Narcotizing Effect of Social Media

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Abstract

Since the emergence of new media, it has been widely accepted by the scholars that new media strengthens democracy, freedom of speech and social movements; however, they have mostly ignored new media's potential for narcotizing. This study examines social media from a critical perspective and applies Lazarsfeld and Merton's "Narcotising Dysfunction Approach" to social media to see whether or not social media helps people's active participation to the social movements. In this study, it is argued that although new media can be a useful tool for helping users to get organized, generate contents and spread these contents out to their peers, increasing dosages of mass communication, during the times of unrest, may transform the energies of citizens from active participation to passive knowledge and this may lead people to become passive protesters. This study, for the first time in the literature, will apply the "Narcotising Dysfunction Approach" to social media and will discuss the concepts of "clicktivism" and "slacktivism" to put forth 'the dark sides' of social media.

Keywords: Social media, narcotizing dysfunction, political participation, slacktivism, clicktivism

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Sosyal Medyanın Uyuşturan Etkisi

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Öz

Yeni medyanın ifade özgürlüğünü genişlettiği, demokrasiyi ve toplumsal hareketleri güçlendirdiği görüşü, ortaya çıkışından beri akademisyenler tarafından yaygın bir şekilde kabul edilmiş; buna karşın bu iletişim kanalının 'uyuşturan etkisi' çoğunlukla görmezden gelinmiştir. Bu çalışma, sosyal medyayı genel olarak eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla incelemekte, Lazarsfeld ve Merton'un "Medyanın Uyuşturan Etkisi" yaklaşımını sosyal medyaya uygulayarak bu iletişim mecrasının bireylerin toplumsal hareketlere ve eylemlere katılmasında etkili bir araç olup olmadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışmada, sosyal medyanın bireylerin organize olmalarında, içerik üretmelerinde ve bu içerikleri paylaşmalarında kullanışlı bir kitle iletişim aracı olmasına rağmen; sosyal huzursuzluk dönemlerinde, sosyal medya aracılığıyla artan enformasyon tüketiminin bireylerin enerjilerini 'aktif katılımdan', 'pasif haberdar olmaya' dönüştürdüğü görüşü ileri sürülmektedir. Çalışma, ilk kez Lazarsfeld ve Merton'un "Medyanın Uyuşturan Etkisi" yaklaşımlarını sosyal medyaya uygulamakta ve sosyal medyanın 'karanlık' taraflarını ortaya koyabilmek amacıyla 'slaktivizm' ve 'cliktivizm' kavramlarını tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal medya, medyanın uyuşturan etkisi, siyasal katılım, slacktivism, clicktivism

Introduction

The waves of demonstration, protest, riot and civil wars in the Arab-world, also known as 'the Arab Spring', started in Tunisia on 18 December 2010 and affected several countries in the Middle East. The armed and unarmed protests were carried out in order to change the political powers in the region. The social movements caused to overthrow many long-standing authoritarian regimes in the region. The protests and social movements were also seen beyond the Arab world to the states as diverse as Uganda, Israel, Greece, the UK, USA and Spain. During and after the social movements, the scholars and researchers mostly argued about the important contribution of social media and internet-based technologies to the political mobilization and pro-democracy movements (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). According to these scholars, social media and new communication technologies have embraced the democracy, political participation and freedom of speech in the region (Morozov, 2011: 37). In addition there is also strong will in the mainstream media to believe that the social media and internet are capable of fostering freedom of speech, making political processes more democratic and leading to social movements and protests. Indeed, some journalists have seen these social movements and revolutions in the Arab region as a direct result of the usage of the social media and called these movements as "Facebook Revolution", since the protestors used social media to organize the action, to make their voice heard, to communicate with each other and to educate the participants (Smith, 2011). Consequently the social media was perceived by many people as a catalyst that ignited the Arab Spring as well as many other social and pro-democracy movements and protests. This assumption is based on the presuppositions about the democratic nature of new communication technologies. However these assumptions need to be closely examined from a critical perspective.

