The Media Makes the Winner: A Field Experiment on Presidential Debates

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Abstract

To evaluate how perceptions of presidential debates are structured by the media, we describe a three-wave field experiment in which subjects were incentivized to watch portions of a presidential debate and post-debate television coverage. We find that post-debate coverage has strong effects on candidate evaluations, with subjects' perceptions moving in the direction of the ideological slant of the channel they were assigned to watch on. Though these effects evolve over time, with subjects across conditions coming to express beliefs in line with the media consensus, they do not disappear altogether; indeed, they are still apparent a week later. The study offers novel field experimental evidence for the literatures on presidential debates and campaign effects. [1]

We report preliminary results from a three-wave field experiment conducted around the first presidential debate of 2016. The experiment was designed to evaluate how the mass public evaluates debate contestants, and the role that media plays in their evaluations. We find that, when subjects watched post-debate coverage, their perceptions moved in the direction of the ideological slant of the channel they watched on. Those assigned to watch post-debate coverage on MSNBC were generally more favorable to the Democratic nominee than those who did not watch post-debate coverage on the same channel. Likewise, those who watched post-debate coverage on Fox News were generally more favorable to the Republican nominee. A follow-up survey administered a week after shows that the effects of being exposed to post-debate coverage persist.

1 Extant Literature

Among other subjects, presidential debates have been used to study the possibility of political learning, the possibility of campaign effects, and the possibility of media effects. This is hardly surprising; after all, there is nothing else like the debates in American politics. Overall television ratings of the debates have climbed steadily upward since their inception in 1960 (Holz, Akin and Jamieson 2016). Indeed, the debate studied in this paper attracted a new record number of viewers.

Conclusions about the effects of debates have varied. In their wide-ranging study of campaign effects, Hillygus and Jackman (2003) find that presidential debates *can* affect subsequent attitudes, but not for each candidate equally. Broadly, debates occasion attitude change in ways similar to party conventions. In the 2000 election, the debates solidified support for Bush. Yet the changes debates bring about are often small in size. Erikson and Wlezien (2012) describe them as making "a bit" of a difference, and leaving less of a trace on the mass public than the party conventions.

Making use of available observational data, Holbrook (1999) demonstrates that presidential debates—especially the first debate—have historically had significant effects on political learning. Such a finding intersects with Jamieson and Birdsell (1990), who view debates as essential to an educated citizenry. Also focusing on the first debate, this time of the 2008 election, Nwokora and Brown (2015) show that the media converged around the idea that Barack Obama had "won." In his study of presidential debates, Schroder (2000) emphasizes the importance of post-debate coverage. As the debate content is reduced to a highlight and impressions are amplified by media commentators, "A parallel version of the debate thus emerges, one that may overtake viewers' original impression of what they saw." This finding echoes the conclusion of Fridkin et al (2007). In an important experimental study of the third 2004 debate, they observe both the debate itself and

the post-debate commentary as important sources of influence on citizens' candidate evaluations.

To understand, precisely, how this "parallel version" of the debate, formed by post-debate coverage, relates to initial impressions, we employ an encouragement design. Long a staple of the medical literature, encouragement designs have only recently come to the fore of political science. Sovey and Green (2012) describe the logic of the design and apply it to understanding the effects of Fox News. Barnes, Feller, Haselswerdt and Porter (2016) use a similar design to understand the attitudinal effects of a new policy initiative.

The present study also intervenes in a long-running debate about the effects of ideologically-slanted news channels. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) exploit the introduction of Fox news to the cable marketplace to understand the channe's effects on vote choice. They show that the network increased Republican vote share between .4 and .7%. Likewise, Enamorado and Clinton (2014) shows that Fox News had a pronounced, if delayed, impact on Republican roll-call voting. The evidence thus suggests that watching important news events on an ideologically slanted network can have important political consequences.

