INNOVATING FOR AND BY USERS

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The users' shaping of networked communication

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Are users innovators?

The new communicational paradigm of our societies is built around the increasing role of the user as innovations developer and innovator in media content to be read, listen or viewed by others. Users have been increasingly addressed as innovators in media, not only because of the dissemination of the Internet and open source technologies but also because of the individualisation of media, namely mobile phones, video cameras and handheld mp3 and video players.

Innovation has to be understood as a dialectical process between participants of unequal power and influence in the marketplace and in the on-going patterns of consumption and use (Silverstone, 2005). As Silverstone (2005) argues, SMS and file sharing have gained almost an aura of mythology in ICT innovation given that both were seen as signs of a radical shift in how innovation takes place, by rebalancing the way producers (technologist, designers, packagers, market analysts, investors) and the consumer interact. The mobile phone industry, taking notice of the SMS uses by youngsters incorporated such knowledge on new mobile phones and services offered (Silverstone 2005; Colombo 2006). Subsequently, the user started to be seen, by the industry, as 'trend definer' or 'active tester of innovation' (De Marez and De Moor, 2007). The innovation processes became less confined to the industrial environments because the quality of experience is measured through the launching of a high number of models into the market and by monitoring the user's choice, in order to redefine which models to improve and which to drop.

When users innovate they become, no longer 'end-users' (Slot, 2007) because they move into the heart of the very own value chain, that is, to the creativity arena. Creativity in a user centric approach, as the one that we are witnessing, depends on the ability of people to organise informal networks (be it companies or organisations that develop beta services/products) and then being able to attract users that will contribute to the definition of the next stage. Such attractiveness depends, in great measure, on the ability to open up the floor and work on the environment, hopping that such an offer will create the conditions for experimentation and creativity to develop among a given growing mediated community, usually web 2.0 sites, but also allowing monitoring the feedback. But the continuity of innovation by users seems to depend also on the development of a group of core members that can motivate the passer-by contributors and, by doing so, to sustain the evolution from episodic networking into structured networking during a given timeframe (Auray, 2007; Verhaegh, 2007). Nevertheless, the business success of the social appropriation of users innovations processes, such as MySpace or Facebook, seem to better develop under organisational cultures that are less structured and that rely more on innovating the ways in which they present themselves, that is, where the 'we' is predominant instead of the typified mediated relationship between 'we', the site management, and the users, being the 'other' (Silverstone, 2006). Examples of such relationships between opposing organisational cultures have been

found in experiments of 'citizen' and 'participatory' journalism where the journalistic culture is, usually, conservative and not innovation driven towards experimenting new relationships with other content producers outside the newsroom, and where marketing and business cultures seem to be more open to those innovations (Paulussen et al., 2007). The success of the innovation performed by users in 2.0 Internet environments is then seen as somewhat dependable on the model of self-presentation and intercommunication (Koskela, 2007) offered by the software platforms or the ways in which the user is allowed to modify them.

But 'users as innovators' are not confined to the web 2.0 successes. Other innovation areas for the user seem to be found almost in every area of dissemination of ICT's software or hardware. The multiplication of personal, mobile and video hardware brings to the user the ability to domesticate new kinds of audiovisual content and, subsequently, to introduce time-shifting domestication processes, that is, the capacity of individual and societies to tame the unfamiliar and the threatening, and by doing so mould these new technologies to the values and habits of their everyday life's (Silverstone, 2005; Van den Broek et al., 2007; Urban, 2007). As an example, the user can also become innovator when it appropriates interpersonal communication devices, such as SMS, for organisational purposes facilitating knowledge and allowing planning differently their lives and increase the cohesiveness within a given group (Byrne, 2007).

The second major area of innovation by users is content. The content originating from the processes of content innovation, driven by the users, has two major types of appropriation. Either they are fuelling the overall offer of newspapers, radio and TV, that are running Internet operations. Or we have individual, and collective, projects of content generation primarily developed for the Internet, although they might evolve in the future for other distribution channels – like the US RocketBoom news, starting online and being now downloadable for the Home TV sets through cable networks. In the first alternative, through the online environment the user establishes with the newspapers, radio and TV, multiple relationships that range from the writing and publication of articles, opinion columns or videos to the participation through comments, rating or sharing of contents (Picone, 2007). The second alternative seems to be where the user is allowed more freedom of creativity and, consequently, where innovation is more attainable and valued.