This study argues against the techno-optimistic approaches to the new communication technologies that see technology as the catalyst of the social and political changes, and the study takes these approaches as problematic. The reason for this, techno-optimistic approaches to the new communication tools can negatively affect the rational critiques, researches and studies about the possible outcomes of the usage of new communication channels. Although new media can be a useful tool for helping users to get organized, communicate, generate contents and spread these contents out to their peers, there can be other 'unexpected' and unwanted outcomes of these technologies. For instance, during the times of social unrests and riots increasing dosages of mass communication may transform the energies of citizens from active participation to passive knowledge. In other words, spending a lot of time for reading and writing posts, tweets, blogs etc. and

overconsumption of these information may serve to narcotizing people rather than energizing them. This may cause worthless 'slacktivism' (a combination of the words 'activism' and 'slacker') rather than real activism. It is argued in the study that Lazarsfeld and Merton's "Narcotising Dysfunction of Mass Media" (1957: 457 - 463) approach can be a useful tool to understand the negative outcomes of the new communication technologies. According to Lazarsfeld and Merton(1957: 457 - 463), exposure to the flood of information that comes from media serves as 'narcotising' rather than 'energizing' the average reader or listener. In light of the information above, this paper reviews recent literature on the contribution of social media to democracy, online activism and e-mobilization and argues that increasing usage of new communication technologies can lead to a better informed, organised citizenry; however it may also have some negative side effects such as narcotisation. In doing so, the study will firstly evaluate the contribution of social media to democracy and social movements, and later techno-optimistic approaches to these contributions will be criticized from the perspectives of Lazarsfeld and Merton's "Narcotising Dysfunction Approach". In addition the concepts of "slacktivism" and "clicktivism" and real activism will be discussed in order to put forth 'the dark sides' of new communication technologies.

Impacts of Social Media on Democracy and Social Movements

New communication technologies, especially social media have transformed the interaction and communication of individuals throughout the world and have changed the way people communicate and join public debates. In order to understand the impacts of social media on democracy and social movements, firstly the definition of social media should be made. However, there is no agreed definition of the term, social media, in the relevant literature because of its changing nature and very wide coverage (Kırık, 2015: 161 - 184). According to Lon Safko, the first part of the terminology, 'social', "refers to the instinctual needs we humans have to connect with other humans" and the second part of the term, 'media', "refers to the media, we use with which we make those connections with other humans"(Safko, 2010: 4). In general, it is possible to define the social media as an "umbrella term"(Boyd, 2007) which "employs mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content" (Kietzmann et al, 2011: 241). Therefore social media can typically be defined as a tool that allows users to participate in online exchanges, contribute to content, and join in online communities and political debates.

In order to fully understand the effects of social media to the political and

social life, firstly importance of media in general, within modern democracies should be understood. Social media is a form of media, and media has a crucial role in shaping a healthy democracy, reinforcing freedom of speech and promoting political participation. Since its emergence in 17th century, media has been seen as the 'Forth Estate' and a forum for public discussion and free speech (Gezgin, 2006). As Panday states, media is like the backbone of a democracy and it "can play a vital role in the political structure of each country through disseminating information, enlightening voters, protecting human rights, creating tolerance among groups and helping governments to be transparent and accountable"(2009: 35).

In modern democracies, media functions like a bridge between the politicians and the public, while transferring information, opinions and ideas from the public to governments; it also transfers the ideas, practices and activities from the governments to the public. In addition media makes the public aware of various social, political, economical and sportive activities happening within a country and around the world and forewarns the public about the problems and issues. Thus the public can make better decisions and choices about their future. At that point, with the help of media, abuses by governments, politicians and other authorities can be revealed. Therefore, within modern democracies journalists hypothetically are the agents of the public, and they supposedly act as a 'watchdog' and work for the benefits of the public (Berger, 2002: 81-99).