2 Experimental Design

The experiment worked as follows. For the first wave, in the week prior to the first presidential debate, we surveyed roughly 2,000 Americans about their political preferences, planned vote choice and media diet, while also gathering standard demographic information. Those who reported not having access to cable news were excluded from the study. With this data, we block-randomized by party affiliation and media diet. On the day before the debate, we contacted all subjects and presented them with their random assignment. The conditions were as follows:

- *Fox News Post Game* Members were told to watch the entirety of the debate on Fox News, and keep watching for thirty minutes afterwards on Fox News.

- *Fox News, No Post Game* Members were told to watch the entirety of the debate on Fox News, and stop watching as soon as it was over.

- *MSNBC Post Game* Members were told to watch the entirety of the debate on MSNBC and keep watching for thirty minutes afterwards on MSNBC.

- *MSNBC, No Post Game* Members were told to watch the entirety of the debate on MSNBC, and stop watching as soon as it was over.

- *C-SPAN* Members were told to watch the entirety of the debate on C-SPAN and stop watching as soon as it was over.

In this design, those assigned to C-SPAN were the pure control. We assigned subjects to watch the debate, and the debate alone, on MSNBC and Fox News to better identify potential demand effects.

To increase the probability that subjects complied with their assignment, we explained to them that they would be entered into a $400 raffle for completing the study. As a matter of design, we did not state whether eligibility for the raffle would be contingent upon compliance (it was not); doing so, we feared, would have generated unwelcome demand effects. To bolster the credibility of the raffle, we emphasized that it would be awarded by a university we are affiliated with. We reminded subjects of their assignment, and of the raffle, in the hours before the debate. We made clear to them that we would send them a link to the survey shortly after the debate concluded.

We administered Wave 2 on the night of the debate, approximately one hour after the debate had finished. It asked subjects to evaluate each candidate along standard dimensions, to evaluate the debate moderator, and to describe their media diet during the debate itself (e.g., were they also on Facebook while watching the debate). We measured compliance in multiple ways. First, we asked subjects to answer substantive questions about the debate content. Then, we presented subjects with a set of faces of television personalities, and asked them to select those who had been on their assigned channel. Those assigned only to watch only the debate should only have selected the face of the debate moderator. Those assigned to watch the post-game on a specific channel should only have selected the faces of those who actually appeared on their channel during the assigned time frame.

After Wave 2, we randomly selected the winner of the raffle. We alerted the winner; to maintain our credibility as researchers, we messaged all other subjects to tell them that a winner had been chosen, and that winner was not them.

We administered Wave 3 a week after the debate. In recontacting subjects, we did not specify the previous waves they had completed as part of this study. Subjects answered questions about their perceptions of each candidate's debate performance; which candidate the media had declared the winner; the extent to which they agreed with the media consensus; and whether the debate moderator had been biased or unfair. We also asked them questions about the conversations related to the debate they had had in the preceding week.

All surveys were administered over Amazon's Mechanical Turk, a popular tool that abets low-

cost data collection (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz 2012). We turn the standard research concern about Mechanical Turk—that its subjects are overly compliant—on its head, leveraging their compliance so that they may uptake an unusually complicated and demanding treatment.

3   Results Summary

Across a variety of measures, we observe significant differences between treatment groups, both immediately after and one week following the debate. Generally, subjects assigned to watch post-debate coverage moved in the direction of the purported ideological slant of their assigned channel. These effects were robust across party affiliation, and in some cases were amplified by it.

In Figure 1, we present estimates of how each candidate was perceived across treatment groups, immediately after the debate's conclusion. Respondents were presented with a standard battery of evaluative dimensions, such as whether they perceive that the candidate in question cares about people like them, was persuasive, and appeared presidential. They responded on a 0-100 feeling thermometer.

In Figure 2, we display immediate post-debate estimates of who respondents perceived to have "won" the debate, separated by their party ID. While Clinton was perceived to have "won" across conditions and in many cases across party affiliations, examine the results for Republicans. Republicans who watched the post-debate coverage on MSNBC were more favorable to Clinton than Republicans in any other treatment group.