Although, recognizing the innovating role performed by users in terms of the new availabilities of content, user generated content is not yet being produced by the majority of the world's online users. The analysis of data shows that, in the USA, only 8% of web users had, in 2006, edited a blog (Idate, 2006). Similar figures are found both in France, where only 7% of the population had ever built a blog (Idate, 2006) and Portugal with 12% (Cardoso, 2006).

Other examples of user generated content, now regarding video production, can also be found. For example YouTube, where more than 5 million videos were available in late 2006, had around 30 million of unique users each month, with more than 100 million video streams per day. Nevertheless, YouTube uploading of videos seems still to be involving less then a tenth of people editing blogs (Auchard, 2007). User generated content can also be found in social sharing, or Web 2.0 so called sites. Websites like MySpace were, in late 2006, generating more than 270.000 new members per day (Auchard, 2007).

Another channel for distribution of user generated content is the P2P networks. Such networks were in Europe, in 2006, attracting between 15% and 35% of Internet

users and, in the USA, 25% of users, mainly teenagers and young adults were using its services (Idate, 2006). Although better known for the piracy of copyright contents that regularly hit the pages of newspapers, P2P networks offer many non copyrighted material or, sometimes, remixes of audiovisual contents (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). In some specific areas of copyrighted material, like continental European cinema, P2P networks even have a good chance of evolving towards being the main distribution channel. European cinema, both financed by the national European boards or by the very European authors, doesn't have, in many countries, access to good distribution, being P2P a good alternative to reach audiences.

Users have become main innovators in the network society, but the user is also very different one from the other. So we can characterise one of the main trends of the new communicational paradigm to be the innovation performed by users, but we must understand that specific users innovate in specific areas, the ones where communication is seen as most important for them, be it SMS, video content, blogs, etc (Silverstone 2005; Lull 2007).

The user's role in a new communicational paradigm

Because technological development and the appropriation of the media place in coexistence mass media, interpersonal communication media and media that combine the two, such as the Internet, the principle characteristic that pervades the whole sphere of communication is that of networking. But networking is not the only dimension shaping communication. We are also witnessing a change in the communicational paradigm that shapes the media system. The change in our communicational paradigm can be witnessed through the analysis of several dimensions, and the more important dimension is related with the role of the users shaping those networks.

Our mediated world, shaped also by us 'the users' is today dominated by a media rhetoric mainly built around the visual component (Howell, 2003). The visual has gained, increasingly, importance over the textual, even within the Internet realm. Such gain is the product of technological development, like broadband, but also of users choices. Users have chosen to increase their viewing of entertainment and news embedded in visual formats, domesticated the use of video in Web 2.0 platforms and have diffused worldwide the social appropriation of the mobile phone as a video recorder and camera. Still focusing on the users, we should also stress the role that the visual plays within the users computer mediated communication. We should acknowledge that, even when we refer to aural or verbal modes of communication, within the Internet, we are analysing a mediation process that combines both visual and textual or visual and aural. Skype and other VOIP programmes, or verbal script media like Instant Messaging, programmes or even email are increasingly combining the use of visual modes of communication, too. So what we are witnessing is not a overwhelming victory of visual against other mediated communication modes but the increasing mixture of the visual with other modes of communication (Fornas et al., 2007) a trend that we can traced back to the 1980's experiments on the relationship between music and moving image and the worldwide success and expansion of the MTV genre and video clip production (Frith et al., 1993).

Clearly, instead of trying to conflate the verbal/nonverbal and visual/aural polarities, we should focus our attention on the multidimensional complexity of human communication faculties, in order not to oversimplify historical trends or momentary

transitions (Fornas, 2007). Inside and outside, the Internet we find an overwhelming rhetoric based on visual culture, a culture founded on a mode of communication based on simplicity, rapidity and emotions in which 'to see is enough to be' and where 'to repeat is to inform' (Ramonet, 1999). We are witnessing, all around the world, live experiments fostered by television companies, radio stations, newspapers and Internet companies, such as Google or Yahoo!, on how to combine verbal script and aural rhetoric's of communication with the use of chats, SMS, e-mailing, podcasts, video, etc. Although not being yet able to ascertain what the media world will innovate in this domain, the trends seem to indicate that traditional media, as newspapers and radio, and also individual users, are trying to explore how video can complement their traditional textual scrip and aural rhetoric's by enhancing their growing Internet presences with moving images, broadcast and downloads. Television's Internet presence is also trying to evolve, using the World Wide Web or the P2P networks, from more textual and aural approaches to the full broadcast of moving images.