The rights of citizens to receive information declare ideas and opinions freely and criticize all institutions and organisations that political authority has its hands freely, can only be achieved by the means of free media. Thus media must be free of censorship, self-censorship, and control of the government, ownership pressures and political pressures. However, conventional media has been increasingly criticized for its ownership structure, sensationalist, superficial, sided and partisan behaviours in the recent years, especially with the effect of the increasing power of media monopolies around the world. As Barnett states, the fewer owners 'cause fewer voices' and 'less opportunity to tell the truth to power' (Barnett, 2010). This situation caused the loss of trust to both journalist and media organisations. As Berger emphasised, once 'watchdogs' of the public, with the impact of the ownership concentration in the recent years, became "showdogs" for their owners' interests. The drawbacks of the traditional media, such as this, caused scholars to approach optimistically to the internet and social media (Berger, 2002: 89). Accordingly scholars have hailed the empowering potential of the internet, foreseen the dawn of a cyber-democratic society or the emancipation of citizens from state power and market forces (Breindl, 2010: 43).

The excitements of techno-optimistic scholars about internet and social media can clearly be seen from "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace" written by John Perry Barlow in 1996, "Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us" (Barlow, 1996). What made Barlow and other techno-optimistic approaches think like this are the decentralising, adaptive and interactive features of internet and social media. According to techno-optimistic approaches, "new media are opening new channels of communication for all, creating unprecedented opportunities for participation in traditional and new ways, and promoting the competition of ideas. Democracy is fundamentally about these matters. Ergo, democracy is being enhanced by digital media" (Wilson, 2009).

Instead of having one-way communication through traditional media, social media users are now able to have access to the interactive, up to date and two-way communication. Social media also gives individuals and groups the opportunity to discuss about their social and political issues within a less costly, collaborative, asynchronous and decentralized structure. According to Unwin (2012: 3) new communication technologies provide three types of liberty to the individuals. These are, 'space-time liberty', 'information sharing liberty', 'information access liberty'. For him, new communication technologies enabled people to communicate between any parts of the world at any time, which he calls space-time liberty, these communication technologies also changed 'top down' the dissemination of information by media corporation to co-creation of information which caused 'sharing liberty' and finally new communication technologies made information easily accessible to public in terms of its costs and speed. For Unwin, these 'liberties' have had "dramatic impacts on political processes, both enabling governments and politicians to spread their messages directly to individuals, as with texts sent to mobile phones to encourage people to vote in particular ways, but also for individuals to share graphic images and accounts of things happening to others anywhere in the world, thus raising global awareness of political actions by regimes with which they disagree" (2012: 3).

Social media is supposed to function as an organisational tool, an alternative press and creator of public awareness during the times of social unrests. It also helps the users to get organised and capture videos and photographs from the events and broadcast news, comments and information from the streets that are different from the information provided by the governments. These contributions of internet based technologies to social movements inspired techno-optimistic scholars such as Balkin (2004) to think that new communication technologies caused "the digital revolution". For them, new

communication technologies donated a new perspective to freedom of speech just as the developments of radio and television and radio did it before (Balkin, 2004: 2). However techno optimistic scholars mostly ignored to see the negative effects of social media to the democracy and social movements. Therefore following section will evaluate the effects of the internet and social media to the democracy and social movements.

Rethinking the Contributions of Social Media to Democracy and Social Movements

Influence of social media on the culture of democracy, political debates and social movements, as stated above, has been emphasized by many scholars. Also many researchers state that social media is an indispensable part of the mobilization process in mass protests (Balkin, 2004: 2). Proponents of such arguments overlook the negative effects of these new communication technologies. The hype surrounding the effects of internet and social media on political and social life is mostly linked to discourses by technological optimists like "Nicholas Negroponte, Bill Gates or Manuel Castells who advocate the advent of an information or network society profoundly different from the society built since the industrial revolution in the early nineteenth century"(Balkin, 2004: 2).These technological optimist thinkers see the technology as an independent factor, and for them, this gives the power to technology to determine all social events. In the case of Arab Spring, techno-optimist thinkers such as Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain (2011) argued that internet, mobile phones, and social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter made 'the difference'. According to them, "thanks to these technologies, virtual networks materialized in the streets. Digital media became the tool that allowed social movements to reach once-unachievable goals even as authoritarian forces moved with a dismaying speed of their own to devise" (Howard and Hussain, 2011: 36).

