

# Economic Pressure on a Novice Independent Podcaster in the Middle East: A Case Study

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## Abstract

This paper examines a Saudi novice independent podcaster making episodes on Buzzsprout, a podcast hosting service that enables businesses to create, publish, and distribute podcast episodes across several platforms. Buzzsprout is a well-known podcast hosting platform that has assisted over 100,000 individuals in establishing podcasts since 2009, and it offers several tools to help podcasters create and sell their episodes. This paper's main objective is to illustrate how Buzzsprout monetizes and regulates its policy on beginner podcasters in the Middle East. This paper will explore the regulations social media platforms impose on new podcasters, emphasizing the domination of corporate media platforms that control creators' content and storytelling if they do not pay for a monthly subscription. To reach a deep understanding of monetization and regulations in the media system, we will apply Marx's critique of the political economy. Finally, this paper will discuss different models for monetizing and regulating podcasts.

**Keywords:** buzzsprout, monetization, podcast content, regulation, criticism of the political economy

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, podcasting platforms have emerged as a significant new subject in media and mass communication, digital media, and digital humanities. Contemporary media and digital media regulations affect how people interact with published news and share content. Advertisers fund radio stations and Google, and we receive "free" music and news. Direct revenue immediately measures customer preferences in books, movies, and music. Podcast platforms rely on subscription payments to make money, especially with newer podcasts that have no sponsors. In some cases, it seems more logical to believe we pay for broadcast radio and television when we purchase things advertised on them.

Nowadays, many people are looking to increase their financial income with online jobs. Social media assists people with augmenting their income through sharing their lives, knowledge, and skills. On the one hand, people currently can increase their monetization through various social networks—for instance, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, blogs, and X. Recently, Twitter added a monetization feature to its platform, enabling users to make money through it. On the other hand, podcast platforms have restrictions on monetization.

Notably, users' subscriptions to social media platforms do not require a monthly payment. Nevertheless, paradoxically, podcast platforms require a monthly payment for users who create content on podcasts, which poses obstacles to continuing to create podcast content. Additionally, corporate media distinguishes between content viewers in the United States and viewers from developing countries. For instance, YouTube pays more to YouTubers who have more viewers in the United States and pays less to those with viewers in developing countries or regions like the Middle East.

The purpose of this paper is to look at a specific podcast and analyze how Buzzsprout monetizes and regulates its policy for beginner podcasters in the Middle East. This paper will address the following questions: How does oligopoly domination in corporate media platforms control the content of storytelling creators once they do not pay for a monthly subscription? How do podcasters use these platforms to earn income and devote their methods and techniques to drive monetization further?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Media Corporation Hegemony on Content Published Through Media Platforms

Historically, the media has depended on advertising and other sources of revenue to be sustained in the market. Interestingly, after the internet revolution, the concept of media economics has developed differently in the digital media age. For example, media capital invested in online news agencies, newspapers, magazines, and radio and television programs that was first provided at no cost to customers has now evolved into subscription services. Investments have also been made in online shopping to offer books, CDs, and movies (Knoche, 2016). Media production, dissemination, and production processes have changed, with far-reaching implications for media and cultural employment, education, and the labor market (Knoche & Siegert, 1999). As a result, not only are monopolistic laws and regulations limiting ownership required, so are policies and regulations that preserve independent voices. Governments should also promote domestic media and content, encourage the establishment of new competing media, and enable access to nonmainstream voices and alternative means of reporting on social and political issues (Gustafsson, 1995; Picard, 1985; Rouet, 1991). Research has revealed that different units of a medium and distinct media produce somewhat different content, programming, and opinions due to financial considerations, the adoption of industry customs and business practices, and reliance on a small number of similar-looking sources of news and opinion (Gaunt, 1990; Jamison & Campbell, 1998; McManus, 1993; Nimmo & Combs, 1990; Picard, 1998; Underwood, 1993). Changes in media ownership and communications have led to an increase or decrease in political and social discussion and action. On the one hand, these changes have led to a growth in the number of broadcast stations, cable and satellite systems, and broadcast and cable/satellite networks throughout the world (Picard, 2001). On the other hand, there is hegemony, a concept formulated by Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony involves dominance of values, ideals, objectives, ethics, and cultural and political meanings in a community. The associated term “hegemon” identifies the actor, group, class, or state that exercises hegemonic power (Storey, 2012). Older media industries like film and music are in the hands of a few corporations; this environment is an oligopoly. In an oligopoly, a handful of firms dominate a market industry (Campbell et al., 2014). Furthermore, media corporations are defined by their technology, such as the broadcast television corporation, the film company, or the music business, but that obscures the functions of the corporation. A more productive way of thinking about media corporations is to divide them into the three most common industry structures: monopoly, oligopoly, and competition (Campbell et al., 2014).

