Social Media and Political Propaganda: From Manipulation to Censorship

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Abstract: The Internet Age heralded at the end of the 1990s foresaw enormous social changes. Manuel Castells held that these changes would transform the way in which we communicate. The growth of social media went through a turning point with the appearance of smartphones in 2007. Since 2000, political campaigns realized that the web was a new platform through which to promote candidates using political propaganda. By 2007-2008, Obama's Presidential Campaign, using a skillful microtargeting strategy, together with other strategies, was able to position Obama as a candidate and rise to victory. The milestone that this successful campaign represented, forced many candidates to recognize that it was indispensable to use a digital propaganda strategy. The Presidential Campaign that took Trump to victory raised widespread discussion about the role played by Cambridge Analytica, which, with Facebook's support, gained access to the information of millions of users. Subsequently, the impeachment inquiry against President Trump led to a debate regarding the participation of Russian hackers through promotion campaigns favoring the Republican candidate. These two phenomena will be discussed since they continue to generate an intense debate about the role played by social media in manipulating the electorate and the need for regulating social networks.

Key words: political campaigns, political propaganda, social media, framing, priming

JEL code: Z

1. The Internet Age and Social Media

The Internet Age — heralded at the end of the 1990s — foresaw enormous social changes. Manuel Castells held that these changes would transform the way in which we communicate. Castells' warning roughly anticipated what is happening today with the internet and social media, as well as the relationship that a broad sector of the population experiences with regard to its use. The internet's rapid development promoted two large-scale perceptions regarding its potential. The first perception comprises the "cyber-optimists", who believe that by enabling a large number of users to participate in debates and exchange of information, the web was opening the doors to freedom. The second perception comprises the "cyber-critics", who critique the way in which the web has evolved, particularly the transformation that the economy has undergone hand-in-hand with large-scale enterprises and the impact this has had on vast areas of life ranging from the labor market to what has been referred to as surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2021). The central purpose of this paper is to describe, discuss, and analyze the impact political propaganda has on the web and its probable and necessary regulation.

First of all, regarding the emergence of social media, Facebook became the most widely used network. Adam

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Kucharski stated that, "just as the finance industry had got excited about new mortgage products in the 1990s, social media was seen as something that would change politics for the better. But much like those financial products, it wasn't an attitude that would last" (Kucharski, 2021, p. 167). William Davies warns that, "As society has been flooded by digital technology, it has grown harder to specify what belongs to the mind and what to the body".

> In the murky space between mind and body, between war and peace, lie nervous states: individuals and governments living in a state of constant and heightened alertness, relying increasingly on feeling rather than fact (Davies, 2019, p. 17).

How can we separate these altered states from the way in which the internet is flooding our lives? The current stage we are undergoing can be differentiated from other stages by the fact that individuals are over-informed. We are exposed as never before in humankind's history to the stream of information that permeates social media sites and platforms. For any platform like Google, this phenomenon represents that the company:

> ...would turn its own growing cache of behavioral data and its computational power and expertise toward the single task of matching ads with queries. New rhetoric took hold to legitimate this unusual move. If there was to be advertising, then it had to be "relevant" to users. Ads would no longer be linked to keywords in a search query, but rather a particular ad would be "targeted" to a particular individual. Securing this holy grail of advertising would ensure relevance to users and value to advertisers (Zuboff, 2020, p. 75).

Extracting navigation data from search queries based on the initial argument that this action responds to the platform's concern and wishes to process information in order to improve its services in fact was opening the door to microtargeting, i.e., to personalizing advertising. This digital fingerprinting is unique since each user leaves a trace of their navigation through a diversity of websites which enables platforms to have an idea of the consumer's personality and based on this typology they can program and offer products, services, websites, all of which is done through microsegmenting.

Our relationship with electronic devices, such as smartphones, tablets or personal computers reveals that we are devoting increasingly more time to them, whether for work or leisure. According to studies conducted by Google, we check our smartphone every nine minutes, which is around one hundred times per day on average. During 2020 and part of 2021, sui generis years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which implied extensive lockdowns, the time in which the internet was consumed increased to an average of 7 hours per day. The number of social media users increased to 4,200,000 users, representing an average consumption of 2 and a half hours per day. Out of the five more widely used platforms, four are Facebook property (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp), i.e., they belong to Mark Zuckerberg (We Are Social, 2021). These large platforms, like Facebook and Google, are rising like powerful technological and political giants. "This Google is the superpower that establishes its own values and pursues its own purposes above and beyond the social contracts to which are others are bound" (Zuboff, 2020, p. 82).

