

Understanding the Sharing Mania: What Libraries Can Learn from the Current Rise of Collaborative Consumption Models

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Keywords: Collaborative Consumption, Sharing Economy, Business Models, Libraries

Citation: Gareau-Brennan, C. (2018). Understanding the sharing mania: what libraries can learn from the current rise of collaborative consumption models. *PNLA Quarterly*, 82(3/4).

Abstract

This article explores the current rise of collaborative consumption models for a library context. Specifically, it explains these models and unpacks key success factors from collaborative consumption. Subsequently, the article postulates what is beneficial for librarians and libraries to understand from the current trend of collaborative consumption. While there has been much research and criticism about applying traditional business models to libraries, little academic work has been completed in using contemporary business practices such as the collaborative consumption models. To address this gap in the literature, this article addresses the following questions via a literature review: “What is the current trend of collaborative consumption?” “What models for success exist within collaborative consumption?” “How do libraries already fit into collaborative consumption?” “What are the ramifications of considering libraries a form of collaborative consumption?” First explored is the definition of collaborative consumption and its current state. Following this query is a look at what models exist within collaborative consumption and how these models have contributed in making collaborative consumption successful. Finally, there is a discussion where librarians and libraries fit into these models. Areas of future research in this field are also identified with the hope that librarians and libraries can use these disruptive business models as momentum to enhance their services and resources.

Introduction

Libraries and librarians alike are continually called upon to justify their existence, advocating for and communicating their value to the public and other stakeholders, thus contributing to an underlying defensiveness in library literature. To create and communicate value, much discourse has surrounded librarianship’s adoption of business models to guide them in advocating for their resources and services. Idrees and Rehman (2009) state that organizations such as libraries, once believed to be “sacred and in society serving them was taken as worship” (p. 13), are under threat from competition; similarly, Buschman (2003) points to librarians’ perpetual perceived threat to their craft. Chandratre and Chandratre (2015) postulate that in this competitive sphere, business concepts must be applied to the library world.

However, business models used in libraries have often been criticized for having misaligned values with librarianship. For example, libraries ultimately exist for the public good, which is at odds with the business goal of profit creation. By applying business models, libraries are pressured to “conform to the model of the market place” (Trosow, 2014/2015, p. 24), which can conflict with librarianship’s fundamental ideals. Though some argue that the market service model will benefit library users, Buschman (2003) states that there is little evidence to support this claim and indicates that more often these cases distort the library purposes and practices.

All of the arguments for and against business applications in librarianship draw from traditional practices, and there is little work on libraries and their relationship to contemporary or disruptive models. Although certain library professionals such as Figueroa (2016) have drawn a link between libraries and collaborative consumption, there is a considerable gap in librarianship discourse regarding the application of the new and disruptive business models used in collaborative consumption. Although libraries can continue to benefit from studying traditional business models, this paper postulates that libraries and librarians should further examine emerging collaborative consumption business models and consider adopting certain aspects to better and advance librarianship.

Objective, Research Questions, and Methodology

This work is an initial approach addressing the aforementioned gap contemporary and disruptive business models in librarianship literature, focusing on business models apparent in the collaborative consumption trend. In order to systematically analyze this disparity, the paper will address the following questions:

- What is the current trend of collaborative consumption?
- What models for success exist within collaborative consumption?
- How do libraries already fit into collaborative consumption?
- What are the ramifications of considering libraries a form of collaborative consumption?

To answer these research questions, the project proceeded with a literature review of collaborative consumption and the current application of business practices in libraries.

The Current Collaborative Consumption Trend

Definitions

Collaborative consumption is known by several different names, but all point to a model in which resources or services are shared rather than owned. Although slight variances occur among these names, for the purpose of this work they will be interchangeable. These names include the sharing economy, collaborative consumption, the on-demand economy, the peer economy, and the access economy. The most comprehensive, yet simple definition comes from the US Department of Labor (2016): an economy “formed from the business model predicated on peer-to-peer transactions and popularized by such companies as Uber, Airbnb, and TaskRabbit” (n.p.). Habibi et al. (2016) use the Oxford English Dictionary definition which includes a technological aspect: it is “an economic system in which assets or services are shared between private individuals, either for free or for a fee, typically by means of the Internet” (p.277).

