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SCANDAL MINING AND
SOCIALLY MEDIATED
VISIBILITY

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Aspiring and actual public figures make use of social media to author uncivil and vitriolic statements. While this is hardly a new practice, these statements may be unearthed at a later stage, for example, in the context of an election campaign. These discoveries appear to have significant implications for our understanding of scandal, notably through a potential democratisation of political interventions. This appears to be a by-product of the recent emergence and uptake of digital devices, which enable a more pervasive monitoring of public and private spaces, along with prominent digital platforms that trouble such dichotomies. Political candidates become an easy target when anyone can comb through their Twitter profiles for objectionable content. At the same time, established political and media figures adapt to these conditions and develop both reactive and proactive strategies in response to online scrutiny and denunciations.

This chapter considers scandal mining as an emerging practice that is shaped by longstanding forms of political denunciation, and in turn shapes potentially democratised forms of scrutiny and accountability. Drawing from previous research on this topic (Trottier 2017a), I begin with a critical review of academic literature on political scandals, notably as they relate to mediated visibility. Particular attention is devoted to the role of digital media technologies in particular. I then provide an overview of the 2015 federal election in Canada as a pivotal moment in scandal mining practices. This election saw nearly 40 candidates from four major parties becoming compromised as a result of content they either authored or shared online. In light of current concern with political scandal, I conclude by considering directions for future scholarship, while attempting to anticipate what the mediated political and electoral landscape will resemble in the coming years.

Defining political scandal

Earlier literature on political scandal provides an indication of how personal incidents (of varying degrees of severity) are expressed in news media. Thompson (2008) identifies five features of scandal (13–14): (1) transgressions of certain norms or values that (2) were meant to remain concealed, but become known to others, who (3) disapprove of these transgressions, and (4) publicly express this disapproval, and (5) may damage the reputation of those involved. First, the transgression itself may be categorised in terms of “financial corruption, political corruption, personal scandals, and international scandals” (Basinger and Rottinghaus 2012, 218). We may
anticipate that the opening up of candidates’ lives via social platforms affords a preponderance for personal scandal, if only because one struggles to imagine evidence of financial and political corruption manifest through a candidate’s public posts. Also, we may consider “talk scandals” as an additional category of speech acts that transgress discursive norms about “how one should behave in the public sphere” (Ekström and Johansson 2008, 64). Not only can such utterances be situated within a social media platform at their conception, but they can easily circulate through a broader digital media landscape. Examples include transgressive public statements, but also instances where “back-stage utterances” are rendered public. Speech acts contained on (and circulated through) social media platforms further complicate distinctions between front and back stage (Goffman 1959; Trottier 2013), as statements presumed to be fit for circulation in the interpretation of a context-specific public (such as the fellow members of a regional or hobby-based social media group) may still provoke offence and recourse if they circulate to a broader public (such as through coverage by a national broadcaster or newspaper).

Second, the process of concealment and discovery is “often characterised by a drama of concealment and disclosure” (Thompson 2008, 18). On first pass, this drama may be greatly diminished in the case of digital media scandals, when offending acts are posted on public profiles. Yet the retroactive management of online content (deleting posts; augmenting privacy settings) may nevertheless constitute a “second order transgression” (ibid., 17), which can potentially overshadow the original offence.

Third, discovery without disapproval by some kind of audience will not constitute a scandal. In considering the role of digital media, revelation and disapproval followed by silence (or online chatter that fails to reach an indeterminate threshold) may not suffice either. Scandal is partly enacted by “opprobrious discourse” (ibid., 20), including condemnation, reproach and rebukes. Thompson comments that the intensity and perhaps also the veracity of such morality-based discourse are lessened in contemporary media culture, and may instead serve partisan or policy ends. Nevertheless, the response must be uttered “in a way that it can be heard by a plurality of others” (ibid., 21) in order to produce “consistent views and widespread anger among the audience” (Kepplinger et al. 2012, 659). With digital media tools “individuals can express opprobrium in ways which, by virtue of the medium itself, endow the expressions with the status of public speech-acts” (ibid.). Yet we can consider the amount of circulation or plurality necessary for such speech-acts to trigger scandal. If a social media-based talk scandal in the 2015 election was discovered and circulated by a blog with a few thousand readers, but not recirculated by the national broadcaster or major newspapers, can it be considered as scandalous?

