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## **Contesting the Mainstream: Understanding the Audiences of Alternative News Media**

Perspectives on alternative news audiences have shifted repeatedly between normative binaries. On the one hand, scholars like Chris Atton (2002) predicted that alternative news would lead to a more horizontal communication between news makers and their audience (p. 27) and Tony Harcup (2016, p. 680) described alternative news audiences as “fostering a sense of active citizenship”. On the other hand, dystopian conceptualizations have recently become prominent with alternative news audiences being increasingly labeled as “misguided and having insufficient media literacy” (Noppari et al., 2019, p. 23).

In this editorial, we argue that understanding alternative news requires understanding that audiences are central to keeping them alive. This insight is a central element of a general “audience turn” in journalism studies more generally (Costera Meijer, 2020, p. 2330). For journalism studies, Swart et al. (2022) argued that a radical audience turn requires (i) less “(mainstream) media-centric” approaches (p. 11), examining “structurally unattractive” audiences with a (supposedly) lower economic value (p.12), asking what users experience as “informative” (p. 13), and understanding users as “active agents” (p. 14). Examining the audiences of alternative news helps us to address these requirements and tells us something about news audiences and their attitudes towards journalism more generally.

In this second Special Issue on ‘Contesting the Mainstream: Understanding Alternative Media’, we bring together scholars whose work on the audiences of alternative news help us take an audience turn in alternative news research. The papers included in this special issue employ qualitative, quantitative and computational methods, and they provide several new insights into the multifaceted relationships between alternative news and their audiences. Together, the contributions make a strong argument to move beyond binary ideations of normatively ‘good’ or ‘bad’ alternative news audiences and embrace both

perspectives, “light and dark”, and “everything in between” as Quandt (2018, p. 44) described, conceptualizing digital participation more generally.

### **The Relational Understanding of Alternative News**

Before studying the audiences of alternative news, one must clarify what alternative news is. In this editorial, we employ a relational definition, understanding alternative news media first and foremost as a “a proclaimed and/or (self-) perceived corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 862). Inherent in this relational understanding is a fundamental embeddedness of the term alternative news. What “alternative” or “mainstream” means differs depending on perspectives, cultural, or political systems, and historical contexts (Waisboard, 2022).

Research has suggested that a counter-hegemonic stance is how audiences characterize alternative news. For example, the seminal work by Rauch (2007) showed that progressive activists perceived media to be alternative when they were opposed to a commercial, hegemonic mainstream, when they were committed to social change, and when they were organized in a non-hierarchical structure. In a later survey, Rauch (2015) showed that for users with divergent political orientations the provision of perceived-as ostracized, alternative content was central for rating something as “alternative news” (p. 134). Perceptions of alternativeness can vary between users and researchers. Rauch’s (2007) study showed that from the user perspective, alternative news media included the left-leaning platform *IndyMedia*, but also the *British Broadcasting Company (BBC)* (p.1001). Relatedly, the recent Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2022) shows that across different countries, users, when asked for examples of journalists, also mention YouTubers, influencers, non-journalist authors, and podcasters. In the United States specifically, 15% of ‘journalists’

named in this survey would be categorized as ‘alternative’ or ‘independent’ actors by researchers (p. 54).

The first article included in this special issue by **Steppat, Castro, and Esser (2023)** extends this focus on audience perspectives by showing how context shapes users’ perceptions of “alternativeness” and “establishment”. The authors used an online survey with 12,676 respondents from Denmark, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, and the United States to better understand what users perceive to be ‘alternative news’ and how this perception varies across countries with different levels of media fragmentation and different levels of polarization. When asked to identify “alternative news media”, almost half of the users identified sources that would not typically be considered alternative news by researchers. For instance, one quarter of their respondents named mainstream news sources when asked for alternative ones, and less than one fifth named alternative news media in a narrower sense (p.13). Furthermore, people in more fragmented and more polarized media environments reported more alternative news use, indicating a potential relationship between polarization and users’ turn towards sources and content they perceived to be counter-hegemonic.

From a scholarly perspective, alternative news centers on the communicative politics of contestation (Waisboard, 2022) and serves to form *counter-public spheres* (Schwaiger, 2022, p. 12). Hence, although users and researchers might differ in their classification of a specific source or content as ‘alternative’ or ‘mainstream’, both perspectives imply relationality and thus are inevitably context dependent. Examining these contexts is necessary, as we work to expand our understanding beyond the Western democracies where many studies, particularly on the audiences of alternative news, continue to focus on (but see Harlow & Harp, 2013 for an early exception). Yet, even in a comparatively homogeneous context such as Western democracies, researchers' perspectives on alternative news audiences

have varied substantially over time, often in concert with shifting perspectives on journalism and society more generally.

For a cleaner systematization of these different perspectives, we broadly distinguish three different views in the following: Alternative news audiences as (i) ideal participants and activists; as (ii) being misinformed and manipulated; or as (iii) critical users. Together, these perspectives depict the richness of alternative news/audience relationships. We will discuss all three perspectives in the following, highlighting how the individual papers included in this special issue advance each of these views and showing how they jointly contribute to a more nuanced understanding of (alternative) news audiences.