Several sources note that the differences in the divergent types of collaborative consumption models make it difficult to agree upon a definition or even a classification of definitions (McArthur, 2015). For example, Lamberton (2016) establishes that collaborative consumption is dependent on the context in which it is examined. Therefore, Lamberton (2016) has different interpretations for an anthropological context, an experimental economics context, a management and psychology context, as well as a consumer research context. The library environment is most closely aligned to the experimental economics context which “offers the perspective that collaboration can allow individuals to maximize their personal utility compared to sole ownership” (Lamberton, 2016, p.56). Botsman and Rogers (2010b) offer another definition that takes into account the socio-cultural context that is critically im-

portant to the context of libraries. It states collaborative consumption is an “economy and culture model [...] systems of organized sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010b, n.p.).

Context

Collaborative consumption within economic and social contexts is not a new concept. According to Botsman and Rogers (2010a), these ideologies can be traced back to the “idea of ‘the commons,’ a term applied to resources that belong to all of us, dating back to the Romans” (p.88). This idea relates to “things set aside for public use” (p.88) by the Romans. The public library, as popularized in North America by Andrew Carnegie, is a historical example of the Product Services Systems (PSS) model of collaborative consumption (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a). However, these authors do not use libraries as a contemporary example of collaborative consumption.

Collaborative consumption models have been on the rise recently, despite there being little mention of libraries in the contemporary field. In terms of a more current examination of collaborative consumption, McArthur (2015) found that Felson and Spaeth first used the term ‘collaborative consumption’ in their 1978 paper, “Community Structure and Collaborative Consumption: A Routine Activity Approach” (McArthur, 2015, p. 241). In the modern North American setting, the increase in sharing economies relates to the shift in consumer desire to pay for the benefit of a product rather than the ownership of the product (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a). Rather than being passive consumers, individuals become active participants in collaborative consumption models (Ronen, n.d.).

Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera (2012) identify current motivations for participating in collaborative consumption as cultural, social, experiential, political, and ideological reasons. These diverse motivations stem from the numerous ways in which individuals can participate in these economies. Botsman and Rogers (2010a) talk of two categories of participation: the role of peer provider, which provides “assets to rent, share, or borrow” (p.72); and the role of peer user, which consumes “the available products and services” (p.72).

Technology, desire for financial saving, and environmental concerns have framed these recent shifts. Technologies, in particular the Internet and social media, have been fundamental to the development of the collaborative consumption models, as they make it easier to connect with other people willing to share (Matzler et al., 2015). Habibi et al. (2016) state that the rise in our technological systems and digital literacy has enabled resource sharing more readily due to lowered barriers and costs. These systems offer innovative opportunities, as technology “has brought about many new ways of sharing as well as facilitating older forms of sharing on a larger scale” (Belk, 2014, p. 1595).

Additionally, a major motivating factor to participate in collaborative consumption is the cost reduction that goes along with sharing (Botsman and Rogers, 2010b). Cost savings are highly important to consumers with reports that they “would consider sharing instead of buying if it allows them to save 25% on their purchase—and among younger customers in particular, the vast majority are swayed by potential savings” (Samuel, 2015, n.p.). Payment for services is an interesting component to examine when comparing the similarities and differences between collaborative consumption and libraries. Users of collaborative consumption models pay directly for the services and resources offered to them

whereas libraries users pay indirectly with their taxes for public libraries and with tuition fees for academic libraries. Library users also pay when they invest time and effort into learning how to use the library—however, most people do not consider this to be a traditional form of payment.

Environmental concerns are another potential motivation to participate in collaborative consumption. Collaborative consumption can benefit the environment in its reduction of over consumption (Pedersen & Netter, 2015). However, there is evidence suggesting that the rise in collaborative consumption is not solely motivated ecological concerns (Matzler et al., 2015). Therefore, marketing this component may not be the most efficient way to motivate participation from all demographics. Additionally, the rebound effect, in which consumers use the money saved through collaborative consumption to buy and consume more resources, has yet to be examined in-depth and may lead to other detrimental repercussions (The sharing economy: More than just a trend?, 2014).

