Article

Television Studies, We Need to Talk about "Binge-Viewing"

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Abstract

This article argues that a crucial task for a renewed investment in television audience research now is to investigate the range of practices currently covered by the label of binge-viewing. Notwithstanding the widespread application of the concept of binge-viewing within both industry commentary and academic research, this article will suggest that the concept has reached the point where it has outlived its usefulness for television studies. Rather than staying with what has become an extremely imprecise term, the argument continues, television studies should turn its attention toward generating more located and nuanced observational accounts of the evolving "cultures of use" within consumer households in order to develop a more accurate and usable set of terms to describe what is actually happening in domestic spaces as people watch television.

Keywords

television studies, media studies, audience studies, binge-viewing, media consumption, television cultures

The state of audience research in television studies has gained increased attention over the last couple of years (Gray 2017). A special edition of *Television and New Media* (Das 2019) featured contributions from a number of scholars, including Kim Schrøder and Sonia Livingstone, calling for a renewed investment in audience studies. Livingstone (2019), in particular, reminded us of the continuing relevance of the methods associated with the founding traditions of ethnographic television audience studies

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through such work as Dorothy Hobson's (1982) study of *Crossroads*, David Morley's (1980) analysis of the *Nationwide* audience, and Morley's (1986) *Family Television*. The present article, in endorsing the call for the kind of ethnographic research Livingstone cited, argues that a crucial task for television audience research now is to investigate the range of practices currently covered by the label of binge-viewing (also known as binge-watching)—terms that have become interchangeable in the research literature. Notwithstanding the widespread application of the concept of binge-viewing within both industry commentary and academic research on reception, production, and distribution, this article suggests that the concept has reached the point where it has outlived its usefulness for television studies. Rather than staying with what has become an extremely "rubbery" and imprecise term, the argument continues, television studies should turn its attention toward generating more located and nuanced observational accounts of the evolving "cultures of use"[1] within consumer households in order to develop a more accurate and useable set of terms to describe what is actually happening in domestic spaces as people watch television.

While it has become customary for the academic and industry audience literature to assume that the evolving cultures of use are taking us toward very different behaviors than those that obtained in the past, once we turn our attention away from specifically fan-based behavior, or from the use of mobile devices, there is very little evidence upon which to base that assumption. This does not necessarily mean that such an evolution is not under way, however; rather, it reflects the fact that the contemporary dynamics of everyday television consumption within the household—both in specific zones of consumption and in general—are largely a mystery to us at the moment. Indeed, as Elizabeth Evans (2019) suggested in the discussion generated from her paper at the 2019 Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) conference in Seattle, it is possible that, for many consumers, very little has changed at all. An earlier chapter Evans co-authored with Paul McDonald (2014, 165) reported findings from focus groups and questionnaires that suggested "traditional attitudes and behaviours" around television were persisting despite the significant changes in access, technology, and content. More emphatically, Gerald Sim (2018) challenges the standard narrative that has appointment viewing in decline, while also rejecting the proposition of consumer autonomy which underpins that narrative. He describes the presumption of increased consumer sovereignty "in the realm of programming decisions" as a "manufactured fantasy" (Sim 2018, 193).

At present, we do not really know if any of that is the case and to some extent the concept of binge-viewing has become a handy proxy for the proper development of that kind of knowledge. We can all agree that such a practice exists, and that it will likely affect many people's experience of television in some way or other, and to a greater or lesser degree. On the other hand, and notwithstanding the constant reference to binge-viewing as an established practice, there is no agreement on how it should be defined, nor on how to assess its impact on the general experience of what Rhiannon Bury (2018) has called "Television 2.0." While there is certainly plenty of evidence of technological changes to the processes through which television consumption occurs—in terms of the devices used, the platforms employed, and the catalogs of content

available—there is much less evidence which can tell us about audiences' experience of watching TV in their own domestic spaces, and how their current practices of television consumption are imbricated into their everyday lives. This is in a context in which we are also experiencing considerable change in the normative social definitions of these domestic spaces and in the make-up of the households which inhabit them.

