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9

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONTENTIOUS ACTION IN CHINA

Zixue Tai

Introduction

Social media have been spearheading the latest waves of network technology breakthroughs and innovations in the global society. In China, a variety of blossoming social networking sites have elevated grassroots participation to brand-new territories. As a result, the expanding social media space has engendered creative ways of mass collaboration and peer production, and it has ushered in new formations of digital activism through which dispersed individuals and organized groups coordinate efforts to contemplate, mobilize and organize variegated forms of contentious action.

This chapter offers a critical overview of the evolving field of social media activism in China. Situated in China's contemporary state–society relations and highly controlled information environment in the wake of decades of economic reform, the chapter starts with a discussion on the contextual factors that have shaped the field of contentious action in the country, followed by an analysis of the diverse patterns of social media activism in China today. It then goes into depth in examining the important dynamics and particular socio-cultural traits pertaining to social media activism in relation to contentious action from inception to mobilization to actualization.

Contentious action and mass protest in China: continuity and change

China lays claim to one of the most robust legacies of mass resistance, rebellion and revolution in the world from ancient to modern times (Perry 2001). In recent decades, fast-paced economic development in the reform era has accentuated diverse patterns of conflict and grievances, and has disentangled new dynamics in the landscape of popular contention and mass resistance. In particular, contentious activities ranging from environmental protection to property rights to labour relations have been on the rise since the 1990s with the deepening of economic reform and the continuous widening of disparity in terms of material benefits and wealth distribution among individuals in society.

The fertile ground for popular contention has transitioned China into a 'contentious authoritarianism' in which 'a strong authoritarian regime accommodates widespread and routinized collective protests' (Chen 2012: 189). Chen's penetrating analysis of social protest leads him to

identify three interrelated factors underpinning the surge of contentious activities in recent years. First, collective protests allow a venue for the ordinary people to lodge complaints and extract state responsiveness amidst the ‘contradictions and ambiguities’ embedded in the Chinese power structure. Second, economic reform has fundamentally reconfigured state–society relations, and has created divergent, sometimes competing interests among sectors and social groups. Third, protests are a tactical way to strengthen the bargaining power of certain constituents in maximizing gains through negotiating with state agents and interest groups.

The ability of the Chinese regime to reconsolidate itself in the face of rising challenges and hold on to power while maintaining ruling legitimacy is summarized in the perspective of ‘authoritarian resilience’ (Nathan 2003). A key aspect of this resilience is the establishment of channels of mass participation and appeal which permit citizens to pursue grievances and voice complaints without potential threat to the regime as a whole. Instead of destabilizing regime control, some (e.g. Lorentzen 2013) contend that regularizing protests, narrowly tailored and under circumstances that the central authorities can keep tabs on, actually provides a mechanism for the Chinese government to maintain political stability. In a polity in which reliable sources of information are not readily available about actions by local officials or discontent of individuals and organized groups, tolerating protests provides a viable monitoring device on both.

In their sweeping overview of popular contention in China since the early 1990s, Steinhardt and Wu (2016) pinpoint four defining characteristics encompassing the repertoire of collective action in the landscape of Chinese sociopolitical activism and contentious politics. First, most of the protests have been ‘cellular’, involving narrow constituencies linked with pre-existing social ties. Second, the mobilizing grievances tend to hinge on factors related to protesters’ immediate interests such as monetary compensation and restoration of property and residential rights. Third, victimhood-driven resistance is the norm, with the goal of participants confined to seeking compensation or retrospective justice for acts or harm that already occurred. Fourth, there is a noticeable absence of policy advocacy in most contentious activities. Since the mid-2000s, Steinhardt and Wu note that an emerging repertoire of environmental protest has been setting the new trend departing from these four patterns attracting large numbers of participants unknown to each other in pursuit of goals that revolve around public goods, policy concerns and symbolic values relevant to the community or even the country at large.