Finally, damaged or depleted reputation is neither necessary nor inevitable, but the risk of it is. While this has been the end state for many twentieth-century scandals, the magnitude of this depletion (for the individual candidate as well as the political party and its leader) may be lessened depending on the status of the political actor targeted by scandal mining. Beyond individual or party reputation, we can consider scandal’s broader impact on “the perceived boundaries of public institutions, either reinforcing or blurring traditional lines of demarcation between the political class, the media, the judiciary and corporate interests” (Fieschi and Heywood 2004, 290).

Mediated visibility as constructed and contested

In explaining a growing prevalence of political scandal, Thompson (2008, 108) provides three attributions. First, an increased visibility of political actors produces vulnerabilities for candidates. Media publicity is a requirement for political life, while simultaneously binding aspiring politicians to other actors and unanticipated and unmanageable circuits of information exchange.
Second, changes in technologies of communication and surveillance result in supposedly private conversations that “may unexpectedly acquire a public character” (ibid., 109). These features are addressed in further detail below. Third, we can consider a changing culture of investigative journalism. To this we may specifically consider actors that are placed at the margins of conventional journalism, such as online semi-professionalised or crowd-sourced venues. This is considered in the following section.

Visibility stands as a central condition (Lyon 2002) and category (Brighenti 2007) for the social sciences. Recognising this importance implies a need to appreciate the deliberate effort taken to produce and acknowledge social visibility. In the context of political scandal, it is not simply a matter of discrediting details being revealed (or leaked). In addition to discrediting content, scandal depends on the media and the public, who must accept the event as both having occurred and being offensive. In pointing to perceived shortcomings in the literature, Welch addresses an over-emphasis on the determinant nature of the moment of exposure, at the expense of understanding “the prolonged and contested process through which that exposure occurs and is made significant” (2007, 182). Focusing on exemplary twentieth-century American cases such as Watergate and the Clinton–Lewinsky affair, he advocates for an anti-essentialist understanding of political scandal “characterized not by exposure but by the political construction of exposure” (ibid., 187). In contrast to the epistemologically simplistic “smoking gun” metaphor, the notion of plausible deniability “expresses its politicized complexity” (ibid., 188). While the construction and management of scandal warrants greater scrutiny, we may presume that in the case of lesser political figures (including inexperienced candidates in unfavourable ridings), established parties prefer the strategy of removing disgraced candidates, rather than denying the scandalous nature of social media postings. Yet treating mediated visibility as “always shaped by a broader set of cultural assumptions and frameworks” (Thompson 2005, 36) supports an understanding of scandal that is necessarily co-construction by political, journalistic and other mediated actors and contexts. The recent focus on social media gaffes further complicates this co-construction, as platforms where the offending act is authored and circulated are prominently used in a range of personal and professional contexts.

Indeed, social media are often framed as indispensable tools for politicians in elections, notably in order to reach and mobilise younger voters (Aldrich et al. 2016). Yet recent scholarship also suggests that politicians generally make use of platforms like Facebook and Twitter for “the more familiar and conventional logic of [a] one-way flow” of party approved content (Ross et al. 2015, 266), and that those who actively make use of these platforms tend to hold a kind of political “underdog” status as they are “younger, in opposition and out of the political lime-light” (Larsson and Kalsnes 2014, 653). This suggests a generalised reluctance among established political actors to go beyond a conservative and calculated presence on these platforms. Under these circumstances, scandalous speech acts may play a greater role in shaping public understandings of political engagements online. Not only do citizens come to expect and seek out available content linked to politicians, but scandalous revelations may be found on accounts also used for strategic ends by candidates, notably those bearing an “underdog” or “nobody” status.

The openly available and easily recirculated nature of social media content appears to dampen the possibility of political actors engaging in denial and/or concealment of scandalising content. In providing a more rigorous account of candidate reactions to these discoveries, it is possible that they invoke privacy and/or unsanctioned visibility in defending their reputation (and delegitimising the revelations). As such, these revelations and the kinds of appeals to privacy that are (not) made speak to the negotiated status of such personal or political data. And while citizens may be in a position to locate and remediate incriminating content from political actors, these conditions of visibility may also shape how their own online visibilities are understood and negotiated.
A shifting news media landscape?

