

TWEETING THE TV EVENT, CREATING 'PUBLIC SPHERICULES': AD HOC ENGAGEMENT WITH SBS'S GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM – SEASON 2

Abstract

This article uses the example of the mediatization of Season 2 of the Australian documentary-cum-reality TV series Go Back to Where You Came From, and the associated #GoBackSBS Twitter feed, to investigate how public opinions are shaped, reshaped and expressed in new hybrid media ecologies. We explore how social media tools like Twitter can support the efforts of a TV production; provide spaces through which the public can engage ad hoc with a public event, be informed, shape their opinions and share them with others; and thus open up new possibilities for public discourse to occur. We suggest that new online public sphericules are emerging that provide spaces within which publics can engage with the cultural social and political realities with which they are confronted. In this way, we highlight the importance of mundane communication to the shaping and constant reshaping of public opinion.

Everyday communication, which now increasingly takes place in online fora, is intimately tied up with the ways in which people understand and process what occurs around them. Yet current research on the public sphere and its communicative structure often still disregards these mundane practices of sense-making. The overlap of traditional media formats, such as TV shows, with new media technologies like Twitter produces complex flows of information through which modern individuals engage with key cultural and political public events. Within this 'hybrid media ecology' (Jenkins, 2006; Benkler, 2006), new public (sub)spheres, or what have been termed 'public sphericules' (Gitlin, 1998; Cunningham, 2001; Bruns, 2008), emerge. By examining the mediatization of Season 2 of the Australian documentary-cum-reality TV series *Go Back to Where You Came From* (referred to as *Go Back 2* from now on), and the use of the associated #GoBackSBS Twitter feed as a back-channel to the TV event, we can come to understand how social media tools like Twitter support the efforts of a TV production; provide spaces through which the public can engage *ad hoc* with a public event, be informed, shape their opinions and share them with others; and thus open up new possibilities for public discourse to occur. Acknowledging the role of mundane communication in shaping the contemporary public sphere is an important nuance that is often disregarded in current research on public discourse. A changing, more complex, interrelated and multi-directional media ecology necessitates a more sophisticated understanding of the intricate processes involved in its constantly shifting makeup.

Twitter and TV

The power of TV events in shaping public consensus, sparking debate and creating communities has long been acknowledged in media and communication studies (Balkin, 1999; Cunningham, 2000; Iyengar, 1991; Turner, 2000; van Dijk, 1996). Public affairs television programming in various formats has always attempted to set the news agenda of subsequent days for other, follow-on media, from print to talkback. Increasingly, however, social media tools like Twitter are also supplementing the *live* experience of televised public events by engaging audiences in new ways with the content they encounter (see Harrington et al., 2012; Harrington, 2014). Information flows between producer and consumer are more interactive and reciprocal. Opinions are formed and reformed in intricate processes of viewing, reacting and communicating.

Televised events with public policy foci increasingly go hand in hand with discussion in the Twittersphere. For example, in Australia, Twitter is an integral part of political TV shows like *Q&A*, *Insight* and *The Drum*. Viewers are invited to respond and contribute to content as it is being aired, and producers gauge the success of a show based on its online resonance. Supplementing a TV event with the use of social media opens up engagement with a topic and sparks communicative activity between viewers, in addition to keeping audiences glued to the screen and thereby maintaining ratings and advertising revenue.

Dahlgren (2009: 74) is adamant that taking into account everyday communication is crucial to understanding ‘how publics “come alive” ... what their sociocultural dynamics look like’. This article examines how Twitter served as a back-channel for communication and opinion formation around SBS’s *Go Back 2* to illuminate how ‘public sphericules’ emerge out of new techno-social hybrid assemblages between televised events, their audience and the technologies viewers employ to engage with themselves and others in the service of shaping their views and understandings of the complex world in which they live. This provides a more nuanced understanding of the interrelation between traditional media outlets like television and online technologies, and how this shapes opportunities for individuals to engage in communicative action and become actively involved in public policy issues.