Innovation in Entertainment and News Models

Another of the dimensions of the *new communicational paradigm*, where users play a powerful innovation role, is the Innovation in News and Entertainment Models. What are the new trends that have a major influence on the way our world is being shaped, and consequently, on the way our news and fiction are being told?

Each Era has its predominant genres and modes of broadcast representation (news, chat show, soap opera), as well as different ways to express the uniqueness of the individual (popular music culture, blogging, messaging, file sharing). Although they represent the search for different kinds of order and a struggle for power and control over one's immediate material and symbolic space and time (Silverstone, 2007), they work differently over time and space. Both news and entertainment have been changed in their nature by the possibility given through the arrival of the Internet and tools that foster the production and dissemination of contents by individuals (Syvertsen 2004; Beyer, 2007). But at the same time media companies have also changed their news and entertainment offers. The mixing of the two dimensions of change, one driven by individual producers the other by media companies has changed the media landscape of news and entertainment (Syvertsen 2004; Ytreberg 2004). But what common trends can we find in order to understand and typify the change in contents, both in news and entertainment?

It is here suggested that major historical discontinuities or events, within a given historical continuum, can promote change in the way we classify experience and that the media, given its classification function in society (Silverstone, 2007), are also influenced by those in the way news and fiction are produced and delivered. Social change brings changes not only to the way we organise society, institutions and family, but also to the culture of a given period in human history (Castells, 2004). The media are not only technology; they are also the contents they print, broadcast or display. It's not only the technology that changes but also their contents. Both news and fiction are embedded and shaped by the values and representations of a given society in a given time and space. For those reasons we can argue that, not only we can trace the current change in contents offer by the media companies (Miège, 1997; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Boczkowski, 2004) back to the needs for economic growth (that lead into the territorial expansion of their audiences via satellite and cable television), and to the dissemination

of the use of the Internet, but also to major social events that have influenced our societies in the last three decades.

The argument here made is that we have witnessed, during the last decade, a change within the very own mediation processes and that change is closely related to the historical events and the technological transformation that we have witnessed between 1989 and 2001. Those two major historical events are the fall of the Berlin Wall and, consequently, the geopolitical change in Europe and around the world in the two sides of the political blocks (Castells, 2000) and the 9/11 of 2001 attack at the Twin Towers in New York. Between both events we also witnessed the growing social appropriation by media companies and citizens of the Internet and Satellite Television Broadcasting.

The works of Roger Silverstone (2002) and Umberto Eco (2007) provide us with a set of concepts that help to understand the change within the news and entertainment we today watch, read and listen, those are: *interruption*; *transcendence; otherness* (Silverstone, 2002); *boundary*; and *reserve* (Eco, 2007).

For Eco (2007) the fall of the Berlin Wall combined with the globalisation of media, first satellite TV and then the Internet, brought, to our life's, a change on the ways in which both the 'limits' of the know, the frontier between something, together with what is considered to be righteously 'concealed' or kept in 'reserve' are addressed. Such views, in his opinion, have also changed the ways in which mediation occurs and our involvement in such processes. According to Umberto Eco (2007), one of the first concepts that was questioned by the globalisation of communication is the notion of boundary. The fall of communicational boundaries brought about by the new information and communication technologies has produced two conflicting phenomena. On the one hand, there is no longer a national community that can cut off its citizens from knowing what happens in other countries – even in dictatorships it is increasingly difficult to rule this out (Eco, 2007). On the other hand, the globalisation of communications (Lull, 2007) has introduced modifications at the monitoring of communication exchange. For example, the Orwellian *Big Brother* is not the Endemol television version (Roscoe, 2005), where millions of 'voyeurs' watch one single exhibitionist. Today, the *Big Brother* watching us does not have a single face and is not alone: he is the totality of the global economy (Lyon, 1998; Rodotà, 2000). Eco's argument (2007) is precisely built around the questioning if such a change, in the roots of monitoring, is not producing a movement of cultural change in the perception of what we socially value in relation to reserve and up to where those changes influence our mediated experiences in fiction.

