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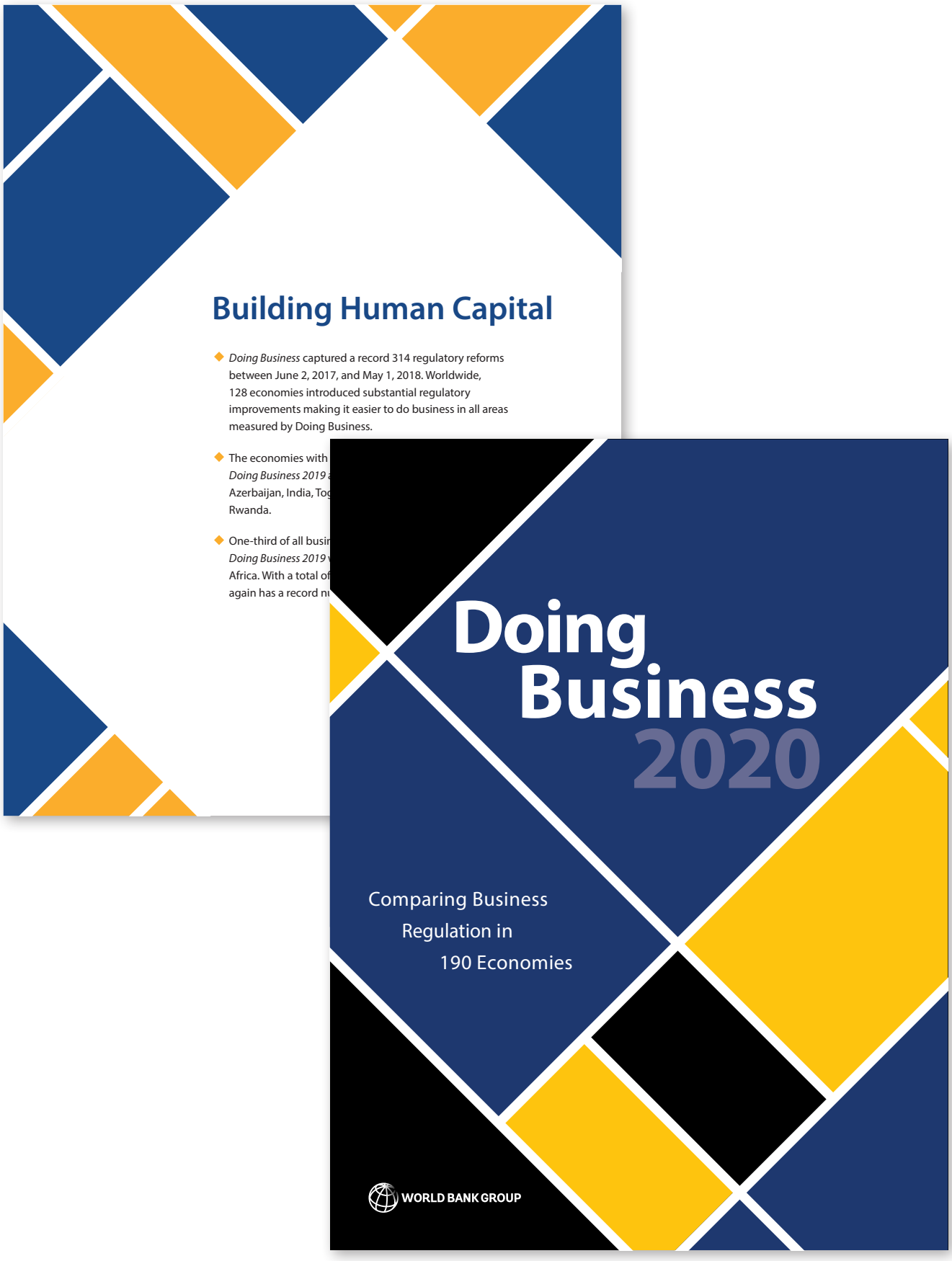