The press are typically understood as fulfilling multiple roles in the construction of political scandal. These include setting “a stage for the denouncer to suggest scandal”, further legitimating the proposed scandal by “react[ing] to make the pattern evolve from the stage of suggesting scandal to a fully developed one”, and finally serving “as a proxy—or more formally speaking, as a functional equivalent—for the public in scandal communication” (Esser and Hartung 2004, 1047–1048). Formal media outlets are thus understood as not only providing the conditions for an initial revelation, but also for the subsequent denouncement and deliberation. Such an emphasis on scandal may serve to trivialise popular understandings of the political process (Fieschi and Heywood 2004, 299), although politicians themselves may exploit “the media’s shift to a more personalised content” as a means “to bypass more conventional party-based channels of communication with the electorate” (ibid., 300).

Whereas potentially scandalous information was previously withheld and brokered by specific gatekeepers, Williams and Delli Carpini describe the contemporary digital media landscape as “providing virtually unlimited sources of political information (although these sources do not provide anything like an unlimited number of perspectives)” that “undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes: If there are no gates, there can be no gatekeepers” (2004, 1208). Digital media tools can be broadly understood as enabling greater citizen engagement, notably in the manifestation of citizen journalism as well as user-led campaigns (Tufekci and Wilson 2012). They also allow citizens to identify and circulate potentially discrediting information about political actors. Indeed, recent scholarship considers how news media practices can adapt to user-led digital media activity. Chadwick refers to the emergence of “nonelite participants” who “now interact exclusively online in order to advance or contest specific news frames or even entire stories” (2011, 8). The fact that social media platforms in particular are both a source of scandalous data as well as spaces to publicise further this content supports the view that coverage of scandal “takes place in public or semipublic online environments” (ibid.). Yet empirical studies suggest that “viral” spikes in social media viewership of a scandalous event depend on coverage from mass media venues (Toepfl 2011). News may “break first online” and then be picked up, circulated and even validated by the press (Chadwick 2011, 5). The degree to which political events are rendered meaningful and visible nevertheless continues to depend on press organisations.

The role that digital media might play in the propagation of scandal needs to be understood more in terms of how these platforms “function in tandem with other spheres of traditional mass media rather than as isolated forms of communication” (ibid., 1315). It is necessary to examine the interactions between digital media and other media spheres as co-constitutive of scandal. Individuals engaged in scandal mining may depend on conventional media channels in order to reach a sufficient audience, but also for the designation of a mediated act as scandalous. For this reason, cases that are reported online and not picked up by broadsheets and major broadcasters are especially illustrative of this mutual co-construction of scandal. Yet even if the role of the citizen journalist in reporting scandal is limited and dependent upon more established media channels, this marks a departure from previous understandings of the public as the mere recipient of the scandalous event (especially if mass media served as a more effective proxy for the public than members of the public themselves). This fits an understanding of citizens as an audience “who have had their fill of scandalous disclosures” (Thompson 2008, 88), contributing both to a weariness towards the media, as well as a generalised distrust of politics. While digital media may offer a novel engagement to mitigate these effects, they are also characterised by a so-called engagement economy (McGonigal 2008) whereby user input is itself a scarce and fleeting
resource. Potentially, engaging through social media platforms enables citizens to mobilise fellow citizens, for example, in the context of discrediting a political candidate. Yet this potential does not obviate the need for scandal to flow through conventional media channels.

**Scandal mining in the context of the 2015 Canadian federal election**

The 2015 Canadian federal election was first announced on Sunday, 2 August. With the election date set for 19 October, the 78-day campaign period would be the longest in recent history, and longer than the previous two federal elections combined. Already prior to the election call, three federal candidates were identified as a result of political missteps. Béatrice Zako from the NDP resigned in June after being identified as favouring Quebec independence on another (provincial) party website, while the Liberal’s Ray Fox and the Conservative party’s Julian DiBattista had published offensive content of their Facebook profile and blog, respectively. In the week following the election call, three candidates from the Liberal and Conservative parties were targeted by Montreal based newspapers *La Presse* and the *Journal de Montreal*, along with political analyst Jean Lapierre. In the following weeks, unaffiliated blogger Robert Jago and political content start-up *True North Times* (TNT) were collectively responsible for the discovery and reporting of at least 15 cases on Facebook and Twitter, but also YouTube, Tumblr as well as personal blogs and comments posted on news websites. These actors stood alongside more conventional news media such as the national broadcaster (CBC), prominent newspapers such as the *Globe* and *Mail* and the *Toronto Star*, as well as online news venues like *Huffington Post Canada*. While the latter did first identify some candidate missteps, such as Conservative candidate Jerry Bance’s infamous urination into a client’s coffee cup, they also provided Jago and TNT with greater circulation by reporting their discoveries.