### 2.2 Podcasting Platforms (Apple as an Oligopoly in Corporate Media Podcasts)

Podcasting is quickly gaining traction as a cultural phenomenon, linking listeners to audio content produced by professionals, radio stations, and amateur hobbyists alike (Sullivan, 2019). According to Sullivan (2019), Apple’s platform was used to download or access about 56% of all podcasts it hosted in 2017.

Apple is the most popular podcast platform worldwide. Podcasters use Apple as much as any other platform because Apple enables several features that are easy to use. Apple Podcasts (previously iTunes) is the most popular directory with a significant first-to-market advantage, with the majority of podcast listeners in the United States getting their shows via Apple’s directory (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2017). Apple chose not to host audio data files for download (thus adopting the RSS decentralization approach), making paywalls, pay-per-download, and other monetary transactions for podcasting unfeasible via iTunes. This was one of early podcasters’ motivations to adopt ad-supported business methods. Apple’s iTunes was the first service to provide a podcasting platform that provided a centralized podcast collection for easy discovery, and it also allowed podcasters to reach listeners by combining their separate RSS feeds into a seamless digital interface (Sullivan, 2019). Although Apple’s early dominance makes it the most likely beneficiary of podcast platformization, the business need for audience consumption data promotes competition among existing platforms. The emergence of services like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts increases the likelihood of discovery through these channels (Sullivan, 2019).

### 2.3 Buzzsprout Podcast Hosting (Buzzsprout’s Oligopoly in Corporate Media Hosted Podcasts)

Buzzsprout podcast hosting assists podcasters in publishing their content on several podcast platforms. According to Sullivan (2019), the number of podcast hosting providers has increased with the popularity of podcasting. A podcast hosting provider is frequently the first point of contact for independent podcasters. With the increased commercial potential of podcasting, there has been significant consolidation among podcast hosts. Podcasters use podcast hosting to increase the number of their viewers, frequently offering their shows on as many hosting platforms as possible. This has fostered the emergence of podcast hosting companies that claim to provide “one-stop” distribution through the most popular directories (Sullivan, 2019).

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Political Economy Theory

Our research will focus on analyzing how Buzzsprout monetizes and regulates its policy for beginning podcasters in the Middle East. How does oligopoly domination in corporation media platforms control the content of storytelling creators if they do not pay for a monthly subscription? How do podcasters use the platforms to earn income and use their method and techniques to drive monetization further? This analytical research will benefit from theoretical assumptions taken from numerous frameworks.

We will apply political economic theory using McChesney's (2000) conceptual definition, which is the most relevant to the aim of this study. Political economy theory emphasizes monetization and restrictions in the media system, and its study has tended to focus accordingly on explaining and evaluating capitalism, a system that, in essence, converts resources such as workers, raw materials, land, and knowledge into marketable commodities that generate profit for investors. Political communication scholars have studied and documented how media, information, and audiences are packaged into goods for sale. Many people who go from studying old to new media underline the similarities between these two forms of capitalism, arguing that new media intensifies and expands trends within older forms of capitalism by providing new ways to convert media and viewers into marketable commodities. As a result, media consolidation, commercialism, rich-country domination of the global economy, information divides, and militarism endure and develop (McChesney, 2007; Murdock & Golding, 2000, 2004; Schiller, 1999, 2007a; Sparks, 2007; Wasko, 2003 as cited in Mosco, 2009).