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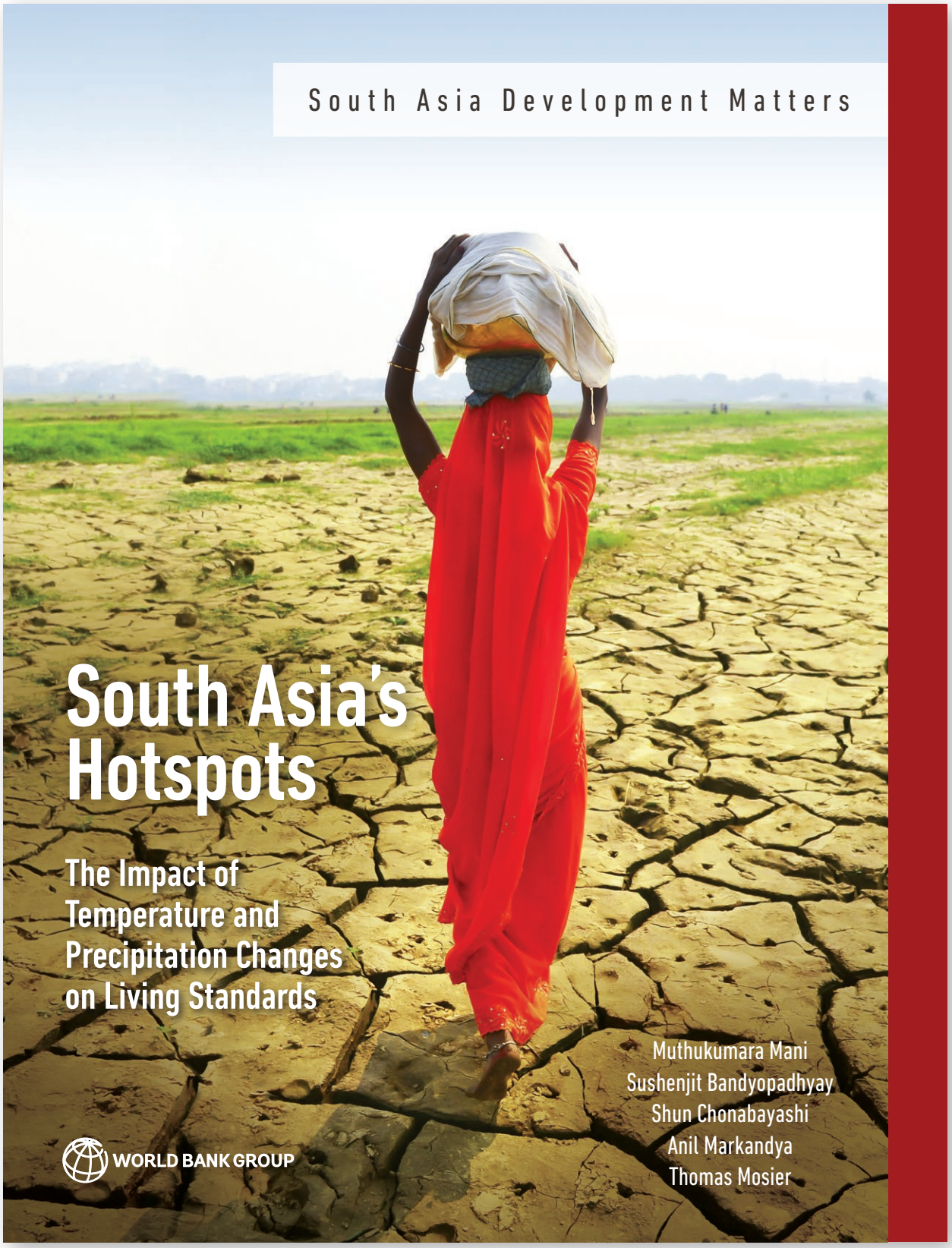
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