These motivations point to an even larger economic evolution that fundamentally disrupts traditional business, market, and capitalist models. Collaborative consumption is at odds with the individualistic-oriented consumer culture (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012), as well as the market economy's need for "things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate" (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a, p. 6). A collaborative consumption model limits the number of products consumed, which can slow down or even stunt economic growth, and questions whether unlimited growth is necessary or sustainable.

This paper postulates that libraries should utilize models that illustrate collaborative consumption as a disruptive force. However, some literature claims that collaborative consumption models are simply on the rise because the private sector is using them to address private market failure (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014). Furthermore, there is discourse that claims collaborative consumption contributes to a neoliberal utopia, in which every individual becomes their own entrepreneur (The sharing economy: More than just a trend?, 2014). However, this perspective may simply attempt to pigeonhole collaborative consumption into a traditional business model, as this new model "frightens people who think in terms of classical business models and cling to them" (The sharing economy: More than just a trend?, 2014). While this paper aligns collaborative consumption with basic librarianship values, the skepticisms surrounding the utopic view of the collaborative consumption models are of legitimate concern and must be noted.

Collaborative Consumption Models for Success

Types of models

While every sharing economy is unique, many authors agree that there are three distinct models. The first of these consists of the Product Service Systems (PSS), "which allow members to share multiple products that are owned by companies or by private persons" (Matzler et al., 2015, p.72). According to this definition, PSS is the category that most closely aligns with library operations. Within PSS there are two different models: a usage PSS, and an extended life PSS (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a). Usage PSS models work for customers, removing barriers to accessing or gaining entry to resources (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a). Libraries can be categorized as a usage PSS where products are "owned by a company or an individual and multiple users share its benefits through a service" (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a, p. 101). Other non-library examples of usage PSS include car shares and Netflix

(Botsman & Rogers, 2010a). Extended life PSS are somewhat different in that they “focus on after-sales services such as maintenance, repairs, upgrading, or reuse that extend the life of a product as well as the user’s relationship with it” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a, p. 116). An example of extended life PSS may include companies that offer repairs on products that users already own, such as Denim Therapy – a repair company for denim (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a, p. 72).

Other collaborative consumption models include the redistribution markets and peer-to-peer matching or social networks, which “allow the reownership of a product” (Matzler et al., 2015, p.72). These products can be re-owned for free or a fee and examples of redistribution markets include Freecycle, in which products are free, or thredUP, SwapTree, eBay and Craigslist, in which products are swapped or sold (Botsman & Rogers, 2010b). Over time, “redistribute” may become the fifth R—joining “reduce, reuse, recycle, and repair”—and a key form of sustainable commerce. Collaborative lifestyles connect those who “share similar interests and help each other with less tangible assets such as money, space or time” (Matzler et al., 2015, p.72). Examples of collaborative lifestyle can take place on local or global scales, from people sharing “working spaces (for example, on Citizen Space or Hub Culture), gardens (on SharedEarth or Landshare), or parking spots (on ParkatmyHouse)” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010b, n.p.). However, these models fall outside of the scope of this investigation and will not be examined further because they are not as directly applicable to libraries as the usage PSS model.

Key success factors

Depending on the industry, there are several aggregable factors to success. This investigation relies upon Botsman and Rogers’ method of collecting and organizing four underlying principles: “critical mass; idling capacity; belief in the commons; and trust between strangers” (2010a, p.75).

Building a critical mass of collaborative consumers is essential to success. Collaborative consumption models rely upon the support of their participants and those with the most participants tend to be the most successful (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a). Matzler, et al. (2015) depict several ways in which companies can respond to the popularity of collaborative consumption. These techniques aggregate customers “by supporting [them] in their desire to resell goods, by exploiting unused resources and capacities, by providing repair and maintenance services, [and] by using collaborative consumption to target new customers” (Matzler, et al., 2015, p. 72), thus creating a critical mass for their products and services. For libraries, achieving critical mass could include exploring increasing membership and use through the removal of users’ barriers to accessing services and resources.

