaningful, but do journalists evaluate the same PR sources they rely on as less credible than non-PR sources (RQ2)? Our data strongly supports this hypothesis, as the PR sources in our sample, which journalists relied on very often, were evaluated by them as significantly less credible than non-PR sources. As can be seen in the second part of Table 1, one in every three PR sources (33%) was evaluated as non-credible, compared to less than one in every four non-PR sources (23%). Testing for correlations on the original credibility scale yielded a negative correlation, indicating that PR sources are evaluated as significantly less credible than non-PR sources ($\chi_s = -.133$; df = 1; r < .001).

However, by separating source and message credibility evaluations, a distinction that was never done before in the context of PR (Barnoy & Reich, 2022), we can see that the information PR sources provide is *not* evaluated as significantly less credible than the information from non-PR sources ($\chi_s = -.056$; df = 1; NS). This difference is one of the issues addressed in the qualitative analysis at the end of the findings section.

In answer to RQ3, overall, the paradox manifests similarly for reporters in different hard news beats. The share of PR among all sources does differ between the primary beat clusters ("Politics" = 30%, "Economy" = 33%, and, "Domestic" = 44%), as was found in previous studies about Israeli news reporters and PR in the past (Reich, 2010, 2014). However, as can be seen in Table 2, analyzing beats separately, renders differences between PR and non-PR sources insignificant on about half of the

Table 3. Epistemic factors of interactions/sources and items.

Factor	PR	Non-PR	Correlation[1]
Source/interaction variables			
Textual interaction	70%	41%	.248**
Government sector sources	51%	24%	.218**
Familiar source	82%	57%	.262**
Identified sources	79%	46%	.337**
Item variables			
Item includes a factual disagreement	28%	29%	−.009NS
Item interesting	55%	61%	−.063*
Item important	57%	60%	−.034NS
Item based on leak	15%	21%	−.089**
Publication involves risk	17%	19%	−.070*

*r < .05/**r < .001/NS-not significant.
N = 1,147.

measures. While the statistical insignificance might be a result of the smaller samples, the directions of the correlations remain the same in all three beat clusters for all the factors examined in Table 1 (except for "informative contribution," which has an insignificant correlation of −.016 for reporters in the political beat). So the paradox is not a unique phenomenon for reporters in specific beats.

Reliance on PR vs. non-PR sources

In RQ4, we suggest juxtaposing journalists' interactions with PR and non-PR sources to compare the epistemic characteristics of said interactions. As can be seen in Table 3, across all the measures we examined, reliance on PR provides journalists better epistemic justification to rely on the content than interactions with non-PR sources: (a) interactions with PR sources are significantly more often textual, leaving a trace of the interaction ($\chi_s = .248$; df = 1; r < .001); (b) PR sources represent governmental institutions or role holders significantly more often than non-PR sources ($\chi_s = .218$; df = 1; r < .001), making them more authoritative; (c) PR sources are significantly more often regular sources, interacting with journalists at least once a month, and they are thus significantly more often familiar to them ($\chi_s = .262$; df = 1; r < .001); and (d) PR sources are identified in the published items by name, role or organization significantly more often than non-PR sources ($\chi_s = .337$; df = 1; r < .001), making them much more accountable for the content.

RQ5 juxtaposes PR and non-PR sources once again to see whether the items they are involved in are different. As can be seen in the second part of Table 3, item characteristics can barely explain reliance on PR. Reliance on PR is not associated with significantly more or less factual disagreements or an item's level of importance. Though they are involved more often in items with lower levels of perceived interest and risk, and are less often involved in items based on a leak, correlations are lower than.1 and are rather unpersuasive. So all and all, a claim that PR sources are involved in items with lower stakes is hardly supported.

