CHAPTER 16.

# GENRE FORMATION AND DIFFERENTIATION IN NEW MEDIA

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In a speculative paper from the year 2000, Charles Bazerman suggests that the letter as a written form "might have a special role in genre formation" (p. 15). He characterizes letters as "literate meetings" that encode direct communication "between two parties within a specific relationship in specific circumstances" (2000, pp. 15, 27), and provides evidence that letters have given rise to a panoply of more specialized and complex genres, including journalism, the novel, and the scientific report; monetary and credit instruments such as bills of exchange and paper notes; business documents such as stockholder reports; epistles, papal bulls, encyclicals, and other religious documents; patents, contracts, grants, wills, and other legal documents. I have long found this paper intriguing for the connections it reveals among seemingly disparate genres. It is also helpful in thinking about the more general questions of where genres come from and how they change, questions that have occupied me for some time (2012; 2015; 2016; 2017).

Bazerman proposes that the letter has been such a generative genre because it is "so overtly tied to particular social relations of particular writers and readers." Letters "reveal to us so clearly and explicitly the sociality that is part of all writing." They are, in his words, "self-interpreting" (2000, p. 27); that is, their social relations are both obligatory and obvious. Letters are thus a "flexible medium" that makes "new uses socially intelligible," allowing communication to develop in new directions (2000, p. 15). He concludes that letters "have helped us find the addresses of many obscure and remarkable places for literate meetings and have helped us figure out what we would do and say once we got there" (2000, p. 27).

The process of change that Bazerman tracks in this article is the classic evolutionary one of adaptive differentiation and replication. The particular affordances of the letter, as a genre, permit and perhaps encourage functional adaptations to new social circumstances and needs, and the functional utility and satisfactions of those adaptations encourage replication and typification—new genres. The story Bazerman tells is consistent with previous approaches to genre formation, such as Kathleen Jamieson's use of biological metaphors: genres have ancestors,

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she suggests, that convey "chromosomal imprints" (1975, p. 406). Similarly, when Tzvetan Todorov asks, "From where do genres come?" he answers, "Why, quite simply, from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination" (1976, p. 161). Inversion, displacement, and combination are some of the resources that permit adaptive differentiation (see also my discussions of genre evolution, Miller, 2015; 2016; 2017). Furthermore, Todorov, like Bakhtin, suggests that simple genres, such as speech acts, are the origins of complex genres, such as the novel and the autobiography (Todorov, 1976, p. 165 ff), and we can see this pattern as well in Bazerman's account of the letter and its more complex progeny.

What I want to do in this space, where we are reflecting and building on the prodigious work of Charles Bazerman, is to add to his emphasis on the "social grounding of genres" some attention to the technological grounding of genres, that is, to the interplay between social relations, exigence, and medium in the formation and transformation of genres. And by taking up medium as an element of genres and their formation, I also wish to push beyond Bazerman's focus on the literate and discursive to include the auditory and the visual, that is, to emphasize the multimodality of genre.

It was in my studies of blogging with Dawn Shepherd that I became first puzzled and then intrigued by the relationship between genre and medium (Miller & Shepherd, 2004; 2009). Blogs presented an instructive case of genre formation because they appeared so suddenly and so recently, making evidence about them and those who use them easily available. It seemed clear when we began looking at blogs that they were a genre: that's how users talked and thought about blogging: it was a distinctively identifiable form of social interaction that had become typified: participants mutually recognized roles, conventions, and shared motivations. Users, or participants in blogging communities, had agreed fairly rapidly on what features blogs should have, what distinguished a good blog from a not-so-good one, and what satisfactions they could expect from the activity of blogging. These shared recognitions were based in an exigence that Shepherd and I characterized as a "widely shared, recurrent need for cultivation and validation of the self" at a time of postmodern fragmentation and mediated simulation (2004). Because we were able to apply a genre analysis to the blog, it appeared to us to be a genre. And yet, even as we finished our analysis we saw evidence that blogs had speciated, differentiating into sub-genres that responded to different exigences in different communities of use:

> Shortly after everyone thought they knew that a blog was an online diary, we started to hear about journalism blogs, team blogs, photo blogs, classroom blogs, travel blogs, campaign