Although new media has led to the concept of digital capitalism, it is still capitalism, and there is little dispute as to which word is more essential (Mosco, 2008). Political economic theory allows us to examine how Buzzsprout monetizes and regulates its policy for beginning podcasters in the Middle East, allowing the researcher to determine both the extent of monetization and regulation in the Buzzsprout podcast hosted and what improvements can be made.

#### 3.2 Industrial Economics Model/Media Oligopolies

Profit is the difference between a corporation's revenue and the costs of producing a product or service (Campbell et al., 2014). Our market economy's touchstone is profit maximization. As a result, implications for democracy are often overlooked, resulting in squabbles and sometimes public outcry over corporate policy decisions (Campbell et al., 2014).

Campbell et al. (2014) argued that the study of oligopolies demands a look back at the history of the media sector. More than anything else, an external threat unites a media oligopoly. Oligopolists are looking for ways to regulate competition such as the pricing of music downloads. The concept of "vertical integration, in the media industry, means a company owns the production distribution, and public presentation or exhibition of its product" (Campbell et al., 2014, p. 185). Interestingly, the assessment of the trends and innovation in the podcast business oligopoly tolerates a certain amount of independence and outside labor.

Media consumers must closely monitor changes in the oligopoly mix. It is simple to argue that monopolies are bad for democracy, but it is more challenging to argue that the system of competition known as oligopolistic competition is incapable of simultaneously maintaining the financial success of enterprises and upholding democratic norms (Campbell et al., 2014). As a result, we live with media oligopolies; nonetheless, we need rules that provide them with incentives to work in the interests of democracy—even as they pursue their primary goal of profit maximization (Campbell et al., 2014).

The media oligopoly model emphasizes the domination in corporate media platforms that controls creators' content if they do not pay for a monthly subscription. Oligopoly in media corporations tends to hide content producers and practice online gatekeeping, which should not be acceptable in the internet age. In addition, this allows the researcher to determine the extent to which content is controlled by a few media corporations.

#### 3.3 Cultural Industry Theory Commerce

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer formulated cultural industry theory. The culture industry's entire activity is a transparent imposition of financial motive onto artistic forms. The concept of their manifestation as value, as Brecht and Suhrkamp phrased it, governs the industry's cultural commodities, not their own substance (Adorno & Bernstein, 2020).

The Marxist assumption that cultural forms such as paintings, operas, and films are no different from other consumer products such as cars or television sets is a part of the term culture industry, confirming the Marxist belief that culture is not an abstract thing produced by an individual genius but rather a product of social and economic conditions in

society (Mambrol, 2016). This definition of cultural industry helps to understand how podcasters use the platforms' features to produce content to make money and come up with their own methods and tactics to boost commercial monetization.

The nature and perceived value of the podcast medium is evolving. Although independent podcasters have long aimed to monetize their work (Markman, 2012) and make podcasting into a full-time job (Markman & Sawyer, 2014), podcast producers are still looking for innovative ways to monetize their material tailored to their target viewers' tastes to create a long-term cash stream from their podcasts (Markman & Sawyer, 2014). Podcasters who distribute their work across many platforms do not make any money. For example, Apple Podcast (Spinelli & Dann, 2019), which accounts for the majority of podcast traffic, has a payment mechanism for all forms of content but not for podcasts due to the open design of the RSS feed (Morris & Patterson, 2015; Sullivan, 2019). Setting up a paid subscription system for individual podcasts requires a separate app or website where listeners may download and pay for the podcast. This is certainly inconvenient for podcast listeners who are used to listening to a range of different podcasts (Adler, 2021). Independent podcasters make little money from their work despite their best efforts (Adler Berg, 2021; Markman, 2012). Podcast listeners are still hesitant to pay for podcasts, and businesses are hesitant to sponsor them (Spinelli & Dann, 2019; Sullivan, 2018). By converting audience attention into a smaller number of high-profile performances, these platforms act as gatekeepers to audiences (Sullivan, 2019).

#### 4. Methodology

The qualitative single-case study approach is an effective tool for reaching a deep understanding of a particular case. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the object of study and context are not clearly evident. It addresses a technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points. One result relies on multiple sources of evidence with data converging in a triangulating fashion, and another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Dul & Hak, 2008, as cited in Yin, 2003).

