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## Forms of user contribution in online communities: mechanisms of mutual recognition between contributor

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## ***Forms of user contribution in online communities: mechanisms of mutual recognition between contributors***

Abstract – Over the past decade, the Internet has developed as a space for socialisation and sociability. At the same time, users of the Web are becoming information producers. We suggest that a certain unity underlies the diversity of collaborative practices in online environments. We are analyzing processes of creation and exchange in online environments along four dimensions: (a) modes of visibility that facilitate social recognition among contributors; (b) levels of expertise displayed by contributors; (c) norms and governance models among groups of contributors; (d) the insertion of contributory behaviours in the context of an economy of the immaterial based on the exchange of informational goods. Our goal is to shed light on the complexity and fluidity of exchanges among amateurs and professionals. We illustrate our approach by looking at citizen cyberjournalism and the case of OhmyNews. Can new social media support the principles of participatory democracy? And, if so, how? To what extent are ordinary users empowered? Or are their contributions and their goodwill exploited by the organisations that aggregate them?

### **Introduction**

In less than a decade, a *social* Internet has grown up around us (blogs, wikis, social networking sites). Users of the Web are becoming information producers. Internet users exchange messages, post evaluations, comments and photos, remix music and videos that they can then publish worldwide. Wikis allow the collaborative production of texts that everyone can edit. Social network sites such as *Friendster*, *MySpace* or *Facebook* encourage users to publish their profiles and to comment publicly or semi-publicly on the profiles of others. They invite their users build a public network of contacts (“friends”) and to navigate among a panoply of third party applications. Users thus “collect” contacts and form groups or “communities” of interest around shared passions, hobbies or interests. How do individuals and groups behave in this new digital context? How can we use a sociological vocabulary to describe the new ways that user communities are using social web platforms to collaborate and to produce content in cyberspace?

The notion of community employed here has little in common with the definition the first sociologists used to describe the passage from a social group based on tradition (community) to modern society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) defined community (*gemeinschaft*) as a social form based on emotional and geographical proximity and involving direct, physical, authentic interactions among its members. In the so-called “digital community,” however, members typically have no common geographical ties and face-to-face physical interactions are no longer necessary. Today’s digital communities also differ considerably from the first Internet use communities that Howard Rheingold baptised “virtual communities” (Rheingold, 1993). This type of community was much smaller. Strong social ties and sustained commitment to communal goals developed within these online communities, even though users met asynchronously and at a distance.

Since about 2002, the expression “digital communities” has come to refer to large networks of user/contributors who post content on sites such as Wikipedia or Amazon and to social

network sites composed of huge quantities of interconnected user profiles. Today's digital communities are often nothing more than aggregations of individual users, ephemeral micro-clubs gathered around shared interests and characterised by partial belonging and similarities in one aspect or another of their lives (consumption, professional, associative life, etc.). The hypermodern identity of the Internet user appears to be composed of a constellation of multiple, contradictory sources of identification and subjectivities in action (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007). The social ties produced by social Web platforms appear to be sociologically quite different than the ties developed in either traditional communities or early virtual communities (Proulx et al. 2006).

### **Emergence of *individualized networking media***

In the Internet's digital setting, approaches to creating and distributing content have been undergoing significant change for more than a decade, turning cultural industries' traditional models upside down. Four characteristics mark this turn to "participative culture" practices (Jenkins, 2006b). First, users are positioned at the centre of the apparatus, encouraged to produce and distribute their own content online: this is generally referred to as *user-generated content* or *user-created content* (OECD, 2007). Second, participation appears to be facilitated by the limited level of cognitive and technical competencies required to use the tools of these new platforms – inequalities in access and appropriation notwithstanding – to create a context which favours increased creation and content-sharing among casual Internet users (Leadbetter & Miller, 2004). Third, these changes are grounded in the development of online collectives and communities, networked and structured in apparently non-hierarchical ways (Surowiecki, 2005). Fourth, these transformations spawn new economic models (Gensollen, 2006) based on the large-scale aggregation of often minimal individual contributions, and a market rationalisation of the production and distribution of informational goods. Kick-started in 1999 with the propagation of peer-to-peer music file sharing that revolutionized the music recording industry (Moreau, 2008), new forms of participation have multiplied, demanding strategic adaptation by a number of sectors of the cultural industries.