However, to go beyond simple correlations, we also present a regression model built of two different groups – the interaction factors that were found significant in RQ4 and the item factors that were found significant in RQ5. The model, presented in Table 4, reaffirms the analysis above. Familiarity, governmental affiliation, the textuality of the interaction, and source identification are all significant predictors of reliance on PR sources. To use the terms of the intereffication model, we indeed find indications for epistemic "inductions" from PR practitioners, which resonate with journalists' increasing epistemic needs, and act as incentives for them to prefer PR over other sources. However, the association of item factors, interest and risk level and the reliance on leaks information become statistically insignificant.

Table 4. Logistical regression for PR sources testing item and interaction variables.

Variable	Exp. B
Constant	.05 NS
Leak-based story	.79 NS
Item is interesting	.89 NS
Publication involves risk	1 NS
Familiar source	3**
Governmental sector	2.26**
Textual interaction	3.1**
Source identified in publication	5**
Model summary	
Significance	r < .001
Cox and Snell R square	.252
DF	7
F	302.899**
−2LL	1108.247

**r < .001/NS-not significant.
N = 1,147.

Explaining the paradox in their own words

In RQ6, we are interested in exploring journalists' own explanations about their relations with PR sources, to better understand the meaning of the statistical findings presented above. Interviewees addressed a series of issues in the qualitative parts of the study, including their decisions to rely on PR sources who they perceived as less credible, the gap between source and message credibility evaluations amongst these sources, what did the non-credible PR sources contribute to the items and more. A critical analysis of their answers yielded three main themes:

Reliance without trust – "It's not that I believe what these sources tell me is definitely true; it's that I can rely on their messages, even if I don't trust them as people, since I know that they know that they will be held accountable if it turns out to be false," explained an interviewee about her decision to rely on a source that she said is generally a non-credible person. This sort of explanation, which coheres with the epistemic notion of "reliance without trust" (Goldberg SC, 2020), seemed to repeat itself. "This person is generally not someone I would 'take his word for it,' but it's not at all what I am doing here – I am taking his written commitment, sent from an email with a governmental domain. I find it hard to believe he will directly lie to me in such a well-documented correspondence," explained another.

There is a risk involved in such cases, which some interviewees acknowledged: "I can, as I said, be very certain she isn't lying, but that does not mean she can't omit information, mislead me or spin it – this might be nothing but the truth, but not necessarily the whole truth," summarized another interviewee.

Balancing epistemic and logistical needs – Another explanation for the reliance on PR resonates with the well-known "compromise" notion, but it suggests a need to balance "between my duty to get information that is, at least, not false" and "the need to get it done and fast," as an interviewee explained. "I wouldn't print it if I didn't have enough reasons to believe it is at least relatively accurate, or if I had a reason to believe he [the PR source] is lying – however, I do forfeit going out to see 'with my own eyes,' or checking with other sources, as in most cases I simply don't have the time," explained another interviewee. "If I had unlimited resources, perhaps I would never talk to a PR, let alone copy-paste some of the text in the press release, but that is never the case," summarized another.

Success as a justification – Some journalists explained that their experience indicates reliance on PR sources works: "I don't know why it is, but looking back, PR sources hardly ever got me in trouble with false information or incorrect data," explained an interviewee. "Maybe they are credible, and they just have a bad reputation, or maybe it is because they know how to provide information that is just biased enough to serve their interest, but not too biased as to be considered wrong," he continues. "But whatever the reason is, I can say that when I talk to other sources – citizens, politicians, even some experts – I more often end up publishing stories that are not accurate."

These themes, combined with the previous quantitative results, indicate an adaptation according to the intereffication model. By interviewing journalists, we can only get indirect evidence for an adaptation. However, PR's epistemically-virtues practices, clearly resonate with the increasing logistical constraints our interviewees indicated, and their need to find the most efficient ways to get defendable information (even at the expense of veracity, to some extent).

Discussion

This paper investigates a relationship that dramatically impacts our social life, politics, and democracy. Though numerous scholars studied the relationship between journalists and PR, the paper introduces a theoretical innovation and a unique empirical approach that helps expose, for the first time, its epistemic characteristics, revealing why the PR paradox persists, and what underlies journalists' continuing willingness to act in a way they perceive as a professional compromise.

