Navigating Media Ambivalence: Strategies of Resistance, Avoidance, and Engagement of Media Technologies in Everyday Life

Panel Abstract

As media technologies continue to infiltrate the domestic sphere with interactive opportunities, an increased interest in time and content management has surfaced. Social media websites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* have been commonly associated with "wasted time" and the accessibility of unchecked content has placed a strain on the preservation of family ethics and values. On the other hand, media technologies continue to offer spaces of both meaningful and necessary communication, as well as enjoyment, education, creativity, and political action. Based on this cultural conundrum, important questions about social practice and media resistance follow: Under what logics are individuals and families using deciding to resist media technologies? What are the everyday practices of media ambivalence and resistance and how do they operate in the domestic sphere?

In most research and popular discussion of media texts and platforms, the focus is understandably on current or potential users of media. This panel aims to provide space for discussing an important, though perhaps under-attended to, phenomenon within media consumption: the active non-use or negotiation of media by subjects who hold ambivalent attitudes toward communication technologies. Using empirical evidence and discourse analysis, each of the papers on this panel draws attention to the strategies employed by people who want to actively manage their own media use, as well as that of their families. The papers collected here consider a variety of communication technologies (email, television, smart phones, and social network sites) and focus on a range of factors (including gender, religion, and national context) that shape the attitudes taken and the tactics deployed in regulating media use.

The first paper in this panel explores and analyzes technological and discursive "tactics" (i.e., "screen time") that users employ to negotiate and limit media use for themselves and their families. Drawing upon qualitative interviews conducted in households in Israel, the authors try to make sense of these different practices through comparisons with research conducted about parents and children. The second paper looks at the role of gender, as a social practice, in the regulation of domestic media consumption—including the gender identification of the primary policing parent and resistance toward gendered symbols in media culture—in order to identify how gender norms are perpetuated through practices of media regulation. The third paper in this panel explores how Muslims in the United States devise evasive tactics that both engage and resist the proliferation of media technologies in the household. In particular, the author argues that given their media deficit in American society, Muslims often feel they cannot afford to resist media technologies, particularly smart phones and social media because of their connective qualities and their interventionist affordances. Finally, the last paper examines the practice of refusal of social media platforms, for example, the active resistance by potential users to participation on sites like *Facebook*. The author argues that this works against the potential for media refusal to function as effective strategy of collective action. Practices of social media refusal and the discourses around it serve as sites of symbolic and material struggle within the contemporary commercial media context.

As a panel, the papers converse with each other to examine the ways that individuals and families confront their usage of new technologies in a media saturated age. In particular, the nuances of media resistance are analyzed at the discursive and textual level in order to understand the productive ways in which media technology is managed. In an age where individuals and families increasingly use technology to restrict their technology use, scholarship on digital media ambivalence becomes essential to understanding contemporary media culture.

Self-restraint as Freedom: Limitation of Use as a Form of Media Ambivalence

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Abstract

In the contemporary media-saturated landscape, even small acts of non-use or temporary avoidance can be understood as expressions of media ambivalence. This paper explores and analyzes technological (i.e., http://macfreedom.com/) and discursive "tactics" (i.e., "screen time") that users employ to negotiate and limit media use for themselves and their families. Drawing upon qualitative interviews conducted in households in Israel, as well as popular texts in Israel and the U.S. that discuss media "diets" and tactics for "slowing down" (http://slowmedia.typepad.com/), we show how these approaches express ambivalence about the effects of media upon children, family life, or upon the individual's quality of life. In this context, we ask how moral responsibility for use and non-use is delegated to both human and non-human actants in different cultural and religious environments.

Keywords

media avoidance; limitation; restriction; slow media; media accounts

The National Day of Unplugging was celebrated world-wide on March 1-2 2013 (http://nationaldayofunplugging.com/). In preparation for that day, computer users were encouraged to unplug – to avoid technology and commerce, to connect with their loved ones, to get outside and to find silence (http://www.sabbathmanifesto.org/). Many heeded the call and before unplugging, uploaded photos of themselves holding a sign in which they explained: "I unplug to" – recharge, rest, be with family, play music, read etc. This national-global day, then, both advocates and creates an opportunity to practice a particular form of media avoidance – one based on the limitation of use. Unlike avoidance, in which one decides or is expected to practice total resistance, here technology is used and yet moderation is recommended: enjoy, but do not surrender; let go, but set limits.