New collaborative practices for Internet-based content creation and exchange have emerged in a variety of sectors. Consider the following practices, each of which corresponds to a particular kind of online participation:

- Collaborative encyclopaedias: contributors to *Wikipedia* are inventing new ways to dynamically assemble encyclopaedic knowledge (Levrel, 2006);
- Citizen journalism: citizen journalism sites are challenging journalism's traditional rules (Gillmor, 2004; Bruns, 2005);
- Free and open source software: communitarian forms of open source software development increasingly constitute an alternative to proprietary software (Weber, 2004);
- Immersive environments: *Second Life* is an original digital environment in which content creation depends intimately on users' ongoing contributions (Boellstorff, 2008);
- Podcasting: podcasting practices imply important reconfigurations of the radio broadcasting system (Berry, 2006; O'Neill, 2006).

Juxtaposed, this diversity of collaborative practices suggests a major evolution in Internet use. We suggest that a certain unity underlies this diversity. Like Axel Bruns (2008), who coined the term *produsage* to distinguish these new practices from the traditional process of *production*, we seek to highlight what is particular about these phenomena of *online contribution*. Since users do not receive payment for their online contributions, such uses appear motivated by

powerful symbolic rewards instead. This suggests the importance of recognition in Internet user practices – that is, peer confirmation of a subject’s social value (Honneth, 2002).

Recent work in media and cultural studies has described the digital environments that emerge from the convergence between computing, audiovisual media, and telecommunications as privileged sites for widespread cultural creation. After a first movement of technological and economic convergence during the 1980s, we are now witnessing a second movement of convergence between mainstream media and new media (Jenkins 2006a; Bruns 2008). Similarly, recent studies on the uses of technological innovation describe the user as playing an increasingly active role in the innovation process (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003, 2008). This kind of research initially described the lead users’ capacity to identify their "needs"; to devise technical solutions to fill them; and, finally, to build and test prototypes under practical conditions of use (von Hippel 2005; Cardon 2005). It has since been extended to take into account the larger universe of users who might contribute to a process of *bottom-up innovation*. Rightly or not, von Hippel thus talks about “democratizing innovation” (von Hippel, 2005).

### **Analyzing users’ contributions**

The nature and quality of online communities, and subsequently the legitimacy of online knowledge activity in epistemic communities, has been a subject of debate since the Internet has emerged as a major social force. Proulx & Latzko-Toth (2000) review various approaches to the notion of community, relating it to the notions of *public* and *social network*. More recently, there have been several attempts to develop typologies of “commons-based peer production” collectivities (Benkler, 2006). Haythornthwaite (2009a) proposes a reconciliation of peer production and virtual community approaches to online collaboration by articulating dimensions of contributory behavior, recognition and reputation mechanisms and affiliation to community along a continuum running from crowdsourcing (Howe, 2006; Surowiecki, 2005) to community. Vainio et al. (2006) distinguish online epistemic communities according to community size, degree of centralization of decision-making, and how they deal with intellectual property, while West & O’Mahony (2008) identify transparency and accessibility as two key features of openness in online collaboration, and outline dimensions of organization of production, community governance and intellectual property as elements of what they term architectures of participation. Like O’Reilly (2005), they argue that architectures of participation are socio-technical accomplishments in which social considerations such as recognition, reward, motivation and co-orientation are as important as technical features. Even digital communities that appear to be nothing more than aggregations of individuals (crowds) may be able to create content and produce knowledge thanks to their largely invisible social organization.

In some sense, the promise of online knowledge crowds is the promise of participatory democracy, as evidenced in participatory culture and citizen journalism. In this context, the Internet provides a platform for citizens to voice their concerns and create an alternate structure for citizen engagement. As Haythornthwaite (2009b) notes, crowdsourcing is the beginning of some larger change or action, with an idea of continued attention and action. While the crowd may not be a community, it is assembled *in the interests of community*. Individuals are independent contributors to a collective enterprise, but not a collaborative one.

We are analyzing processes of creation and exchange in online environments along four dimensions: (a) the modes of visibility mediated by the system which facilitate social recognition among contributors; (b) the level of expertise displayed by contributing Internet users; (c) norms and governance models among collectives of contributors; (d) the insertion of contributory

behaviours in the context of an economy of the immaterial based on the exchange of informational goods.