The preceding statement is an example of Yin's all-encompassing descriptive definition of case study research (2003). According to this definition, it is without a doubt one of the most efficient research strategies used by researchers to achieve both practical and theoretical goals.

To collect the data, the researcher interviewed a Saudi podcaster in-depth to evaluate monetization and regulations regarding hosting a podcast in the Middle East. The podcaster lives in the Middle East, specifically in Saudi Arabia, and is in her 20s. She was using Buzzsprout podcast hosting to publish her creator content in Apple and SoundCloud.

In compliance with conventional research ethics, the researcher obtained the interviewee's approval to record the interview on the Microsoft Teams app. The interview lasted around an hour and a half. The interviewer asked several questions regarding the podcaster's experience using the Buzzsprout platform. The questionnaire focused on the three aspects identified in the conceptual framework, with questions covering all major topics.

The researcher concentrated on a number of issues that are crucial to this discussion, specifically the pros and cons of Buzzsprout's platform and monthly subscription service strategy for novice podcasters. The interviewer asked the podcaster to explain and evaluate her financing methods to better understand her experiences as free or paid labor in the podcast business. Eventually, after interpreting the data of this case study, we are thus able to derive different models for monetizing and regulating podcasts.

##### 4.1 A Case of a Beginner Saudi Podcaster Producer: AlMehmadi's Story With Buzzsprout Podcast Hosting

Almehmadi started her podcast Mofaker in the middle of 2020, hoping to earn a living. Almehmadi's content is philosophical discussions regarding media. It is concerned with information about human self-identity, offering spiritual, intellectual, and subjective content. Many channels provide content specializing in self-development. However, the Mofaker podcast is distinct because it provides evidence, information, and professional ethical guidance from several sources. For example, in one episode, she investigated the concept of talents, presenting the AMIAS Arabic abilities scale and teaching listeners how to use it.

Some people use social media because they like to share their skills, whereas others use it to make money. According to Markman and Sawyer (2014), there are three reasons people start podcasting: public creativity, performance and promotion, and entertainment. Almehmadi mentioned the purpose of her podcast by saying, "I love listening to podcasts. After I graduated I tried to find work, but I could not because of the 2020 pandemic. I thought an online job was the best way to make money. I started an online course to learn more about podcasts and how to make money through it. Then I started my own podcast on the Buzzsprout platform."

## 5. Experimental Findings and Analysis

The internet has become a crucial distribution source for old content in a tangible form, mainly to better manage inventory. Because of the intangibility of media goods, it is more cost-effective to disseminate them in a nonphysical form online. As a result of online distribution, businesses will benefit from lower marginal costs and higher profit margins. As entrepreneurs have begun to focus on this aspect, several on-demand services have emerged (Elavarthi & Chitrapu, 2021).

Creating a social media account and publishing content are free. Independent podcasters are highly linked to blogging and social networking sites, according to previous studies (Markman, 2012; Markman & Sawyer, 2014; Millette, 2011; Spinelli & Dann, 2019; Wrather, 2016). A content creator on YouTube gets paid through YouTube based on high viewership and subscriptions. Additionally, YouTube pays more revenue to YouTubers who have more viewers in the United States and pays less for viewers in developing countries or regions such as the Middle East. In certain circumstances, podcast services require content creators to pay a monthly subscription fee to post content and publish episodes. In this paper, I will look into monetization models through the lens of a beginner podcaster from Saudi Arabia.

### 5.1 Podcast Regulations in the Middle East

The motivation, restriction, and monetization model that independent podcasters follow when becoming independent content creators on subscription membership platforms includes the following categories:

#### Category 1

This category includes Buzzsprout and Apple Podcasts' regulations for beginner podcasters in the Middle East.

According to Almehmadi, "When I created an account on Apple Podcasts, the registration was too complicated. Apple podcast took approximately five days to respond to accept or deny my podcast channel idea." Almehmadi added, "Registration on Apple Podcasts does not mean that I got a chance to publish my episodes directly. First, I needed my request to get approved. Apple sent me an email regarding accepting my order to start my podcast channel and publish my episodes" (see Figure 1). This indicates podcast platforms are not like other social media platforms in terms of creating an account. Apple must approve the type of content before a podcast begins, thereby partly determining the podcast content to be shared on its platform. Apple thus functions as an online gatekeeper because it is leading and dominating online podcast content.