2. From Marketing to Microtargeting

Let's step into the discussion about propaganda's impact through the main platforms: Google/Apple/Facebook/Amazon/Microsoft (hereafter referred to as GAFAM) using a diversity of microtargeting strategies. Since 2000, political campaigns viewed the web as a new platform by the means of which to promote candidates using political propaganda. The web's growth faced a turning point when smartphones appeared in 2007. Media use with the development of software to process navigation data meant that:

> Google's invention revealed new capabilities to infer and deduce the thoughts, feelings, intentions, and interests of individuals and groups with an automated architecture that operates as a one-way mirror **irrespective** of a person's awareness, **knowledge, and consent**, thus enabling privileged secret access to behavioral data (Zuboff, 2020, p. 90).

Among the various changes to be mentioned in this respect and that are specifically related to what is being discussed in this paper is the transformation of segmentation into campaigns. Obama's 2007-2008 Campaign, with the inclusion of former platform managers with a skillful microtargeting strategy, together with other strategies, was able to position Obama as a candidate and eventually succeed. The milestone represented by this successful campaign obliged many candidates to consider a digital propaganda strategy as inevitable.

The participation of former Google platform managers in Obama's campaign also implied the arrival of algorithms as the great microsegmentation decision-maker. Today, the development of what is called cyber politics, understood as a set of political actions carried out through different platforms, is considered a milestone in campaigning. Algorithms can be understood as a set of instructions with which to program a data-processing system (a user's navigation preferences) in order to carry out certain tasks or activities, in this case setting up the profile of websites that are considered to be of interest to users. According to Eli Pariser, this leads to the development of filters based on the user's identity (that is, of course, what Google or Facebook claim).

> Most personalized filters are based on a three step model. First, you figure out who people are and what they like. Then, you provide them with content and services that best fit them. Finally, you tune to get the fit just right. Your identity shapes your media. There's just one flaw in this logic: Media also shape identity. As a result, these services may end up creating a good fit between you and your media by changing … you (Pariser, 2017, p. 34).

2.1 Habemus Big Data: From Cambridge Analytica to Russiagate

For the 2016 presidential campaign in which Trump won the elections, there was a discussion about the role played by Cambridge Analytica, which with Facebook's support, obtained information about 50 million users. This information was used by the campaign strategies implemented by the Republican candidate's team. Jorge Aguilera noted that Steve Bannon, former Vice President of Cambridge Analytica, processed the information obtained from Facebook through a:

> methodology that Bannon developed through *Cambridge Analytica* (that) consists of obtaining user data from social media about their emotional ratings (likes, dislikes, themes of interest) as building blocks for creating a psychological profile of individuals in a society in order to use algorithms to manipulate them emotionally. They can thus trigger hatred, anxiety, and rage, channeling these emotions through microsegmenting messages. The way individuals act in reality is therefore based on the information with which they were manipulated through social media (Aguilera, 2021, pp. 296-297).

Bannon later on became the chief executive officer of Trump's campaign. The campaign is thought to have also conducted countless focus groups, which enabled them to identify the lines of what would later be the "anti-system" narrative. The campaign's framing was constructed in this way. It should be kept in mind that "[b]roader frames and inclusive accounts generally lead to more rational decisions" (Kahneman, 2011, p. 362). For Lakoff, framing is like a metaphor, "framing is about getting language that fits your worldview. It is not just language. The ideas are primary — and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas" (Lakoff, 2004, p. 23). What better way to find the words that the electors will identify with than doing prior research. The anti-system narrative obtained through Facebook and focus groups made it possible to identify the citizens that would become the Republican candidate's base of support. These angry citizens, upset by the massive economic breakdown during the crisis of 2008-2009, expressed their rage on their profile "walls." Losing their jobs and homes and witnessing

companies move their production plants to other countries in order to save money on wages and escape environmental controls, these people saw in Trump a figure whose highfalutin speeches attracted more and more of the citizens who felt that the political system had abandoned them. The Republican candidate would play the role of an avenging politician opposing traditional politicians in Washington D.C., the same politicians who had abandoned at least half the citizens of the country.