Idling capacity, as delineated by Botsman and Rogers (2010a), relates to the consumer’s desire to use a shared product at their own convenience. Successfully managing idling capacity also includes the organization’s ability to redistribute the non-used capacity to consumers at their point of need (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a). This type of capacity caters to self-oriented individuals, inviting them to participate in collaborative consumption because their motivation tends to be self-motivated (Matzler, et al., 2015). Creating ideal idling capacity is one way of removing barriers, thus reinforcing fluidity of issue which is defined as “the idea of removing barriers to use so that the solution is attractive and seamless to take up” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a, p. 192). A tangible example of idling capacity can be found in car sharing and having enough cars in a variety of areas so that anyone needing a car

would be able to do so whenever and wherever they wanted. However, the car share would not want too many cars, which would lead to cars not being used. Reaching idling capacity means arriving to the proper amount of car to balance of these factors. Achieving idling capacity in libraries could mean examining collections and ensuring that they are relevant and easily accessible to users. This could include instituting full or partial floating collections to make sure that library items are accessible where and when library users want them. For those libraries who already use a system that includes floating collections, such as Calgary Public Library or Edmonton Public Library, this may mean continually reevaluating these systems to make sure they meet users' needs.

Another encompassing success factor is the belief in the commons. This factor is related to ownership and non-owner ideologies that are central to collaborative consumption. Ownership, and thus a rejection of common resources, is deeply ingrained in our society, as seen in the adage “you are what you own” (Belk, 2014, p. 1595). In modern history, individuals have been defined by their possessions (Habibi & Laroche, 2016), which has political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal ramifications. However, there is a recent uptake in the belief in the commons where “people are realizing that ownership for the sake of exclusive possession is less important than the sense of belonging that ownership imparts” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a, p. 112), shattering previous systems. This belief has become popular in public and academic discourses regarding sustainability (Hellwig et al., 2015). A necessary component in the concept of the commons is efficient and effective sharing (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012). Historically, common property has often been shared among family and community members, but with collaborative consumption individual circles of sharing become bigger (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012). This larger circle of sharing allows for more resources to become “common,” thus creating more support for this idea. To take advantage of the belief in the commons, libraries could further enhance community-led practices by seeking out users who already are driven by these beliefs and collaborating with commons-based organizations and communities.

Sharing can also be used to create trust between strangers. Habibi and Laroche (2016) draw upon Airbnb to demonstrate that even sharing economies with profit-seeking motives benefit from relationships among both product providers and consumers. Collaborative consumption models have frequently led to the creation of communities, and these collaborative consumers have often “described how participating in these events helped them feel more involved with others in the broader community” (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012, p. 311). Indeed, Aristotle identified the principles of reciprocity and interdependence as the basis of community (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012). The allure of building networks is enough motivation for certain individuals to join a shared economy (McArthur, 2015). Community adds to the entire experience of participating in collaborative consumption. For librarianship, this idea of community could be related to creating collaborative and community spaces within the libraries.

How Libraries already fit into Collaborative Consumption

Libraries already subscribe to many underpinnings of collaborative consumption. Some literature even cites libraries as a historical example of a PSS as they remove the obstacles of price, availability, and social status when it comes to obtaining information (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a). Modern libraries, which emphasize the libraries as community spaces, also adhere to the principles of product sharing

and community creation and support, as “the sharing economy is more than sharing resources—it’s about the experience” (Crump, 2016, p. 20).

Despite libraries sharing even before sharing was “cool” (Figuroa, 2016), this discipline has yet to deliberately identify themselves as a significant part of the collaborative consumption movement. This process of outwardly identifying with a collaborative consumption model is ultimately a branding and promotion issue, since most strategic goals and outcomes of libraries are already aligned with the collaborative consumption models used in for-profit arenas. In librarianship, appropriate and efficient branding plays a vital role, as “strong brands increase customers’ trust of the invisible, enable them to better visualize and understand the intangible benefits of the services which very much depend upon the employees’ actions and attitudes because services brands are particularly different from those of physical good” (Chandratre & Chandratre, 2015, p. 172).

