

# THE ABSENT VICTIMS: AN ECOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES IN THE NEW YORK TIMES

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## ABSTRACT

Absence of coverage in elite newspapers about one aspect of climate justice is environmental migration. Very little is understood about victims caught in the debate about climate change and forced movement. In *The New York Times*, the selective framing of the issue portrays people displaced by slow and gradual climate change or sudden climatic events as being security risks, making absent other important ideologically factors that seem to alter the central story line of environmental migration. Using Pan & Kosicki's (1993) framework to understand how a frame is built in the newspaper, what emerges is that the reportage is marked by absences. These absences offer the elite newspapers a way forward to ignore issues that do not seem to be newsworthy for coverage. Yet, these absences of coverage lead to absence of attention on the true victims of climate change.

**Keywords:** Climate change; climate refugees; environmental refugees; framing; absences; news discourse.

## PREAMBLE

**E**nvironmental refugees featured in the newspaper *The New York Times* (henceforth *NYT*) are framed as being security risks. I argue that this frame-package of environmental refugees' as security risks is marked by absences. Projecting environmental refugees as security risks is an incomplete projection of the issue, as some other ideas, like lack of a legal status even as a refugee, do not seem to be given equal if not more legitimacy in constructing the issue. The central storyline of the reportage began with portraying them as victims of climate change when the newspaper first mentioned them in the early 1980s. This changed in the 1990s when global warming

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<sup>1</sup> There were other frame-packages that emerged including the North-South divide on climate change and Small Island Nations (SIDS) as the first victims of climate change, but the most recurring frame-package was that of these humans being displaced framed as security threats.

moved from being primarily an environmental problem to one where climate change affected political, social, and economic aspects of society.

The term environmental refugee is a controversial construct, a legally unrecognized term of reference, yet it is used by writers and some opinion-makers alike. Biermann and Boas define such people as “people who have to leave their habitats (and home territory) immediately or in the near future because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity” (2010, 67)

## FRAMING IN ECOLINGUISTIC LITERATURE

Ecolinguistics inherits many of the premises and aims of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) in that ecolinguists’ intention in their object-of-critique<sup>2</sup> is similar. While CDA examines ways in which discourse constructs and reflects ideologies that create unequal power and hegemony (i.e., humans vis-à-vis other humans), some ecolinguists aim (in addition) to address how language use can have an unequal ecological impact through the actions of humans vis-à-vis other humans, non-human species, ecosystems, and the environment. In both cases, the objective is to address issues of concern and make unequal relationships both visible and central to the discussion.

In ecolinguistics, framing is one of the tools used to understand how the media can shape and limit the speech, action, and options of both policymakers at one end and the readers on the other. This method has been used by Stibbe (2015), Lakoff (2010), and Cachelin et al. (2010) to show that ecological framing of environmental issues is mostly done in negative terms, as issues that need to be diagnosed or solved. This analysis of *NYT* joins this group where the trajectory is framed by justice for both

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<sup>2</sup> As explained by Fairclough, an object-of-critique is “discourse being some sort of ‘entity’ or ‘object’” and a critique of object is “a [combination of] critique of discourse and an explanation of how it figures within and contributes to the existing social reality” (1995, 3).

humans and their environment. In studying the reportage of environmental refugees, the aim is to understand what kind of justice these people are served by other humans, but it is also to understand the relational nature of humans with their environment.

The understanding of a frame in this research is that it is a group of factual and interpretative statements with a specific thematic orientation supported with a combination of rhetorical<sup>3</sup> and stylistic devices. This is called a media-package by Gamson and Lash (1983) or frame-packages by van Gorp (2007). In framing analysis, the principle task of the researcher is to unpack these frame-packages. This is done by detailing the specific thematic orientations and linguistic structures that combine to form the frame. Repetition of such form a frame package. Each frame-package is distinguishable by its unique way of combining the structural, rhetorical, or stylistic devices. Each frame-package provides the “central organizing idea[s]” connecting different elements of the news-story including the actors, quotes, sources, context, and background information, and relaying these as “interpretative packages that help to make sense of relevant events, suggesting what is the issue” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989, 3).

The present research differs from and serves to supplement the growing number of ecology-based projects examining nature and human interactions by shifting the focus from how humans affect nature through material actions and events to how news discourse serves to convey, construct and negotiate meanings about human relationships with the environment and its interrelated parts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Rhetorical devices” is an overarching term that includes stylistic devices such as metaphors, exemplars, and catchphrases, in addition to facticity strategies employed by writer’ to increase the effectiveness of news (Pan and Kosicki, 1993, 62).

<sup>4</sup> Nature is inclusive of non-human species, flora fauna, earth, soil, sun excludes humans; environment is all of these along with humans.

## METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The empirical evidence for this study was generated from a systematic reading of newspaper articles on environmental refugees from *NYT* over a 31-year-time-period.<sup>5</sup> The sample initially consisted of 78 newspaper articles from 1985 to 2015 including terms such as “climate refugee/migrant” or “environmental refugee/migrant.” The list was generated using the online database Lexis-Nexis; the ‘major mentions’ was used to search for stories that have start and end dates of January 1, 1985 to December 31, 2015. In addition, ‘major mentions’ limits the search to include the terms “environmental refugees,” “climate refugees” in the headlines, lead paragraphs and indexing tags. One advantage of using the Lexis-Nexis route was the appearance of fewer framing mechanisms—no pull quotes and no logos.

The dataset includes all types of articles: news articles, editorials, opinion pieces, features and published letters to the editor. Letters to the editors were dropped as upon review they did not offer any fresh perspective. Selected items were arranged in a chronological manner. A mix of all genres of news articles were included due to the small amount of data retrieved over the 31-year period. The articles<sup>6</sup> were examined qualitatively. The final population was N=53.

*The New York Times* was chosen as the focus of this research as it is the industry standard for gathering news and reporting it. It is considered the most influential media source in the agenda-setting process both among policy makers and other media organizations (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). The newspaper is also a forerunner in the industry not in terms of circulation as much as for investigative and in-depth reportage on controversial issues.<sup>7</sup>

To examine the construction of the frame-package environmental refugees as security risks, it was helpful to understand the repeated thematic orientations in the

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<sup>5</sup>The choice of this rather long time-period ensures that the results are not distorted by specific climatic events such as the 2010 Indian Ocean tsunami or the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. An article was included in the dataset as long as it had at least one discussion on any aspect of environmental migration as opposed to a mere mention.