Techno-optimistic scholars believe that the technological developments, in general, is the key factor in the history and it is mainly the reason for developments in the societies. However, they fail to see that the technology, on its own, can not affect the whole society, social developments and human actions. On the contrary the human actions and social forces have the ability to shape the technology and to determine how and for what purposes the technology is used. Also the results and effects of the technology can not be always estimated. For example, an injector can be seen as a useful technological tool to get healthy medicine for people; however one could use the very same injector to get unhealthy drugs. The inventor of the injector probably did not mean this unhealthy use of the injector. The same thing goes for radio and television, these technological tools could have been used

as the tools of information pluralism, freedom of speech and rational debates, however the purpose of the use of these technological tools, most of the time, can be quite the opposite. At this point, it is possible to say that the technology itself is only a tool and it is not the main determinant, accordingly the usage purpose of the technology is primarily important. Therefore, instead of seeing the technology as a primary determinant, the technology should be seen as a field of power struggle. Hence, in order to see the big picture, the unpredictable aspects and the purposes of the use ofthe new communication technologies have to be investigated.

According to Katz et al (1973), the tool of mass communication technologies satisfies a variety of needs of people that arise from their social roles and psychological dispositions. For them, people are active in choosing and using particular media to satisfy their specific needs, however during the use of a particular media they can be exposed to some negative and unintended outcomes. In the light of information given above, there can be some unpredictable, unintentional and negative effects of new communication technologies; therefore instead of only hailing the positive sides of these communication channels the other side of the medallion should be examined.

In the relevant literature there are some scholars who argue that the use of social media may some times negatively affect the political participation and social movements. For instance according to Hess et al, the internet and computer based technologies are generally considered as a tool of emancipation for individuals (Hess et al, 2008), however these technologies may cause isolation of individuals from society and this may cause the 'computerization of social movements'. Likewise, for scholars such as Daniel Trottier during times of social movements, unrests and riots social media and internet can be used as tool to scrutinize the participants (Trottier, 2012). Also according to Kerrigan (2011) during times of riots the investigator may try to 'friend' a target by pretending to be a stranger or an unknown peer to have more information about the riot. Similarly for scholars such as David Lyon (2007) and Christian Fuchs (2011) internet and social media may cause participatory surveillance rather than political participation. Besides surveillance causes people to feel under pressure and therefore can discourage people from taking part in demonstrations.

One of the most interesting study about the negative effects of social media to political participation and social movements was conducted by Navid Hassanpour from Yale University in 2011, the study of Hassanpour put forth that social media may have a 'pacifying' role in the societies confronting mass political turmoil (Hassanpour, 2011). According to his *Media Disruption Exacerbates Revolutionary Unrest: Evidence from Mubarak's Quasi-Experiment* titled study, Hosni Mubarak's government shut down the

internet and the other communication tools on January 28, 2011 and this unexpectedly caused the protests to intensify and spread across Cairo and other big cities of Egypt and this irreversibly put an end to Mubarak's 30 years long regime. As Hassanpour states:

> In response to the opposition staging demonstrations for three consecutive days in Tahrir Square and promising a yet larger demonstration on a Friday of Rage, Mubarak's regime shut down the Internet and cell phone coverage across the country at the early hours of January 28, 2011. Instead of stalling demonstration in Tahrir, the consequences caught the regime by surprise. Protests flared across Cairo and other Egyptian cities including Alexandria and Suez. The protests were unusually diffuse and widespread and overwhelmed Mubarak's security forces by the end of the day (Historical New York Times n.d.). Around 7 PM on January 28th the military was brought into the scene to replace the dysfunctional police force. After deployment of the military, dynamics of the interaction among the political players (the incumbent, the military, and the opposition) changed. The military's inaction, accompanied with unexpected implications of the regime's bold experimentation with the mass media in the following days, put an end to Mubarak's thirty years rule. At the turning point of January 28th, lack of cell phone coverage and Internet connection forced the population to find other means of communication, encouraging local mobilization (2011: 27).