Go Back to Where You Came From Season 2

Go Back 2 aired on SBS in August 2012 in three episodes on consecutive days. The reality TV-style documentary addresses the ongoing political debate around asylum seeker policies and refugee issues that flared up in light of current policy changes and public outcries. In August 2012, the current Labor government reinstated legislation to ‘deter’ asylum seekers, in a sharp reversal of its initial policy approach. Negative media coverage constructs a marginalising discourse of ‘illegal immigrants’, ‘boat people’ and ‘queue jumpers’ (McKay et al., 2011). Reports show that more people now hold strongly negative views of asylum seekers than strongly positive ones in Australia (Markus, 2012).

Go Back to Where You Came From aims to challenge understandings and opinions around asylum seekers by sending a group of Australians on a first-hand experience of living the life of an asylum seeker. In Season 1, six ordinary citizens featured on the show. In Season 2, SBS sent six prominent Australian public figures from politics and entertainment on the asylum seeker journey. The group consisted of former Defence Minister Peter Reith, former Commonwealth Ombudsman Allan Asher, rock singer and political activist Angry Anderson, writer and social commentator Catherine Deveny, model and actress Imogen Bailey and former talk radio presenter Michael Smith. The

25-day-long physical and mental journey, during which they engaged with asylum seekers both within and outside of Australia, tested their understandings and opinions and, by extension, those of the wider Australian television audience.

Producers aimed for the program ‘to get the nation talking’ (SBS, 2012a). SBS Managing Director Michael Ebeid stated that the aim of the show was to ‘tap into local sentiments about refugees and asylum seekers’. This suggests that, beyond presenting information to its viewers, *Go Back 2* sought to engage its audience with contentious topics and spark conversation that would inform a public debate. Using well-known public figures in the second season most likely increased interest in the show and boosted its resonance on Twitter and elsewhere. SBS also provided comprehensive coverage of *Go Back 2* through its radio channel, including talkback shows, exclusive interviews, in-depth features and discussion. Furthermore, it developed educational resources such as video clips, links and activities related to the show, and made them publicly available on the *Go Back 2* website for schools to use (SBS, 2012b). Non-SBS media outlets, especially talkback radio, also thematised the program, exploring both critical and supportive perspectives. Clearly, SBS’s agenda was to penetrate deeply into the public conscience and engage diverse audiences through a multitude of channels.

***Go Back to Where You Came From* and Twitter**

SBS keenly promoted Twitter-based engagement with *Go Back 2*. It suggested the hashtag #GoBackSBS and promoted the show via the @SBSNews Twitter account. Other SBS personalities tweeted actively about the show. For instance, as the first episode aired, SBS *Insight* presenter Jenny Brockie (@JenBrockie) tweeted:

Not your average reality TV #GoBackSBS (21:14)

and SBS *World News Australia* co-host Anton Enus (@AntonEnus) posted:

Confronting is such an easy word to say, #GoBackSBS is giving it a whole new level of immediate, in-your-face reality (21:17)

(The time of each tweet is given in brackets after the message itself.)

SBS encouraged viewers to engage with the show beyond passive consumption. Twitter provides a vital medium through which public involvement in policy issues and televised events can be animated and secured. The proverbial ‘water cooler’ conversation that usually takes place in offline social settings, spatially and temporally removed from the initial encounter with a show, occurs in real time on Twitter. The already communal experience of watching television is extended and reconstituted by its online mediation (see Harrington, et al., 2012; Harrington, 2014).

Methodology

We utilised the open source tool yourTwapperkeeper¹ to collect all tweets that included the hashtag #GoBackSBS in the week during which *Go Back 2* (and a special episode of *Insight*) aired. The first episode (screened on 28 August 2012) attracted the highest level of public engagement, both on Twitter and in terms of the size of its TV audience. From just before the broadcast (20:26) until about an hour after (22:30), we recorded just short of 11,000 #GoBackSBS tweets (including retweets). The first episode also attracted the largest TV viewership; 752,000 viewers (Throng, 2012a), in contrast to 652,000 for the second episode (Throng, 2012b) and 692,000 for the third (Throng, 2012c).