<sup>6</sup> The word articles replace newspaper articles.

<sup>7</sup> As an aside, most climate change denial reports have an Anglo-American perspective (Björnberg et al., 2017, 234).

newspaper. The frame was the central idea or storyline that provided meaning to unfolding events. It also directed the reader's attention to understand the issue in a certain manner. In a frame, there is preference for certain selection of words and phrases, including stock phrases and sources of information (Simon and Jerit 2006, 257). Gamson postulates it is a frame that offers a "central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events" (1989, 157). The repetitive use of selected linguistic structures, and reasoning devices makes absent or less prominent other ideas that may be equally relevant to the discussion. Thus, overtime many articles lend salience to a particular aspect of an issue while other aspects are absent or become marginalized in the reportage. As suggested earlier, for this study we will only focus on one frame-package. In detailing how the reportage framed the environmental refugees, I chose to follow the methodology laid out by Pan & Kosicki (1993), which allowed me to closely examine structural elements in the discourse that allow construction of a certain version of reality. This approach shows how linguistic constituents assemble a particular storyline, thus, how the frame was built block by block. By using this linguistic approach, I am able to observe not only the building blocks of the frame but also what is missing or made less salient in the discussion.

Every article in the dataset was annotated to detail the syntactic, script, thematic and rhetorical structures of a frame as proposed by Pan and Kosicki (1993). Briefly, syntactic structures in an article are similar to Van Dijk's (1988b, 26) "macrosyntax," that is the inverted pyramid arrangement of headline, lead, episodes, background, and closure in a news article. The script structure of an article often follows closely that of a story—a beginning, climax and end, despite news articles having their own story grammar (1988b, 50) consisting of the five Ws (who, what, when, where, why) and two Hs (how and how much). The thematic structure of the article, or, the idea that pervades the whole article was observed as it allows the writers to construct the story with one theme as the central core connecting various subthemes. Lastly, the rhetorical

structures<sup>8</sup> of every article were documented to detail the stylistic choices made by the writer but they are not discussed in this paper.

To build the frame, lexical items, sentences, paragraphs and the macro-text itself was examined in every article. Lexical items were useful to identify the elements of script and thematic and rhetorical structures. Sentences were analyzed to understand how the theme was developed in an article. Paragraphs allowed for an understanding of the thematic direction of the article and the macro-text was useful to understand how the syntactic constituents were arranged repeated over time. The next step in the process was to make aggregate observations of factual and/or interpretive elements along with their stylistic devices and then to name the frame-package. The names of the frame package were indicative of the thematic orientation of a group of articles that share similar ways of presenting the issue along with a network of rhetorical devices and reasoning devices. The name functions like an identity tag of the frame. Once the frame package is named, articles with similar thematic orientations along with similar reasoning and stylistic devices supporting the theme were grouped together. Pan and Kosicki's (1993) approach pays enough attention to the structure of an article and sufficiently guarantees the reliability and the validity of the frame constructed.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

An issue as complex as the displacement of humans due to climate change has multiple causes, effects, and interdependencies. Framing entails understanding the “. . . central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (Gamson and Modigliani 1994, 143). The initial hypothesis is that the central storyline is built through structural units that portray environmental refugees negatively. The analyses of basic elements that build the frame<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Gamson and Lasch's (1983, 102) list of stylistic choices of framing devices suggest how to think about the issue and three reasoning devices justify what should be done about it. The framing devices are “(1) metaphors, (2) exemplars (i.e. historical examples from which lessons are drawn), (3) catchphrases, (4) depictions, and (5) visual images (e.g., icons).

<sup>9</sup> For a full list of articles analyzed please see Venkataraman 2019.

(Venkataraman 2019) are presented along with a discussion of how they functionally present the problem of human displacement. The conclusion will provide an overarching argument of how some themes regarding climate change and its effects on humans are made less salient by the frame-package.

- *THEMATIC STRUCTURES: THE CHIEF ARCHITECT OF THE FRAMES*

Themes in an article are developed through the description of an actor(s) and their action(s). The theme might include the goals of the actors developed through direct and indirect quotes, while detailing the context and the background. It also examines the root causes and consequences of events and actions. Themes are an integral part of how a frame is realized. Thus, themes help “constructs a particular angle of interpretation on the topic of each text which resonates with other aspects of discourse organisation” (Martin 1992b, 12). For Pan and Kosicki (1993, 59), “the theme is also called a frame” because frames provide ways in which “media organize and present issues and events” (Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2005, 404).

- *THEMES*

Themes are the basic entities that define a socially constructed reality in a frame. Since the articles selected focus primarily on environmental refugees, the themes developed the topics of displacement of “climate refugees” (*NYT*, 20), “floating populations” (*NYT*, 25), and “ecological refugees” (*NYT*, 18). The first absence to note is that people who are displaced are not refugees, as they do not have a legal status that offers them protection in the host countries.

The recurring theme of climate change as a threat-multiplier was a way by which climate change moved from being categorized simply as an environmental risk, to that where climate change was seen to be affecting the environment, geo-political interactions, economics, society and human security at large. Climate change as a threat-multiplier then co-opts environmental refugees in the bargain, for environmental refugees on the move to escape the environmental stress or conflict was a way by which *NYT* chose to frame human displacement in the 1980s. The movement

of people in places such as Mali was portrayed as, “a crippling drought in this landlocked West African country has made water as precious as the salt and gold traded in Timbuktu centuries ago” (*NYT*, 23). In Syria, the extreme drought along with a growing population, corrupt regime, extreme sectarian and religious passions were the reasons why “half the population in Syria between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers left the land” (*NYT*, 12). The environmental refugees were therefore seen as victims of complex situations involving strife, lack of resources and a changing environment. As a threat-multiplier climate change was seen to be one of the root causes of human displacement. In addition, during sudden climatic events, essential resources were used ineffectually to tackle emergency situations like food and water distribution. Thus, environmental refugees were framed at this point as truly being part “of the effect of warming[which] will be calamitous for poor countries” (*NYT*, 19) since we are “talking about some countries that never had much chance to recover from the last serious drought. And there is quantitatively and qualitatively an increase in insecurity” (*NYT*, 21). While climate change was a threat-multiplier, environmental refugees were seen to be the true victims who might be “need[ing] American humanitarian relief or military response” (*NYT*, 2).