Potential ramifications of considering libraries a form of collaborative consumption

This work suggests that libraries can benefit from branding themselves as part of current collaborative consumption. This promotion can come as a top-down perspective, in which library administration can frame this messaging. Additionally, libraries can encourage their users to talk about and advocate the message of libraries as part of the sharing economy. This idea is aligned with Figuroa (2016), who states that people should be more vocal about the sharing happening in libraries. In either case, to define themselves as a significant part of collaborative consumption, libraries can emphasize the following elements.

Ease of use

Libraries should highlight the ease and flexibility of use in their products. Alternatively, if their resources and services are not easy to use, then libraries should work towards creating fluidity of use. Fluidity of use in libraries would mirror that of collaborative consumption, ensuring numerous and diverse points of entry to resources and services, as well as the removal of barriers. Additionally, place of delivery as a marketing component should be considered. Much library rhetoric already focuses on “delivering library resources, services and expertise at the point of need, in a manner that end-users want and understand” (Livingston, 2016, p. 20). Specialized points of need should be emphasized and celebrated—libraries that already do this should promote their fluidity of use, and those that do not must develop this capacity. A current library example of such fluidity of use is the *epl2go Literacy vans* at the *Edmonton Public Library* which are vans that bring “EPL programs and services beyond our branches” (<https://www.epl.ca/epl2go/>).

The experience

As in other PSS, libraries should emphasize the user experience alongside their tangible resources. This underscores the success factors of trust creation and the belief in the commons. Figuroa (2016) discusses that sharing economies perceive themselves as different from traditional library sharing because they create and accentuate an experience. In libraries, this means highlighting the creation of communities as part of the library experience and establishing a collaborative and trusting environment within this context. Open communication with the members of the community is necessary for libraries “to make their experience better, to reuse it to drive recommendations and suggestions and to better understand the network of sharing” (Figuroa, 2016, p. 22). It is also suggested that by encour-

aging communication and connections within a community, its members will also become advocates for the organization (Figueroa, 2016).

Access over ownership

From external and internal perspectives, libraries must emphasize access rather than ownership. In terms of outward facing action, libraries already emphasize this by providing access to resources and services. Libraries may want to reach out to groups who are already embracing access without ownership, but do not necessarily associate it with the library. A group to target could be those involved in the Little Free Libraries movement. As described by Schmidt and Hale (2017), this movement is an example of the non-profit industrial complex that corporatizes grassroots advocacy and can potentially discredit work done by libraries. However, Schmidt and Hale (2017) explore how libraries can use community-led approaches “to harness the enthusiasm of these self-described literacy warriors” (p. 13). Using collaboration consumption models to present the library to this group alongside community-led work can strengthen library advocacy by relating the work done by libraries to a similar frame that they are used to seeing.

This suggestion relates to a shift in strategic perspective and organizational culture. Shaughnessy (1991) notes that there is a gradual transition towards access and “while it is doubtful that the traditional ownership-based measures used by libraries will be dropped in the foreseeable future, it is quite likely that measures of access (both qualitative and quantitative) will be developed and used by libraries with increasing frequency” (p. 5). Examples of a commitment to access include library consortia, interlibrary loans and an investment in digital resources rather than owning as many physical items as possible. NEOS is an example of such a consortium, which includes “government, health, college and university libraries that cooperate to share library resources, technology, collections and people” (<https://www.neoslibraries.ca/welcome/what-is-neos/>).

Concerns and mitigation

Some elements of collaborative consumption raise concerns in librarianship. One such issue is privacy. It is possible that “the data-driven algorithms that drive a lot of sharing” (Figueroa, 2016, p. 22) are at odds with the core library values of intellectual freedom and privacy, which should not be compromised simply to fit the collaborative consumption models. Although data has always been collected in libraries, collaborative consumption models often use data to sell services or products to users.