NationalDayOfUnplugging.com is not alone. The web offers a broad array of services, from friendly advice to actual "productivity tools," that advocate moderation and practically restrict use. This paper analyzes these web-based services as sites of media ambivalence in order to gain insight into the ways in which they reconcile "use" and "don't use." Drawing on Billig et al.'s (1988) notion of ideological dilemma, it explores the complexities of middle-range media resistance and reflects upon the role of limitation as a practice of media ambivalence. The paper

is part of a larger project that studies media ambivalence in everyday life (R&R) in an attempt to map the practices that lie between media use and non-use, viewing and not-viewing, adoption and avoidance. The project is based mainly on observations and interviews with individuals and families that practice media avoidance or otherwise critically negotiate household or personal media. In this paper, by contrast, the reliance on websites' "about" and FAQ pages offers a unique understanding of the ways in which the limitation of media use, as a dilemmatic social practice, is "sold," literally and metaphorically, to users.

Limitation of media use is advocated in two types of websites. NationalDayOfUnplugging.com, Sabbathmanifesto.org, LetsMove.gov and others formulate the rationale for restricting media use and discuss ways to put it into practice. Let's Move, for example, contrasts screen time with physical activity and recommends setting screen time and logging screen time vs. active time (http://www.letsmove.gov/reduce-screen-time-and-get-active). Other websites present tools for practicing limitation: SelfRestraint, SelfControlApp, MacFreedom, GetColdTurkey, Unplug, RescueTime, MinutesPlease, InternetTimer, LeechBlock, StayFocused, Anti-Social, FacebookLimiter – to name a few – sell applications that allow *their* users to reduce the time spent surfing in general and social networking in particular.   Both types of websites view excess use as a vice and view moderation as an ideal, and emphasize the role of self-control or restraint. They view time as an important resource that needs to be wisely managed, especially since technological convergence blurs the boundaries and distracts the user from "more important" goals. Finally, the websites imply an imagined community that helps users feel "that they are not alone," even though they are sitting in front of the screen.

Despite these common features, the first type of websites – NationalDayOfUnplugging.com, SabbathManifesto.org, LetsMove.gov – can be described as discursive and performative in that they provide users with a common language and approach for managing their media in everyday life. The second type of websites – that offer tools for practicing limitation – are technologically and commercially based. The performative websites engage users with a vision of a wholesome life, and promises of self-improvement. Practicing unplugging helps the user to remember what is truly important.   Creativity is considered the basis for a happy, healthy lifestyle, and users can express their own individuality through the practice (and by uploading their photo to the website).

The technological websites focus on productivity and the exchange value of their services: "Anti-Social might be the best fifteen bucks you have ever spent."   Users are viewed as addicts and procrastinators who need a technological solution for their weaknesses.   They are offered statistics based on their performance as an incentive, yet they are perceived as too weak to actually perform restraint or self-control without an electronic pat on the back or a technological nudge.

In our paper, we try to make sense of these different practices through comparisons with research conducted about parents and children (see Clark, 2012; Livinngstone and Helsper, 2008; Nelson, 2010; Seiter, 1999), particularly those that point to class as a distinguishing factor between parental approaches to technology. We complement those studies by emphasizing how users (individuals) delegate moral authority to the technologies, so that they share responsibility with them for social action.

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Identity Politics and Domestic Media Regulation: Gender Ideology, Negotiation, and Strategy

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Abstract

Based on household interview data, this paper analyzes the role(s) of gender, as a system of social practices, in the enactment of regulating domestic media consumption for children. Whereas time management and content-related issues, such as violence and language, were often cited by parents as justifications for control, issues directly related to gender performance in household practices were absent from responses at the conversational level. Using critical discourse analysis, and focusing primarily on gender ideologies and strategies, this study uncovers three main findings: (1) A correlation between the primary caregiver of the child/children and an increased knowledge base for the family media policy; (2) Management of gendered messages were most often directed at female children; (3) Household gender ideologies intersected with other social beliefs. These particular findings will be instructive for future studies on media resistance and media ambivalence in the home, and in particular, studies that focus on digital media and communication.