> blogs, and more. The forms and features of the blog that had initially fused around the unfolding display of personal identity were rapidly put to use for purposes of political advocacy, corporate tech support, classroom interaction, and public deliberation. With a rapidity equal to that of their initial adoption, blogs became not a single discursive phenomenon but a multiplicity. (Miller & Shepherd, 2009, p. 263)

We pursued this problem further in a subsequent study. In comparing two general types of blogging, the personal blog (with which we had begun) and the public affairs blog (which came to prominence later, in the context of concern about changed media regulation, commercialized political discourse, natural disasters, and international terrorism), we saw a similar suite of technological affordances, i.e., the blogging medium, deployed to meet quite different social exigences, for different communities of users, against a background of different cultural relevancies. If there was anything singular about "*the* blog," it wasn't genre; rather, it was its nature as a technological medium, or platform. We concluded:

> When blogging technology first became widely available through hosting sites, it was perceived to fit a particular exigence arising out of the late 1990s, even helping to crystallize that exigence, and the personal blog multiplied its way into cultural consciousness. The genre and the medium, the social action and its instrumentality, fit so well that they seemed coterminous, and it was thus easy to mistake the one for the other—as we did. . . . [But] as the technology evolved, and as multiple users engaged in ceaseless experimentation and variation, the suite of affordances called blogging was discovered to fit other exigences in different ways, so other types of blogs proliferated, other genres—public affairs, corporate, tech support, team, etc.—and the coincidence between the genre and the medium dissolved. (Miller & Shepherd, 2009, p. 283)

I'll venture a hypothesis here, extrapolating from some resonances between what Bazerman found in the evolution of the letter and what Shepherd and I found with the blog: that this may be a general evolutionary process from new medium to multiple genres. Of course, the process of genre proliferation occurred much more rapidly in the case of blogging than with letter writing. But generally, the earliest use of a new technological medium will tend to be understood as the only way to engage its affordances; the recurrent exigence will

be recognized simply as the use of the new tool. The technological affordances of the letter, as Bazerman tells us, were the embedded identifications of author and audience and the portability of those social relationships across time and distance; as a new medium, in particular cultural-historical situations, letters enabled the exertion of centralized authority at a time of increasing urbanization, economic exchange, and military competition between centers of authority. The medium of the letter coincided with the genre of the written, authoritative command-at-a-distance. Until it didn't. The medium, it turned out, could also address other exigences: it could be used to maintain and cultivate personal bonds, to petition authority, to promise payment, to advise or recommend peers. And, as Bazerman goes on to show, to do so much else as social, economic, religious, and legal relationships became more complex over the very long time since the first letters. Social relationships and needs evolved; the medium changed but little; the genres multiplied.

The history of communication technologies presents a series of new media, of which the letter is one of the earliest and the blog just one among many in a recent proliferation. Those who study communication media have tended, according to Joshua Meyrowitz, to understand them as conduits, as languages, or as environments (1993). As conduits, media become invisible delivery mechanisms for "content"; as languages, or grammars, media become a set of "expressive variables, or production techniques" that can alter the meaning of content (Meyrowitz, 1993, p. 58); as environments or contexts, media become a fixed suite of affordances that shape both what content and techniques can be incorporated in any given communication and how the medium relates to other media in a given socio-economic-political context. Meyrowitz contends that each perspective overlooks as much as it includes and that full understanding of any communication medium requires insights from all three. I would contend that genre, as rhetorically conceived, already incorporates all three perspectives, connecting content, grammar, and constraints into a socially recognizable cultural artifact. As I have earlier argued (1984), rhetorical genres can be characterized by their semantic features (content), syntactic features (grammars or forms), and situational contexts (see also Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). Media scholars have had little to say about genre (some major exceptions will be discussed below), and few genre scholars in rhetoric and writing studies have engaged seriously with media theory and research. As Friedrich Kittler notes, for centuries writing "functioned as a universal medium—in times when there was no concept of media" (1999, pp. 5–6). But this is no longer the case, and increased engagement between media studies and genre studies would, I believe, be of benefit in both directions.[1]