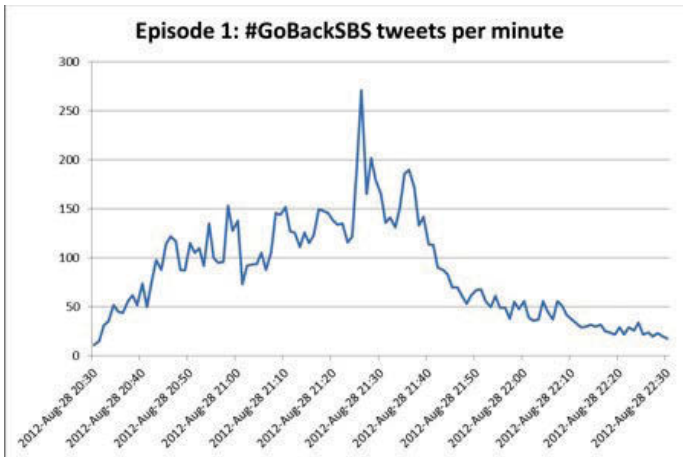


Figure 1: #GoBackSBS tweets per minute for Season 2, Episode 1 (28 August 2012)

Source: Generated using the methods and metrics outlined in Bruns NS Stieglitz (2012, 2013).

Figure 1 shows that tweeting activity grew incrementally as the first episode screened, indicating that audience engagement and retention were secured successfully. We analysed the content of 7102 tweets, including all tweets sent between just before the show was aired (20:26) and just before it finished (21:28), as well as a further sample of its finishing minutes (21:29–21:31) and of a spike at 21:36, when the show was over and people drew their final conclusions. Retweeted tweets were also counted, even if they occurred outside of the identified timeframes. This close content analysis of a large sample of tweets revealed which topics and aspects of the show had the most traction with different types of users (organisations, individuals, etc.). Our analysis reveals how everyday conversation on Twitter about a particular issue of concern supplements communication in conventional media and enables the emergence of new public sphericules.

We devised seventeen representative categories to make sense of our sample through manual content analysis. Through a close reading of all tweets, one coder identified relevant categories that best described the sample. While content was coded by one researcher only, reliability was ensured through a stability test (see Krippendorff, 2004); coded data was re-analysed at regular intervals to adjust categories and eliminate intra-coder disagreement. Samples of coded tweets were also reviewed by a second researcher to ensure agreement. Categories were mutually exclusive; each tweet was assigned to the one category that best represented it. Categories were also exhaustive; all tweets were coded into one of the seventeen categories. Figure 2 shows the seventeen categories we identified and their relative prominence in the dataset. Available space in this article does not permit us to explain all of these categories in detail; the following analysis will therefore focus on the first three, most prominent categories.

Data analysis

The three most common types of tweets about *Go Back 2* were comments on participants (34%), comments on the wider asylum seeker debate (17%) and comments on the show's content (14%). This indicates that audiences engaged with both the show's immediate content and the broader subject area. Different types of tweets became more prominent at different points during the first episode. First, we recorded a major

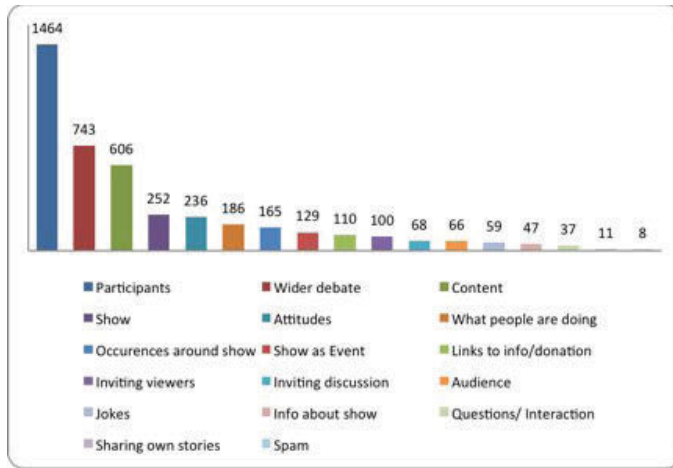


Figure 2: #GoBackSBS tweets for Episode 1 of *Go Back Two* across content categories

spike in comments about the participants, followed by a spike in comments on the wider asylum seeker debate. After this, comments on the content of the show assumed prominence, followed by another spike in tweets about the wider asylum seeker debate. This indicates that the show successfully sparked debate beyond the immediate dramaturgy of the broadcast itself. Twitter's immediacy enables discussions to eventuate *ad hoc*. Being able to respond straight away to what they see increases viewers' engagement with the show and supports the formation of new public sphericules within which public opinions are uttered, shaped, contested and reformed. Examples from the three most commonly recorded categories of tweets shed light on how Twitter was used to mediate *Go Back 2*, to engage its audience and to support public debate. This shows that Twitter is a technologically mediated public forum for participatory communication.