Almehmadi also critiqued Apple Podcasts' communication feature by saying "Apple podcast did not allow the podcast producer to interact with listeners through comments. I was not able to reply on my followers comments regarding my episodes." Because interacting and communicating with their followers motivates content producers, this is a negative aspect of Apple Podcasts.

The scope of regulations that Apple Podcasts imposes on beginning independent podcasters is restrictive. However, when analyzing the interview, the researcher found that Apple Podcasts defines the type of content published by the producers before allowing them to access it. In addition, interaction is a part of communication that keeps the conversations beneficial and the listeners more loyal to the podcast because they will feel their comments are appreciated. However, producers are not able to interact with audiences in Apple Podcasts, which means producers might lose listeners.

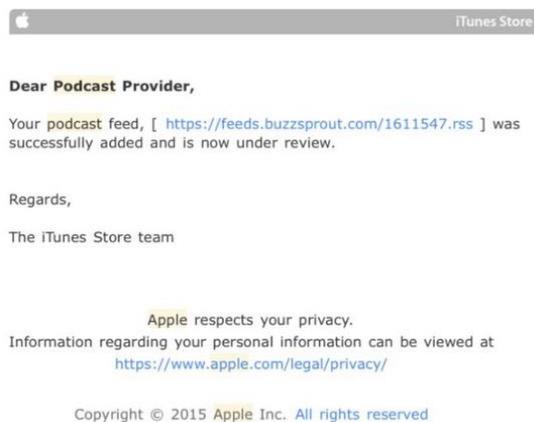


Figure 1. Apple Response on the Case of Almehmadi Regarding Her Podcast Channel Request

## 5.2 Media Corporation Oligopoly

### Category 2

This category includes how oligopoly domination in corporation media platforms controls the content of storytelling creators if they do not pay for a monthly subscription.

Almehmadi stated that “I got an email from Buzzsprout podcast hosting when I first used the free plan that said, ‘Episodes on free plans are only hosted for 90 days. This episode will be deleted on April 13, 2021, unless you [upgrade to a paid plan](#). Deleted episodes are removed from iTunes, Buzzsprout, your website, and anywhere else you have shared them’” (Almehmadi personal interview, 2022). The Buzzsprout podcast oligopoly is the market for hosting a podcast. Based on Almehmadi’s experience, the free option on Buzzsprout was implicit. Buzzsprout’s purpose is to make a profit from subscribers. Almehmadi added, “After using the free plan for a month, I upgraded my plan to three hours duration time for each month. However, the Buzzsprout platform notified me that if I miss one monthly payment, all my episodes will be deleted.” Almehmadi added, “In my third month I did not pay. I tried to access my account, but I could not. All my information was deleted. All my episodes were deleted just because I did not pay for a month.” Buzzsprout’s monopoly on cutting off content for payment reasons and lack of supporting independent podcasters may harm the quality and diversity of content on podcast platforms.

Oligopoly domination of corporation media platforms controls podcast content if creators do not pay for a monthly subscription. In addition to the monthly payment plan, Buzzsprout podcast hosting defines a time limit for uploading episodes. In addition, beginner independent podcasters, who work to create content and want to make a living from their podcasts, end up with all their content and information deleted. From the interview, the researcher found that oligopolistic corporation media platforms do not support beginner independent podcasters. In this case, Buzzsprout also makes money through users and producers because of its dominance in the market. Furthermore, Buzzsprout is able to delete content and function as an online gatekeeper.

## 5.3 Podcaster Monetization

### Category 3

This category includes how podcasters use platforms to earn income and invent their own methods and techniques to drive monetization.