According to Hassanpour (2011: 36) this sudden disruption of media tools aggravated the riots. Shutting down these communication tools caused apolitical citizens to become aware of the unrest and forced the people who did nothing more than posting on Facebook and sending tweets, to have more face to face communication and finally more physical presence in streets. Thus, the disruption of cell phone coverage, social media and internet based technologies on January 28, 2011 forced to communicate face to face and exacerbated the riot. As Hassanpour states social media can act against political participation and grass roots mobilization because social media and other internet based technologies "discourage face-to-face communication and mass presence in the streets" (2011: 36). Consistent with Hassanpour's study, it is possible to say that social media and the other internet-based technologies cause people to have engaged in impractical and superficial internet activism since people can only find out their strength when they are physically on streets. The findings of the study conducted by Hassanpour, bring to minds Lazarsfeld and Merton's *Narcotising Dysfunction of Mass Media (1957)* concept since it indicates the dysfunction of internet and social media during times of unrest.

Revisiting Narcotising Dysfunction Approach In the Age of Social Media

Narcotising dysfunction approach is one of the most overlooked approaches of media effects in the relevant literature. Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld in their *Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action* named article, argue about the *narcotising dysfunctions* of media. According to their approach, media creates an apathy in which people are content to 'know' rather than 'do' something. In this context, media provides information about the events and the receivers demonstrate some superficial concern on media about the events while the importance of real action is neglected. Consequently, the receivers are drugged into the inactivity like they are under the influence of narcotics. One of the main assumptions of this approach is that, increasing dosages of mass communications sometimes 'unpredictably' transform the energies of the receivers from 'active participation' into 'passive knowledge'. As Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld states:

> Exposure to this flood of information may serve to narcotize rather than to energize the average reader or listener. As an increasing mead of time is devoted to reading and listening, a decreasing share is available for organized action. The individual reads accounts of issues and problems and may even discuss alternative lines of action. But this rather intellectualized, rather remote connection with organized social action is not activated. The interested and informed citizen can congratulate himself on his lofty state of interest and information and neglect to see that he has abstained from decision and action…. He comes to mistake knowing about problems of the day for doing something about them. His social conscience remains spotlessly clean. He is concerned. He is informed. And he has all sorts of ideas as to what should be done. But, after he has gotten through his dinner and after he has listened to his favored radio programs and after he has read his second newspaper of the day, it is really time for bed (1957: 464).

As stated above, according to *narcotising dysfunction* approach the receivers know what needs to be done, they are aware of everything because they read, watched and listened all the news about the problem. Their conscience is clear and they feel comfortable inside since they are not unconcerned about the issue, they think that they have done something to remediate the issue by reading, writing and thinking. However, being informed and concerned is not a replacement for action.

Lazarsfeld and Merton wrote their article in 1948, during that time internet and social media were not invented yet. So their approach needs to be revisited in the era of new communication technologies. Social media is still a form of media and in this case, it is possible to adopt the *narcotising dysfunction* approach to social media. As it is stated before, social media and

internet-based new communication technologies are assumed to support the democracy and social movements, since it is considered that with the effect of these communication tools, individuals are not mere content consumers but they are content producers. However, these communication tools disseminate huge amount of information to the individuals and information overconsumption may lead to information obesity (Eşitti, 2015: 75 - 97).

Social media gives individuals the opportunity to express their ideas, feelings and dissatisfactions on the cyberspace. In this case, (if we apply the narcotising dysfunction approach to social media) expressing ideas, feelings and dissatisfactions on the cyberspace may cause the users to feel that they have done all the best they could do. More clearly, expressing feeling via sending e-mails, tweets or posts could serve to self-satisfaction. Accordingly, social conscience of the individuals 'remains spotlessly clean' (just as Lazarsfeld and Merton emphasised long ago) since they are concerned, informed and even they express their feelings about the issue.In this case, social media can be seen as a 'social narcotic' or 'the new opium of the modern societies'. Because knowing, concerning and expressing feelings on the cyberspace do not always get followed by offline participation and physical actions. People are stronger when they are physically on the streets and participating in the decision making processes such as voting. In this context, posting some information, sharing images, commenting on Facebook or retweeting a post on Twitter, in short showing some seeming concern, as Lazarsfeld and Merton state, become the way of clearing people's conscience (1957: 457 – 473).