There is some progress, however. A notable element in much of the recent work in television studies which actually has focused on audiences is a concentration on securing audience responses to what are quite fundamental questions about their current consumption practices: working toward developing a body of empirical evidence to document and, eventually, understand the changing cultures of use. Typical are those questions asking respondents what they choose to watch, with whom, where, and why (Evans 2011). Next, are questions about audiences' choices of device, seeking in particular information about to what extent respective devices might be used in distinctive or demarcated ways—are they allocated specific purposes within the domestic media ecology, for instance (Muller and Roser 2017)? An increasingly important set of questions aims to complement or in some cases to challenge industry-sourced information; this relates to the manner in which respondents make use of different platforms or systems of delivery where their "connected viewing" ranges across free-to-air broadcast, cable, time-shifted, streaming, DVD or boxsets, or to Internet-distributed television more broadly (Holt and Sanson 2014). Finally, there are the more social questions about how choices of content are made within the household, as well as about practices of sharing viewing experiences beyond the household which will help address our understanding of the role that social media play in creating what Yu-Kei Tse (2014) calls "social togetherness."

Furthermore, there is an emerging, and welcome, tendency to explore ways of better understanding contemporary television's place in the domestic moral economy (Silverstone 1994): some of the most productive recent research has explicitly located analyses of television use within the context of domestic relations and everyday life (Bury 2018; Evans 2011; Jenner 2018). It is still early days in this area, though. Elizabeth Evans (2011, 14), for example, makes it clear that the research which went into her *Transmedia Television* had a particular emphasis on audience attitudes and opinions rather than on patterns of behavior or use. Evans' work in this space has continued to be important, with the project she is currently developing focused on learning about the patterns of "engagement" evident in those she describes as "passive viewers," a term employed slightly ironically to distinguish what we might think of as the "average" viewer from those who are described as "active" or "participatory" in the ways usually identified with fan-based behaviors (Evans 2019; Evans et al. 2017). As an indication of the limits of this tendency so far, however, it should be noted that all of the research cited above makes use of surveys, focus groups or interviews, rather than direct or located observation, as primary research tools. Consequently, a gap remains in the research field for more observational or ethnographic work which sets out to learn more about how television is now integrated into the practices of everyday life, not only at an individual level, but also within the domestic social spaces of the household.

As noted at the beginning of this article, in the post-broadcast era that gap has been occupied largely by poorly defined descriptors of audience behaviors. It is in this context that binge-viewing has taken on a special prominence as the most widely used point of reference for the contemporary changes in consumers' viewing practices; there have been other contenders, it is true (e.g., Bury 2018; Perks 2015), but none has had the traction of binge-viewing. As the next section argues, therefore, there is reason to believe that it is time television studies more vigorously explored the complications of, and indeed alternatives to, this term. Television studies needs to develop research projects that will address the challenge posed by Amanda Lotz et al. (2018) "provocation" on "internet-distributed television" that of coming up with a more robust terminology to describe what is happening in front of our domestic screens. Having served the industry as a means of branding changes to practices of delivery, and television studies as a placeholder for the closer analysis of changes in consumption, not only must we define binge-viewing more precisely but we also need to develop new descriptors for the various behaviors and practices which do not fit that definition but which are currently allowed to be subsumed under the term.

The Problem with Binge Viewing

Mareike Jenner has reminded us of the history of the concept of binge-viewing as a branding device for Netflix in its pre-streaming days, when it was used to promote the consumption of its box-sets of DVDs. Netflix, says Jenner (2018, 111), "came to the conclusion that audiences preferred watching a full disc in one sitting, rather than viewing DVDs as ancillary product for fans." Their "deduction" that this "could interest more than just a few audience segments could have gone nowhere if it had not actively pushed the terminology and used the concept to explain itself." Furthermore, as Jenner goes on to argue, "unlike what some of the cultural logics surrounding Netflix may suggest, binge watching is neither a 'pure' nor a 'natural' way of watching television content." Rather, she continues, "it was deliberately marketed as such" (Jenner 2018, 118), and extremely successfully.