The later political impeachment of Trump, as president, initiated a debate about the participation of external actors (the Russian hackers) in campaigns promoting the Republican candidate. Both Cambridge Analytica and Russiagate phenomena generated an intense debate about the role played by social media in manipulating the electorate to favor a specific candidate. The Cambridge Analytica case per se presented many different facets.

> … the advertising industry was helping to normalize Cambridge Analytica for years. It's unclear if that will change, even in the wake of a global scandal. In its year-old press release, the firm openly declared that it had succeeded in **"identifying persuadable voters, discovering the issues that would drive their voting decisions",** and that it had 'targeted undecided Democratic women voters after building models of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton support in ten swing states.' To its peers, Cambridge Analytica operated in full daylight (The Intercept, 2018).

Perhaps the participation of former officials of the Google platform and their successful campaign, through cyber political strategies left something clear—political campaigns, at least those with a higher profile, Presidential and Federal Congressional elections, would no longer be the same. This became clear not only to the political parties, but also to Silicon Valley. The buoyant sector of digital economy –GAFAM– became aware of the leverage it had in order to support the Democratic candidate to reach the presidency, either through mobilization strategies or through financial support. Power is meant to be exercised and that is precisely what GAFAM would do from then on. It was not until January, 2017, that Robert Hannigan, former Director of the British intelligence agency, expressed a warning during an interview with the BBC:

> ...that Facebook is "potentially" a threat to democracy "if it isn't controlled and regulated. But these big companies, particularly where there are monopolies, can't frankly reform themselves. It will have to come from outside", he said. Politicians have realized that Facebook can be as powerful as the governments (Economía digital, 2018).

2.2 Russiagate

It is believed that since the summer of 2015, unusual movements or "digital intrusions" — as they are called by the National Security Agency (NSA) and the FBI — were recorded. By 2016, Wikileaks and DC Leaks had been identified as the source that had disseminated the emails from the Democratic National Committee obtained by Russian hackers: "The information regarding the Russian intromission caused deep concern at Obama's National Security Council. With time, information improved and became more convincing" (Woodward, 2018, p. 55).

> In autumn, intelligence reports showed that Moscow — like almost the whole world — thought that Clinton was likely to win. The strategy was changed by Russian President Vladimir Putin's influence campaign which focused on undermining Clinton's coming presidency. Clapper and Jeh Johnson, Secretary of Homeland Security were in a great hurry to warn the public about the Russian interference. On Friday October 7, at 3pm they issued a joint statement in which they officially accused Russia of trying to interfere in the US elections, although they did not publicly name Putin (Woodward, 2018, p. 56).

The Russian intervention in the US elections has been set forth as an unlikely thesis to be discussed. Perhaps it is up to internationalist experts to decipher what it means for hackers from one country to intervene in the electoral process of another country, an increasingly recurring dynamic enabled by social media. Perhaps what is more

questionable regarding this form of intervention might be the intervention itself, that is, interfering with a country's sovereignty in an attempt to influence the debates and tilt results towards a certain candidate, thus affecting their adversary.

Adam Kucharski recognized that that year there had been a lot of Russian propaganda as well as many other contents circulating on social media. "American users saw over 11 trillion posts on the platform. For every Russian post people were exposed to, on average there were almost 90,000 other pieces of content" (Kucharski, 2020, p. 168). Kucharski delved more deeply into the topic and stated that in fact the greatest support Trump had received came from the mass media, "it's been estimated that in the first year of his campaign, Trump gained almost \$2bn worth of free mainstream coverage... 'In just six days, the New York Times ran as many cover stories about Hillary Clinton's emails as they did about all policy issues combined in the 69 days leading up to the election'" (Kucharski, 2020, p. 168). Perhaps that was actually the Russian intervention in the process — alleging that information from the Democratic candidate's unencrypted emails had come from sites such as Wikileaks, which was in turn disseminated through diverse media. The controversial information contained in those emails irremediably damaged the campaign.