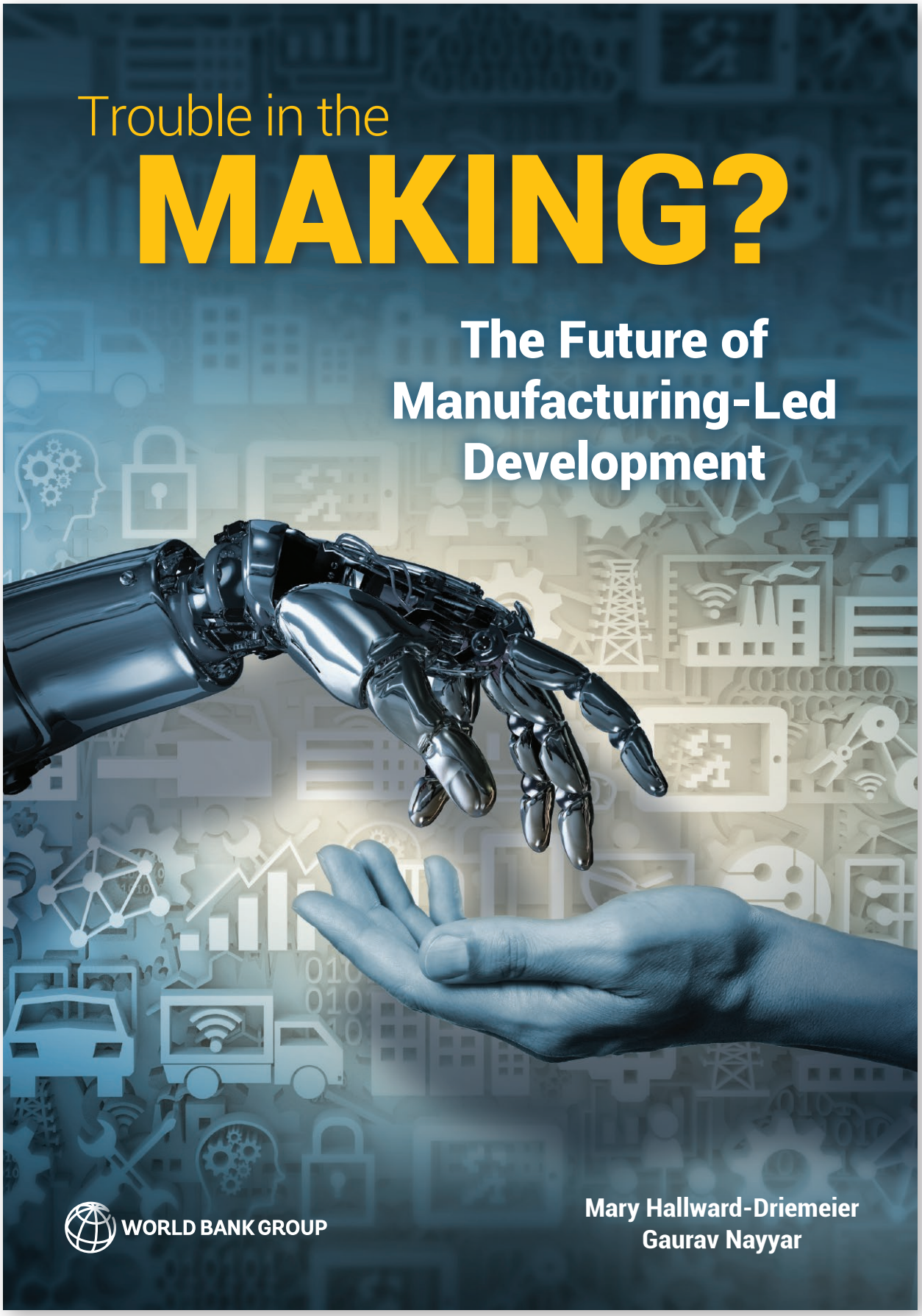
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