When these people moved to surrounding regions, violence erupted as they competed for already stretched resources in host regions: “‘now there are too many people for one well,’ said a regional official, surrounded by makeshift tents of mats, sticks and newspaper” (*NYT*, 11). These violent fights in neighboring regions allow the framing of threat-multiplier to identify climate change as a root cause of security in these regions.

This repetitive theme of climate change as a threat-multiplier also has implications for the basic entity of the frame “environmental refugees.” In fleeing from the effects of climate change and unrest at home, these environmental refugees are construed as the victims of climate change. Yet when they cross into neighboring regions and they compete for resources in the host regions, they are seen as a “deluge” and “invasive.” The attention is now on the intentional harm caused by these people as they fight for resources.

Of particular interest is the relationship between the themes of loss and damage often projected together, with the writer making no distinction between what can be rectified through technological or financial help and complete loss of livelihoods, cultural heritage, and status as a nation.

The signifying elements of a theme are the lexical choices that are arranged in a certain fashion to develop a particular view. They function as “framing devices because they are recognizable and thus can be experienced . . . conceptualized into concrete elements of a discourse, [and] be arranged or manipulated by newsmakers” (Pan and Kosicki 1993, 59).

Two points are made here. The words “risk,” “climate change,” “migration,” “loss,” and “damage” were used repeatedly. In contrast, the terms “justice” and “legal status” resulted in surprisingly low returns despite being the crux of the matter. The term “justice” and its synonyms were found in only three sources and with a mere four references over the three decades in NYT whereas the word “legal” had four references in three articles. This is a significant absence concerning these people as they try to move away from degradation and harm.

This brief description of themes and lexical choices made by the writers provide the entry point for discussing the concrete elements of the discourse arranged to make the frame communicable through the news media.

## SYNTACTICAL STRUCTURES

- *MACROSYNTAX*

The first structural element of a frame is called “macrosyntax” (van Dijk 1988b, 26). This consists of an inverted pyramid structure where headline, lead, episodes, background, and closure are arranged in a top down manner and in descending order. Given below is a detailed discussion of the structural elements where environmental refugees are featured in the leads of the articles or hidden as a mere mention in the context, background or closure of the article. Every time environmental refugees are mentioned in the lead the discussion was coupled with climate change.

- *HEADLINES*

In a macrosyntactic structure of a newspaper the headline is the first element that helps in framing an issue. Headlines provide ways by which frames are bolstered. While headlines have specific linguistic forms and communicative functions (Bell 1991, 186; Dor 2003, 697; Van Dijk 2013, 221), the most important way by which they contribute to the frame is by providing a summary of the article. In most of the *NYT* articles, the headlines served as a macro-proposition for the entire article, that is the thematic focus of the text is projected in the headline (Van Dijk 1988b, 33). This is how the “central organizing idea or story-line” (Gamson and Modigliani 1994, 143) is expressed. The mention of environmental refugees is entirely absent from all headlines. The first framing element in the macrosyntax, the headline, fails to engage with the theme explicitly.

The headlines fall into three syntactic patterns: groups, non-finite clauses, and finite clauses (Montgomery and Feng 2016, 504). A group mentions a specific geographical region or entity: “Obama on Obama on Climate” (*NYT*, 11), whereas non-finite clauses are expressed as “A Paradise Drowning” (*NYT*, 17), and finite clauses consist of a complete sentence or clause: “Haitian Refugees Chide U.S. Policy; Unequal Treatment of Immigrants Cited” (*NYT*, 15).

In discussing the headlines, the finite clauses frame the threats, risks, dangers and consequences of climate change, the groups characterize the consequences of climate change in specific geographical locations, mostly in Africa and the Asian subcontinent while non-finite clauses talk of climate change as a global phenomenon from privileged or elite perspectives only. If the U.S. is mentioned in the headline,<sup>10</sup> it is to explicitly project its stances, for example: “U.S. is Ending Haven for Those Fleeing a Volcano” (*NYT*, 2).

The headlines in the non-finite group provide only a part of the information. What is missing are the major actors like the high-carbon-emitting nations. The deletion of details in the headlines help embody a point of view signaled by the

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<sup>10</sup> By and large the articles reflected a U.S. perspective on issues related to the environment and migration.

headlines itself. In the headline, “Paradise is Drowning” (*NYT*, 17), neither the victims of climate change nor the causes are mentioned. The frame develops the problems of climate change, and the headline legitimizes bold assertions about climate change but without mention of either perpetrators or victims. In yet another example, “The Impending Deluge” (*NYT*, 9) the use of the *verb+ing* form in the headline creates an effect of immediacy, even a sense of doom in the immediate future. Non-finite clause headlines thus contribute to the alarmist and doomsday discourse often associated with climate change representations in the media (Risbey 2008, 27).

In both categories of groups and finite-clause headlines, the newspaper frames the environmental refugee issue as either a risk or threat. In the example, “Obama Recasts Climate Change as a Peril with Far-reaching Effects” (*NYT*, 6), the headline signifies the discussions of disruptions in host countries because of human movement towards First-World countries. This developed credence between 2006-2015, when climate change was cast as a security threat by military experts in the White House. In another example, “Africa’s Drought Sears the Land of Timbuktu” (*NYT*, 7) we see the same issue reported in a diagnostic fashion. The problems faced are constructed in an interweaving manner that explains local problems of weak governance, economic mismanagement, and climatic conditions that have contributed to the present state-of-affairs.

Headlines between 1985 and 1995 used perspectives of victimhood to construct the frame on environmental refugees. Yet as we began to live with climate change in 1990s, the headlines began to narrow in scope. In the 2000s, the frames in the newspaper dealt exclusively with security threats or projection of the global phenomenon of climate change on others’ locally lived realities.