Consider what demand effects might likely have looked like in this context. If respondents were anticipating that we were interested in the effects of being exposed to an ideological channel, it is unlikely that Republicans who watched just the debate on MSNBC would be distinct from those who watched the debate and the post-debate coverage on MSNBC. But this is not the case. So far as we can tell, the post-debate coverage mattered on its own.

In Figure 3, we return to the same question, but our results here reflect responses collected a week later. Again, pay attention to Republican responses. Once again, a large number of those who watched the MSNBC post-debate coverage viewed Clinton as the winner—a larger number of Republicans than of those in any other treatment group.

In Figure 4, we illustrate subjects' compliance with their treatment assignment. Specifically, we display whether subjects asked to select images of the television personalities who appeared on their assigned network did indeed make selections that reflected actual appearances. Not all images we presented to subjects were of personalities who actually appeared; some were figures associated

with the network who did not show up in the half hour after the debate. Again, we observe high levels of compliance, with subjects willing and able to select the faces of personalities who actually appeared, while largely avoiding making false positive selections.
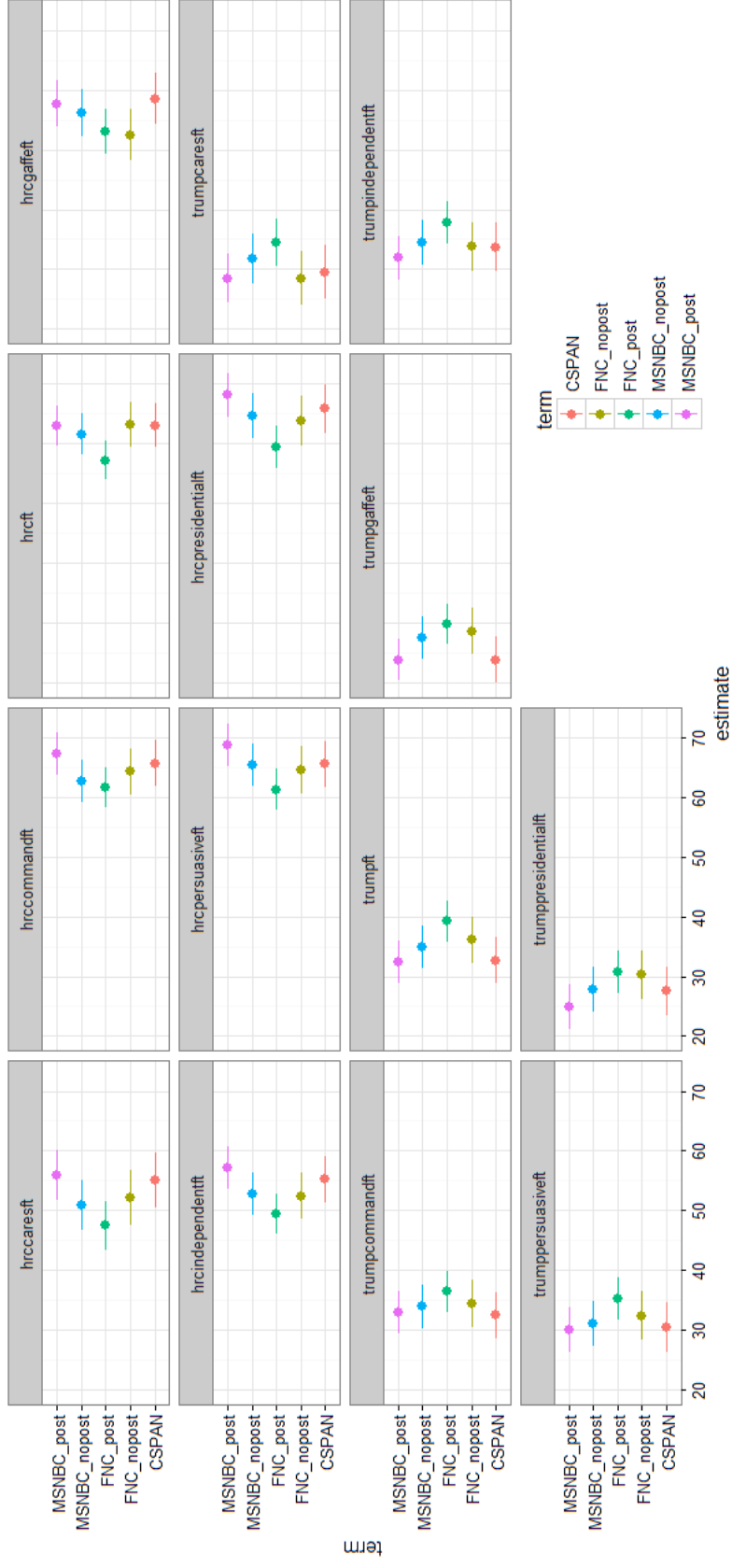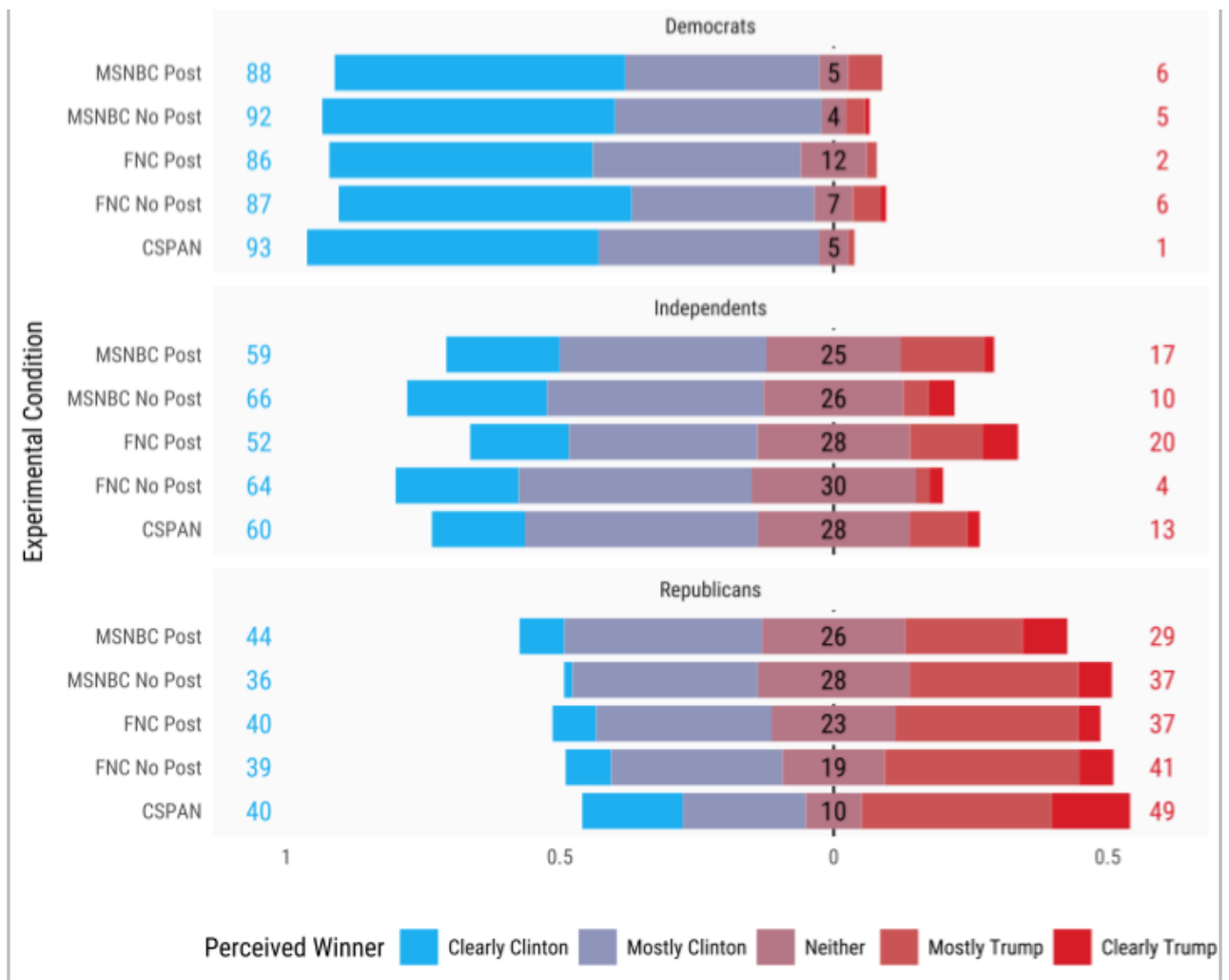
Figure 1: Post-Debate Differences