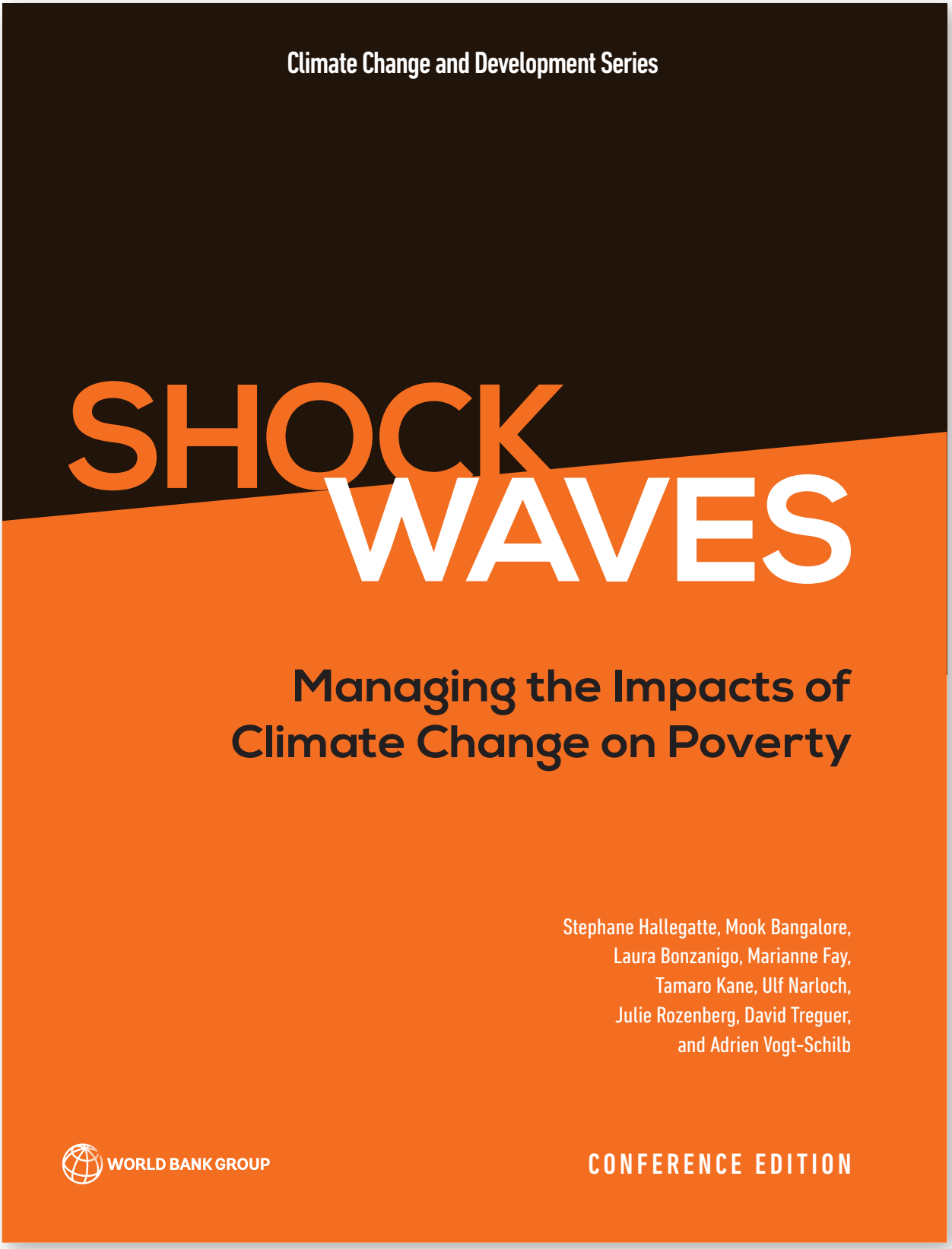
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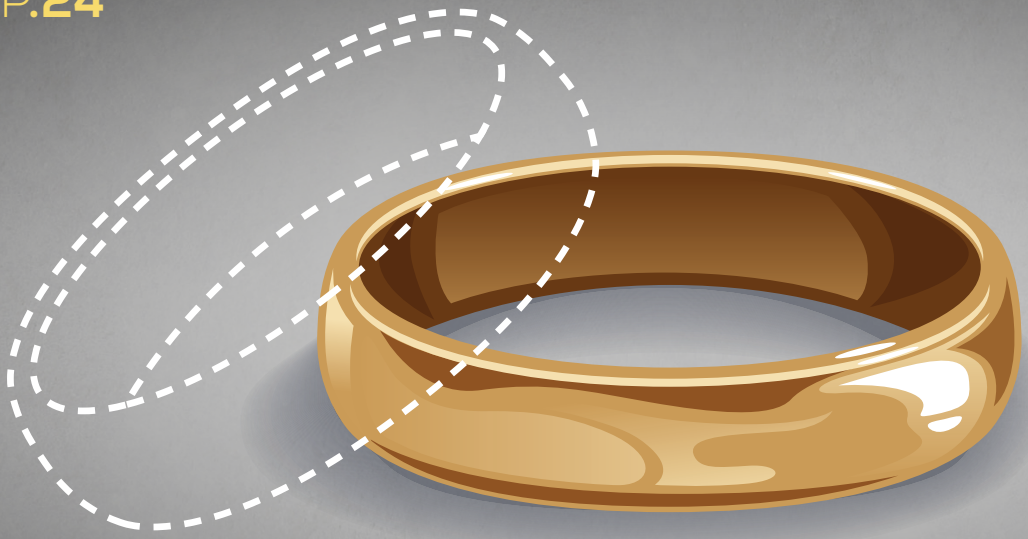