- *Visibility and social recognition in contribution systems.* While remaining attentive to the diversity of uses of any system, we are examining the eventual transformations in visibility that result from relationships between users and systems (Thompson, 1995, 2000). The conception and design of second-generation Internet tools appears to integrate different visibility models. As users appropriate these platforms and tools, the boundary between what may and may not be seen (Cardon, 2008; boyd, 2008) may also shift. Changes in visibility also condition mutual recognition between users, who require visibility as a precondition for mutual recognition (Voirol, 2005b). We thus hope to describe the processes and procedures by which users construct the categories of the visible and invisible, on one hand, and to identify the normative assumptions through which what is worth seeing and not worth seeing is determined (Voirol, 2005a) on the other. Accordingly, an analysis of reputation management – that is, of symbolic rewards related to recognition – seems relevant.

- *Level of expertise and contribution quality.* New collaborative platforms encourage casual users to participate directly in content creation. However, these informational goods remain generated mainly by “amateurs”. This observation leads us to question the status of ordinary/amateur/lay users with respect to that of “professionals” (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004) and to examine the processes by which the figure of the expert (re)emerges within user groups, paying close attention to how collaboration and contributions are recognized among users (Dejours, 2007). Rather than exploring the distinction between these artificial categories and the asymmetrical relationship it assumes, we seek to assess the nature, quality and degree of effective expertise among ordinary contributors (Collins, 2007; Collins & Evans, 2007). Expertise, in this setting, refers to mastery of technical devices as well as to the ability to develop specific content or to communicate in digital environments.

- *Norms and models of governance models in contributor groups.* At first glance, contributor groups appear to be non-hierarchical, spontaneous agglomerations. However, participants organize their diverse content in ways that will make it easy for other Internet users to find (Auray, 2008). Formal and informal rules of governance develop, and communities can be disaggregated into circles of contributors according to various levels of participant engagement (Cardon, 2005). Three variables appear to determine the degree of openness of these online group’s governance: the permeability of their boundaries to the outside world, the ability to discuss norms for conflict resolution within the community, and the transparency of the criteria linking the merit of users’ contributions to their reputations (Auray, 2008). This last point is an important one, since “reputation systems” are important elements in groups using second-generation Internet tools.

- *Economic models: contribution in the context of the immaterial economy.* From an economic standpoint, media content distributed over collaborative platforms constitute non-rival informational goods: even they have been acquired by third parties, they continue to exist at the point of acquisition (Gensollen, 2006). Scarcity thus shifts from the body of information created by users, to the technical procedures and social organisations which facilitate its optimal use. Contributors aggregate information that has already been developed, and whose cost of supply is therefore very low. In order to make efficient use of this patchwork, Internet users need tools for research and quality control. We thus move from the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997) of the mass media to an economy of free content in which value is transferred to the equipment and services necessary for its collective use. In this economic context, there is an eventual risk that

the goodwill of contributors may be exploited by the organisers and managers of the masses of information they produce. The owners of collaborative platforms hold information use rights and may employ those rights to increase market efficiency (Dujarier, 2008).

### **The case of *citizen cyberjournalism***

The use of individualized networking media has brought "citizen cyberjournalism" practices to the fore (Proulx, 2009). These include the production, processing, and distribution of journalistic information by individuals who are not professional journalists but who use the tools of the social Web. Everyday users thus participate cooperatively in the online publication and processing of journalistic facts. From the humble status of reader, Internet users become *editors* of news, *commentators* of current events, or *recyclers* of information in other formats. However, what does the term "citizen" mean in such a context? Is it simply a way of contrasting ordinary people and professional journalists?

If so, then citizen cyberjournalism appears as a simple complement to traditional media production. Adopting the tactics of crowdsourcing here suggests only the mobilisation of a larger number of persons for processing and publication (Surowiecki, 2005), not any particular citizen activism. If, on the other hand, citizenship designates a movement towards speaking out on the part of ordinary people seeking to participate actively in the life of the City, we can then ask ourselves whether participating in cyberjournalistic practices creates a real alternative to conventional mass media in the tradition of engaged citizen media, also referred to as *autonomous media* (Langlois & Dubois, 2006; Granjon, 2008). This is the position held by Gillmor (2004) and the co-founder of the French citizen cyberjournalism site *AgoraVox* Joël DeRosnay (2006).