For Silverstone (2002) both mediation and key historical events, in our recent history, are seen as fundamental processes. The structural dimension to the mediation of events, as the one that took place on September 11, helps us to envisage the broader context of how the media represent the world to us (Silverstone, 2002). The media are the main vehicle for bringing into our lives everything that is not 'near' us, that cannot be experienced, seen, touched without mediation, be it from TV, Internet, newspapers or radio. Mediation involves three dimensions of relations between what is mediated and who participates in such mediation process: time; space and ethic (Silverstone, 2002). Events, such as September 11, bring change in the realm of time (*interruption*), in the realm of space (*transcendence*) and in the realm of ethic (*otherness*). Interruption refers to the way in which the schedule of the media, its continuity, is fundamental to define the conduct of everyday life. In a society where mediation becomes evermore present everyday routines tend to relate to the routines of the media. Routines bring assurance

and continuity, when the routine is broken we are faced with change, with questioning, with the assumption we must readapt to the new, whatever it is. Media routines are only broken when, editorially is perceived something important has happened, and that such event must be communicated. Transcendence refers to the claims of the media as to being able to address, the global village proclaimed by McLuhan (1997), the annihilation of distance to provide new forms of global connectivity by bridging distance (Silverstone, 2002). The media have always provided us with the representation of the event, not the reality, but its image. Nevertheless, they have increasingly suggested that "what you see is what you get" (WYSIWYG), that is, representation and reality are expressed has being the very same thing.

The last concept here analysed is the role of otherness in our analysis of innovation in news and entertainment models. Otherness, relates to how the 'the other' is represented to us and how we come to perceive it in our daily life's (Silverstone, 2002). An example, identified by Silverstone (2002), is that until the appearance of Al-Jazeera on western screens 'the other', in this case the inhabitant of the Muslim countries to where the Al-Jazeera broadcasts in Arab language, had been both in fiction and in news, mainly a product of the description of western media. By, simply existing, or broadcasting, Al-Jazeera showed us that we can also be 'the other', that otherness can have two ways: the way we see the others and the way the other sees us.

But how do such concepts help us understand the change in media and the way mediation is performed in the network society? Let's look at the eroding of the social value of both boundary and reserve (Eco, 2007). Such erosion has influenced the way in which journalism is practised and the way in which entertainment is built by media companies and individual content producers. This change of the concept of boundary has not only influenced the sources used in journalism and the way journalists work, but also has opened access to sources to be used by people that were not journalists and, ultimately, it also led to the access to new distribution channels for the news produced by them, namely the Internet (Cardoso 2007; Eco 2007; Lull 2007).

Our perceived social value in relation to *reserve* might also bring us some clues to answer why our current games and quiz entertainment has moved from traditional stages surrounded by audiences applauding the contestant into what we have been commonly referring to as 'reality shows'? Eco argues (2007), that in order to understand the changes in entertainment we need first to follow a path started in news production. One of the main changes in news content, in the last thirty years, occurred in the written press, a change led by the traditionally referred to as the 'celebrities press' (Eco 2007; Littler 2007; Turner 2007). Such publications, mostly wrote about famous people – actors, singers, monarchs in exile or playboys – who voluntarily exposed themselves to the observation of the photographers and chroniclers (Street, 2006). The readers knew that many times the events featured in the news stories were themselves concocted by the journalists, but the readers were not turning to these publications for news or, if we prefer, the truth (Marshall, 2006; McQuail, 2000). What the audiences looked for in such publications was mainly entertainment and not news in their more traditional definition (Eco, 2007). With the aim of competing with television and also given the need to fill a greater number of pages with stories, the generalist and reference press began to take a growing interest in social events, show business and gossip, thus altering its criteria on what constitutes a news story. Gossip became a reference information matter and even targeted those that were not its traditional targets – reigning monarchs, political and religious leaders, state presidents, scientists, etc. –

giving rise to the idea that becoming the object of public gossip was equivalent to acquiring the same *social status* as a famous actor or politician (Marshall 2006; Street 2006; Eco 2007). This second stage took place fundamentally in the entertainment dimension, which confers upon it a logic of association between the contestant and his actions as a universal model, for the logic is 'if he exposes himself, anyone can do it' (Eco, 2007).