The breadth of cultural currency the term has acquired is notable. It stands as an example of industry promotional strategies installing a terminology that has been taken up, initially quite uncritically, within academic research and analysis and then applied on a scale that ultimately overstates its provenance and significance. (Other examples of this kind of phenomenon might include Chris Anderson's [2006] theory of "the long tail.") Yet, as noted earlier, it remains the only term in general use which is specifically tasked with identifying the behaviors that have sprung up as audiences have migrated from free-to-air, or from free-to-air plus cable, to engagement with an expanding range of other platforms and especially to streaming services and "internet-distributed television" more generally. The breadth of application is such that it is no longer clear what binge-viewing actually describes other than a general tendency. That has been widely noted, as numerous scholars have questioned what actually qualifies as binge-viewing: is it viewing two or more consecutive episodes, three or more, or is there some other magic number of episodes involved? For Lotz et al. (2018, n.p.),

none of that is good enough: rather, they argue, the use of the "term 'bingeing'" to describe viewing of consecutive episodes—whether two or ten—diminishes the utility of the term and "such varied behaviours" warrant "more precise understanding."

Jenner (2018, 111) points out that "defining binge viewing can be difficult" before going on to outline the problems she has in mind. In the first place, she argues, the importance assigned to the number of episodes that need to be watched in order to establish a "binge" creates a problem because "there are different ways to approach this issue":

> Binge-watching can be measured in relation to subjective viewing behaviour, as a number set by Netflix or other media institutions, or in comparison to what linear television allows for one sitting (see Jenner, 2017). None of these are necessarily practical means to define binge-watching. Establishing binge-watching as "excessive" compared to everyday viewing behaviour is almost impossible: "everyday" media behaviour likely changes over a lifetime . . . [T]he number of episodes needed to constitute a binge is subjective and heavily dependent on individual circumstances. (Jenner 2018, 110)

As she notes, viewers may also "engage in different forms of binge-watching, but still use the same terms to describe them," and we have already seen how this blurring of definition in consumer practice is reflected in the research literature.

Bury claims that what actually "constitutes a televisual binge has never been clarified," and she chooses to use an alternative and older[2] term, "marathon viewing." This choice, though, is not necessarily because marathon viewing is more clearly defined but because it avoids the "negative connotation of [binge viewing], for example, binge eating and binge drinking" (Bury 2018, 86). These connotations open up another dimension of the discussion of binge-viewing which places it within yet another context: within discussions of addiction and impaired cognitive development. It has to be said that this seems unhelpful if it is meant to serve as the primary frame of analysis for such a widespread set of behaviors, but it is not surprising. Any significant shift in the practices employed within popular culture—especially those which are thought to allocate more power to the consumer—is likely to be criticized as a challenge to "culture as we know it," and the negative connotations embedded in the binge metaphor (e.g., addiction, excess, gluttony) do chime with some "historical attitudes about TV" (McCormick 2017, 103). In an academic extension of this tendency, there is a small subfield of analysis from within the social and cognitive sciences that considers binge-viewing in relation to pathologies of addiction (Snider 2017). That said, it is far more common to find binge-viewing given a much more positive reading despite the connotations of the metaphor. When connected to rhetorics of consumer control, and associated with the discourses of "quality" that have accompanied the promotion of "binge-worthy" programming, this more positive account of binge-viewing represents it as a "productive, often deliberate, and potentially transformative mode of viewing" (McCormick 2017, 104) and one that is well suited to the artistically elevated medium television has become.

Contradictions abound in this space. While the comments above demonstrate that there is significant variation in how binge-viewing is understood and defined, the research literature in general reveals the existence of a consistent discourse of

universalism in how the practice of binge-viewing tends to be described. Mostly, it is offered to us as a singular global phenomenon; as if, in understanding the transnational audiences so frequently seen as the core practitioners of binge-viewing, there are few relevant regional or local variations to be considered. The kinds of enabling conditions that Ramon Lobato (2018), for instance, outlines as essential for the success of transnational streaming services in each market they approach—access to domestic space, disposable income, the required level of infrastructure, a particular kind of consumer culture and regulatory environment, and so on—are largely left out of the picture. In this regard, television scholars seem to have temporarily forgotten some of the important lessons of the recent past as television studies has "de-westernized" and "de-centred" itself (Curran and Park 2000): the need to "continually recognise and interrogate profound differences in how digital media is deployed, organised, monetized, used, adopted understood, and evaluated across local, international, or regional contexts" (Evans and McDonald 2014, 159). The corrective needed here is a body of detailed, located, and empirical investigations of the social practice of consuming television within particular cultural contexts or "zones of consumption" (Pertierra and Turner 2013).[3]