Comments on the show's participants

Most commonly, tweets commented on the show's participants. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the show features well-known Australians who voiced firm and opposing views. *Go Back* series producer Rick McFee claims he purposely selected prominent participants to whom he thought the public would respond; once again, the emphasis on generating discourse and engaging viewers becomes evident. McFee also claimed he looked for participants with strong opinions and an even distribution of generally positive and negative perspectives.

Some of the tweets that commented on the show's participants simply referred to their appearance or conduct. The further the show progressed, the more common were emotive responses to the things participants said or did on the show, or to their attitudes and behaviour more generally. For example:

That Michael guy is a moron #GoBackSBS (21:26)

Another user commented more positively on a participant:

Allan Asher might just be a really good guy. Patience and empathy. Bless him.
#gobacksbs (21:00)

Sometimes comments on participants also took the form of @replies, which address the participant directly:

@CatherineDeveny the only compassionate member in show so far Making me proud Reith, Smith & Anderson make me ashamed #GoBackSBS (21:03)

Twitter engages audiences of a reality TV style show like *Go Back 2* more actively and interactively with the people they see on TV. Through @replies, retweets and comments, Twitter users communicated with the show's participants and became involved in the public debate alongside them.

Using Twitter to reflect on the behaviour of participants on a reality TV show is a technologically mediated means of engaging with mundane activities like watching TV. Publicly expressing opinions about participants on a TV show and immediately communicating them to those to whom they refer, while remaining physically distanced, is a new mechanism for public engagement. Blurred boundaries between comments and interaction, and the opportunity for *ad hoc* discussion with a community of others, creates new public sphericules within which communal debate can occur and opportunities for collective action can arise.

Comments on the wider asylum seeker debate

The next most common type of tweet referred to the wider asylum seeker debate. This indicates that viewers went beyond simply absorbing the immediate content of the show; they drew connections to larger public policy issues. The comments on the wider asylum seeker debate largely spoke in favour of an open policy towards accepting refugees. For example, one user tweeted:

If only we could stop talking about asylum seekers in racist and legally inaccurate terms and refer to them as PEOPLE. #GoBackSBS (20:34)

and a little later followed with:

Australia receives less than 1 PERCENT of total asylum flows. We are hardly in danger of being 'swamped'. #GoBackSBS (20:38)

Another user stated:

Seems timely to remind folk that seeking asylum is NOT an illegal act – it is an act of desperation #GoBackSBS (20:39)

Slightly more negative comments, like

God I hate this whole immigration debate #gobacksbs (20:53)

as well as tweeters who tried to remain impartial:

no one has the right to knock anyone on #GoBackSBS ... there is no right or wrong opinion (20:50)

were few and far between. Rather than being negative *per se*, these comments suggest that the debate is perhaps being over-simplified by the highly polarised exchanges between asylum supporters and opponents in politics. They offer more cynical viewpoints such as:

remove the borders, kick the government out, problem solved #gobacksbs (20:54)

Sigh. People tweeting on #GoBackSBS actually believe representative democracy might one day respect #refugees. Bit sad. (20:46)

So much moral panic. The media and both sides of politics have a lot to answer for. #GoBackSBS (20:46)

But the overwhelming majority of #GoBackSBS tweets supported a pro-asylum seeker standpoint. This indicates that the public sphericule encompassing those who watched the show and engaged with it via Twitter is characterised by agreement. A particular section of already interested and supportive individuals discussed and reaffirmed, rather than reconsidered, their views. Twitter users raised this concern in their tweets:

Again, I do wonder whether #gobackSBS viewers = preaching to the converted (20:53)

While this observation could be seen to weaken the argument that Twitter provides a public forum within which contentious issues can be debated, it may simply be an indication of the audience of the TV show, rather than of the potential for Twitter to act as a space within which transformative communicative action can take place. Some of the most prominent participants in the Twitter debate were human rights organisations. Their tweets were widely retweeted, such as this post by @amnestyOz, which was retweeted eighteen times:

Heartbreaking to hear the risks asylum seekers are forced to take to find safety #GoBackSBS (21:02)

The high visibility of human rights organisations that support the struggles faced by asylum seekers contributed to the overall positive sentiment reflected in the Twitter discussion on the wider asylum seeker debate in Australia in connection with *Go Back 2*.