One significant factor that has shaped contentious actions in the new context is the rising public awareness and popular consciousness among the ordinary people about their rights and expanding repertoires of options for redress of grievances (Perry 2009; Li 2010). As a result, mounting acts of ‘rightful resistance’ have been noted in recent years, especially in China’s vast rural territories in which protesters invoke the rhetoric and normative language of the powerful in anchoring defiance and mobilizing allies to curb the exercise of power by respective authorities in direct contravention of their rights (O’Brien & Li 2006). In terms of logistics, the Chinese state is often perceived by boundary-pushing activists as sending mixed signals in setting the limits of participation: ‘Beyond some well-marked no-go zone, acts of advocacy are treated unpredictably, with suppression, tolerance, and endorsement all possibilities’ (Stern & O’Brien 2012: 188). This murkiness may incentivize individuals and groups with unconventional acts of protest in order to extract responsiveness from state agents. Moreover, government authorities are more likely to respond immediately to citizen demands manifested through collective contentious activities, or even the mere threat of staging them, as evidenced in the field experiment by Chen, Pan and Xu (2016).

Social stability is a centrepiece of the ideal-typical society the Chinese Communist Party preaches. Disruption of stability and social order, therefore, is a slap in the face of ruling authorities in the domain/region affected, from the central government to township bureaucrats.

Understandably, hand-in-hand with the relentless pursuit of economic growth is the obsession of the state with stability maintenance (Yang 2017). As Jonathan Benney (2016) demonstrates, *weiwen* (stability maintenance) has functioned as the de facto local-level conflict-resolution mechanism in China, especially when legal and political resources do not produce practical benefits to citizens. As a practice of social control, *weiwen*, of course, works the most effectively as a pre-emptive strategy to stop mass incidents and public protests from happening, or under other circumstances, to prevent them from getting out of control. On the other hand, grassroots activists who resort to collective action often strategically stage public acts of disruption in order to gain leverage in their bargaining power with *weiwen* officials.

Social media activism: China and beyond

Media have been afforded an indispensable role in academic and pragmatic deliberations of social/political activism across national contexts. As Meikle (2002) demonstrates, from culture jammers to dissident Indymedia to pioneer hacktivists, media activism takes variegated forms and shapes. In their explication of media activism via the lens of social movement theory, Carroll and Hackett (2006) identify three concentric circles. At the center are groups within or around the media industries whose affiliation and intimacy with the media establishment allows them the insight of the alienation, constraints and exploitation of the media system; they are also the most proficient in utilizing existing media sources to their advantage in advancing a particular cause. The second circle consists of subordinate groups whose interests may be sidelined by the media machinery and whose access to media is limited, but who are actively seeking rightful media representation. The outermost circle comprises more diffuse groups whose concern over and engagement with the media are tangential, and whose media-related motive is niche and narrow. These different groups vary in their possession of source resources, and differ drastically in their strategies of intervention.

One important hallmark to bear in mind in discussing media activism in China is the tightly controlled nature of the media apparatus. As a direct part of the marketization reform, the media have transitioned from the hitherto state-subsidized model in the pre-reform era to their current advertising-supported financing system. This is not to say, however, that the state has relinquished efforts to control the media. To a great extent, the media have to fulfill the dual role of serving the audience while succumbing to state propaganda mandates. As a result, while the media may perform tasks such as monitoring local officials and promoting information transparency, they are still most likely to stay away from controversial issues and contentious topics (Shirk 2011). With regard to the new media environment, China has been noted to have developed and implemented a multi-tiered and multifaceted networked surveillance system in targeting proscribed content in its vast online networks – aka the ‘Great Firewall of China’ (Tai 2015a). State regulations stipulate that all internet sites involved in any type of content publishing be licensed by designated state authorities and work in tandem with official censors in real-time monitoring of online activities.

It is no wonder that online communication becomes the target of government cleansing, considering its network size and volume of content. The latest report by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) reveals, as of December 2016, China’s internet users reached 731 million, 695 million of which surf the net via their smart phones (CNNIC 2017). Social media use is led by three types of applications: WeChat and Qzone are regularly used by 85.8 per cent and 67.8 per cent of Chinese netizens respectively, while Sina Weibo (a micro-blogging service) is accessed routinely by 37.1 per cent of the online population. This aligns well with the overall observation I made of the Chinese virtual culture through comparative

analysis of longitudinal surveys of internet users in different national settings, which points to an unmistakable pattern of proclivity among Chinese netizens to contribute to and rely on a variety of User-Generated Content (UGC) (Tai 2006). I attribute this deviation to the closely controlled nature of the Chinese information environment in which content propagated by the state media (and often deemed boring by average users) pervades online space, and steers netizens away to popular venues of peer production.