Rather than such research dominating accounts of binge-viewing, as one might have hoped, the most curious aspect of television studies' examination of binge-viewing is how little research has involved observing actual audience behavior and how much of the discussion of binge-viewing has been prosecuted instead through the analysis of a select group of television texts, most commonly *Breaking Bad* and *House of Cards.* This is especially notable in discussions of the streaming giant, Netflix. Consider, for example, Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey's (2017) co-edited collection, The Netflix Effect, one of the most substantial contributions to the literature on Netflix to date. Its chapters are organized into three parts under the headings of "Technology, Innovation and Control," "Changing Entertainment," and "The Business of Media Convergence." There are no chapters which present audience research as such, but there are three chapters which deal directly with binge-viewing, and one which deals with binge-viewing within the larger context of disruption and the media economy. Of the three chapters which deal with binge-viewing directly, one is a piece of textual analysis that focuses on *House of Cards* and reads the invitations to binge-viewing off the narrative attributes of the text (McCormick 2017); the second deals with the "cognitive psychological effects" of binge-watching while also reflecting upon the author's personal consumption (of the series *Damages*, initially) (Snider 2017); and the third discusses the creation of a genre of Netflix "noir" that largely references (again) *House of Cards* (Biesen 2017).

There is a clear provocation for this textualist tendency, of course, in the historical connection usually drawn between the popularity of the practice of binge-viewing and the success of "quality" television of the kind identified with HBO, AMC and Netflix (the informal canon here includes *House of Cards, Breaking Bad, Mad Men, Orange is the New Black*, and *The Wire*, among others). It is not at all unreasonable that the rise of binge-viewing should be examined through analyses of these texts, and in particular by way of an analysis that investigates what might be the triggers for binge-viewing, for what makes these texts "addictive." That is certainly worth investigating and there

is a substantial body of work—including much of the research cited in this article—that takes us a long way into that project. The puzzling element is not that this kind of work has been undertaken, but rather that there has been so little examination of the practice of binge-viewing at the point of consumption as well.

What would be the issues we might want to address at this point of consumption? The early adoption of binge-viewing tended to be associated with what we might consider a consumption "event," a weekend marathon around a box-set DVD, or taking the opportunity to watch a whole series immediately after it becomes available online, for instance. Years later, it is worth asking if this relatively "active" mode of engagement continues to be the definitive mode of binge-watching, or merely one among many more or less active, and more or less intense, modes of engagement that involve the on-demand viewing of multiple episodes in one sitting. There is reason to argue that what we might once have designated as binge-viewing—again, the viewing of multiple consecutive episodes in one sitting (let's leave the number of episodes aside for the moment)—has now become part of everyday social practice within many households. For them now, perhaps, it is just how they "watch television."

Elsewhere, I have discussed the outcomes of a research project into the dynamics of cultural consumption in Australia, "Australian Cultural Fields" (Turner 2018, 2019),[4] where a series of interviews revealed just how rapidly Australian television audiences had transitioned from a diet of free-to-air and subscription television, to a diet that had been significantly changed by the introduction of Netflix to the Australian market. This was not a transition marked by a sudden embrace of binge-viewing—that practice was already established, although the capacity to engage in it was relatively limited prior to Netflix's arrival. Rather, the interviews suggested that the shift in consumption was largely motivated by the expansion of choice that streaming provided as a welcome alternative to the content available on linear free-to-air, and by the absence of advertising (subscription television services in Australia, as well as all the commercial broadcasters, carry significant amounts of advertising). What was especially notable about the manner of its adoption in a number of cases was how easily the consumption of Netflix had been integrated into existing patterns of behavior within the household, and these were patterns which included the consumption of linear television and the use of broadcasters' catch-up services. Netflix is now part of the daily menu of television choices for 50 percent of the Australian television market. The Australian Cultural Fields research found that the manner in which this range of choices was addressed in everyday patterns of consumption varied significantly, particularly across age groups, and so the results could not be used to support any kind of general or universalising claims. However, it certainly did raise what now must be a key question: what happens to the concept of binge-viewing once it is no longer connected to an event or to moments of deliberately intensified engagement, and when its distinctive mode of consumption has become contingent, quotidian, and simply "normal"?