Brexit represents another verdict regarding the role played by hackers in manipulating successful campaigns. Kucharski himself argued that there was little evidence that the process had been manipulated from Russia. However, both in this case as in earlier ones, the "successful" emancipatory role played by social media has been established, perhaps through intense propaganda campaigns in media such as the press and television. This can be illustrated by what came to be known as the Arab Spring (2010-2012), in which apparently smart-mob strategies were used, that is, protests called through smartphones. This, however, is highly unlikely if we consider the low internet coverage in the countries in which these mobilizations were recorded–Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Digital illiteracy in the region should also be taken into account. Castells notes that that is how the events unfolded, that the population, fed up with the excesses committed by the dictators in the region, in the face of their political power, became organized through social media, particularly Facebook (2012, p. 66). This highly popular thesis, held in particular by the aforementioned "cyber optimists". has practically become a verdict. The truth is there is a lack of empirical evidence to uphold such arguments that are unlikely and hard to believe in countries with so much poverty and backwardness, which were the initial cause of the unrest.

2.3 Communication Strategies and Social Media Manipulation

2.3.1 Algorithms and Manipulation

Political propaganda has found in social media a new space for disseminating its ideas. We believe that social media does not necessarily reinvent and exaggerate the possibility of influencing digital propaganda. Do let's avoid endorsing the theoretical assumption held by studies about the interwar period carried out in the twentieth century (the bullet or hypodermic needle theory) that set forth that the internet user is totally manipulated and that propaganda is absolutely effective. Evidently, we cannot deny that manipulation has been recorded precisely because of a combination of various communication strategies aimed at manipulating. This is exactly what will be discussed in the next few lines. Let's use the scenario in which Google decided to appropriate user information:

> In 2016, 89 percent of the revenues of its parent company, Alphabet, derived from Google's targeted advertising programs. The scale of raw material flows is reflected in Google's domination of the internet, processing over 40,000 search queries every second: more than 3.5 billion searches per day and 1.2 trillion searches per year worldwide in 2017 (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 65-66).

The numbers are impressive. The platform has accumulated such power hardly ever seen in the history of mass media. Let's now focus on the strategies. Upon reviewing the debate about digital propaganda, Samantha Bradshaw, from the Oxford Internet Institute, identified "cyber troops", defined as "government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online". In order to attain their goal, these actors resort to diverse strategies:

1) The use of bots to amplify hate speech;
2) The dissemination of manipulated content (fake news and post-truth politics);
3) Illegal data collection;
4) Microfocalization;
5) Troll armies geared to intimidate political dissenters or online journalists (Bradshaw, 2019, p. 1).

Each of the five strategies that Samantha Bradshaw points to, can generate a broad debate. They are today the coordinates needed to address the debate about propaganda's digital dimension and its impact on public opinion. Regarding the third strategy, illegal data collection that Google and other GAFAM have been identified as conducting, Shoshana Zuboff notes that, "predictions about our behavior are Google's products, and they are sold to its actual customers, but not to us. We are the means to other ends" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 66). With regard to this, Robert Hannigan, the former Director of the British intelligence agency until January, 2017, stated in an interview for BBC's *Today Programme* that "Facebook's primary goal is to squeeze every drop of profit from its users" (Economía Digital, 2018).

The platforms integrating GAFAM have accumulated so much economic and political power that it is perhaps the moment to ask whether it is still relevant to refer to a "free market" –considering their evident monopolistic presence– or whether it is still possible to refer to political freedoms, the very essence of contemporary liberal democracy. Perhaps it is time to recognize that we are today facing a clear Cyber-Leviathan, except that it is far from what the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes proposed, given that the "Biblical monster" is currently found in Silicon Valley,[1] the new locus of power.

We are aware that absolutely all our web activity generates what Zuboff calls "behavioral surplus," which fulfills several purposes, including serving personalized commercial campaigns, but also providing political information in accordance with the profile that the GAFAM companies create about us. The filters and the bubble or buckle they create around us has a very evident bias:

> The filter bubble doesn't just reflect your identity. It also illustrates what choices you have. Students who go to Ivy League colleges see targeted advertisements for jobs that students at state schools are never even aware of. The personal feeds of professional scientists might feature articles about contests that amateurs never become aware of. By illustrating some possibilities and blocking out others, **the filter bubble has a hand in your decisions**. And, in turn, it shapes who you become (Pariser, 2011, p. 35).