During the 11-week campaign a constellation of actors, including unaffiliated or covertly affiliated individuals and organisations as well as journalists and political professionals, rendered candidate missteps visible. The line separating journalistic and independent actors from major party campaigns is not evident. The website MeetTheNDP.ca took aim at the official opposition, and circulated potentially controversial perspectives expressed online. While nominally similar to sites like Conservatives of FB, a Facebook page that targets semi-anonymised Facebook users and circulates their views, MeetTheNDP was in fact registered to the Conservative party. Such sites indicate that scandal mining marks a convergence of established party attack advertisement strategies and broader online campaigns of public shaming through recirculation.

In terms of alleged offences, candidates like the Bloc Québécois’s Chantal St-Onge had expressed support for extremist groups like Pegida, while others like the Conservative’s Blair Dale and Gordon Giesbrecht expressed controversial views about abortion. Interestingly, the TNT identified Liberal Kimberley Love’s anti-gun rhetoric as potentially incompatible with her rural Ontario constituents, and NDP candidate Ethan Rabidoux’s pro-gun sentiment as incompatible with his party. Thus, the expression of scandal seems based on any available political incompatibility, rather than from a personally rooted sense of moral offence. Yet the above examples of political incompatibility were overshadowed by cases of sexist, racist, xenophobic and generally vitriolic sentiment, which made up a significant part of the documented offences. Of the 39 candidates who were targeted online, 18 resigned or were removed by their party (along with Conservative board member Sue MacDonell), while the other half apologised, transferred blame to other members of staff, or simply did not acknowledge the revelation. When looking at the candidates who were targeted, only three (Buddy Ford, Nicola Di Iorio and Jerry Bance) did not involve content which those candidates previously posted on either
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social media, comments sections in online news sources, or other websites. Social media features predominantly in the public expression of political scandal, as for both party-affiliated and autonomous actors it is a platform to express and announce it, but also the platform where the gaffe occurs. As Facebook and other platforms become sites for user-led production and circulation of content, these actors begin to maintain assumptions about candidates: that they have some kind of public presence on social platforms (especially as political hopefuls), and that this presence contains incriminating statements.

Of the 39 targeted candidates, only one was an incumbent: NDP Pat Martin, whose offending utterances occurred at a public forum. Likewise, only three of 39 candidates were elected. As social media allow for a greater focus on non-political life of political figures (including those at the margins), unelected candidates become more visible and legible in election media. As it becomes taken for granted that all candidates are present on digital media (for electoral as well as in other professional and personal capacities), marginal political party members may have a greater bearing on the success of their parties. Candidates identified in scandal mining often were based in ridings where the party had little historic evidence of former success, such as Liberals in Calgary and Conservatives in Toronto. These non-incumbents could be assumed to be comparatively inexperienced in public political communications, and for strategic reasons not as carefully vetted by their party. Yet the previous election also demonstrated that these ridings’ predictability was not assured, particularly as when the NDP’s electoral gains in Quebec placed a party-affiliated type of “political nobody” into the public eye.

The content used to scandalise political actors in the 2015 elections dates as far back as 2005. While political strategists may look back at 2015 as a formative moment in social media liabilities, social media platforms, blogs and comments sections on news websites were by no means a novelty at that point. Political parties and prominent candidates employed digital media strategists. And while lesser candidates surely have forward-looking strategies for social media that are to some degree directed centrally by party strategy, they may still have to cope with online content they posted previously. We can presume that many candidates proactively remove content, though these strategies may fail to evade automated caches and vigilant (manual) screencapping, often by unaffiliated individuals and self-styled “political nobodies”.