In this context, two principal elements are important: the creation of content by Internauts is facilitated by the ease of use of next generation Internet tools and platforms, and competition with mass media allows traditional journalistic gate-keeping practices to be short-circuited. Bruns (2005) describes this empowering participation by ordinary citizens as "gatewatching." In this second scenario, the traditionally linear, top-down communicational chain linking the journalist to the public is broken. In its place, we find a circular and continuous chain of communication involving citizens' active participation in online information publishing. News becomes a conversation between professional journalists and community members sharing the online media publishing space, to the benefit of the audience. Active publics such as these could thus potentially echo social movements and activist groups that formulate social, political and cultural demands.

Citizen journalism websites initially appeared in response to what were perceived as significant shortcomings in mainstream news media (Deuze et al., 2007). The common use of "citizen journalism" as a blanket term tends to obscure significant differences in approach between various participatory news sites (see Bruns, 2005, for a classification of models for collaborative online news production). In fact, a variety of models employ various degrees of balance between enabling direct participation by citizen journalist contributors in producing the news and some level of editorial oversight by site operators and journalistic staff. In the ten or so years since citizen journalism has come to the fore, citizen-only sites have proved difficult to sustain, and the near term future of citizen journalism appears to lie in collaborations between professional and nonprofessional journalists to produce the news. The following case describes one prominent and successful citizen journalism site. OhmyNews is an example of a site that relies primarily on citizen contributions but which also integrates professional editors and

journalists. It is a hybrid between institutional or commercial support and community engagement.

### ***“Every citizen is a reporter”***

OhmyNews is an experiment in citizen cyberjournalism that has served as an inspiration to sites of a similar nature around the globe. It was founded in 2000 by Oh Yeon Ho, a veteran investigative journalist, in reaction to South Korea’s conservative mainstream press (Kahney, 2003). Only a few years later, the big, collaborative online newspaper had become one of the country's most influential media outlets. As a credible institution, its reporters are given access to government ministries and public institutions, putting them on level footing with professional reporters. In 2010, the site attracts an estimated 2 million daily readers. An international English language version of the site was launched in 2004, but it now focuses more on “curating the debate on citizen journalism” than on the news itself.

With “Every citizen is a reporter” as its motto and guiding concept, OhmyNews has changed how news is produced, distributed and consumed. “Journalists aren't some exotic species, they're everyone who has news stories and shares them with others” (Oh, 2004). Anyone who registers with the site can contribute and there are no restrictions on membership.

OhmyNews reflects a hybrid model of news production. While the site is based on citizen participation, it is careful to balance participation with professional presentation. The vast majority of the news is written by more than 62,000 registered citizen journalists who contribute about 150 stories a day, over 70 percent of the news content for OhmyNews. A paid staff of about 70 editors and reporters edit articles posted by citizen reporters and write in-depth stories (Ohmynews.com).

The production process resembles that of a traditional newspaper, but is conducted through discussion forums on the site that allow reporters and editors to discuss story ideas with citizen contributors. Citizen reporters decide what ideas they want to follow at their own time and expense. Reporters can post anything on the site, as long as they abide by the site’s code of ethics. For example they must agree to stick to the facts and to use their real identities. The site warns contributors that they bear sole responsibility for their posts. Copyright is shared between the site and the reporter, who is free to republish the material elsewhere. Stories are submitted through a Web interface and enter an editing queue before going live. All stories are fact checked and edited by professional editors, but some errors may still make it through. For example, OhmyNews has occasionally had to retract articles, and there have been problems with reporters' undisclosed conflicts of interest (Kahney, 2003). Occasional inaccuracies are not necessarily a problem in a peer-production model, however.