In frame construction, headlines provide the first cues to the classification of the frame-package, yet it is marked by a visible absence, the mere mention of environmental refugees themselves.

- *LEADS*

Leads, or the first two paragraphs of the article, indicate the most important information found in the article (Lorimer and Gasher 2004, 238). Traditionally, the inverted pyramid style used to have the lead as the base providing the five W's, in covering an event or episode that is considered newsworthy. Thus, leads almost always establish the frame of the story (Sieff 2003, 260). In most leads, the descriptive information provided serves to “orient the [reader] in respect to the person, place, time and behavioural situation” (Labov and Waletzky 1967, 32). In 51 articles (out of 53), the lead echoed what the headline said.

While most articles followed the traditional style of using leads as a way to clue the readers into the rest of the article, there were instances of the lead being a poor indicator of the frame of the article for reasons that had more to do with absence playing a pivotal role in shaping the discourse than with a shift in style to a more relaxed narrative style that fuses features of descriptive writing with news reporting.

Another type of lead that is seen in the newspaper were those which offer a scaffold for the writer to reorient a specific actor's point of view in their own terms. In Example 1 below, the writer allows the lead to hook the reader by envisaging the risks posed by rising sea-levels, yet the article reorients the risk with the writer's own understanding of the issue:

Example: 1

*Headline: The Bay of Bengal, in Peril from Climate change (NYT, 1)*

*Lead:* Nearly one in four people on earth live in countries that border the Bay of Bengal. The region is strategically vital to Asia's rising powers. Its low-lying littoral—including coastal regions of eastern India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand Malaysia and Sumatra—is home to a billion people who are now acutely vulnerable to rising sea-levels. Storms are a constant threat; over the weekend, a cyclone, Phailin swept in from the bay to strike the coastal Indian state of Orissa, leading to the evacuation of some 800,000 people.

*Opinion of the writer:* But first the countries that ring the bay must rise above their potential fault lines and embrace the interconnectedness of their history . . . The bay's turbulent climate has played an outsized role in the region's history.

In the example above, in the lead, the writer “cull[ed] a few elements of perceived reality and assembl[ed] a narrative that highlight[ed] connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman 2007, 164). The particular interpretations developed by the writer follow the lead by weaving the writer’s own world views and culling details of the proceedings of the conference or detailing what happens when rising sea-levels batter the mangroves of Bangladesh or force people in dinghy boats toward Australia. These particular interpretations were developed by “sizing and magnifying or shrinking elements of the depicted reality . . .” to make certain elements of the event “. . . more or less salient” (Entman 1991, 9) thus, influencing the central storyline of the frame. The writer promotes an understanding that closer inter-governmental interactions between neighboring countries could help solve local problems with climate change. There is an absence of any help suggested from any of the developed countries in the same region or even in the West. This is also the way the lead contributes to the frame changing over time. These displaced people move from being victims to problems that need to be managed.

While the leads provide the main frame of the article, there were also instances of culling and sizing of the information that were evident in ways that do not allow the reader to understand the frame immediately. For example, in articles that begin with a short narrative about an individual in order to contextualize the argument, there is a marked absence of evidence to show how the narrative builds the argument for or against environmental refugees’ status or about climate change’s effects on human displacement.

The following example shows how the lead begins with framing an issue with an individual story, yet, further on in the article the frame develops thematic relationships about the main entity of environmental refugees as being security risks to society. An individual story as a lead but soon forms a thematic generalization of a group of people. The article begins with an individual story that seems to be credible, reasonable and natural, while the article itself opens space for an incredible, unreasonable and unnatural displacements of humans which shows an ill-defined nuance in an issue.

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There is a disconnect between the lead being the hook of the article and the development of the issues.

Example: 2

*Headline: China Migrants: Economic Engine, Social Burden (NYT, 24)*

*Opening Sentence in the Lead:* With his possessions bundled in plastic and hung from his shoulders, his trousers rolled up to beat the heat, 30-year-old Ren Jun drifted into Beijing this month, part of the migrant tide of 50 million peasants that is threatening to swamp China's urban landscape.

*Analysis:* The journalist refers to internal displacement, rather than to outward migration. This makes absent the need for discussion on the legal status of environmental refugees when they cross borders. It also makes it a local problem that is regulated by domestic laws and regulations applicable in China.

*Comment:* The reader is exposed to a frame that is familiar and reoccurring in migrant literature, namely, the "refugee invasion" (Leudar et al. 2008, 188) as expressed in the article as "pressure on existing infrastructures," "overburdened rail system," "criminalization of these people," ". . . gangs of criminals . . ." (NYT, 24). The lead develops the theme in a way already familiar to the reader instead of engaging with the issues that confront these victims from an environmental-migration nexus perspective. The notion of climate change and its consequences on the livelihoods is posited in just one sentence: "The land is not fertile, and it is far from any water." In brief, even if it is identified, the underlying issue is not effectively addressed.

To conclude, while the lead suggests themes that follow and describe the risks and problems associated with human displacement, it also frames the issue because it occludes other themes on human displacement that include justice and suffering of the displaced. If environmental refugees are featured in the lead, they form "mass migration" or "large scale displacement of people" (NYT, 3). In many ways the focus is on the consequences of climate change and its risks rather than on the suffering of environmental refugees.

In an overwhelming majority of the articles (97.6%), the lead allows the observer to understand the frame of environmental refugees as security risks. The only exceptions come with individual stories that contextualize the article itself but do not necessarily develop the main frame of the article.

- *CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND*

In a frame, context and background play the roles of making the reader aware of the issue either by reminding of old information or building a scaffold to new information. In this reportage, they enhance the reader's understanding of probabilities and uncertainties associated with human displacement. While the function of context in *NYT* is the specific climate-related event(s), outcome of a conference, or the particular disaster covered, the background is the more comprehensive, structural or historical information given about climate change or environmental refugees. Context and backgrounds work as important signifiers of familiar knowledge and introduce fresh details for new events or episodes.

In *NYT*, the context and background are presented in an incomplete and superficial manner, their logical contribution to the frames being in the form of predetermined values which allow the frame to recycle themes of non-sustainability, loss, and damage associated with climate change, refugee invasion, and accompanying security threats.