We may consider the origins and motivations of this particular category of political nobody. Though unaffiliated with influential media outlets (or political parties), they use digital media to discover and announce scandal, while relying on the national broadcaster and major newspapers’ reporting and confirmation of these scandals when their discoveries are picked up on these venues. Robert Jago is a Montreal-based blogger who cites several reasons—including electoral reform, the fair elections act and anti-terrorism measures—as justification to target a particular type of Conservative candidate: one with little public visibility standing in tactically important ridings. True North Times is a website managed by a group that is partly inspired by Jago’s efforts yet employs more of a start-up framework in expressing its purpose and structure. They claim to produce media content “designed to engage the demographics that have a huge potential impact but are plagued by apathy”. Although they may stand outside of conventional political parties and mass media outlets, their political experience and organisational structure is not fully captured in the term “political nobody”. Likewise, Liberal candidate Ala Buzreba’s offensive tweets were discovered by Sheila Gunn Reid, currently the “Alberta Bureau Chief” of TheRebel, an online platform run by former Sun News Network host Ezra Levant. Online platforms like Press Progress also contribute to scandal mining, notably through the identification of Conservative candidate Marilyn Gladu’s anti-Muslim rhetoric on Facebook. Yet this particular outlet has explicit links to progressive think tank the Broadbent Institute (founded by former NDP leader Ed Broadbent), and as such do not share the same
kind of non-professionalised designation. Other cases may be linked to less prominent actors who remain unnamed in press coverage. Low-level scandal can also be triggered by real-time activity on digital media, for example when Chantal St-Onge expressed support for Pegida on Facebook nearly seven weeks into the campaign. In this case scandal is framed as being brought about in direct response to the candidate’s online act, and the process of seeking offensive content is greatly downplayed.

While digital media platforms are thus framed as a resource that can be extracted for political and or media gains (through the visibility of missteps), the 2015 election also indicated some limitations to the kind of visibility that can be constructed. First, as discussed previously, candidates will remove incriminating content, either pre-emptively before a discovery, or shortly after it is announced or covered in the media. Such tactics mirror earlier denial and concealment moves by political actors in the grips of a scandal. What is more striking is that those involved in the extraction and circulation of scandalous content also have an ephemeral presence online. At the time of writing, neither Jago’s website (Some Random Political Blog) or Twitter account contains any substantial evidence of the revelations made during the 2015 election campaign. In these cases, the process of making scandals visible is itself no longer visible. Such findings are in line with a generalised strategic use of mediated visibility (Trottier 2017b) whereby any evidence of a mediated campaign is itself removed. They also problematise a claim by Thompson that political scandals “are unlikely to rely solely or heavily on relatively ephemeral forms of evidence” (2008, 68–69). Social media content may initially be more accessible to the public than other evidence of scandal, notably through the recirculation of offending content by investigative journalists and “political nobodies”. Yet if the offending content and the initial discovery can both be removed by their respective perpetrators, it bears reflecting on the ephemerality of such campaigns, with evidence of the offence and ensuing campaign accessible only through secondary press coverage and archived caches.

**Discussion and considerations for future research**

The above literature review taken together with the 2015 case study raise a number of concerns about the manifestation of scandal through contemporary digital tools. We can anticipate that political strategists as well as journalists will continue to refine their professional strategies, all while new digital media tools become available to the public. Scholarly research ought to be attentive to the following considerations.

First, in 2015 the notion of the “political nobody” stood out as a prominent subject position, yet it remains unclear who will continue to be able to bring political candidates to resignation in the future. In questioning who is entitled to participate in mediated scrutiny and denunciation of politicians, scholars must be mindful of the types of barriers to participation that will be upheld in the coming years. As a starting point, one would expect political actors to remove any problematic content. On the one hand we can anticipate a more proactive self-management by individuals aspiring to hold political office. As is the case with social media use more broadly (Marwick and Boyd 2014), high profile incidents may prove instructive in guiding candidates to either sanitise or withhold objectionable content online. Along with candidates themselves, it seems likely that party strategists will implement a more direct management of candidates’ public, but also private and personal, digital media content. Inexperienced candidates in particular will likely undergo more rigorous and further reaching screening practices, and those who risk bringing scandal to the party will be omitted. Finally, scholarship should remain attentive to commercially available tools and services for managing and scrubbing missteps, as well as for working towards a collective “forgetting” of past indiscretions, for example, through search
engine manipulation. As Jon Ronson notes in the context of public shaming (2015), such tools are available, and disproportionately favour those who can afford them.