On the other hand National consumption of TV programming in Europe shows us that the great majority of fiction has become nationally produced, but at the same time markets are becomingly increasingly open to the combined offer of national, European, North and South American fiction lowering cultural barriers and promoting cultural exchange (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Taplin, 2007). An example of blurring of borders and focus on reality formats has been the increasingly success of mystery and Sci-Fi series, but this time combining our daily life with supernatural (Lost, Supernatural, Medium, Invasion, etc). In what relates to the influence of changes in reserve social perception and fictional writing, we have witnessed the reworking of more traditional concepts as the one's portrayed in Desperate Housewife's, Grey's Anatomy, House or Prison Break. Those are examples of very traditional plots but that are being mixed with the open up of the privacy, or reserve, of human relations within a work environment, household environment or even between people subjected to extreme stress and so more bound to explore the extremes of human relationships. Formats are no longer just present in Docudramas, Docutainment or reality shows but now have reached comedy too, like for instance the programme Camera Café present in France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Poland. Coaching concepts is another example of the blurring of borders between previous types of programming and the use of subjects related to the personal life that have gone beyond talk shows and into 'formats' built to coach people in health issues in programmes such as You are what you eat or the Biggest Looser aired in Channel 4, NBC, RTL or M6. Adding to all those new 'formats' we continue to witness the presence of reality shows, like Big Brother, now built around the celebrities and not just 'common ordinary people' (Giles, 2006). If reality shows were a first example of loss of reserve and blurring of borders as driving concepts of entertainment we know keep on watching innovations in this sector be it through the mix between sing and dance contests and reality shows, or through the talent shows aimed at Business, Fashion, Education, Boxing, Football or even dating shows (Ytreberg 2004; Turner 2006).

What we find in entertainment models today is an innovation promoted by a myriad of factors that combined a specific set of themes, ways to tell stories and types of fictional characters, together with multiple media environment networked by the plots, scripts and technology. That network combination allows, producers to build, and us to view, different angles of the same story, that is, the networking concept adapted to fiction and entertainment. But we cannot forget that the success behind reality TV, or coaching formats, owes a lot to the user's role. Participants in reality TV are, in fact, acting as users, innovating in the sense that it's their actions, their capability innovate in behaviours and actions, that are responsible for the success or failure of shows, very much the same way in which they are making Web 2.0 sites prosper or decay in their online social networking.

News is a central component of the media system and it would be difficult for us to imagine a world where we would no longer find the news at the newsagents, where we would not hear the news every half hour when we turn on the car radio, where we would not surf the Internet in search of a sports page when we arrive at work, where we

would not (occasionally) be tempted to go check the website of a newspaper to see if anything new has happened, or where, when we get home, there would not be one of those faces on the televisions screen that we have become so accustomed to watching at dinner time reading the news to us. News is part of our everyday life, so we do pay a certain amount of attention to it, even without such emotionally strong catastrophes such as the 9/11 disaster or the tsunami in South-east Asia in 2005 (Cardoso, 2007).

The main contemporary trends within news production in our societies are built around the idea of coexistence of different news models under a same time frame. Evolution in journalism has meant during the majority of the 20th century that we had a leading model for news production (Burgh, 2005, Shoemaker 2006). What we seem to be witnessing is a news environment where we find as many news production models and strategies as the possible audiences. So we have, as always, different approaches to news based on the medium used (radio, TV, newspaper or Internet) but also the need to differentiate the way news are built, sources are chosen and distribution channels are used in order to build many different audiences. At the same time, audiences network different media looking for more information on a given subject or simply choose different media for different news.

News has gone beyond dialectic between 'opinion news making' versus 'descriptive news making'. They have arrived at a stage where the multiplication of producers (journalists vs. non-journalist), together with a multiplication of news models (diversified in terms of perceived quality, quantity of news displayed, scope of the thematics chosen, types of sources) becomes the rule. The change in news is twofold driven, both by who writes them and who receives and searches for them, for both are subject to a media enriched environment. A media environment enriched, by the quantity of information available, the multiplication of interfaces and their networking. The fact is, that people are still looking for novelty and the truth but, they triangulate it between many different sources by making triangulation of journalist vs. citizen journalism or between journalist vs. journalist or, even, between citizen journalism vs. citizen journalism.