The following example provides an understanding of how the frame is built through the themes echoed in the context and background.

Example 3

*Headline: No Fixed Address (NYT, 5)*

*Context:* The images of starving, exhausted, flood-bedraggled people fleeing New Orleans and southern Mississippi over the last two weeks have scandalized many Americans long accustomed to seeing such scenes only in faraway storm tossed or war-ravaged places like Kosovo, Sudan or Banda Aceh.

*Analysis:* Environmental migration is contextualized by comparison to scenes seen as typical of faraway storms or wars ravaging in Africa or Asia, allowing the reader to understand that the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is in many ways a new sight for Americans. It can also be viewed as providing backgrounding to Hurricane Katrina

In the newspaper, when environmental refugees were constructed as a consequence of climate change, they are often not seen in the lead but only in the context and background to climate change.

In the frame-package of environmental refugees as security risks, the structural background in these articles explains *how* these people become environmental refugees but does not explain *how* they become security risks. Instead, this is just repeated in the closure of the articles. Thus, leads that contain lexical choices about a “national security imperative” (*NYT*, 6) or posing “a serious threat to America’s national security” (*NYT*, 7) are provided with detailed background about situations that allow us to understand the push factors for climate change but not how these people might become security threats to America.

The context and background of articles delving into the issue of human displacement due to climate change often provide negative supplemental information. However, this information does not lead to a better understanding of the complex nature of the problem but promotes fallacies with counterproductive values ascribed to environmental refugees as security risks.

- *EPISODES*

The articles’ main bodies contain what Werth details as including: “actions, events, motions, accomplishments and processes” (1999, 102). These are the episodes in an article. When the newspaper reports the proceedings of meetings and conferences, the events advance or progress in complication, leading to resolution and outcomes, meaning the articles highlight the outcomes of the conferences or meetings. In contrast, when the report has no resolution, it is an opinion piece.

In *NYT* the episodes are presented as two kinds of suspenses:<sup>11</sup> past-oriented suspenses and future-oriented suspenses (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 12; Knobloch et al.

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<sup>11</sup> An initiating event described in the newspaper might have significant consequences. This is likely to instigate concern from the reader, resulting in suspense. The suspense is an affective reaction from the reader. (Knobloch et al. 261)

2004, 261). Future-oriented suspenses are episodes detailing human displacement which explain what might happen when they are displaced; past-oriented suspenses are episodes that encode what caused them to move.

As seen in Table 1 below, *NYT* develops the past-oriented suspenses in greater detail. This is expected since the future-oriented suspenses often lack a closure in terms of real-world answers.

**Table 1:** Difference between past and future-oriented suspenses

Past-oriented suspenses	Future-oriented suspenses
Here is what scientists have found is happening to our climate . . . Almost all of the ice-covered regions of the Earth are melting—and seas are rising ( <i>NYT</i> , 13)	The prospect of waves of environmental refugees fleeing ravaged Third-World economies or low-lying areas and causing “enormous destabilizing pressures. ( <i>NYT</i> , 24)

The significance of suspenses as a framing device in episodes is considerable. Past-oriented suspenses are varied in the reportage from understanding climate change to postulating how weak governance or stretched resources in countries from where environmental refugees are forced to move contribute to their movement. Yet the future-oriented suspenses do not encode thematic development of episodes regarding their legal status or loss of nationality or even their way of life. Instead these are framed singularly as the *eventuality* that they will be part of the security risks.

- *CLOSURES*

There is no resolution to the issue of human displacement in the real world at the moment. Yet the issue is written up with elements of a closure in which specific scenarios are imagined. This is not reflective of the real-world situation where human displacement is still taking place, and imagined scenarios are not substantiated. The socially constructed reality created by the writers forecloses alternatively imagined

geographical spaces for environmental refugees, or even legally binding adaptive measures for these people. Closures work as one of “the formal points at which ideological closure is most powerfully exerted” (Fiske 1989, 180). In *NYT* closure showcases a window to the elite representation of this issue where only ideas of loss, damage and security risks are echoed but accountability fails to be mentioned. Having provided a frame for interpreting the issue, the closure completes the frame as exemplified in the following examples in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Closures

Reference	Excerpts from <i>NYT</i>	Themes of Closure
( <i>NYT</i> , 6)	Climate change especially rising seas is a threat to our homeland security—our economic infrastructure and the safety and health of the American people.	Threats that are not substantiated
( <i>NYT</i> , 14)	The environmental effects of the gulf spill remain largely unknown. But the number of lives disrupted is certainly in the thousands, if not tens of thousands, . . . the ultimate cost will be counted in billions.	Consequences without accountability

There remains a lack of definitive conclusion in the discussion about environmental refugees, save in two articles. Instead, the closure recasts the issue as a consequence of climate change exclusively.

To conclude this section on macrosyntactic structures the features analyzed here all contribute structurally to frame. Yet when each of these elements is studied in the data, the structure of the frame emerges in the following manner: headlines posit the problems of climate change exclusively; the leads suggest that mass migrations constitute a security risk; the episodes in the article progress both with past and future

suspenses even if the past is more detailed; and the future suspenses allow for a very negative construct of human displacement with no alternatives imagined. Finally, the closure works to remind the reader of the loss and damage of climate change while reiterating the issue as a security concern.

- *MACROSYNTAX: SCRIPT STRUCTURES*

The script structures are how the arrangement of elements in an article contributes as a signifying power in terms of location in the macro-syntactic structure of news articles. As we saw throughout our discussion the headline along with the lead has the greatest potential to frame an issue, as it is located at the top of the article. Yet, only once in three decades was the signifying power of the headline used to directly engage with the problem of human displacement. As discussed earlier, the headlines focused on climate change rather than human displacement due to climate change. Aligning the headline with the larger issue of climate change allows the themes normally associated with climate change in the form of consequences, effects, problems, causes, and moral responsibility to be discussed here. Since the issue has some undecided and unknown variables, in terms of legal status, causes of migration, and the actual numbers of refugees moving, it makes it hard for a journalist to frame so many uncertainties. Thus, headlines provide the means by which we can legitimize our understanding of content that has many variables and is abstract in nature. It therefore seems logical for newspapers to engage with a better-known topic such as climate change (despite climate change itself being fraught with so many uncertainties) and then find an entry point to engage with this topic on more familiar grounds. The headline in the newspaper thus offers proof of this as it frames the effects of climate change rather than frame human displacement itself. In addition, as headlines are structurally situated first in a news article, they also are the first points at which they impose meaning upon uncertainties. The first point of framing is in the headline where human displacement is magnified as a security risk, dramatized in other lands or even minimized as just another effect of climate change.