The paper presents compelling evidence that journalists rely on PR sources regularly and heavily, though they evaluate them as less credible than other sources. This finding contradicts previous studies' suggestions that the paradox results from journalists categorizing specific PR sources as experts, and that they do not, in fact evaluate their PR sources as less credible, but they only hold this approach toward the profession in general or other PR practitioners they do not work with (Jeffers, 1977; Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Sallot & Johnson, 2006).

The study also demonstrates that the interactions in which PR sources are involved encompass more epistemic virtues than interactions with non-PR sources. These interactions are more often textual, represent authoritativeness, rely on familiarity, and allow public attribution of the information to the source. Another hypothesis derived from the literature, according to which reliance on PR can be explained by their involvement in stories that entail lowers levels of risk, is refuted by our findings.

Journalists themselves seem to confirm that indeed interactions with PR sources are more reliable, yet that is not an indication they believe these sources are always sincere. The gap found between source credibility evaluations and message credibility can also be understood in light of journalists' accounts – they do not perceive the sources as credible, but the information is delivered in a manner they feel they can safely rely on, even if they are not positively sure it is "the whole truth."

One aspect that was not fully explored in the findings is reliance on social media. Not because social media is not of special interest, but rather because the findings did not allow it. Social media played a surprisingly meager role for the interviewees: out of the 1,147 sources they accounted for, only 26 originated from social media, either Facebook (22) or Twitter (4). A possible explanation for these results, provided by one of our interviewees, is that social media is used to rapidly scan "what people are talking about," but is rarely used as a source of information for a specific item.

Theoretical, normative, and social implications

The PR paradox is not only reaffirmed, but is also explained based on the epistemic notion of "reliance without trust" (Goldberg SC, 2020). Rather than deciding whether the information is true, journalists turn to examine whether they can defend their decision to rely on it. This finding contextualizes the common claim that trustworthiness is a prime predictor of source selection, and it calls into question whether "trust" is the correct term to use, and not reliability. Whether this is an intentional strategy of PR sources, who wish to compensate for their bad reputations, to seize the opportunity of the epistemic crisis (Zerfass et al., 2019) and position themselves as an island of reliability in a sea of misinformation, or whether it is coincidental, the result can be labeled as "epistemic subsidies." Instead of focusing on delivering complete, ready-to-publish information, PR sources gain from providing information that requires less verification and justify less doubt.

We also found a new type of induction, which is defined according to the intereffication theory as: "communicative offers or stimuli, which result in resonances in the respective other system" (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008, p. 36). In our case, PRs' epistemically-virtues communicative practices, the "epistemic subsidies," offer a stimuli which resonate with journalists' needs. The subsidies arrive from the PR-actor level, yet the statistical analysis indicates these practices are embedded as a profession-wide norm, and thus could also be seen as systematic inductions.

Can we also argue that the findings expose a new type of "adaptation" effect? Lacking longitudinal data or the accounts of PR professionals, it is hard to determine whether these epistemic subsidies are indeed reactions to journalists' epistemic needs or driven by other factors. And yet, the differences between PR and non-PR sources are clear and consistent enough to argue that there is probably a connection between journalists' increasing epistemic needs and PR's practices, and call for further investigation. Moreover, if we recall that Zerfass et al. (2019) found that PR practitioners wish to position themselves as reliable sources, our findings provide evidence that these wishes manifest in their practices.

The needs triggering these adaptations would originate from all three levels in journalism: the system, editorial office, and media actor. However, while institutions and organizations can cope with instances of mistakes, and might allow themselves greater risks in a truth-seeking mission, individual journalists are more likely to prefer reliable and safe interactions to unreliable ones, even in cases where they deem the latter to be more truth-revealing than the former (Barnoy and Reich, 2021).