If we combine the practises of triangulation of news offers together with the differences in cultural identity, that have always been the trademark of journalism between different areas of the globe, we must acknowledge that the change we are witnessing in news production and availability owes as much to the change in boundaries and reserve as to the perception of otherness, the valorisation of interruption and the search for transcendence. Both newsmakers and newsreaders are faced, at the same time, with diversity of news models within their professional and national communities and also have been obliged to consider the existence of diversity in news production and news fruition around the world. That is the change: the networking concept that moulds the way we produce news and inform ourselves of novelty with accuracy.

The Networking of the new media system

On the basis of the developments here analysed its possible to argue that a new media system has slowly been establishing itself over the last decade and that the role of users in its shaping must be acknowledge. In the 1970s McLuhan argued that the media were the message (McLuhan, 1997), meaning that any single medium induces behaviours, creates psychological connections and shapes the mentality of the receiver, regardless of

the content that medium vehicles. Castells, in turn, characterised the organisational relation of the current media as being based on the 'message being the media' (Castells, 2000), i.e. the media are shaped depending on the message one is trying to get across, and seeking that which best serves the message and the audience at which it is aimed. But, not only have we evolved from a moment where 'the media were the message' into a society where we find the 'message being the media', we also are witnessing a moment when the channel or medium is no longer neutral with respect to what it vehicles. Furthermore, 'the media precede the message' (Eco, 2001) when the technological acceleration produces multiple new channels that exist before there is content to be placed there, creating a new challenge of an economic character, thus rendering transmission feasible without having equated what is to be transmitted (as in the case of interactive and digital television or the interactive CD-ROM). In addition to the economic challenge, we find also a cultural change that marks a new paradigm of communicative organisation. Such a paradigm is visible in the fact that the majority of the new communicational channels have been presented to the general public in a process of active experimentation which Castells has defined as 'learning by doing' (Castells, 2000) or the shaping of its own media environment by the audiences, and no longer only by the media companies. This cannot be seen as merely a conjuncture change in the mass media system. This new media system, whose consolidation phase took place between 1990 and 2001, is characterised by global changes in the communicational trends that have given rise to a new communicational model.

It has been argued in this paper that we have gone beyond a communication model based in mass communication and into a fourth model, a communication model based in networked communication.

Our society's communicational model is shaped by the combined leverage of world wide communicational globalisation processes, together with the networking of mass and interpersonal media by the media users and consequently, the rising of networked mediation. The organisation of uses and networking of media within this communicational model seems to be in direct connection with the different degrees of interactivity usage that our current media allow.

If we build communicational models in our societies it is also true that main *communicational paradigms* formats also what a given media system will be. Our communicational paradigms seem to be built around a rhetoric essentiality built on the importance of moving image, combined with the availability of new dynamics of accessibility to information, with new roles of innovation ascribed to users and with profound changes in news and entertainment models.

Our contents, be it news information or entertainment seem to have changed due to the increased presence of contents delivered by media users and not just media companies, giving rise to the coexistence of different news models for different audiences. Not only news information has changed but also entertainment. The innovation in entertainment models therefore is connected to the availability of user generated content but also to the changes brought by media companies, namely the search for new types of contents like the 'formats' and the experimentation with the erasure of boundaries between traditional programmes genres and new approaches to social values such as privacy, reserve, and changes in the realm of time, in the realm of space and in the realm of ethic, all of them reflected on the way stories are told and scripts written.

The communicational model generated in the informational societies, where the prevailing social organisation model is the network, is that of *networked communication*. A communicational model, that does not replace the previous models, but articulates them, producing new forms of communication and also enabling new forms of facilitation of individual empowerment and, consequently, communicative autonomy. In the Informational Societies, where the network is the central organisational feature, a new communicational model has been taking shape. A communicational model characterised by the fusion of interpersonal communication and mass communication, connecting audiences, broadcasters and publishers under a matrix networking media devices, ranging from newspapers to videogames and giving newly mediated roles to their users.

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