As seen in the example below, the headline and lead allow the reader to understand the article from a particular point of view. When examined, they project two important points in the frame. First, for an issue to be considered as a problem, it has to command the attention of the public. Yet neither the leads nor the headlines succeed in garnering attention to the issue of human displacement. While they engage with larger themes of climate change, they do not direct attention to one of the core issues that define the problem, namely the lack of a legal status of these people. Next, both the lead and the headlines as a structural unit contribute to the transformation of environmental refugees from primarily victims of climate change to potential security risks, thereby helping to transform the focus on the consequences of human displacement in a familiar borrowed discourse of invasion of immigrants (Charteris-Black 2006, 564).

Example 4:

**Headline: Global warming's role in mass migration is addressed** (NYT, 3)

**Lead:** The two UN climate conferences outside Paris . . . But global warming has already another effect- the largescale displacement of people that has been an ominous politically sensitive undercurrent in the talks and side events here . . .

**Thematic Analysis:** Destabilizing effects of mass migration

It is in the context or background of the article where the environmental refugees were mentioned most often. In 98% of the articles, the issue of environmental refugees is discussed as part of context or background information that allows the reader to understand the phenomenon of climate change better. While the context and background play important functions of situating the environmental problem within a specific temporal or geographical location, it is an ineffectual means by which to frame the issue. This is because context and background are merely used as a scaffold to express a point of view on the main theme of the article. Thus, the context and background allow the issue to be hidden rather than being projected prominently for the reader. It requires a careful reading of the whole article for the reader to have access

to information on environmental refugees. In the example given below, we understand the structural background information on floating populations only in the fourteenth paragraph of the article. In terms of prominence, the article focuses on the lack of a natural resource defining human displacement within a country's borders, again making absent the legal aspect of environmental refugees.

Example 5:

**Headline: The Dynamic New China Still Races against Time** (*NYT*, 25)

*Lead:* There is not an adjective that soars high enough or denotes with enough force to describe China's economic explosion or the promise of its future.

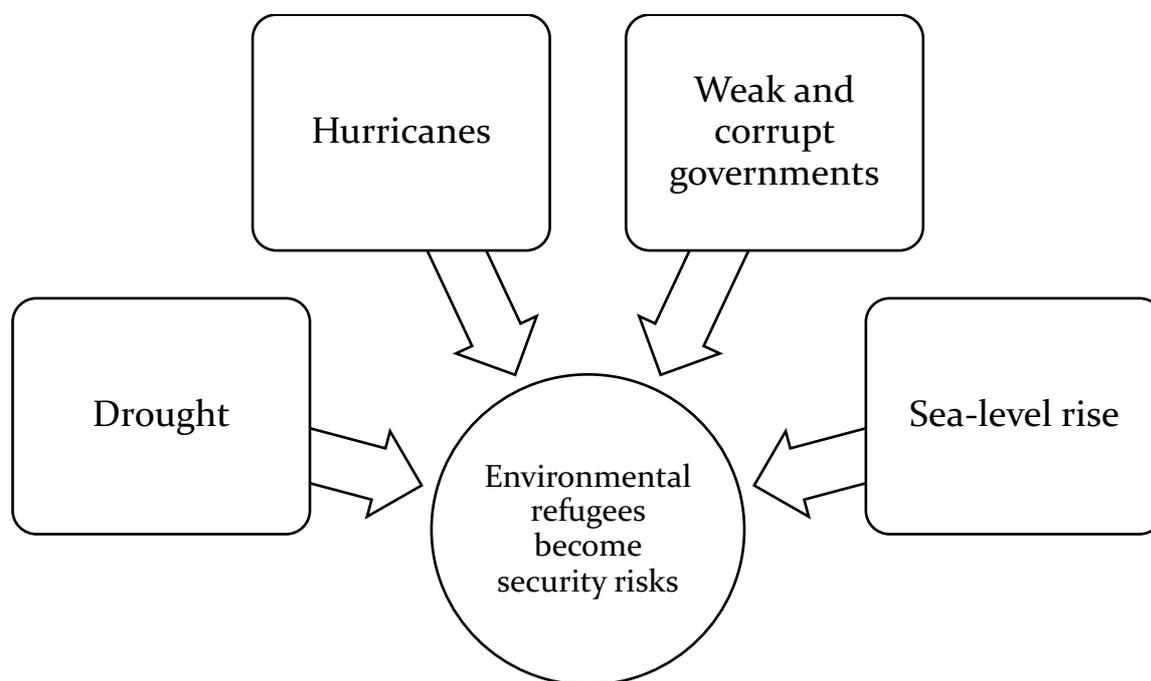
*Background:* (Paragraph 14) By some estimates, millions of environmental refugees may already be among a 'floating population' that is migrating towards the cities and coastal provinces.

Thus, structurally the context and background information allow for environmental refugees to be introduced to the reading public, but since the information is not foregrounded, it contributes to its absence from the newspaper.

The topic of environmental refugees is developed in episodes that covered specific calamities and also included hypothetical evaluations of mass migration. Most of the episodes have either to do with sea-levels rising or lack of natural resources to sustain a population. The episodes thus contribute to the frame development by laying out specific instances of mass migration, the casual-consequential dimension built up through reporting of incidents and accidents.

Figure 1 details episodes of the causes of movement of people. Other dimensions of the issue, such as the nature of the movement and the legal status of these people are absent. In terms of contributing to the frame construction, it is context, background, and episodic development in the articles that allow for the issue to be discussed as it is.