1 For a similar argument along these lines, see Jack Andersen's contribution to this volume.

What genre studies might gain from media studies is an appreciation for constraints and affordances offered particularly by Meyrowitz's environmental perspective, as our traditional attention to writing and print tends to overlook or obscure these. For example, Richard Altman points out that "film genre's consistent connections to the entire production—distribution—consumption process make it a broader concept than literary genre has typically been" (1999, p. 15). Understanding film as a medium requires attention to distinctive conditions such as the tools and expertise involved in production, the costs and investments required, relevant legal and regulatory frameworks, advertising practices, distribution channels, consumer behavior and habits, and much more. All these "environmental" factors of film-as-medium impinge on the development and propagation of film genres, that is, on the typified social actions that both producers and audiences find sufficiently satisfying. Likewise, understanding the blog as medium, insofar as it provided the conditions of possibility for blogging genres, requires attention to the development of Web 2.0 technologies, such as blog-hosting platforms, commenting, image editing, permalinks, web syndication, tagging, blogads, and the like, as well as to the role of legislation such as the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which affected the wider media environment, triggering the consolidation of media ownership and transforming the news industry (Miller & Shepherd, 2009, pp. 277–278).

Some media scholars have paid particular attention to the introduction of new communication technologies. Even as new tools, platforms, and machines have appeared with dramatic speed in what we call "the internet age," we are not, as Carolyn Marvin observes, "the first generation to wonder at the rapid and extraordinary shifts in the dimension of the world and human relationships it contains as a result of new forms of communication, or to be surprised by the changes those shifts occasion in the regular pattern of our lives" (1988, p. 3). Her work focuses on such shifts in the late 19th century occasioned by the early electrical communication technologies: the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, radio, and cinema—all of which "fascinated" our forebears in much the way the internet and digital media have fascinated us. She makes the case that "the history of media is never more or less than the history of their uses" (1988, p. 8), which sounds to me a lot like a history of genres. Resisting the traditional treatment of media, centered on technological artifacts, Marvin is interested, rather, in the "drama" of negotiations among social groups that ensues when a new medium transforms "old habits of transacting between groups" by altering social distance, possibilities of surveillance and exertion of authority, and modes of establishing credibility (1988, p. 5). New media, in other words, modify socially typified rhetorical situations and their historically sedimented roles and constraints (and thus their genres). And even though Marvin aims to direct our

attention away from technological artifacts toward the social environments in which they are used, her approach must engage with the specifics of any given new technology *as a medium* in order to trace how it "intrudes" on and challenges established social relations.

New communication technologies do not arrive with their uses or social placement in any way obvious. As Geoffrey Pingree and Lisa Gitelman observe,

> new media, when they first emerge, pass through a phase of identity crisis, a crisis precipitated at least by the uncertain status of the given medium in relation to established, known media and their functions. In other words, when new media emerge in a society, their place is at first ill defined, and their ultimate meanings or functions are shaped over time by that society's existing habits of media use (which, of course, derive from experience with other, established media), by shared desires for new uses, and by the slow process of adaptation between the two. The "crisis" of a new medium will be resolved when the perceptions of the medium, as well as its practical uses, are somehow adapted to existing categories of public understanding about what that medium does for whom and why. (2003, p. xii)

I can't help reading "genre" into phrases here such as "habits of media use," "shared desires for new uses," and "categories of public understanding," and I see this passage as a corroboration, in alternate language, of my hypothesis that the full genrefication of a new communication technology takes place after an initial phase when the medium seems indistinguishable from genre.

While it would be difficult to discover whether the medium of letter-writing endured an "identity crisis" such as Pingree and Gitelman describe, we do have Plato's well known objections to writing in general as some indication of a process of adaptation between social habits and the uses to which the new medium of writing could be put (even as Plato expressed some of those objections in letter form!) (1961, Phaedrus 274–275, Letter VII 341c). With blogging, however, we can document the early uncertainties about what the new medium was and how it could be used: from the earliest uses by web-savvy coders in the tech industry to share links and information to the development of hosting sites that required no coding experience and thus enabled the rapid involvement of a large non-technical community engaged in mutual sharing of personal information and perceptions (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). Even in the early phase of personal blogging on the commercial blogging platforms, there was initial confusion about the relationship of blogs to older genres such as private diaries, clipping

services, and newsletters. Over time, the medium and the user communities adapted to each other, as blogging platforms introduced new affordances, and users discovered shared exigences that blogging could fulfill, creating multiple new blogging genres.