Explosive developments in social media platforms and technologies in the past decade have consolidated this overall pattern of user-centered information production and consumption. This is best illustrated by the recent overnight rise of a particular type of social media platform called 自媒体, meaning 'Self-made Media' or 'We-Media' in Chinese, as a purposeful designation vis-à-vis the mainstream, state-orchestrated media. Many of these We-Media platforms rely on celebrity-type anchors in branding their niche, original content and programmes, and have garnered a humongous base of zealous followers. The ultra-popularization of these services makes them the easy target of state regulation. On 2 May 2017, the State Internet Information Center – the top-most official agency in setting the rules of online information control – announced the Provisions on the Management of Internet Search Services, a complete overhaul of a government directive promulgated in 2005 targeting online information publishing (http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-05/02/c_1120902760.htm). The Provisions, which became effective on 1 June 2017, detail rules on the qualifications, licensing and boundaries of content publishing for all online entities in China. It comes as no surprise that one focal domain of sanitizing is social media. Immediately following the enforcement of the ordinance, hundreds of We-Media outlets published via WeChat and Weibo accounts were terminated for violations such as 'dissipating low taste,' 'propagating vulgarity' and 'breaking legal statutes' (*International Financial News* 2017, *Zhenzhou Daily* 2017). This latest development serves as a reminder that the Sword of Damocles can fall on practitioners of We-Media at the mercy of state censors at any time if they veer into the unbeaten path.

This does not mean, of course, that the state is always effective in staying on top of the game of networked information control. The distributed, participatory and free-wheeling nature of internetworked communication creates an environment in which variegated forms of digital insurgencies and popular resistance by different constituents and social groups may exist, survive and occasionally burst. As a particular form of grassroots activism on social media in recent years, dispersed individuals in China have been able to masterfully coordinate, collaborate and orchestrate collective action on China's blossoming social media platforms in uncovering, exposing and publicizing outrageous wrongdoings and transgressions committed by government officials and targeted individuals. Through doing this, grassroots activists have achieved a certain level of success in extracting timely government responses in punishing selective corrupt officials and redressing instances of social, economic, environmental and political injustice as brought to light on social media (Tai 2015b).

Sociopolitical activism takes on many forms and shapes. In explicating the term 'activism,' Joss Hands (2011) identifies three distinct elements in terms of their opposition to prevailing power: dissent, resistance and rebellion. Dissent (or protest) 'is the expression of dissatisfaction with a state of affairs' while resistance 'suggests a more active and stubborn approach' and takes place 'when acts readily cross the boundary into defiance of authority or perceived injustice' (2011: 4). Rebellion, on the other hand, moves beyond the above two to embody necessary 'collective and cooperative' actions towards a particular goal line. In direct relevance to the case of China, as Hands (2011: 5) points out, dissent 'in an authoritarian society can be resistance when the act of speech itself becomes a direct refusal of power'.

In deliberating on internet activist campaigns, Graham Meikle (2010) pinpoints four dimensions of activism: intercreative texts, intercreative tactics, intercreative strategies and intercreative

networks. Intercreative texts involve reworking or re-imagining existing media texts or creating new texts to effect social change; intercreative tactics develop new variations on established tactics and subvert existing media formats; interactive strategies employ the creation of brand-new alternative media spaces for the expression of dissonant perspectives; and intercreative networks focus on mobilizing resources through collaborative deployment of information networks. What makes this line of scholarship interesting as well as challenging is that the dynamics vary substantially with the specific conditions of the national context and they constantly change to adapt to an ever-evolving technological environment.

In their discussion of social activism in China, Ching Kwan Lee and You-tien Hsing (2010) propose a spectrum of politics in three strands – namely, the politics of (re)distribution, recognition and representation – based on the goals and the basis of formation of the collective social actors. The politics of (re)distribution ‘entails struggles and claims for material interests or between social groups and state actors that spring from their common or differential class locations’ (2010: 3). The politics of recognition is concerned with ‘the discovery and articulation of needs previously denied or ignored, especially the demand for social recognition of certain groups’ moral status, political position and identity’ (2010: 4). The third strand, the politics of representation, is related to the expression of ideas and symbols, or ‘symbolic contestations’.