**Fig 1:** Diagrammatic representations of episodes in the reportage



Finally, in 50% of the articles, the closure reiterates either a resolution or a recommendation on climate change. If we use the statistical numerical value to understand how this contributes to structuring the closure, we conclude that it plays a significant role in reiterating ideas echoed in the article about the causes of movement of environmental refugees. Yet a qualitative analysis shows that in these articles, the frames mostly develop the connection to climate change without allowing the issue to be developed in terms of either refugees' legal status or loss of their way of life.

- *REASONING DEVICES*

Arguments help to build up a frame to promote “particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman 1993, 52). Thus, a frame can be built by providing only a certain type of argument or provide

partial information to complete an argument<sup>12</sup>. The argument made here is that the frame on environmental refugees is so poorly constructed that readers are exposed to partial perspectives that allow them to draw hasty conclusions without qualifications.

In the analysis, Stephen Toulmin's (1958, 95) approach to studying arguments has been employed. In every argument, there are essential roles played by the content. The *claims* made are conclusions drawn in an argument; *data* is the support or evidence given to support the claims formalized in numbers, dates, people and their quotes, and named places. *Warrants* help make link between the data and claim and shows how the evidence supports the claim. Not all warrants are universal, thus qualifiers help in asserting conclusions with the use of modal *qualifiers* like "necessarily" and "probably" with various degrees of force. Exceptions to the warrants are laid out by the *rebuttals*. What the proponents or various actors offer to establish their authority is called *backing*. Understanding the argument structure helps us understand how the issue is repeatedly constructed with data supporting different claims being made without a well-established link provided by the warrant. In addition, the arguing from negative consequences allows environmental refugees to be framed as a security threat which empowers the frame with details of the problems and risks of human displacements. An overview of the arguments presented in the reportage are:

- i. Environmental refugees are people displaced by climate change or weak governments and over-stretched resources in home states.
- ii. Climate change is a threat-multiplier and a security threat.
- iii. Environmental refugees are a security risk.
- iv. Migration of these people is problematic.

A careful analysis of the frames shows that when reconstructed, parts of the argument structure make defensible assumptions about the nature of climate change yet fall short in offering careful warrants about humans being displaced, who thus become security risks. Data is positioned to show that climate change is indeed

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<sup>12</sup> It is neither possible nor necessary for *NYT* to deal with any of these issues in a detailed manner as some degree of culling or sizing the information is a necessary strategy employed.

negatively affecting life on this planet. *Data* is presented as facts, judgments, and testimonies as seen in Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Types of data

<p><i>Physical details, numbers:</i> But in sub-Saharan Africa, where the desert creeps south, or in Bangladesh where half the population lives on ground less than 16 feet above sea-levels, or in Syria where extreme drought was a factor in the collapse of a nation, a warmer earth is already generating refugees. (NYT, 8)</p>	<p>Judgment and truth claim.</p>
<p><i>Specialized knowledge:</i> The report on Tuesday follows a recent string of scientific studies that warn that the effects of climate change are already occurring and that flooding, drought, extreme storms, food and water shortages and damage to infrastructure will occur in the near future. (NYT, 4)</p>	<p>Truth claim and Judgment</p>
<p><i>Expert Opinion:</i> “The same thing can happen as a result of sea-level rise. Bangladesh is having terrible problems in this area” (quote by Dr. Oppenheimer, chief scientist of Environmental Defense, a national research and advocacy organization). (NYT, 16)</p>	<p>Testimony</p>
<p><i>Individual Stories:</i> “. . . And then suddenly the drought happened.” What did it look like? “To see the land made us very sad,” she said. “The land became like a desert, like salt. Everything turned yellow.” (NYT, 12)</p>	<p>Testimony</p>
<p><i>Documentary Evidence:</i> A report this year from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that rising seas will force 60 million people away from their coastal homes and jobs by the year 2080. (NYT, 21)</p>	<p>Judgment</p>

As shown in **Table 3**, there are various types of data which lead to a generalized claim that mass migration is a consequence of climate change. Mass migrations constitute

security risks in host countries. In terms of argument analysis, this claims from negative consequences.

The empirical data provided in the newspaper supports the claim that climate change is affecting life on earth and that it does cause migration. The data also supports the claim that climate change does cause mass migration in certain instances but *not* the fact that these refugees become security risks to the U.S. The dangerous future consequences of millions of displaced humans as security risks is not based on any evidential data provided in the newspaper. Backing these claims are only elite voices as seen in the examples given below:

Example 6:

[Former President Obama] “. . . They don’t have a lot of margin for error and that has national security implications. When people are hungry, when people are displaced, when there are a lot of young people particularly young men who are drifting without prospects for the future, the fertility of the soil for terrorism ends up being significant. And that can have an impact on us (*NYT*, 10).”

Although elite voices make the claim that environmental refugees could be security risks, the data provided in the newspaper only supports the view that climate change could be seen as the starting point for conflict in areas where resources are stretched. The warrant making the link between the claim and data is thus reduced to the rhetoric of politics. Even if we assume that the argument is made from negative consequences, the premise (or claim) that these environmental refugees are security risks is not supported.