Another area of professional concern is the propagation of collaborative consumption as an extension of the traditional market economy and the shift towards neoliberal thought. This concern is linked to the assumption that traditional business models that conform to neoliberalism are counterintuitive to the working of libraries, as explored at the beginning of this article. Some literature and ideologies pose that “sharing is so blurred with traditional marketplace exchanges as to be indistinguishable” (Price & Belk, 2016, p. 193). This “sharewashing,” as coined by Price and Belk (2016), is a context in which the marketplace promotes the concept of a sharing economy for marketing reasons, rather than actually supporting ideological underpinning of collaborative consumption. Subscribing to the idea that all sharing economies are traditional marketplace exchanges would simply present the same issues explored at the beginning of this paper in applying market-economic theory to libraries, circumventing any solutions that collaborative consumption may offer to libraries. However, present-

ing all instances of collaborative consumption as sharewashing ignores circumstances in the sharing economy in which the value is not assessed financially. Thus, librarianship should view these models as a disruptive force when it comes to marketplace economies, since it can represent the opposite of capitalism in encouraging the use and sharing of public goods.

These concerns should not be ignored, and they can be mitigated by using core library values as guidelines. However, this should be done at the organizational level for a greater understanding of other environment-specific concerns that may arise and have not yet been established due to lack of implementation of this idea.

Limitations

Due to the large gap in the subject area of applying contemporary collaborative consumption models to libraries, this study undertook a larger scale and broader perspective than originally intended. Furthermore, to the author's knowledge, there are no libraries who formally identify their work as part of the sharing economy, making concrete examples difficult to locate and examine in this article. Thus, it is hoped that this work provides context for future detailed research on similar subject matter. Additionally, this work only considers the theoretical position of the collaborative consumption models, and further studies should be conducted to examine the practical applications of these theories.

Areas for Future Study

The context and scope of this literature is very broad. Therefore, it is recommended that further analysis be performed on more detailed levels. Context-specific case studies are relevant for further development in particular library fields such as technology, library consortia, and assessment. Technology is an aspect of librarianship that is exceptionally well suited for the further analysis, considering its large role in collaborative consumption.

Library consortia are less obvious in the context of collaborative consumption but are notable areas in which libraries can apply collaborative consumption principles. Consortia emphasize access over ownership as they move towards sharing resources. Libraries have "a long history of working together throughout the continuum from cooperation to collaboration and have often turned to consortia as the structure for their shared activities" (Trimble et al., 2015, p. 333). Since library consortia "learn from best practices and experience elsewhere in the community" (Horava, 2013, p. 424), there is the potential to model their practices after shared economies. These models can provide new perspectives to challenges that library consortia currently face and bring insight on advocating for consortia within the library community.

The measurement of success is another area for further study. In the business literature, the concept of success is related to how an organization "creates value from its activities" (Pedersen & Netter, 2015, p. 260). In traditional business frameworks, this value is measured by profit and growth. However, from the holistic view of collaborative consumption, value is not as clear-cut, which is also the case for not-for-profit organizations such as libraries. Certain businesses that use collaborative consumption models, such as Uber, may have the goal of growth and profit, but this is not always the case. McArthur (2015) cited Couchsurfing, Landshare, and Freecycle as using collaborative consumption with no money changing hands and thus "explicitly eschew commercialism and economic exchange,

in line with ideals that are as yet not well understood” (p. 240). Growth may not always be the goal for the collaborative consumption models as it has the potential to limit consumption instead of encouraging endless increases.

These suggestions once again reinforce the belief that libraries can learn from collaborative consumption, but we should also consider how shared economies can learn from librarianship practices. Applying library and information frameworks, theories, and models to collaborative consumption may help this sector improve and evolve. Even in the case where libraries are viewed as prototypical PSS, a more in-depth exploration of success factors to be adopted by the businesses using a collaborative consumption model could be beneficial. Given the scope of this work, it was not possible to examine this reversed application.

Conclusion

This paper uncovers how libraries already fit into collaborative consumption models and the ramifications of considering libraries a form of collaborative consumption, which poses a new approach to applying business practices in librarianship. Current rhetoric explores the dissonance between business practices and library practices, but it is erroneous to view these two disciplines as polar opposites, or completely applicable to one another. Applying collaborative consumption—a disruptive business practice—to librarianship allows for integrative problem solving, in which there are more creative outcomes. These types of outcomes are not always desirable because they are complex and messy, but the challenges that libraries face are not simple and there is a need to develop more comprehensive and interdisciplinary ways of addressing these issues.

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