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Today's Travel Market and Newspapers' Vital Role

ASPs: The Critical Connection

Supposedly the next big thing, application service providers creep slowly toward the printed page and the systems that produce it.

by John Bryan

So the bosses send us out into the virtual hinterland, looking for a strange creature called an ASP. They (ASPs, not our bosses) have been known to frequent the haunts of geekdom, but the question is: Have ASPs made inroads into the newspaper biz?

For that matter, what exactly *is* an ASP?

ASP stands for not only the snake that did in Ms. Cleopatra well before the days of newspaper production, but also the technology trend of the moment, the application service provider.

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They Do the Dishes

Think of your local waffle establishment as an application service provider. They do the cooking, give you a place to eat, plus fine, attentive service. You could cook the same thing at home for less money, but then you get to wash the dishes and buy all the groceries. On the other hand, you don't have to change out of your jammies or comb your hair.

The pixel-stained wretches toiling away at your newspaper's Internet presence down the hall probably have more than a passing familiarity with the concept. A big chunk of most newspaper World Wide Web sites, from the server to the back-end software that dishes up classified ads, chat boards and similar features are, more often than not, hosted elsewhere. And more often than not, several companies throw their tools into the mix. In fact, Norfolk, Va.-based InfiNet cites the ability to "deploy, host and manage applications...from a central place" as one of the key selling points behind the ASP model, President Steve Fuschetti wrote in a letter defending the concept.

"What works for [newspapers'] Web sites increasingly will work for their core business," Fuschetti predicted.

Indeed, the concept is moving closer to the printed page. Consider Danish editorial-system supplier SaxoTech, which already hosts Times Publishing Co.'s GoErie.com and Publicus Web-publishing system from its Reston, Va., data center, with links back to the paper's Agile editorial system in Erie, Pa. It now has grand plans for what it calls a "sixth-generation editorial system" that would require nothing in the newspaper plant but "thin clients," namely PCs running Web-browsing software. Noting the costs associated with maintaining an "army" of information-technology professionals, the company thinks this "brave new world... is just around the corner," SaxoTech's Lars Gjedsig explains on the company's Web site.

"Wonderful," a concerned newspaper executive might say while bolting from one incredibly boring meeting to another, "but why should I care?"

You should care, the folks at venerable Atex Publishing Solutions will tell you, because they've already gone to a lot of trouble installing one of these things at The Industry Standard, it's doing very well, the concept is sound, and other industries are doing it.

Or words to that effect.

"We are going to offer our applications in a service environment. All the customer has to do is operate the program," says Linda L. Folmar, department manager at Atex and a backer of the Bedford, Mass., company's ASP effort.

Atex's ASP operation at The Industry Standard in San Francisco (and New York and Chicago and points in between) gives a good glimpse of how this whole ASP business can work.