With specific regard to online activism, Guobin Yang (2009) makes the distinction among four types of popular contention: cultural, social, political and nationalistic. Cultural activism expresses concern over values, morality, lifestyles and identities; social activism, on the other hand, focuses on issues such as corruption, environmental protection and the rights of disenfranchised groups. Political activism touches upon topics regarding how the country is or should be governed; online nationalism often permeates China’s internet, especially during particular moments of dispute with other countries.

Organizing dynamics and mobilizing structures

In our research on the use of QQ groups in organizing collective action from self-organizing travel tours to well-planned property activists (Tai & Liu 2016), we noted a clear pattern of collaborative and participatory dynamics from contemplation to actualization:

- 1 share and distribute information to relevant individuals and constituencies;
- 2 deliberate and debate on possible courses of action and consequences of action/inaction;
- 3 strategize and call for action (e.g. sit-ins, protests and other public acts);
- 4 engage in and coordinate collective action.

As social networks become increasingly embedded in routines of daily life, social media has empowered grassroots involvement by diversifying and expanding the repertoire of collection action. In what follows, we discuss how social media has enabled digital action networks and revolutionized organizing capabilities in terms of shared awareness, (re)activating potent and existing social connections and mobilization tactics.

Sharing is the linchpin of social media, and digital activism naturally starts with a communal sense of ‘shared awareness’, which is defined by Clay Shirky (2011: 35–36) as ‘the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too’. This shared awareness starts with the communication of information, but it moves beyond simply informational sharing. This condition of shared awareness, Shirky (2011: 36) points out, leads to the so-called ‘dictator’s dilemma’ in that ‘a state accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech finds itself called to account for anomalies of its view of events and

the public's'. This finds echo in Zuckerman's (2015: 132) 'Cute Cats Theory' of digital activism, which argues that 'resilience to censorship may be a less important benefit than the ability to leverage participation, remix and humor to spread activist content to wider audiences'. In other words, activist content that permeates apps on social media works more effectively in inducing change than a few isolated tools (which tend to be the target of censorship and control in China). Individual users, once exposed to the technology, often find creative ways to get the message out and accomplish what they intend on social media. A related idea is 'speech cascade,' which argues that 'public understanding of what constitutes impermissible speech may change abruptly, sparking bandwagons of uncensored speech' (Druzin & Li 2016: 369). As Druzin and Li demonstrate, structural change in the social conditions in the country allow for the potential for China's cyber-censorship regime to unexpectedly collapse alongside spontaneous eruption of open online speech. The accumulation of 'mass incidents' – so called due to their involvement of mass individuals under certain circumstances of social protest – in China over the years offers testimonial to this claim.

Resource mobilization lies at the center of classic social movement theory (Tilly 1978). In his deliberation on the relational aspects of political contention, Tilly refines the core concept of *catnets* by Harrison White (1965) (commonly understood as any set of individuals comprising both a *category* and a *network*) and assigns a central role in the mobilization process. He argues that collective action only materializes to the extent that categorical traits work in tandem with specific relational structures; these catnets convert individual attributes into collective properties and create necessary resources to sustain collective action (Tilly 1978). Traditionally, one of the biggest challenges for the underprivileged and the resource-poor to organize collective action has been the lack of efficient and effective means of mobilization. This, however, has dramatically changed with the mass diffusion of various forms of social media. It is particularly relevant for China, where mobilization resources had been mostly aggregated to the state power apparatus prior to the arrival of the network era.

While the internet has been proclaimed as an empowering tool for media activism (Meikle 2002), and activist-produced information has been made available at an unprecedented scale online, there are still important constraints and barriers with online distribution of activists-centred messages. For one thing, it is still a monumental task to compete with the well-funded and all-pervasive commercial media in churning out and disseminating information to the mass audience. In the case of China, an added barricade for activist-generated information is the state regulation that all information producers must be licensed by the state in order to propagate original information onto the web. As a result, user-generated content in China has been largely limited to BBS-type forums, for which sanctioned platform providers are relegated the responsibility of monitoring and cleansing by following the directives of state censors (Tai 2015a). Social media, however, thrives almost exclusively on mass users, and its culture and technological implementation shift the dynamics of information production and consumption to favour the users.