Almehmadi described her experience with Buzzsprout by saying, “Buzzsprout helped me to get more subscribers. My listeners were not only from Saudi Arabia but also from Israel, Pakistan, and other countries in the Middle East. All my episodes were published in Google Podcasts, Apple Podcasts, and SoundCloud. I used my social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to reshare my episode to get more listeners.” However, that did not help much because she did not have many followers on social media. Social media features help podcasters monetize their channels. Almehmadi admitted that “I made a mistake not promoting my podcast through Twitter and Instagram.” That means podcast producers need to find alternative ways to promote their podcasts financially. One of the best alternatives is to promote podcasts through social media feature promotion. Almehmadi said, “I was supposed to take

courses in marketing and affiliate marketing. Creating a podcast depends not only on creating content and episodes; it is about how to sell your podcast.” She added “My voice and skills did not help me to continue in this field because I needed to pay and give more time. However, I had no rewards.” Marketing is now an essential part of selling products because of how social media platforms work. Podcasters work hard to create content; however, they are not always able to find the best ways to market their channels.

According to Alotaibi, (2024), the long-standing advertising sector has quickly adapted to technological advances. Advertising can hinder podcasters’ creativity by forcing producers to make content that supports the advertised products or services. Almehmadi emphasized that made her avoid advertising in her channel, saying, “providing more ads in my podcast would restrict my content.” According to Neumark’s (2006) research on cross-media (radio and internet), listeners interact with information differently across media platforms, indicating that new media platforms such as podcasts must be developed differently and not just thought of as downloadable radio. Even in the media age, advertising is still one of the essential monetization methods that helps podcasters maintain their content production.

According to Hovgaard and Kuhn (2019), securing funding for independent podcasts within a limited language area and with a tiny audience is challenging, particularly when commencing without any existing listeners or social media following. In the face of such a big task, the fit bottomed girls podcast has performed well. By combining many cash streams, they were able to earn full-time pay (sponsorships, money from live events, selling items, and producing a book). Sponsorships, such as the one with Organic Basics, are their most reliable source of income (Hovgaard & Kuhn, 2019). Celebrities and former radio personalities in the United States and Spanish-speaking countries monetize their podcasts through crowdfunding and sponsorships (Bonini, 2015; Fernandez, 2014; Fernandez & Gallego, 2015).

## 6. Conclusion

This study has offered a comprehensive examination of the economic pressures faced by novice independent podcasters in the Middle East, with a particular focus on the case of a Saudi podcaster using Buzzsprout. It has highlighted the challenges and opportunities in podcast monetization, regulation, and the intricate relationship between content creators and hosting platforms in the evolving landscape of digital media.

Podcast platforms like Buzzsprout and Apple Podcasts exert significant influence over content creators, often requiring subscriptions and conforming to specific content guidelines, which can limit the creative freedom and outreach of independent podcasters. The case study of Almehmadi’s experience with Buzzsprout demonstrates the delicate balance that podcasters must maintain between creative independence and platform dependence. Her journey illustrates the broader challenges faced by podcasters who must navigate a complex web of financial constraints, platform policies, and audience engagement strategies.

Additionally, this study sheds light on the growing importance of social media in promoting podcast content. Almehmadi’s experience underscores the need for strategic marketing and audience engagement, highlighting the potential of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram in expanding the reach of podcast content.

## 7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research, while insightful, limits its focus to a single case study. Future studies could benefit from a broader sample that includes podcasters from various parts of the Middle East, encompassing a range of experiences and perspectives. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the regional podcasting landscape and its unique challenges.

Moreover, comparative studies across different global regions would be valuable in understanding how geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic factors influence podcasting practices. Such studies could explore how podcasters in various parts of the world navigate platform regulations, monetization models, and audience engagement.

There is also a rich avenue for future research in examining the impact of different podcast hosting platforms on practices of monetization and regulation. Investigating how various platforms support or hinder the growth of independent podcasters would offer valuable insights into the dynamics of the global podcasting ecosystem.

Finally, further research could delve into evolving audience engagement strategies, particularly in the context of digital marketing and social media promotions. Understanding how podcasters can effectively leverage these tools to enhance their reach and monetization potential would be highly beneficial.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of the complex economic pressures faced by novice independent podcasters in the Middle East. It underscores the need for supportive frameworks and strategies that can enable these creators to thrive in a rapidly changing digital landscape. As podcasting continues to grow globally, it is

imperative to continue exploring and addressing the unique challenges faced by podcasters in different regions, thereby enriching our understanding of this dynamic medium.

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