Keywords

gender politics; media policy; domestic sphere; regulation

Sociologists have often noted that gender, as a social practice, plays a dominant role in familial relations, negotiations, and strategies within the domestic sphere. In particular, this role is often cited as political rather than organizational, and is often situated as perpetuating inequality. In her seminal work, *The Second Shift*, Arlie Hochschild (1989) argues that the allocation of domestic duties is directly related to gendered power dynamics, thus creating a "second shift" of labor that is directly connected to gender ideologies. These gender ideologies are developed as a result of an individual "unconsciously synthesizing certain cultural ideas with feelings about their past" (p. 16). Through ethnographic research, Hochschild found that due to the subjectification of women as inferior in the public sphere, many families have adopted the belief that women are naturally apt to manage the domestic sphere, including the "second shift" of childcare, cleaning, cooking, etc. However, Hochschild also demonstrates that the "second shift" of domestic labor remains at the negotiated level rather than the hegemonic. Similarly, Cecilia Ridgeway (2011) argues that

gender ideologies are negotiated at the interpersonal level, as part of a framing device that regulates the ways that men and women relate to one another. Here, gender works as an initial framework for "defining 'who' self and other are in order to coordinate their behavior and relate" (p. 7). And because gender is imbued with beliefs about status, masculinity/femininity, ability, and respect, interpersonal negotiation within the domestic (and public) sphere often becomes a site of power and inequality. The domestic sphere, then, functions as a highly gendered space that offers a stage for the performative negotiation of gender ideology.

Of the various domestic activities that are cited as gendered battlegrounds—childcare, cleaning, work—the enactment of regulating children's media consumption has yet to be analyzed in this way. For now, media policies have been often articulated as part of a family's collective identity or as an extension of their views on media effects (Hoover, Clark, and Alters, 2004). This paper is uniquely interested in the roles of gender vis-à-vis media regulation in the domestic sphere and seeks to uncover the ways in which identity politics shape parental duties and implementation. Specifically, this paper draws from audience reception analysis within the cultural studies framework. Rather than abstractly conceptualize these domestic relations, this paper draws on transcripts from twenty family interviews conducted between the mid-1990s from 2008 as part of a Center for Media, Religion, and Culture project on Media, Meaning, and Work. This particular interview instrument focused on responses to religion, work, calling, media consumption, and media policy. In order to identify the ways in which gender ideologies are perpetuated through media regulation, interview data were critically analyzed using questions such as: How are gender norms perpetuated through the management of media regulation? What is the gender of the policing parent? What gendered symbols are regulated? Are there differences for regulation strategies among male versus female children? Although these particular transcripts focus most heavily on television regulation, the conclusions drawn from this data set will be used to construct a forthcoming interview instrument for analyzing the domestic regulation of new media. Because there has been a "stalled revolution" in the adjustment to updated gender relations, the findings from this study will be informative for future studies on domestic media policies (Hochschild, 1989, p. 12).

Based on the application of critical discourse analysis with an emphasis on ideology, strategies and performance, three major findings emerged from the family transcripts. First, a correlation emerged between the primary caregiver of the child/children and an increased knowledge base for the family media policy. Most often, whomever was designated as the stay-at-home caregiver, or the parent with more time for caregiving (over 50% of the households included a stay-at-home mother), was also the parent that would offer more detailed information regarding the length of time that children were allowed to consume media as well as the type of content that they were allowed to consumer. Although the secondary caregiver responded as well, they appeared to be more interested in "big picture" regulations such as "language," rather than an awareness of particular programming, characters, or scheduling. Based on this correlation, it could be argued that a "media policy shift" is added to other domestic duties, creating another area of maintenance for the primary caregiver, who—based on these transcripts—is most often the mother. The second finding was based on media content and the management of gendered and sexual messages. Although the transcripts revealed that time management and commercialization were the two main features of regulation that parents shifted into focus, conversations about "age appropriate" language, sexuality, and violence were often cited as additional markers. Interestingly, concerns related to daughters and sexual content, values, and specific characters (i.e. Hannah Montana) were cited more than issues related to sons. Further, when those issues were raised, it was most often the mother that elaborated on the topic. The third finding was that the gendered beliefs that were used to cite regulation strategies were most often used in conjunction with other variables, such as religion, socialization (childhood experience), social beliefs, and

work. Although this was to be expected, based on the work of Hochschild and Ridgeway, among others, it was helpful to find examples of gender ideology operating at the conversational and negotiated level. During discussions of work, daily activities, and their media policies, parents revealed meaningful clues about their beliefs on gender.