The bubble surrounding us exposes us to certain campaigns, including those revolving around political propaganda, in order to comply with "the goals pursued by others," to paraphrase Zuboff. Of the GAFAM companies, Facebook is the one most exposed to cyber troop activity. This might be due to its size, warns Samantha Bradshaw. Facebook is followed by Instagram and YouTube (2019, p. 2).

2.3.2 Opinion Leaders

Political propaganda strategies through opinion leaders are highly recurrent. They mobilize propaganda campaigns moved by account profiles that might have very few followers, aiming at getting a journalist or opinion

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[1] The site in which the main technological companies are located.

leader replicate the information. If this occurs, the strategy will have reached its goal. Various campaigns widely use bots, like false accounts with programs that imitate human behavior. Among the main reasons for this is the fact that they are fairly cheap to create. Kucharski notes that "mass amplification by politicians or news sources is essentially free" (Kucharski, 2020, p. 171).

In a recent study, NATO identifies that:

> "Social media manipulation is the new frontier for antagonists seeking to influence elections, polarise public opinion and sidetrack legitimate political discussions," the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** warns in the introduction to its recently published study about how digital platforms are failing in the war against manipulation and false content (Economía Digital, 2019, p. 3).

Germán Espino explains that in the United States, opinion leaders, known on the internet as bloggers and influencers, tend to professionalize: "many become campaign consultants for politicians, groups of interest, government agencies or even traditional media" (Espino, 2019, p. 119). Espino cites the case of Steve Bannon as an example, identifying him as an ideologist of white supremacists and the Executive Chairman of Breitbart News website.

Table 1   Type of Social Media Accounts

Type of Accounts Identified in Social Media	Definition
Bots	1) Abbreviation of the word Robot. Automation programmed to mimic human behavior.
Trolls	2) Originally jokers, now haters.
Cyborgs	3) Combines automation with human curation.
Pirated or stolen accounts	4) Cyber troops are used strategically to disseminate pro-government propaganda or censor freedom of expression. Owners are denied access to their own social media.

Sources: 1, 3 & 4: Bradshaw, 2019, p. 11. 2. Kucharski, 2020, p. 212.

The management of enormous platform-generated information flows is only possible through the development of sophisticated algorithms. However, theoretically the attempt is to avoid the bias of reducing human interaction. This is a repetition of one of the most widely discussed cases recorded in recent months, which are those identified by Joy Buolamwini, programmer at MIT Media Lab. Using facial recognition software in her research, she realized that it did not identify her because her skin is dark. The same thing has happened with software designed to support justice administration, for instance, which reflects racism, sexism, and different forms of discrimination. This concern has increased upon witnessing how artificial intelligence software (AI) is stepping into the broadest range of areas in our everyday life. As a whole, the social media user is pursued by bots, trolls, cyborgs, and pirates, so that among other campaigns they surrender to the purposes of political propaganda.

2.3.3 Framing/Priming

Part of the discussion surrounding social media and the communication strategies developed rotates around the use of news produced by traditional media such as newspapers. These media capitalize on the research and news they produce through small news reports in which, using framing strategies, they synthesize and headline the news, knowing that information-saturated users will in many cases replicate the information with their contacts without reading the content. In fact, they are combining framing and priming. It is not our intention to discuss the differences between one theoretical formulation and the other. We earlier referred to framing. With regard to priming, it sets forth the idea that it will trigger a reaction that will unconsciously activate whomever is exposed to the stimulus. As any theoretical proposal, it was widely criticized. Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu noted that the "agenda theory sets forth

that news selection determines both how the public perceives an issue's importance and, indirectly, through priming, how political leaders assess it" (2015, p. 427). Nonetheless, this proposal seems to be widely used in particular in political propaganda campaigns. In reference to this, Kahneman stated:

> …the primed ideas have some ability to prime other ideas, although more weakly. Like ripples on a pond, activation spreads through a small part of the vast network of associated ideas. The mapping of the ripples is now one of the most exciting pursuits in psychological research (Kahneman, 2020, p. 54).