“With OhmyNews, we wanted to say goodbye to 20th-century journalism where people only saw things through the eyes of the mainstream, conservative media. ...We put everything out there and people judge the truth for themselves. ” (Oh cited in Kahney, 2003) The site covers everything a traditional newspaper covers - from sports to international politics, but with a personal and partisan tone. “Stories are often subjective, oozing with emotion and odd personal tidbits. But they also can be passionate, detailed and knowledgeably written.”(Kahney, 2003) Although citizen reporters may be paid a small fee (from \$2 to the equivalent of about \$17 if their story becomes Top News), their motivation for contributing is not monetary. “They are writing articles to change the world, not to earn money. ” (Oh, 2004) By making OhmyNews “a public square and a playground for citizen reporters and readers,” citizens feel they have a possibility to reflect realities as they see them and to change the world.

OhmyNews' business strategy is one of "selection and concentration" (Oh 2004). The relatively small staff tends to concentrate on particular types of stories that have become the calling card of the site - political and social issues. In discussions, they may decide to focus on a particular issue, in which case all the staff will tackle the same issue that day. What is more, they use the affordances of the Internet media to advantage, by reporting speedily and vividly with simultaneous input from readers. For example, in March 2004, two hundred thousand people gathered for a candlelight demonstration in Seoul to protest the impeachment of the South Korean president. Twenty staff reporters and several citizen reporters were there to cover the demonstration with a text-photo-video combination. OhmyNews published a special edition of the weekly paper. They also broadcast the event live on OhmyTV and updated text articles every 30 minutes during the six-hour demonstration. About four hundred thousand readers participated in the demonstration online, and over 85,000 comments on the one issue were recorded on the site (Oh, 2004). With coverage of this kind, OhmyNews is challenging and changing the traditional media formula of who is a reporter, what is news or newsworthy, how to write and how to edit news.

OhmyNews follows a for-profit model. It derives two-thirds of its approximately \$6.5 million in revenue from advertising and competes with established publications for advertising revenue. After making a profit from 2003 to 2008, it is now struggling financially, but this does not seem to worry them unduly. "OhmyNews is more concerned with being a social and media movement than a business," says Jean K. Min, the site's international communications director. "Our goal is to empower citizens" (Min cited in Woyke, 2009). The site has been known to turn to its readers for support. That was its strategy in 2008 when readers flocked to OhmyNews for updates on street protests over U.S. imports, driving up its Web server costs. The site posted a plea for donations and covered its costs within a few weeks (Woyke, 2009).

When asked why has OhmyNews been successful in Korea, while many similar initiatives have floundered, founder and CEO Oh notes several contributing factors: dissatisfaction with the mainstream conservative media; a sophisticated broadband Internet infrastructure and high penetration; the fact that Korea is a small country, in which attention is easily polarized around one or two issues, making OhmyNews' guerrilla strategy (selection and concentration) effective; and most importantly, the desire and willingness of a generation of young Koreans to participate in reforming Korean society (Oh, 2004).

Let us revisit OhmyNews in terms of our four analytic dimensions: modes of visibility and social recognition; contribution quality and expertise; norms and governance; and economic model. Citizen contributors sign their stories using their real names, providing them with a certain degree of immediate visibility. Payment for their work is on a sliding scale, according to the popularity of their story. Thus, even if the amount is largely symbolic, a element of supplementary recognition accompanies the payment. In the past couple of years, the site has introduced a system whereby readers can show their appreciation even more directly by "tipping" for stories they particularly appreciate. Frequent contributors to the site will sometimes develop a following. "Although there are isolated cases of authors earning thousands of dollars in tips for a story, the tips and payments serve more as encouragement than income. The payment system may send a message to citizen reporters that what they were producing is valuable, but also fits the interactive model of the site" (Joyce, 2007, pp. 7-8). The primary motivation for most OhmyNews citizen journalists remains the opportunity to reflect realities as they see them and to participate in social change.

OhmyNews' model integrates professional and citizen reporters. A staff of professional journalists and editors oversee every story for accuracy and presentation. This maintains

standards of quality. The expertise and competency of citizen journalists is recognized, but the role of a core group of professionals is not questioned or contested. The site's code of ethics and the inclusion of citizens in discussions of story ideas likely enhance quality and coherence. They also point to the transparency that governs the site's operations. After ten years of operation, OhmyNews has developed norms and mechanisms for maximizing contributors' contributions. In terms of Auray's (2008) variables for determining openness of governance, membership is open to anyone who wants to contribute, and criteria for attributing merit to contributions are reader-driven and transparent. The site's operating strategy of selection and concentration is well defined. OhmyNews exemplifies an economic model of contribution in the context of the immaterial economy. Information is aggregated and the cost of supply is low. The value-added comes in its presentation and distribution over the collaborative platform. Copyright is shared between the site and the citizen journalist, who can republish his or her article elsewhere, thus limiting the danger of exploitation. As with many citizen journalism sites around the world, the sustainability of OhmyNews' business model has yet to be proven.