During the initial period of uncertainty and confusion about which Pingree and Gitelman write, new communication technologies seem *opaque* to us, because they are unfamiliar and often un-institutionalized. It is only with use, familiarity, habituation, and institutionalization that a new technology becomes natural, obvious, transparent. A new medium is like the alphabet, which is new to each child: the child at first labors over letter shapes and sounds, focusing on this technology of writing, but with familiarity the alphabet becomes "a transparent window into conceptual thought" (Lanham, 1993, p. 4). As Gitelman writes about the telephone, "Inventing, promoting, and using the first telephones involved lots of self-conscious attention to telephony. But today, people converse through the phone without giving it a moment's thought. The technology and all of its supporting protocols (that you answer 'Hello?' and that you pay the company, but also standards like touch-tones and twelve-volt lines) have become self-evident as the result of social processes, including the habits associated with other, related media" (2006, pp. 5–6). More generally, she claims, "the success of all media depends at some level on inattention or 'blindness' to the media technologies themselves (and all of their supporting protocols) in favor of attention to the phenomena, 'the content,' that they represent for users' edification or enjoyment" (2006, p. 6). With use, we become less aware of the medium as a mediating entity and learn to operate *through* it to achieve our social ends: the medium loses its opacity and becomes transparent, a seemingly frictionless conduit.

Gitelman's point is, as she herself notes, a gloss on Marshall McLuhan's notorious dictum that "the medium is the message," or, less cryptically put, "it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (1964, p. 9). Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin characterize this blinding as a "logic of transparent immediacy"—that is, a cultural imperative to erase media and mediation (1999, pp. 5, 21ff). Drawing primarily from the visual realm, they discuss examples such as the development of linear perspective in painting, photorealism in photography, and live television, but from other realms we could include stereophonic audio or "surround sound" and stylistic techniques of objectivity in prose. All these techniques have as their effect an apparent erasure of the technique and thereby of its medium in order to create the impression that what is represented (the "content") is real, is fully present—and is what matters.

Transparency is a quality that pervades discussions of prose style as a medium: the ultimate virtue of written expression becomes "clarity." The term used

by Scottish Enlightenment philosopher George Campbell to describe the most essential quality of language was "perspicuity," which he defined as "transparency, such as may be ascribed to air, glass, water, or any other medium through which material objects are viewed" (1963, pp. 216, 221). And Richard Lanham has brought this ambition into the 21st century, labeling it the C-B-S model of communication, standing for clarity, brevity, and sincerity; this model, he claims, dominates our thinking about language (2006, pp. 137–138).[2] It undergirds federal requirements for government communications, written into "plain language" guidelines and the Plain Writing Act of 2010.[3] Our cultural imperative for immediacy is powerful. Lanham epitomizes the issue as a tension between "stuff and fluff," substance and style (2006), which we can see as a tension between content and mediation.

Neither Lanham nor Bolter and Grusin are satisfied with the dismissal or devaluing of media. Lanham argues that "fluff," the play of the medium—style, surface, ornament, self-consciousness—is important, and in some cases more important, more explanatory, more satisfying than the "stuff" that is purportedly transmitted by a medium. We need, he says, to learn (and teach) a dual perspective, the ability to look both *through* and *at* a text (or any communicative phenomenon), to oscillate between these two perspectives in order to understand both the expression and the medium (1993, 2006). Bolter and Grusin go on to complicate their account of immediacy by introducing a counter-imperative, the logic of "hypermediacy," which is the impulse to multiply media and mediation. This cultural "double logic" undergirds the process they call "remediation" (1999, p. 45), which is another gloss on McLuhan's claim that the "content" of a new medium is just older media. The content of writing is, supposedly, speech; the content of film is theater and photography;[4] the content of a computer's graphical interface is typewriting, or photography, or drawing, etc. Echoing Lanham's focus on "fluff," the logic of hypermediacy produces a visual style built on heterogeneity, fragmentation, and performance (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 31ff). They offer many examples from various computer media and multi-windowed television screens, but also historical examples such as medieval European cathedrals, print layouts of photomontage, and modernist art.