This is the territory of Evans' "passive viewers": those who are engaged in what she and her SCMS co-panelists described as the "mundane" experience of "simply watching content."[5] If a household of "passive viewers'" regular television diet was made up of a mixture of free to air and multiple episodes of streamed content, and if that diet

varied according to what was available and to the levels of engagement generated by particular series consumed online, how useful would it be to describe that set of behaviors as "binge-viewing"? At the moment, we have no real alternative to that description and yet it seems to significantly misrepresent what would be happening in such a scenario, and it would seem likely to be a very common scenario. Furthermore, it seems wise for us to acknowledge at least the possibility that much of the industry hype around Netflix and disruption, the decline of linear viewing and so on, may suffer from inflated levels of enthusiasm similar to those which marked the early accounts of user participation online. Without empirical research to provide us with evidence, much of what our field has assumed to be the case remains simply that, an assumption. The reality could well be markedly different.

Indeed, Katrin Muller and Jutta Roser's (2017) research suggests that this could be so. They were investigating the thesis that convergent media would displace "classic" or traditional media in the German households they studied. They not only studied television, but also included radio and newspapers as part of what they called "the media repertoires" of the households involved. Muller and Roser's (2017, 61) "ethnographically-oriented" study which used interviews, written "profiles" from their subjects, and "home site inspections" as sources of information, found that the media repertoires of their subjects "had not been transformed radically" over their research period (between 2011 and 2013). (And, it is true that much may have changed since the research was conducted.) "Classic media had not been removed from the domestic media repertoire [but] . . . instead, old and new media were coexisting in the common household" (Muller and Roser 2017, 62). They did, however, identify three different patterns of domestic media use: those primarily focused on classic media, those primarily focused on diverse media (integrating the Internet with other media), and those primarily focused on online media. The group with the most diverse media repertoire was the largest, and the researchers concluded that this was the group most likely to grow. Importantly, while finding that new media were "added on" to existing media practice—a finding supported by a long history in media studies—they also found strong evidence that media use was closely articulated to the demands and practices of everyday life within the household. That is, "new media are only integrated if their use fits within the routines of the common household" (Muller and Roser 2017, 69). For Muller and Roser's (2017, 69) purposes in this study, the results supported the proposition that convergence, rather than a primarily technological process, is a process "driven by the users."

While working on a slightly different set of problems to those outlined here specifically in relation to the consumption of television—that is, Muller and Roser were focused on the dynamics between convergence and "de-convergence" in domestic spaces—this research points to the usefulness of strong empirical engagement with the practices of media users within the household. It is very much the kind of work required in television studies to take us beyond binge-viewing. That said, and while it does claim to be ethnographic in its "orientation," Muller and Roser's research does not have a strong ethnographic component, although there is certainly an element of observation in the "home inspections." It is important that the work television studies

prosecutes into the future makes use of approaches that are based on observation in addition to those employing the strategies of self-reporting that have been so widely used in recent years. The concept of binging may have diverted us from such approaches because it appeared to provide sound explanations of these behaviors; furthermore, these explanations are likely to have resonated with researchers' own consumption experiences within their own households and thus appeared to demand less in the way of evidence or confirmation. We need to put that tendency behind us.

Leaving Binge-Viewing Behind

Taking a step away from the concept of binge-viewing as a key explanatory tool necessarily involves the development of a significant body of evidence that has been gathered without being constrained by such a conceptual frame. We need to provisionalise the concept of binge-viewing in order to reconsider its place among the other, varied and contingent, patterns of use that to date have been accommodated by that term. We already know something about how audiences engage with broadcast television, and something about their use of cable services—the industry has provided us with much of this via ratings and other forms of industry reporting. Also, we already something about the use of multiple devices and second screen use, although we know less about how attention is distributed across these devices. Where we need to focus most urgently is on sorting out what is happening when audiences are consuming content via streaming or other non-linear and Internet-distributed services in their own domestic spaces. These audiences should not be the fannish audiences so privileged in television studies research to date, but rather the ones who are "just watching content on TV." Initially, such a project would involve asking some very basic questions about the consumption of consecutive episodes of programming, while also contextualizing those questions within the practices and habits of the various kinds of households in which informants were located. The kinds of initial questions which might help us develop such evidence include the following:

- Do you use streaming or other services to watch consecutive episodes of television programs? If so, are there particular times of the day or the week when you are most likely to do this?
- Where and on what devices would you most commonly do this?
- Does this only happen with particular kinds of programs? (Drama series, perhaps, but not sitcoms, news or sports?) And what factors help determine the choices made in this regard?
- How many consecutive episodes would you typically view in one sitting? If that varies, what are the considerations which tend to influence that variation?
- What determines whether you use streaming services rather than traditional linear television or other options?
- Is this mode of consumption part of your everyday habit for television viewing?
- How would you describe your everyday television habits overall?

- Are your television viewing habits different from others in your household (if there is more than one person in the household)?
- And, finally a very old fashioned one: How are viewing decisions made within your household?

Given what we know already about the crucial roles that age and gender play in this domain of consumption, it is important to attach that identifying information to the responses. Armed with the answers to such questions as these, the next step is to undertake observation of what our subjects actually do, and reinvesting in the long-term ethnographic strategies so fundamental to the advances made in the early days of television studies.

While it is routine to acknowledge, in principle, the usefulness of such research strategies, at present we would have to admit that they are not commonly practiced in most of the current research on television audiences. They may seem somewhat old-fashioned compared to online methodologies, and they may also be discouraged by the assumption that the industry has already told us all we need to know about contemporary habits of consumption, an assumption that needs to be challenged. It is also the case that some of the other commonly used methods, such as the collection of personal testimony online, are actually easier and less time-consuming. This kind of work is also expensive, of course, and as noted elsewhere (Evans 2011; Turner 2018), the pace of technological change has challenged the provenance and likely relevance of any media-focused research that typically takes a long time before it can produce its outcomes. Some would argue that we no longer have the time, or indeed the money, to undertake this kind of research.

However, among the benefits that observational work delivers is the located nature of what is learnt; it cannot help but place the observations of the dynamics of consumption within the larger context of the everyday sociocultural habits and practices of the households being investigated, and to highlight their contingencies. It is precisely that kind of work which makes it difficult to simply adopt the kind of all-purpose descriptor that binge-viewing has become. In a context where industry spin is rife, and where the personal testimony published via social media is too often accepted as reliable evidence of off-line behavior, it is crucial that television studies invests the time into strong empirical research that is grounded in actual households of all kinds, and in varied locations. Lotz et al.'s (2018, n.p.) claim that "further empirical studies of how viewers use and interact with these services is needed before we can theorize the experiential dimensions of internet-distributed television in ways that are conceptually robust" seems unexceptionable today, pointing to what must be regarded as a necessary step toward renovating our contemporary knowledge of the changing dynamics which shape how audiences consume television.

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Notes

1. An earlier and more developed discussion of these cultures of use in relation to television consumption can be found in Turner (2019). It is also employed as a central concept throughout Pertierra and Turner's (2013) *Locating Consumption*.
2. This term was originally employed in discussions of uses of the VCR in the 1990s (Jenkins 1992) so it refers to a very different set of technologies and contexts of consumption.
3. A good example of what this can produce is Chuck Tryon and Max Dawson's (2014) study of college students' consumption practices within the bounded community of a college dorm.
4. *Australian Cultural Fields: National and Transnational Dynamics* was an Australian Research Council funded project which examined changing patterns of cultural consumption within Australia. Led by Tony Bennett, the research team included David Carter, Greg Noble, David Rowe, Tim Rowse, Deborah Stevenson, Graeme Turner and Emma Waterton.
5. The abstract for this panel on "passive viewers and non-participatory fans" starts with the following: In the 1990s scholars including Roger Silverstone (1994) and James Lull (1990) explored television's role within the everyday practices of daily life and positioned watching television as the central behavior for interrogation. After the publication of Henry Jenkins' (1992) *Textual Poachers*, questions of everyday, mundane viewing have been largely displaced by those concerning participation and creativity. While the study of participatory culture is of continuing importance, this panel will revisit mundane or "passive" viewing in the context of the contemporary multiscreen digital estate. The panel was chaired by Rhiannon Bury, co-chaired by Elizabeth Evans and also featured papers by Patricia Ferrante and Lothar Mikos.

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