Figure 2: Wave 2: Post-Debate Winners

Wave 2 Perceived Debate Winner, by condition and partisanship

Democrats

	Clinton	Trump
MSNBC Post	98	2
MSNBC No Post	96	4
FNC Post	93	7
FNC No Post	91	9
CSPAN	100	

Independents

	Clinton	Trump
MSNBC Post	74	26
MSNBC No Post	86	14
FNC Post	73	27
FNC No Post	91	9
CSPAN	71	29

Republicans

	Clinton	Trump
MSNBC Post	59	41
MSNBC No Post	49	51
FNC Post	44	56
FNC No Post	39	61
CSPAN	48	52

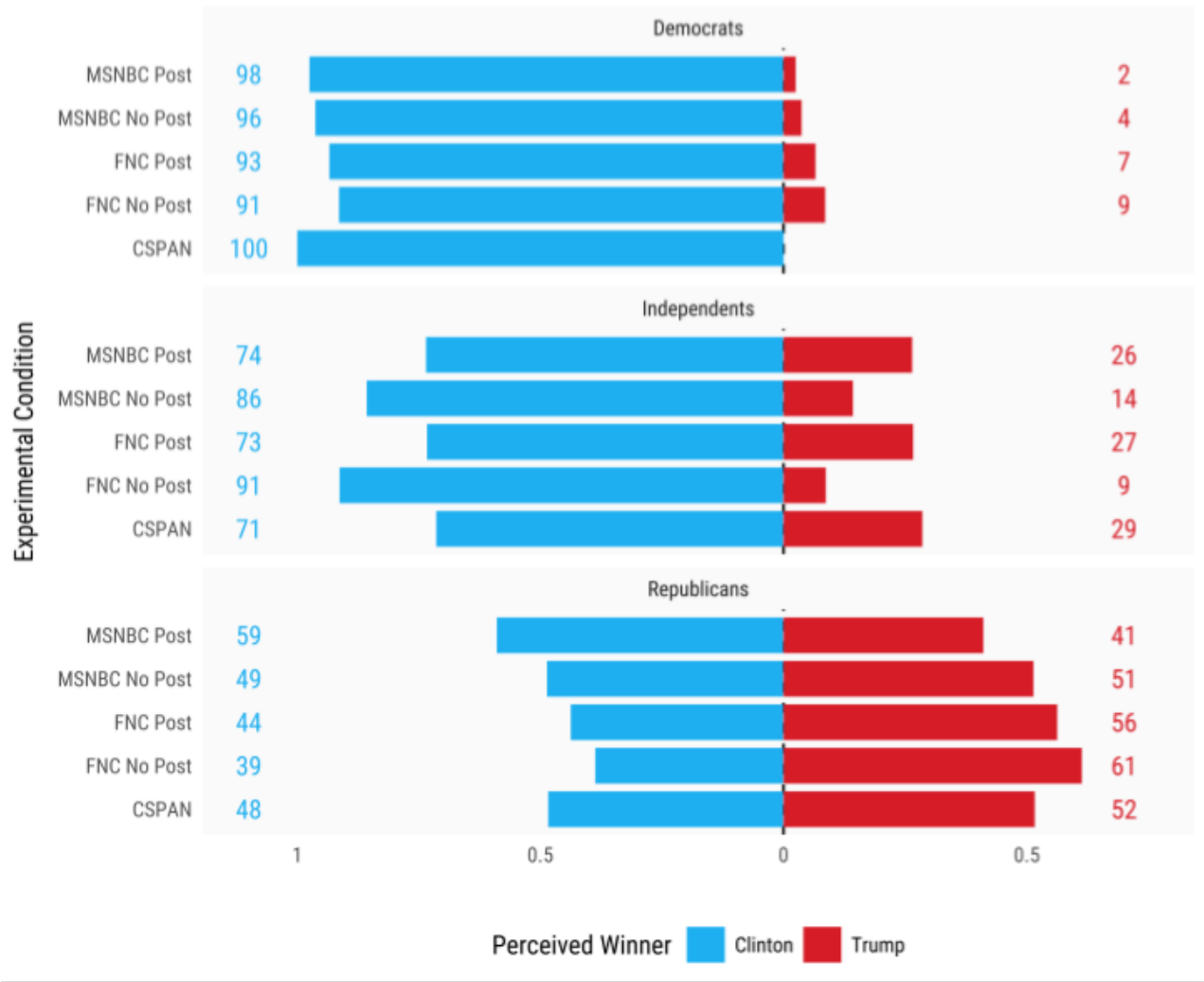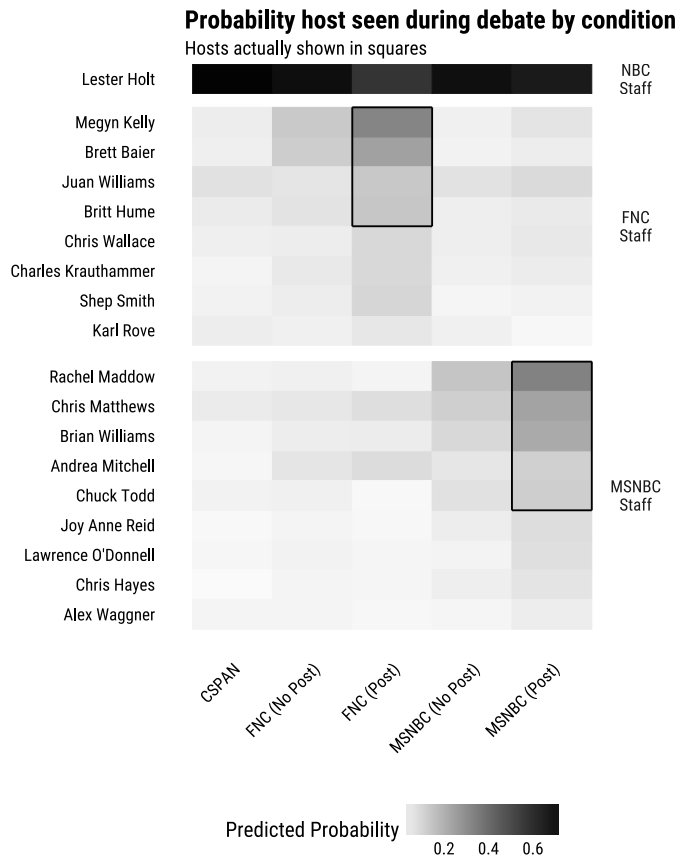Perceived Winner ■ Clinton ■ Trump

Figure 3: Wave 3: One Week Out

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Figure 4: Manipulation Check Results

4   Discussion

Researchers are often concerned that Mechanical Turk subjects are overly compliant and responsive tor requester demands. Our study turns that concern on its head, incentivizing respondents to uptake an unusually complicated and demanding treatment. Our data show that subjects did indeed comply with the treatment itself. We believe, however, that their responses do not indicate demand effects. Far from it; if they had, the responses of those who watched just the debate on MSNBC and just the debate on Fox would be distinguishable. That they are in fact indistinct from each other—and that distinct responses only emerge between those assigned to watch the post-debate coverage—shows that while the treatment was uptaken, responses were not structured in anticipation of requester needs. To believe otherwise is to assume that Mechanical Turkers are intimately aware of the academic literature on media effects. We find this assumption highly implausible.

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