The largely positive general attitude of tweeters also suggests that the people who are interested in, and engage with, the asylum seeker debate via the TV event and related Twitter discussion are those who are supportive of the issue anyway. Opinions that spoke out against asylum seekers (mainly voiced by participants on the show rather than in the Twitter debate) were generally rendered racist, inhumane and unacceptable. For example, one Twitter user responded to Michael Smith's claim that taking care of refugees should not be the responsibility of Australians by stating:

It's not our responsibility to help them. Wrong. It is your responsibility as a fellow human being to show compassion to ALL. #GoBackSBS (20:51)

Yet research shows that public rhetoric surrounding asylum seekers, in combination with media reporting and political discourse, is generally negative (McKay, Thomas and Kneebone, 2011: 114; see also Markus, 2012; McKay, Thomas and Blood, 2011; Haslam and Pedersen, 2007). This attitude was not represented widely in the Twitter debate. The #GoBackSBS discussion seemingly was generated by a supportive minority. The question is whether SBS was successful in shaping the opinions of these viewers in line with its desire to bring 'empathy to a debate that has been largely dominated by slogans and prejudice' (Marshall Macbeth, 2011),² or whether those who watched the show and discussed it on Twitter approached it with a positive attitude from the outset. In any case, it is evident how very particular kinds of publics can come together within an online space like Twitter. Whatever the political leaning of the asylum seeker debate, TV viewers used Twitter not only to engage with the immediate occurrences on the show, but to comment and interact with one another on wider public policy issues.

Comments on the show's content

Go Back 2 viewers also commented substantially on the show's content itself. They used Twitter to engage with the show in an immediate, public, active way by expressing their reactions and views. This engagement then potentially shaped their wider perceptions of the show, its participants and the public policy issues at stake.

Some Twitter users simply commented on the general occurrences on the show. Often tweets provided more or less subtle evaluations of immediate occurrences on the show, such as

Peter Reith interrogating the poor bloody butcher #gobackSBS (20:50)

or more obvious judgements such as the following reference to a comment by participant Michael Smith:

Looking forward to see how Michael smith goes in Somalia. May have limited sympathy – 'their problem' #GoBackSBS (21:11)

A closer look at spikes in audience engagement with the show via Twitter provides an indication of what had most traction, and reveals further how the audience reacted to the show. Dramatic, contentious and exciting material clearly resulted in an increase in tweets about the show's content.

A first spike occurred around 21:00, when refugee Abdi recounted how he had fled war-torn Somalia as a young boy and eventually sought asylum in Australia. Many responded empathetically to Abdi and condemned Michael Smith's critical questioning of Abdi's story and the legality of his arrival in Australia. For example:

Abdhi's story is what the 'stop the boats' slogans always miss #GoBackSBS (20:59)

That is so true! Michael sees him only as a refugee and not a person. #gobacksbs (21:00)

A second spike in engagement occurred at 21:08,³ when the announcement was made that participants would be sent to Mogadishu and Kabul to experience at first hand the terrors from which asylum seekers were fleeing. Tweeting activity spiked further when the participants were shown to arrive at their destinations (21:18), and when Michael Smith, Imogen Bailey and Allan Asher's visit to a refugee camp in Mogadishu was aired (21:26). Comments focused on the immediate occurrences on the show as well as on the behaviour of participants.

During the 21:26 spike, many also commented on Michael Smith having his iPhone on him, contributing further to the increased engagement with the show's content at the time. Participants were shown earlier to hand over their valuables, being told they would have to live without them for the entirety of their participation in the program. #GoBackSBS tweeters expressed confusion and critique when Smith showed children in the Mogadishu refugee camp pictures of his house on his iPhone. While this particular controversy was classed as a comment on the show's content, these tweets also provide comments on the show itself. For example:

Weren't their mobile phones taken from them or was that just staged? #GoBackSBS (21:26)

This reveals how Twitter allows television viewers to publicly criticise the content and format of a show in a way that can directly and immediately reach program producers.