These findings reopen the normative debate about the reliance on PR sources. The results reject the determinist approach, according to which reliance on PR is inherently damaging to journalism, and they also suggest that, as opposed to the common wisdom, reliance on PR sources might actually help journalists avoid factual mistakes, leading to potentially more truthful reporting of public affairs. Stating PR might make journalists more balanced, as was also found in Schönhagen and Meißner's (2016) historical analysis of the development of PR in Germany, might seems preposterous to the average journalism scholar or practitioner today. However, if reporting stories accurately was always journalists' prime objective, and if it continues to be one of the few imperative social roles of journalism in a democracy (Nielsen, 2017bb), then the reduced likelihood of publishing false information that derives from reliance on PR sources might actually mark such practice as normatively desirable, rather than reprehensible.

On the other hand, even if reliance on PR protects the journalists and the public from false information, such reliance still encompasses two types of risks with potentially destructive implications. The first is the risk of becoming even more vulnerable to misleading that is not false. Though falsity is undoubtedly something we need to avoid, using correct facts to mislead hearers is often just as problematic (Sosa, 2007).

The second is the risk of unintentionally prompting social injustice. As identified by critical epistemologists, deciding who and what to trust based on traditional epistemic criteria, such as authoritativeness or familiarity, leads to the unjustified exclusion of certain actors, and strengthens the dominance of existing elites (Alcoff, 2001; Barnoy & Reich, 2021; Fricker, 2007; Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016). So even if reliance on PR is safer, it is bound to deny unprivileged actors – citizens and alternative sources, who lack the resources to employ media professionals – the possibility to affect the public discourse.

These results also impinge on a theoretical discussion about epistemic virtues. If we adopt the approach that the purpose of being epistemically virtuous is maximizing the chances of being correct, adopting true beliefs (Turri et al., 2021), then it seems that reliance on PR does indeed serve its purpose. However, other approaches in virtue epistemology suggest that epistemology should also promote well-being (Sosa, 2007; Turri et al., 2021), by, for example, helping us expose and counter instances of injustice (Fricker, 2007). The findings in this paper suggest that reliance on these traditionally virtuous epistemic measures could be counterproductive, if epistemology is meant to serve purposes that go beyond truth-seeking.

The study suffers from two main shortcomings. First, it relies on self-testimonies. Indeed, the reconstruction method dramatically reduces social desirability and other self-reporting biases, yet they are not fully neutralized. This is especially true when we consider that the specific practice we are investigating – reliance on PR – is often perceived as reprehensible (Davies, 2011).

Second, it focuses on legacy media and the Israeli news industry, limiting the generalizability of the findings in two ways. Israel's news media was found to be dependent on PR sources more or less in similar scope as other western democracies, such as the United States, Australia, or the UK (Sherwood et al., 2019). In the Worlds of Journalism project (Hanitzsch et al., 2019), Israeli journalists evaluated the influence of PR sources similarly to peers in some democracies (e.g., Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, etc.), but higher than peers in other countries (e.g., France, Canada, Norway, etc.). Furthermore, Israeli journalists share basic norms and practices with their peers in other western countries (Meyers & Davidson, 2014). Finally, according to Lahav and Ruth Cohen's report (2017), there are structural similarities between the Israeli and American PR industries, such as the ratio between PR firms, the general population, and the number of businesses. And yet, without an international component, it is hard to evaluate whether these findings will replicate in other cultures.

The focus on legacy outlets is problematic mainly since we discuss the findings' implications on social power dynamics, and elite vs. alternative sources. It is very likely that journalists in alternative innovative news outlets rely on elite sources less often, and they might reject reliance on PR sources (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016).

Since there is great interest in understanding whether the new generation of journalists might be forming a different type of relationship with PR sources, we suggest future studies should include alternative outlets. In addition, we believe scholars must continue to track trends of this relationship, as we are undergoing dramatic technological and social changes, which could very well change the entire dynamic between the two industries. In particular, the field could benefit from longitudinal studies.

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