In San Francisco, it's an ad-booking system for 35 clients, not one of which has a byte of proprietary software on their machines. For their application and database needs, they rely (through Atex) on a

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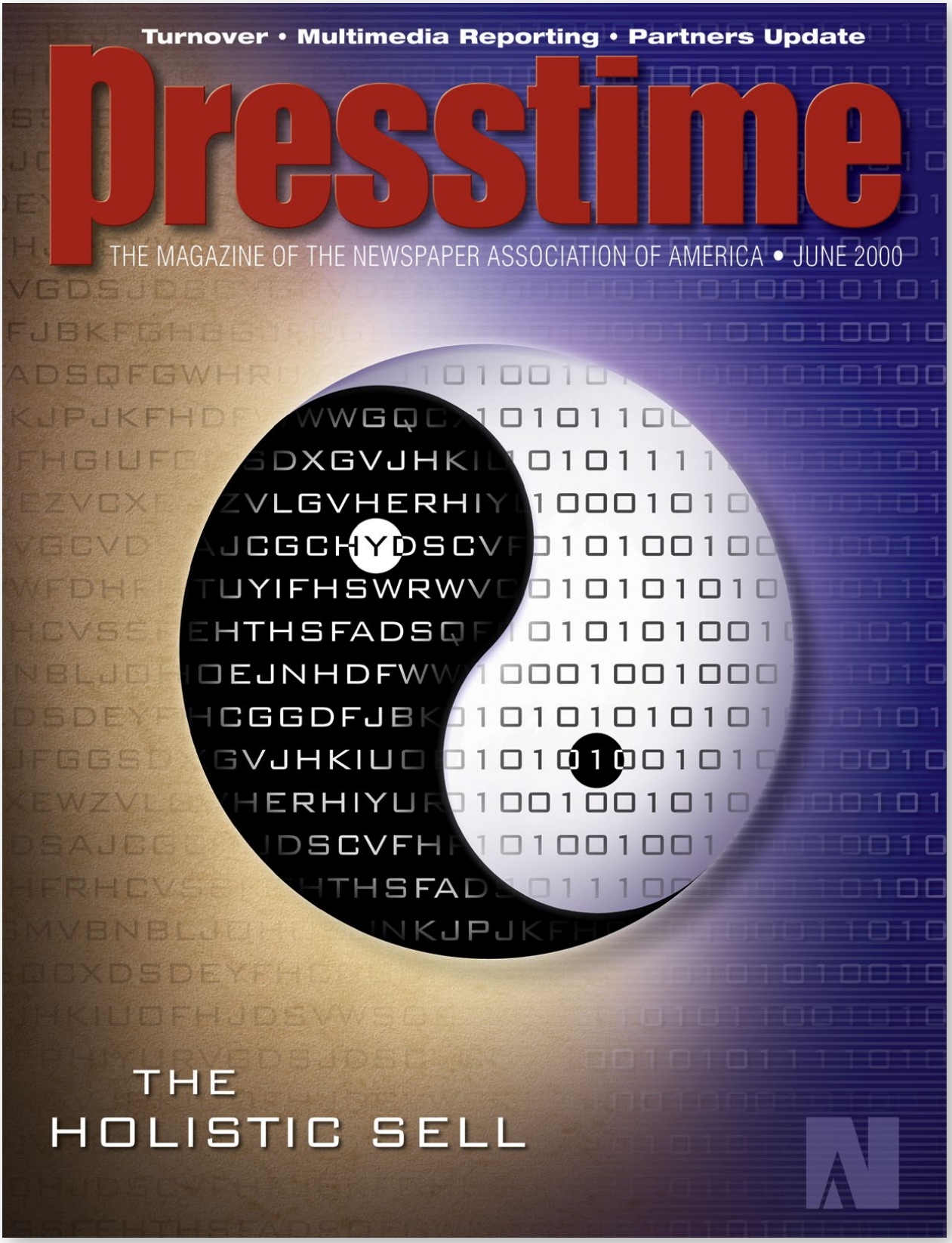
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