Based on these findings, it is essential that future interview instruments that seek to locate domestic practices of media consumption include questions that focus directly on gender strategies. Further, due to the familial adoption of new media for entertainment and monitoring, questions should reflect this social update, as well inquiries into affordances, taste, and agency. In the end, while it is already well understood that the domestic regulation of media is not value-free, this area of research could benefit from locating the negotiations of gender ideology within lived practice.

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Evasive Tactics, Media Ambivalence and Resistance in the Muslim Home

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Abstract

Based on semi-structured household interviews, I examine how Muslims in the United States devise evasive tactics that both engage and resist the proliferation of media technologies in the household. Specifically, I look at how parents spatially deploy these technologies in the home and how they manage their media use and that of their children. I argue that given their media deficit in American society, Muslims often feel they cannot afford to resist media technologies, particularly smart phones and social media because of their connective qualities and their interventionist affordances. Media use and management in the Muslim household can also be heavily regimented by degrees of piety, creating in the process new moral spaces where Muslims experiment with different devotional practices and imagine new mediated paths to cultivating religious virtue.

Keywords

resistance; muslim home; media accounts; social media; media literacy

In the past few decades, American Muslims have rallied behind the critical need to combat discrimination and the increasing racialization of their faith, particularly following the events of 9/11. A number of organizations emerged to defend the legal and civil rights of Muslims and urge them to become active civic servants. Other Muslim organizations targeted popular media and lobbied against stereotyping while helping Muslims navigate better the beguiling world of secular media. Scholars have written about how these organizations encourage Muslims to amplify their voices and develop a media competence to counteract their marginalization in public life. But little has been written about how Muslims negotiate the spatial and ethical terms of their media use at home and how they develop new media pathways that are consistent with their religious convictions and norms. As Nick Couldry (2012) argues, our research is narrowly centered around new articulations of media use and rarely on disarticulations of the media. Couldry calls for a new paradigm of media research that should address "the whole range of practices in which media consumption and media talk are embedded, including practices of avoiding and selecting media input.

The household, which has not been researched much in Muslim contexts, becomes a critical material space, a site for political engagement, negotiation and resistance to narratives of othering. It is a good place to interrogate, through the spatial use of media technologies and engagement with media content, what it means to be Muslim and Muslim American today. Much like the home can reflect the piety of Muslims in terms of its material presentation and spiritual deployment of space -display of calligraphy on the wall, demarcation of spaces for prayers, designation of special places for the display of the Qur'an, etc.- media regulation or resistance in the home can be a good place to explore other practices and micropolitics of making home or performing the homeplace.

Following Couldry's call for a practice-based media studies, I argue that accounts of media use, regulation and resistance help us understand the centrality of home as an important site of identity, security, and belonging for Muslim families. These accounts of media-related practices reveal not only important answers to how family values are inscribed in media practices, but they also interrogate the agency of Muslim families in their struggle to reclaim and re-signify their domestic space, and finally the way in which the geopolitical is experienced and negotiated in the intimacy of home making. The media in this context are part of a social and cultural toolbox used to act on warped representations of Islam, redress the invisibility of Muslims in public culture, and police the boundaries of what it means to be Muslim in America today.

In their work on diasporic communication and everyday life, Roger Silverstone and Myria Georgiou (2007) write that "…mediation is a political process in so far as dominant forms of imaging and storytelling can be resisted, appropriated or countered by others both inside media space, that is through minority media of some kind or another, or on the edge of it, through the everyday tactics of symbolic engagement, in gossip, talk or stubborn refusal" (31). In this paper, I argue that tactics of stubborn refusal and engagement with the media in the Muslim American context take on a different dimension, precisely because the media are both a source of tension, othering, and poor perceptions but also a source of escape into alternative and acceptable frames of what it means to be Muslim.