On social media, the users participate in the political and social arguments; they demonstrate their ideas, feelings and displeasure about issues or events but all from the safety of their couches. They feel comfortable, their conscience is clean since they are concerned and reacted virtually. For them, after reading a couple of posts on Facebook and after sending the last tweet, it is really time to go to bad peacefully like Lazarsfeld and Merton (1957) highlighted. In short, online activism may cause an apathy for people to get physically involved in the political and social actions and this may also cause people to act like 'keyboard warriors' or 'remote intellectuals' which bring to the mind the arguments of slacktivism and clicktivism instead of 'real activism'.

Social Media Activism, Clicktivisim and Slacktivism

Clicktivism is a criticized expression, in terms of the contribution of social media to the social movements and protests. The Oxford English Dictionary defines clictivism as "the use of social media and other online methods to promote a cause". However the critics stresses that 'clictivism' or the

'onlineactivism' is "inadequate and may even harm the social and political causes people are attempting to support by conferring a false sense of accomplishment that forestalls more effective engagement" (Bell, 2013: 282). In this context, the term slacktivism, a combination word consisting of 'slacker' and 'activism', is used to criticize online activism and clicktivism. Morozov (2009) defines 'slacktivism' as an 'apt' term which is "to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact", according to him internet activism is "an ideal type of activism for a lazy generation" since it "gives those who participate in 'slacktivist' campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact of on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group". Similarly, Malcolm Gladwell in his article entitled, 'Small Change: Why the Revolution Will not be Tweeted', dismissed the exaggerated contribution of social media and argued that social media has not "reinvented social activism"(Gladwell, 2011: 153).

Online activism, cliktivisim or the concept of slacktivism can also be evaluated through the *narcotising dysfunction approach*. On the one hand, through internet and social media; liking, sharing, tweeting a post, an image, a video or signing an online petition do not always cause a social or political change, even worse than that, it may give the social media users a false sense of accomplishment and serves as a self-satisfactory tool and narcotizes the participants. On the other hand, overconsumption of the vast amount of information on these communication channels may distract the social media users' attention. Overconsumption of information by the users about a certain issue may cause only a superficial concern. For instance the heavy dosage of negative news over a period would make social media users immune to the shock of such deviant action. For instance representation of violence on television programmes, news and cinema may serve could make people indifferent to similar actions. Therefore social media may render its users incapable of action, causes apathy and serves as a social narcotic.

Conclusion

This paper argued against the techno-optimistic approaches and discussed the negative sides of social media in terms of its contributiontodemocracy, political participation and social movements. As stated before many scholars have hailed the democratic potentialities of internet and social media however these expectations have so far not been fulfilled. Main critiques about the contribution of social media to the social movements and democracy are that online activism creates 'a feel good sense' although in real life it has little impact on social movements and political participations. Therefore the online activism is dismissed as slacktivism. The main aim of this study is to offer a different perspective on social media activism by

reference to the perspective of Lazarsfeld and Merton's *Narcotising Dysfunction* concept. This concept is a mostly overlooked concept within media studies. According to this approach social media creates apathy among people to take real and physical action. Media provides information about the events and the receivers demonstrate some superficial concern while importance of real action is neglected. Consequently, the receivers are drugged into the inactivity like they are under the influence of narcotic. The main assumption of this approach is that, increasing dosages of mass communications do sometimes 'unpredictably' transform the energies of the receivers from 'active participation' into 'passive knowledge'.

Even though social media renders possible the easy access to the political messages and information, political participation continues to decline. People pay close attention to social media and internet based communication technologies, however increasing dosages of information on these communication tools overwhelm people about issues and they become apathetic to take action. Overconsumption of information from social media causes *narcotising* of the users. Main problem here is that the increasing social media usage causes exposure of information overconsumption to its users. Also showing some superficial concern on social media does not take the place of real action. However social media is constantly changing so it is not possible to foresee how it will evolve. So this study aimed to point out the narcotising dysfunctions of social media, the next studies should focus on the solutions. This study suggests that the researchers should focus on the 'information diet' on new media and should focus on improving the new media literacy in the society, so that information overconsumption and negative effects of these communication tools may be prevented.

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