A final spike in Twitter engagement occurred at 21:36,⁴ when Hazara refugee Rezai revealed that eleven asylum seekers he knew, who had been sent back to Afghanistan under the Howard government's Pacific Solution, had been killed upon returning to their home country. Peter Reith responded to this story by saying that 'these things

happen'. Again, comments related to both the participants (particularly Reith and Rezai) and to the occurrences on the show. Those who commented on the content generally reacted in sympathy with Rezai and in disbelief at Reith's comment. For example:

RT @alexpagliari: So sad and shameful to hear from an Hazara man who we sent back to danger #gobacksbs (21:35)

There you go Peter Reith, your wonderful policy that u claim worked, killed people; yet here u r justifying your evil #GoBackSBS (21:35)

these things happen wow, not even pretending he actually cares #gobacksbs (21:35)

Looking at the spikes in Twitter engagement with the show provides an indication of what attracted the most interest and sparked debate. Such detailed insights into the live reactions of TV audiences offer novel ways of discerning audience engagement and garnering understandings of how public opinions form, adjust and are voiced in online public sphericules.

Conclusion

New media tools like Twitter have joined traditional media formats to shape a diversified, multifaceted and interactive media ecology. Within this new hybrid landscape, humans and technologies combine to shape processes of communication, information-dissemination, sense-making and self-formation. Functioning alongside more established media formats such as television programs, online tools open up supplementary means for publics to engage with the cultural, social and political realities with which they are confronted. People form opinions as they engage with traditional media content via new media. In this way, specific, temporary *ad hoc* public sub-spheres emerge, within which citizens actively discuss the content and contexts of the complex realities that surround them. Our examination of the mediatisation of *Go Back 2* provides one example that reveals the dynamics of such interactions, and the processes by which they extend and supplement the conventional mass-mediated public sphere.

Twitter is a technologically mediated public forum for participatory communication. It provides a highly effective backdrop for the screening of TV events, enhancing their reach and effect. However, it is important to acknowledge that new media tools are not the technological advancements that were necessary for new processes of communication and self-formation to emerge. No longer do humans simply create technologies that permit them to live out pre-existing interests. Rather, human interests and technological possibilities are constituted in mutual and interactive processes (Callon and Law, 1982). Technological affordances and their users shape one another in intricately entwined and ever-changing processes that have distinct historical roots. In this way, new media technologies like Twitter represent one of the many tools through which individuals come to shape their relations to self and others, communicate and interact with the occurrences around them, and thus establish guidelines according to which they govern their conduct. The public opinions that are formed in the public sphericules that emerge on Twitter (and other online fora) are shaped by, and shape, the modern techno-social landscape in which we exist.

Publicly engaging with news and media content via Twitter represents one mundane practice through which public opinions and policies, as well as individual relations to self and others, are discussed and shaped, and constantly reorganised. While the power of the internet to provide a public sphere within which true policy change can be achieved has been contested (Wilhelm, 1999; Iosifidis, 2011), it certainly represents

a forum within which opinions can be voiced and disseminated, and public opinion and debate informed. The in-depth analysis of the use of Twitter as a back-channel to the TV screening of *Go Back 2* is one example that reveals the potential for Twitter to open up sub-spheres for public engagement. By focusing on the everyday processes through which people make sense of the world around them and their place in it, like tweeting their thoughts about television shows, we acknowledge the emergence of multiple public sphericules as vital actants in producing public debate. However, we do not seek to judge the effectiveness of these new technologically mediated spaces in producing change. Rather, we suggest that they provide fora within which modern citizens can engage with public policies and form their own and others' opinions, and perhaps speak out to effect change.

Notes

- ¹ yourTwrapperkeeper is an open-source version of the research support service provider Twrapperkeeper which was required to shut down in 2011 as it violated Twitter's API rules by publicly sharing gathered data. yourTwrapperkeeper is available for researchers to install and operate on their own servers but (in theory) not to make archives publicly available (see Bruns, 2013 for details).
- ² Marshall Macbeth refers to a comment made by the director of the first season of *Go Back to Where You Came From*, Ivan O'Mahoney. We assume that SBS supported a similar agenda in the production of the second season of the show.
- ³ The commercial break at this stage also contributed to increasing Twitter engagement, as it allowed people to tweet without being distracted from the show.
- ⁴ This final (and largest) spike in engagement occurred at the end of the show, when viewers also offered final comments and overall impressions of this first episode.

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