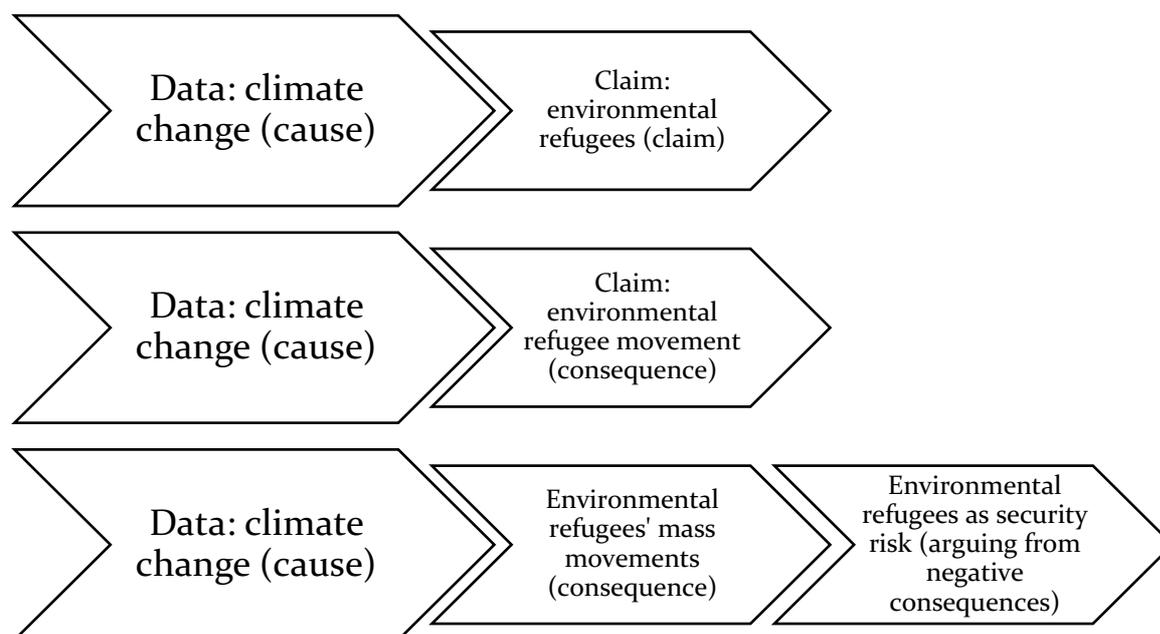
The presence of weak warrants in the arguments has two effects on the frame in this issue. Since 62% of the articles were framed with climate change as a problem, environmental refugees seen as security risks are argued from negative consequences which provides ways for both of these issues to be placed within the same articles. This allows the reader to make the conceptual leap between climate change as a security threat to environmental refugees being security risks based on rhetoric from elite actors alone. Since the argument is made based on negative consequences, this issue is also framed as something that has to be battled with or fought against.

Furthermore since 96% of the articles project elite testimonials as warrants in building the frame, these elite testimonials reiterate support for the argument that it is elite actors that frame the debate (Druckman et al 2013, 59).

Arguing from negative consequences allows the root of the argument to be classified as climate change. Yet the root of the arguments needs to be pushed back further to understand ways by which anthropogenic climate change is constructed.

**Figure 2** below shows this movement of the frame from environmental refugees as victims to that of being security risks. This attempt by elite actors to reframe the issue of environmental refugees as a security risk is done by appealing to two principles: that these people deserve our help and protection, and two, they could potentially be risks themselves.

**Fig 2:** Reframing of the issue



This securitization of climate change has been debated (Warner and Boas 2017; Corry 2012; Trombetta 2008) in academic circles as a means by which the risk or threat of climate change is a way of typifying the problem, allowing for political actors to engage in certain types of action that helps deflect attention from inaction on climate change mitigation. This reframing of environmental refugees as security risks then fits

into the same agenda. If we examine the timeline of when environmental refugees began to be called “security risks” in the newspaper, the frame of climate change as the first and foremost threat-multiplier becomes apparent. The idea that environmental refugees are security risks is not present in the early 1990s when climate change was beginning to be constructed as a security threat, but it only gets mentioned in the late 1990s when environmental refugees are still present as an issue of people displaced due to overstretched or scarce resources in home states. This reframing of environmental refugees as security risks is developed in a negative manner in the rest of the reportage over the last two decades.

## CONCLUSION

The detailing of the building blocks of frames in *NYT* shows the frames are built up from specific lexical choices through specific data types. The headlines, along with leads are the most important component in terms of establishing the framing hook, yet they fail to engage with the issue in a successful manner. Context and background, often ignored in framing analysis, provide ways by which environmental refugees are discussed. Hidden in contextual or background information, environmental refugees are often afforded a discussion, but nevertheless remain less salient than climate change. Finally, while episodes focus on specific climatic instances or general degradation, conclusions frame the universal message that mass migration is an unwelcome phenomenon.

What the analysis shows is that there was a shift from discussing human displacement as one of the *effects* of climate change to discussing human displacement as primarily an *impact* of climate change. With discussions of effects of climate change, we see how environmental refugees cope with the phenomenon, in what ways climate change influences their lives, and how they have to adjust to sea-level rises or the warming of the planet. The discussion can be seen as classifying the primary results of climate change as namely sea-level rises, deforestation, and environmental refugee movement. Then, there was an attempt at reframing the issue with the focus entirely on the resultant impacts of human displacement. This allows for engaging human

displacement as a separate issue where arguments are made about the resultant impact of mass migration on host nations.

In addition, the reportage fails to show differing perspectives on a (non) status as a refugee. As no column space is devoted to the discussion, both policy makers and the reading public are not exposed to varied thoughts on the matter. This absence helps divert attention to the nature of the movement rather than the problematic definition of their status. Descriptions empower the character of the movement but non-coverage of a crucial aspect of the definition leads to focusing on the migratory flows rather than taking a humanitarian stance about their status in host countries and their own homelands.

By defining the environmental refugees as risks, the play of hegemonic power comes into question. The definition of a risk is a one-sided moral evaluation of the problem. In the last decade, the singular framing of environmental refugees as security risks reduces the moral evaluation only to one side. Moral evaluation is possible if the reportage discusses which elite states are capable of providing the protection needed. Instead, this absence of discussing restorative justice by responsible parties is framed as local problems wherein protection and assistance is best arranged at the local or regional level. While the moral claims of the ecologically marginalized are presented, the weakest are the ones who suffer the most; humanitarianism remains a voluntary and virtuous act that does not bring in notions of accountability or obligation. Thus, the option of help from local governments centers on their inability to sustain their own populations, making it possible for a benefactor to step in to help. The moral evaluation includes descriptions of the benevolent benefactor, rather than an obligation based on the historical burden of responsibility.

Narrowing the problem of human displacement to a security issue means focusing on tackling risks and threats, rather than seeking to address the causes of insecurities. This makes absent the need to address insecurities from the victims' point of view as their lived realities do not find expression in the newspaper except as an anecdotal hook into the article.

What this research shows is that in the frame package of environmental refugees as security risks, the clausal and lexical choices made by the newspaper underspecify the humanitarian aspect of it, the agency of these victims and the institutional practices that discuss responsibility.

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