Finally, with regards to OhmyNews' mission – empowering citizens – we might ask to what extent a site such as this can effect change? The site is often credited with responsibility for the election of a progressive President in 2002. Closer analysis suggests that, while OhmyNews had an amplifying effect and served as a platform for mobilizing voters during the 2002 Presidential campaign, a number of other factors were also significant in that election. Joyce (2007) argues that the demographic composition of OhmyNews' citizen journalists (a third are students, half are under 30 and half are from the "386 generation" already known for its militancy) challenges the view that citizen journalism will revolutionize the modern democratic process. While it is potentially available to all citizens, only some – primarily those who were already influencing public opinion – take advantage of the forum that OhmyNews offers. We suggest that in her analysis Joyce is forgetting an important part of the journalism equation – the Korean readers, for whom OhmyNews provides an alternative to mainstream media.

## **Conclusion**

Citizen cyberjournalism practices pose social and ethical challenges, as well as questions about the future of journalism. A first challenge concerns the credibility of citizen sources and the quality of the information they gather. Any rigorous practice requires that citizen media establish control and validation mechanisms for information contributed by Internet users. The presence of professional journalists on editorial committees appears crucial for ensuring quality control, although some advocates of citizen journalism argue that committees formed solely of citizen spokespersons can do without professional journalists. Whatever the answer, the question remains as to what the ever-increasing presence of non-professionals means for the future of journalism and the news industry. The professional identity of the journalistic profession is being redefined as new dynamics for the production of information develop. The task of informing the public sphere becomes a socially distributed one, beyond the control of professional journalists as increasing numbers of amateurs participate in producing the news.

Another challenge concerns the increasingly diverse associations and collaborative strategies between citizen media, conventional media and major Internet players. Some of the Internet's major industry players have demonstrated great interest in integrating citizen-journalism-style practices. New Web 2.0 platforms have given rise to new actors (Wikinews, Yahoo News, MSN, blogs by amateurs, interest groups, political parties and elected officials) as well as new services (for example news aggregators such as Google News). This further threatens the already fragile

balance in the media industries (fragility linked notably to the increasing presence of free media). Yet, citizen cyberjournalism remains largely dependent on mainstream news organizations, whose content it debates, critiques and recombines by harnessing large, distributed communities of contributors. The process of increasing hybridization and convergence between bottom-up and top-down models of news production is well underway. It is in this sense that we refer to a regime of “conflictual cooperation” between mainstream media on one side, and new, individualized, networked communication media, on the other.

We can also reframe the emergence of new practices of citizen cyberjournalism in the context of political actors’ social visibility. Following Castells, we make two observations to characterize the power of the media in the construction of public space today (Castells, 2009). First, the political existence of social actors is subject to their media visibility. Second, until recently the traditional mass media (large television networks and newspaper conglomerates) have tightly controlled the media visibility granted to political actors. Political actors’ ability to speak has been heavily constrained by the logic of traditional media which significantly control the topic agenda, the rules of passage, and the amount of time allotted to different political actors use to speak to the public directly. The growth of individualized networked communication media – one of the fundamental characteristics of current changes in the media environment – suggests not only the emergence of plural and heterogeneous public spaces, but also new mechanisms for the public visibility of social actors.

We thus return to one of the central issue of this paper: can the emergence of these individualized mass communication media echo the principles of participatory democracy? And, if so, how? In analyzing patterns of collaborative contribution in the creation and exchange of media content, our goal is to shed light on the complexity and fluidity of exchanges among amateurs and professionals in various contexts, at the same time building a base of empirical data with which to continue theorizing.

Acknowledgements : This research program is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and carried out by the Lab CMO (Communication Médiatisée par Ordinateur) <http://cmo.uqam.ca>.

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