What can these double logics and oscillations offer to genre theory? Transparency and opacity, immediacy and hypermediacy, can help us think about the

2 See also Dilip Gaonkar's "transparency thesis," i.e., the assumption by rhetorical critics in the early 20th century that oratory is uninterestingly determined by its content, that it is a "mirror" of its object (1990, p. 298), and my discussion of the assumption that language should be a direct imitation of its object (2010, p. 26 ff).

3 plainlanguage.gov

4 Though Altman disputes this (1999, p. 30 ff).

relations between genre and medium. Returning to the question of how genres emerge in relation to new media, I offered the hypothesis that when a new medium becomes available, its use coincides with its nature as a medium to the extent that genre and medium are indistinguishable; it is only with extensive use, experimentation, and adaptation that additional genres emerge and the medium can be distinguished from its uses. We might now say that the new medium is so opaque to its first users that it blinds us to genre. The novelty of the first telephone calls, of the first television shows, the first video conferences, the first blogs, perhaps even the first letters, is so powerful, the new illusion of presence so distracting, that the possibilities for social use are nonobvious; genre is transparent to the spell of the new technology. When it is new, a communication technology, like the letter or the blog, manifests as what we might think of as a genre-medium, a new tool, a matrix of possibilities for genre. Genre and medium are two dimensions of a new communication technology that we learn to distinguish only with time and experience, when medium becomes less opaque and genre less transparent.

Let us take one more example to test the hypothesis, and to compare with our earlier examples of the letter and the blog. My example is anchored not in the written word but in sound: the new technology of radio and radio broadcasting. According to Michele Hilmes, broadcast radio as a medium has affordances "significantly different from any preceding or subsequent medium in its ability to transcend spatial boundaries, blur the private and public spheres, and escape visual determinations while still retaining the strong element of 'realism' that sound—rather than written words—supplies" (1997, p. xvi). The development of radio is a highly complex story that is tied up with the telegraph and the telephone in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But if, like Hilmes, "we regard radio not as a collection of wires, transmitters, and electrons but as a social practice grounded in culture, rather than in electricity" (1997, p. xiii), this history includes not only technical developments sorting wired from wireless communication, but also experiments and protocols that eventually sorted one-way from two-way communication and point-to-point from point-to-mass communication, as well as the influences of multiple inventors and amateur enthusiasts, the involvement of government regulators and the armed forces (especially during World War I), and the rapid formation of corporations that both competed and cooperated to commercialize the new technologies (with many patent disputes). All these combined to keep the social uses of radio fluid and uncertain for decades (see also Barnouw, 1966; Douglas, 1987). As Susan Douglas notes, "Sharply competing ideas about how the invention should be used, and by whom, informed the process from the start. . . . Radio broadcasting . . . was the result of battles over technological control and corporate hegemony, and

of visions about who should have access to America's newly discovered frontier environment, the electromagnetic spectrum" (1987, p. 318).

So, there were grand but inchoate social expectations. The situation fits well Pingree and Gitelman's description of the "identity crisis" phase of new media emergence (2003, p. xii), mentioned earlier. It is telling that Erik Barnouw titles volume one of his three-volume history of broadcasting in the US *A Tower of Babel* (1966). As Walter Gifford, president of AT&T from 1925 to 1948, recalled in 1944:

> Nobody knew early in 1921 where radio was really headed. Everything about broadcasting was uncertain. For my own part I expected that since it was a form of telephony, and since we[5] were in the business of furnishing wires for telephony, we were sure to be involved in broadcasting somehow. Our first vague idea, as broadcasting appeared, was that perhaps people would expect to be able to pick up a telephone and call some radio station, so that they could give radio talks to other people equipped to listen. (quoted in Marvin, 1988, pp. 230–231)