Our interviews of QQ group users (Tai & Liu 2016) illustrate the power and the draw of soft information via social media to individual users. Although identical information may often be available through online searches or other web-based sources, the circulation of content – even when it is obtained through third-party resources – adds a particular context and human perspective to the otherwise hard information. On prominent social media platforms such as Weibo, QQ or WeChat, it is typical that individuals who pass on third-party information often add their own interpretations, perspectives and comments alongside the repackaged content, which adds a unique appeal for users when reading the messages. The added sense of authenticity, personalization and trust makes social media a special venue for information sharing. Besides repackaging

of existing information, social media is also a viable form of distributing highly targeted original messages in the context of collective action, our research reveals, especially with regard to social media groups exclusively established in organizing group actions: insiders' views, backchannel updates, and personal experiences are all well received in these groups.

In their conception of 'the Logic of Connective Action', Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 753) view digital media as core organizing agents through enabling 'the self-motivated (though not necessarily self-centered) sharing of already internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources with networks of others'. The co-production of personalized expression on social media, of course, goes beyond the sharing of content. What it cultivates is an on-going, regenerative process of conversation – a type of everyday discursive articulation that resembles what James Scott (1990) calls 'hidden transcript'. This is a particular way for the subordinate to stage their 'disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance' against domination and the hegemonic discourses as exerted in the public transcript, which translates into official doctrines and state-approved rhetorical invocations on China's networked space. As a specific example, Gleiss's analysis of Weibo posts by Love Save Pneumoconiosis (LSP) activists points to prevalent strategies of contestation: first, the activists articulate alternative discourses that constitute subtle forms of critical challenges to the official discourse; second, activists employ polyphonic expressions to (de)politicize their articulations and legitimize the undertaking of the organization.

Chinese netizens have invented ingenious ways to encode counter-hegemonic discourses and dissenting voices in linguistic wordplays and graphic images in order to bypass state censors and yet convey subtle messages to fellow users (Yang 2016). Over the years, the repertoire of common practices includes creative and ironic reappropriation of official language in everyday speech practices both on- and offline to subvert official rhetoric and state propaganda (Nordin & Richaud 2014), online satire by employing easily identifiable symbols of resistance to challenge the policies or malpractices of the Chinese state (Lee 2016), and the prolific culture of *e-gao* (恶搞) which embeds spoof videos and 'narrative dissidence' in a special type of trickster discourse in the construction of counter-official memory in the average users (Li 2016).

Framing processes are considered an important part of collective action in the network era (Garrett 2006). Proliferation of social networking sites means that individual users and groups can offer their competing perspectives, personal action frames and slogans that may resonate among targeted individuals and trigger participation. Tilly (2004: 3–4) mentions three elements that define the success and failure of social movements: a campaign (sustained, public claims-making efforts); social movement repertoire (ensemble of variable public performances); and participants' concerted public representation of WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment) on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies. In relevance to China's rights defense movement in recent years, Biao Teng (2012), a famed activist and lawyer for defending citizen rights, noted a clear pattern and strategy by organized civilian groups in inventing and propagating WUNC frames on social media and offline in organizing and coordinating protest activities. Pu and Scanlan (2012) found that concise framing is essential in mobilizing support for successful collective action by aggrieved farmers whose land was expropriated by the local government for economic development.

One particular type of digital activism in China is the Human Flesh Search (HFS) engine, which involves mass collaboration in tracking down the identity of individuals caught in online controversies (Tai 2016). Individuals who are exposed in online acts of public wrath and outrageous transgressions instantaneously make themselves targets of collective denunciation, and dispersed individuals self-mobilize to search, collect, process and share what is

often private information in hunting down and punishing individual violators. Gao (2016) conceives this as a special type of political protest, because an HFS tirade often is directed at official misconduct.