Cognitive sciences, which among other sciences have strengthened this interpretation of communicative phenomena have developed many experiments supporting this theory's usefulness and potential. Perhaps one of the most outstanding experiments is the one conducted by a research team from the University of California, headed by Alan Fowler, renowned co-author of the study entitled Connected: The Power of Social Media. This team with a most diverse disciplinary background received support from the Facebook platform. On November 2, 2010, during election day, the Facebook platform users, estimated to be 61 million people, received an "I have already voted" message and a photo was shown to six of the user's friends proving that they had already clicked the link to their polling place. There was a second control group of approximately 600 thousand people chosen randomly, but who had not received a message. In other words, there had been no priming. It should be noted that Fowler's study (Bond, et al., 2012) was not based on the media priming theory, although — given the effects the Facebook experiment achieved — we believe that it is in fact the theory that Facebook used. Once they had obtained such an enormous database (that any researcher would envy) they estimated that the message on its own with no stimulus (i.e., no priming) mobilized close to 60 thousand voters, estimating that the version with friends (i.e., with priming) increased this figure to an additional 280 thousand voters, thus mobilizing a total of 340 thousand voters who were probably not considering going to vote that day. The fact that in November 2020, the United States had just been through a presidential election process in which the results in some districts were very close, or that in Mexico in 2006 there was an extremely controversial presidential election in which there was only a 0.56% difference between the winning candidate and the candidate who came second, representing close to 250,000 votes, evidence that the potential of this kind of priming cannot be overlooked. Fowler called this the contagion effect in which postulates and results are essentially the same.

3. A Pending Agenda: Is it Still Possible to Regulate GAFAM?

A third objective of this paper is to present a brief view of the regulation proposals regarding social media activity in different areas of the world (the European Union, Australia, and Latin America, specifically Mexico).

The early initiatives include the development of sites referred to as fact-checkers, aimed at detecting fake news and post-truth.

Table 2   Types of GAFAM Regulations

Year	Type of Bill
2014 to 2018	44 online bills about fact-checking
2019	Facebook generated a network of 25 fact-checking companies in 14 countries.
2019	Fact Check Explorer/ Google

Source: Badillo, 2019, p. 80.

One of the most recent episodes involving social media was the pulse-taking between the powerful muscles of the main US GAFAM companies and the then US President, which led to his "digital silence" regarding the November, 2020 US presidential elections. The theme had hardly generated any debate in the last five years following the November 2017 elections. The appearance of Cambridge Analytica in 2016 drew attention to the need to keep an eye on these new companies' activities.

A pending item on the agenda is the regulation of GAFAM. This paper notes the warnings made by national security experts regarding the need to set limits on platforms that have accumulated great economic and political power. In his study, Ángel Badillo (2019, p. 26) presents a compilation of the bills developed from 2017 to 2019 by ten countries forming part of the European Union (see Table 1, p. 26).

4. A Brief Conclusion

The activities geared to manipulate public opinion in social media are invariably accompanied by an antiliberal narrative since from a variety of angles their actions can be framed as a global threat to democracy (they censor, practice anti-pluralism, and are anti-liberal). They thus open the door to different versions of authoritarian regimes (Democracy Report, 2020).

We insist that GAFAM have accumulated great power, particularly after 2020, year in which, among other circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic strongly promoted the use of the internet, at an average of 7 hours per day with 2.5 hours devoted to social media. Apart from the fact that the lockdown strongly encouraged e-commerce, thus strengthening GAFAM companies, streaming platforms were also incorporated. The consolidation of a digital economy has not been accompanied by maintaining different expressions of political freedom.

As social media users, we are stalked not only during elections, but every day, by ongoing opened or veiled political propaganda campaigns, whether through fake news, post-truth, or microsegmentation using framing or priming strategies. These campaigns may lead to citizen burn-out regarding political debate. This might be the outcome sought by those promoting these campaigns: to increase political disaffection. The truth of the matter is that we are facing great challenges vis-à-vis the Cyber-Leviathan.

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