In spite of the uncertainties, many of the milestone events identified by historians of radio broadcasting have a kind of proto-generic familiarity to 21st-century minds. One of the very first broadcasts, in 1906, was a Christmas eve program of music and readings. Other firsts included election returns (1916 and 1920), the World Series (1921), the opening of Congress (1923), original radio drama (1923), a Presidential campaign speech (1924), and the network series, *Amos 'n' Andy* (1929). By 1921 several stations were broadcasting on announced schedules, with a typical schedule including news reading, weather, recorded music, and time signals (Barnouw, 1966, pp. 288, 285). In Chicago, "the KYW schedule for the 1921-22 season was entirely Chicago Civic Opera. All performances, afternoon and evening, six days a week, were broadcast—and nothing else" (Barnouw, 1966, p. 88) with a dramatic increase in the ownership of radio receivers in the city during that time. Later developments in the 1930s included the horror show, the variety show, the quiz show and other audience participation shows, the western, and science fiction programs (Sterling & O'Dell, 2010). Hilmes traces the development of a "framework of gradually naturalized structures and practices" (1997, p. xviii), which include personality-based shows and what she characterizes as "narratives of national definition," particularly the minstrel show and radio's "most representative textual form, the serial/series narrative," which

5 Gifford is referring to AT&T; before becoming president, he had served the company as chief statistician and vice-president.

originated in the *Amos 'n' Andy* series (1997, p. xix). Indeed, as Marvin observes, "Wholly invented programming . . . is a distinctive social feature of electronic mass media" (1988, p. 222). The genres of commercial radio are manufactured for the mass audience.[6] But this audience had to be equipped and constituted over a period of years, if not decades. They had to be prepared to want what radio—as it became commercial radio—would and could offer.

I think we can see a familiar pattern here: first, experimentation with the medium qua medium, where the genre-medium is just the transmission of anything, simply to demonstrate the capabilities of radio to others with the aim of impressing them; concurrently, a focus on obvious utility for urgent practical problems (military use during World War I); and later, the development and multiplication of patterns of "naturalized structures and practices," which became the genres of early radio programming. The genrification of radio is shaped in particular by its potential for commercialization, its role in the development of a mass audience and mass culture, and the economic and social conditions of that audience in the early 20th century. Like all genres, the genres of radio are both technologically and socially grounded in important and complex ways, shaped by the affordances of the medium and to the socio-historical context in which it emerged.

In the case of letters, Bazerman showed us that the combined portability and addressivity of the letter constituted a "genre-medium" in ancient cultures that transported authority across time and distance, serving practical purposes of governance, war, and commerce, and lent itself to increasingly specialized adaptations in new circumstances. Letters required few tools and supplies and little skilled labor (compared to, for example, printing, radio, or blogging, even allowing for the fact that literacy long remained an elite skill). As a genre-medium, the letter in its infancy, I am supposing, exhibits the characteristics of both a genre and a medium, and these dimensions cannot usefully be distinguished at the time. Other early written texts, with different addressivities and dissemination patterns, had different uses, giving us, for example, poetic, religious, and philosophical genres (some such texts are cast in the form of letters, but others have no apparatus of particular address). Of the early uses of writing, the letter and its specific affordances, as Bazerman has shown, had a particular fertility—and Bazerman's essay is itself a fertile exploration into the origin and evolution of genres. But I have tried to show that the pattern of adaptation and proliferation he saw is not restricted to the letter. In other words, in the history of genre formation, the letter is a particular case but not a special case.

6 I have earlier characterized such genres, including film genres, as "marketed" or "commercial," in contrast to administered, institutional, and vernacular genres (Miller, 2017, p. 23).

The other point I have been arguing here is that we can learn more about the nature and function of genres, and the ways they emerge and propagate, by paying attention to the media of communication in which they are embedded and which are a part of their identity as a genre; that is, we should attend to both the social and the technological grounding of genres and the historically specific interaction of these factors in any given case. All media, and the genres they subtend, involve social relationships, production and distribution conditions, and semiotic capacities and other affordances, and for "literate" communication these are distinctly different from those of other media. If we limit our scope to the written word, if we assume that writing remains the universal medium, we run the risk of blinding ourselves to the particular relationships, conditions, and capabilities that characterize written media and at the same time of ignoring the many other media in which and through which we live our lives. The increasingly pervasive digital media combine many features of older media in ways we cannot ignore. Visual and verbal, oral and written, temporal and spatial, static and dynamic—all these capacities are combined in today's digital media, in different ways, on multiple technological platforms. An exclusive focus on "writing" or "the literate" does not suffice for understanding genres, media, or their interrelationships.

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