In Chinese culture, *guanxi*, or the network of interpersonal connections, carries special weight in one's social life. The role of personal ties has assumed a more prominent role due to the steady decline in social trust in Chinese society in the past decades, leading 'one to trust only these individuals in one's personal networks' (Yan 2009: 286). Jun Liu's research on the use of mobile devices and personal ties for mobilizing protests in China shows that 'The involvement of *guanxi* as the mobilizing agent, and precisely, a strong sense of moral duty and reciprocal obligation from *guanxi*, acted as the driving force for both recruitment and participation in protests' (Liu 2017: 9). Because social media builds primarily on pre-existing social networks, it also is an effective tool to activate personal ties in facilitating recruitment and engagement in contentious action. On the other hand, social ties such as relatives, friends and native-place connections may also be used by local authorities to practice relational suppression as a form of control in demobilizing and defusing contention (Deng & O'Brien 2013).

Classic theory on social movements places significant emphasis on the role of formal organizations and clearly identifiable leadership in the mobilizing process (Tilly 1978). The social media culture, however, introduces drastically different dynamics. As Gerbaudo (2012) has demonstrated through his research on the Arab Spring movement, protest mobilization in the era of social media has become horizontal, decentralized, fluid, self-nurturing and instantaneous. The distributed nature of networked activism allows for 'organizing without organizations' (Shirky 2008), which comes as a blessing for contentious action in China, because the traditional strategy by the state is to go after identifiable leaders and organizations to stop mass movements.

This is not to suggest that social media activism no longer needs or benefits from leadership. Rather, it means that leadership can be rendered anonymous – unidentifiable, faceless and not clearly connected to any individuals. This is summarized aptly by Poell *et al.* (2016: 1009; original emphasis): 'Facilitated by social media, this mode of leadership revolves around *inviting, connecting, steering, and stimulating*, rather than *directing, commanding, and proclaiming*.' This finds confirmation in our research on the use of QQ groups for mobilizing collective action in China (Tai & Liu 2016). Our extensive in-depth interviews of activists indicate a multilayered organization mechanism. Social media groups focusing on collective action typically enforce a stringent certification process in formation, as individuals who intend to join have to show proof of identity and relevance to the mission of the contention, and those who are deemed extraneous or unlikely to participate are excluded. Moreover, members in the group are monitored for their contribution to group conversations, and are constantly reminded to stay on track in the type of content they disseminate. Violators face the risk of being expelled from the group. This is necessitated by the constant practice of government authorities and other targets of grievances (e.g. real estate developers) in trying to infiltrate into contentious activities, especially in the planning stage, in order to defuse or derail them. Another interesting discovery in our findings is that group leaders often resort to a more exclusive, smaller group reserved for reaching consensus on strategizing among core activists, and will then turn to the larger social groups for mobilization and organization.

Conclusion

Despite its sustained efforts to brand the country as a harmonious society, China's high-capacity authoritarian regime has not eliminated or even reduced popular contention and

organized protest. Further economic activities in the reform era have unleashed conditions for variegated forms of conflict and contestation. Lack of established institutional and legal recourses to address grievances and resentment has turned the country into a fertile land of collective action by diverse interest groups and organized entities. Amidst rising public awareness and popular consciousness about individual rights and the expanding repertoire of options is the quick routinization of social media tools in the everyday communication of Chinese citizens.

Due to the highly controlled conventional media environment, the distributed and peer-to-peer nature of social media technology has empowered grassroots communication and turned it into a viable venue in planning, coordinating and staging collective action. Besides expanding access to brand-new types of user-produced information, the embedding of social networking applications into routine life cultivates a shared awareness among the vast populace in understanding not only what information is available, but also what can be done as individual members work together. While the government has intensified its efforts in monitoring and censoring networked communication, and it has been largely successful in blocking individual sites and eradicating isolated tools, it is much harder for the regime to control the lifestyle or mentality induced by widespread social media use in society in the wake of permeation of activist messages and dissenting information on social media.

Social media activates relations of catnets (that is, categories of people manifested in different networks), and has transformed ways to communicate, organize and coordinate collective action. This is particularly so in China, where interpersonal networks and personal connections have assumed prominent roles in social life. Individuals are more likely to respond to calls of contentious action via social media, and they are more likely to contribute to causes advocated through trusted entities from social networking groups. As we have seen on numerous occasions in recent years, creative use of social media has introduced new dynamics into the conception and mobilization of contentious action. In this regard, the continuous development of social media into new terrains gives us hope for more optimism in the years to come.

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