Alongside political actors, it is important also to consider the role of platforms in either enabling or dampening user scrutiny of public figures. This seems especially important as platforms like Twitter appear to occupy the status of default platforms for political communication with the public, and may even serve as a kind of public record in a more cross-contextual sense (Trottier 2015). Researchers should continue to interrogate the perceived status of prominent platforms, especially as recent platform-specific scandals (such as Facebook’s troubles with regards to Cambridge Analytica) bring about a disinvestment from these sites. Yet political figures may feel compelled to maintain an authentic presence on these sites. Authenticity in this case may be measured in terms of how long they have been online, and how frequently they upload original content. It may also be measured in terms of the extent to which this content appears to reflect the candidates’ own views, which in turn may stray from either party lines or public opinion. Critical social media scholarship should consider the maintenance of different strata of users, and in particular the additional affordances that are granted to (as one example) “verified” Twitter users. A related concern is the requirements that non-privileged users must meet to obtain privileged status, or simply to carry on practising scandal mining. For the time being it is technically possible for any Twitter user—as well as non-user—to comb through someone’s public tweets (which may date back to the launch of the platform) and use their web browser’s search function to identify sexist, racist or transphobic content. Such functionality may be curtailed in the service of the so-called “right to be forgotten”, and could conceivably disproportionately benefit those with greater social or financial capital. It is also worth noting that when considering the role of media platforms, the press continued to play a pivotal role in publicising scandal. We may question whether they will continue to maintain this agenda-setting role, as well as whether they will remain as persistent in reporting on social media incivilities.

Relatedly, it bears noting that digital media shaming of politicians in 2015 focused predominantly on talk scandal. While problematic utterances can be considered a worthy subject of political intervention (and at the very least a relatively convenient one to unearth), there is a risk that among citizens, journalists and political rivals scandal mining may overshadow other types of political scandal. This risk is especially salient in a media climate that may prefer to avoid complex deliberations about (for example) financial misdeeds. The tendency towards talk scandal in the above case study is at least partly a product of social media platforms that most readily facilitate text-based communication. As such we can speculate whether live streaming and other audio-video forms of expression will lead to the discovery of other kinds of objectionable acts in the future. While the range of actionable misdeeds may diversify to include more instances of public urination, we can equally presume that candidates would have enough self-discipline to avoid doing so, alongside the continued scrutiny by their parties.

These concerns are applicable for political scandal mining, but also other instances of public scrutiny. This follows a pattern of introducing surveillance technologies and practices in response to exceptional events, or categories of objectionable individuals, and then broadening their scope through what Lyon calls “surveillance creep” (2007). It seems reasonable to expect that both the standards and scrutiny maintained for politicians and other highly public figures will be extended to other communities. Recent examples include the mediated denunciation of young adult authors (Rosenfeld 2017), social media celebrities (Grant 2018) as well as potentially any individual achieving a modest amount of publicity (Romano 2017). As with politicians, we may also anticipate that those who self-identify as a public or quasi-public figure (regardless of the size of their following) may self-scrutinise and self-manage their online presence in anticipation of scandalous outbreaks. Yet despite a continued mainstreaming of mediated scrutiny, it seems
reasonable to expect that services to mitigate scandalous denunciations may remain in reach of those able to afford them.

Finally, the term “scandal mining” itself warrants scrutiny. The language of resource extraction may have limited value in making sense of contemporary digital media practices (Andrejevic 2013), and in particular may overlook the crucial role of (mis-)interpreting personal data as either valuable or actionable. Also, such imagery often coexists with other ways of rendering data practices meaningful, such as the imagery of the virus (Nahon and Hemsley 2013). Scholarship should remain attentive to how such imagery may both enable but also limit scholarly and public understandings of scandal.

Notes

2  http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/06/19/ray-fox-liberals-facebook_n_7620260.html; http://www.metronews.ca/news/toronto/2015/08/06/conservative-toronto-candidate-apologizes-for-comments.html
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