Based on semi-structured household interviews, I examine how Muslims in the United States devise evasive tactics that both engage and resist the proliferation of media technologies in the household. Specifically, I look at how parents spatially deploy these technologies in the home and how they manage their media use and that of their children. I argue that given their media deficit in American society, Muslims often feel they cannot afford to resist media technologies, particularly smart phones and social media because of their connective qualities and their interventionist affordances. Media use and management in the Muslim household can also be

heavily regimented by degrees of piety, creating in the process new moral spaces where Muslims experiment with different devotional practices and imagine new mediated paths to cultivating religious virtue and building political capital. Media accounts also reveal how a complex sense of media literacy is critical in helping both parents and kids understand not only how to be alert to negative stereotyping but also how to strike back with their own media. In a sense, home dynamics of media use for some families, through the promotion of a 'media talkback culture' as read and write instead of read-only, generates a subversive, internal media capital to compete with the symbolic power of mediated discourse of Islam and Muslims. This study explores how this kind of disruptive use of media is embedded in family values and how Muslim American households revise their media rules in the digital era.

Finally, this kind of research on Muslims as dynamic subjects has significant value because it thickens our understanding beyond issues of representation of Islam and Muslims in media texts and beyond our focus on predictable sites of research on Muslims such as formal spaces of worship as the mosque. It highlights how Muslims produce their homes through a dialectical relationship with media and through media-related practices. It's not only about what the media do to Muslim but also what Muslims do with and to media.

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Media Refusal as Site of Struggle: The Contested Meanings of Digital Labor, Lifestyle Activism, and Opting Out of Facebook

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Abstract

This paper examines the practice of refusal of social media platforms, for example, the active resistance by potential users to participation on sites like *Facebook*. It situates such resistance within debates about digital labor and neoliberal lifestyle politics. As a practice of activism, "media refusal" must be understood as a hybrid between a labor strike and a consumer boycott, since social media users are positioned simultaneously as producers, commodities, and audiences. However, the decision to abstain from *Facebook* use is often discursively constructed, by both non-users and by commercial media representations, as an individual lifestyle choice rather than a tactic of political resistance. I argue that this works against the potential for media refusal to function as effective strategy of collective action. Practices of social media

refusal and the discourses around it serve as sites of symbolic and material struggle within the contemporary commercial media context.

Keywords

social media; resistance; labor; lifestyle; activism

A small but vocal contingent of social media users are fed up. Popular blogs and technology columns are abuzz with accounts of those who are actively turning away from networks like Facebook. Some people object to their incorporation and exploitation into an ever-more omnipotent (and therefore ominous) commercial network. Others simply find the platform—or their friends who also populate it—distracting, frustrating, or over-dramatic. Still others use refusal as a means to establish themselves as elites or hipsters, above the masses of social media sheep who blindly scroll along with the crowd (though few will willingly claim the hipster label for themselves). This paper draws on my analysis of these discourses of refusal—as published in the popular journalistic press and as expressed in interviews I conducted with Facebook non-users—to theorize how acts of social media refusal might be understood in relation to notions of online labor, lifestyle, and resistance. Social media refusers can be situated within a tradition of media resistance that includes anti-television campaigns (Mittell, 2000) and other historical precedents, but they also responds to specific conditions of the present moment, namely the political economy of digital labor and the neoliberal culture of lifestyle politics.

The phenomenon of social media refusal bears a complex and at times contradictory relationship to the concept of work. By attempting to remove themselves from the network, some Facebook refusers enact a kind of individualized resistance to incorporation in an exploitative system of user labor. Within media studies, there is a longstanding understanding that commercial media audiences are consumers, commodities, and workers (Smythe, 2006; Andrejevic, 2002). Social media users bring into stark relief the interconnections between production and consumption that were perhaps more abstract with regard to other media forms such as television. Indeed, popular statements of resistance sometimes echo the critiques that have been leveled by theorists of digital labor (Terranova, 2013; Andrejevic, 2011). Through active not-consuming, these actors simultaneously attempt to make themselves into non-producers. Resistance to social media participation thus must be situated at the crossroads of activist traditions that include both labor strikes and consumer strikes (Cohen, 2003; de Certeau, 1984; Micheletti, 2003).

Simultaneously, and in contrast to the more overtly critical resisters, there is a discourse employed by some refusers that indicates their rather straightforward incorporation into neoliberal ideologies of personal productivity. For example, many explain their negative attitudes toward Facebook in terms of its interference with their ability to "get work done." In this sense, resistance to social media might be seen as a kind of technology of the self, used to discipline the subject into docility as an offline worker (Foucault, 1988). This view assumes a different definition of labor than the Web 2.0 free labor model; in this perspective, the kind of "prosumptive" (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) activity that happens in social networks is a distraction from more authentic (and remunerative?) forms of labor. As I have argued elsewhere (Author, 2012b) the issue of productivity is clearly complicated by a political economy driven by user generated content, immaterial labor, unceasing surveillance by both corporations and the state, and (if we're feeling optimistic) participatory democracy through media channels. Being "more productive" while offline, then, may actually simultaneously entail becoming less productive in the new ways that productivity has come to be defined for today's media-using citizens.

Social media refusal must also be understood as a practice of lifestyle activism that goes beyond the mere rejection of a particular product, potentially aligning the refuser with a way of life and even an identity whose meaning is constituted by revolutionary opposition to mainstream patterns of work and leisure. The "Facebook dropouts" of today evince parallels with the other counter-cultural refusers such as hippies, anarchists, and feminist separatists (Marcuse, 1972; Author, 2012a; Echols, 1989), yet media resistance is also a unique phenomenon both within the digital labor economy and under the general conditions of neoliberalism in which individuals are made responsible for their own well-being in the realm of (supposedly) autonomous lifestyle choices (McGee, 2005; Littler, 2009). While strikes and boycotts are proven forms of collective action in some instances, the individualism of many practices of media refusal render them perhaps less likely to succeed in altering the structural conditions that spawn the problems to which refusers object. Even where objections are not based purely in individual self-interest, popular media representations of abstainers' motivations may encourage such an interpretation, thereby steering readers away from a critical stance toward conditions of corporate exploitation.

Based on the accounts of politicized media refusers, practices of media refusal can be usefully understood as instances of "propaganda by deed," in the tradition of anarchist activism. Just as anarchists from the turn of the twentieth century on saw their acts of insurrection—notably assassinations and riots—as spectacles which could potentially inspire the masses to revolt against oppressive systems, some of today's social media abstainers see their resistance to corporations like Facebook as an act of moral and political integrity that sets an example for others to follow. In other words, the choices made by individual (non)users become deeds which propagandize for the arguments against Facebook's exploitative commercial model. Despite their utopian aspirations, anarchist propagandists often find themselves vilified by media representations and state institutions; their political critique gets lost in the face of mainstream discourses that use various tactics to minimize dissent against hierarchical systems of power. While the stakes appear lower in the case of media refusal propagandists, the discursive conditions faced are similar. Deeds which indict the centralized power of media corporations are unlikely to get a full airing in commercial media contexts. Drawing on analysis of media representations of Facebook abstention, I show that this tactic which may have substantial ethical and political motivations is often represented as a consumer trend or personal quirk, thus leaving intact the hegemonic view of the commercial media economy as a neutral backdrop to individual lifestyle choices. In these instances, resistance is re-appropriated by commercial media itself, as a driver for view counts and click-throughs. Further complicating this is the variety of spaces opened up by social media platforms for discourses of resistance, as when Facebook quitters take to Twitter, blogs posts, and comments sections to air their objections to Zuckerberg's empire, often in direct response to the hegemonic representations just mentioned above.

We must see social media participation as both the object of resistance struggles, as well as a site for the representation of those struggles over meaning and resistance. It's clear that media refusal is a complex phenomenon, made even more complicated by the multiple discursive frames through which it is represented and understood, even by its own practitioners. This paper presents the above brief discussion of these complexities, as an intermediate step toward a fuller understanding of the ambivalent cultural attitudes toward media consumption and the ambiguous place of social media participation within contemporary societies and political economies.

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