### **Audiences as ideal Participants and Activists**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the global success of the Internet fueled democratic hopes for a more inclusive digital public sphere and more participatory forms of journalism (Gillmor, 2006, p. 236). During those years, alternative news was mostly understood as citizen or dissident projects operating outside of the capitalist news industry, providing the means for “democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production” (Atton, 2002, p. 4). Alternative news promised to overcome established media’s failure to account for (seemingly) commercially unattractive audiences (Swart et al., 2022), and the decoupling of journalism and citizenry (Zelizer, Bockowski, and Anderson, 2022), by broadening mainstream news’ narrow focus on the rich, white, and blue as Usher (2021) summarized it recently for the United States (U.S.).

During this time, alternative news users were often described as particularly active members of social movements and countercultures, indicated by labels such as “radical” (Downing, 2001, p. 1) and “critical” media (Fuchs, 2010, p. 174). Although it was recognized early on that alternative news could also be used by authoritarian and fascist movements (Downing, 2001, pp. 88–96), scholarship mostly idealized alternative news users as

counterexamples to an otherwise homogenous group of consumers of mainstream news (Downing, 2001, pp. 5–7, 10). A substantial body of work even focussed on users becoming *citizen-* (Allan & Thorsen, 2009) or *grassroot-* (Gillmor, 2006) journalists themselves.

Not all alternative news users become producers. However, the triumphal march of social media has substantially enlarged users' agency (Hendrickx, 2022), allowing for digital participation and activism through commenting, liking, or sharing alternative news. So far, research on the comment sections of alternative news has been relatively scarce. However, it has been shown that comments sections allow users to showcase their support for the outlets' ideological stance without requiring them to become producers themselves. This also allows for the participation of regressive and authoritarian actors. For instance, comment sections of immigration-critical alternative news and YouTube channels have provided fertile grounds for hate speech towards immigrants (Paasch-Colberg et al., 2022, p. 157), particularly when these are compared with the comment sections of legacy news media (Humprecht et al., 2020, p. 6). Noteworthy, that does not mean that far-right alternative news media do not moderate at all. Based on five interviews with editors and moderators and an analysis of the comment sections at three alternative news sites in Norway, Haanshuus (2022) showed that clearly illegal content and antisemitism was considered non-tolerable by all interview partners and many of the users that commented on the examined sites.

The **second article** of this special issue by **Roslyng and Blaagaard (2023)** advances this perspective by showing the complexity of article/comment relationships within alternative news. Their article centers on a specific case: A video of a young boy who is denied broccoli in a refugee detainment and repatriation center in Denmark due to age restrictions for vegetables. The boy's father responds to this denial by demanding to be treated as a citizen with civil and human rights. Roslyng and Blaagaard (2023) present a discourse analysis of this case considering articles but also comment sections in populist, political, and networked mediascapes. Consistent with the hope that alternative news provides space for

(seemingly) commercially unattractive target groups, the study shows that left-leaning alternative/citizen media forwarded political acts and rights-claims *for the people by the people*, whereas mainstream media generally invite elite sources to speak on behalf of the people. However, the comment sections below left-leaning alternative news stories were dominated by critical comments that in fact, were used to advance immigration-critical right-wing news. Thus, Roslyng and Blaagaard (2023) provide first evidence that the comment sections of alternative news allow for the emergence of layered counter-publics that allow for the expression of opposing (political) views.

Other studies have focused on digital traces of participation through the sharing of alternative news on social media (e.g., Marchal et al. 2019, p.4). For instance, it has been shown that alternative news is shared frequently in digital counter-publics that endorse conspiracy theories (Frischlich et al., 2020; Schatto-Eckrodt et al., 2020). The audience of alternative news seems to be particularly active when it comes to sharing: Despite legacy news reaching a much larger audience, alternative news posts are shared nearly as often as legacy news posts on Facebook (Boberg et al., 2020, p. 5). Notably, high sharing rates can be due to coordinated inauthentic engagement (Giglietto et al., 2020). Therefore the high number of shares should be interpreted with care. Consistent with this notion, tracking data shows that less people share alternative news compared to legacy news (Hopp et al., 2020, p. 13).

Examining this (potentially) strategic element in sharing alternative news, the **third article** included in this special issue by **Nordheim, Rieger and Kleinen-von Königslöw (2023)** examines the use of alternative news media by European right-wing populists. The authors used computational methods to analyze the degree to which these politicians (compared to politicians from other political parties) refer to sources and topics in their tweets that could be considered “insular”. The study shows that topical insularity, i.e., the focus on a few right-wing populist core issues, is a common strategy of populist politicians across European countries. Yet, their reliance on alternative news depends on the context. In

countries characterized by high trust in media and low levels of political polarization, the source insularity was low and right-wing populists retweeted a large variety of sources. In countries in which the right-wing populist parties were politically marginalized, the focus on alternative news sources was stronger. Thus, the study by Nordheim et al. (2023) confirms that alternative news is strategically used for expressing views that might otherwise not be represented in the mainstream but that these views are not necessarily progressive.

The strategic use of alternative news is not restricted to right-wing populist politicians as the **fourth article** in this special issue by **Atkinson, McWan, White & Hoque (2023)** shows. The authors conducted eleven interviews with key leaders responsible for communication and campaign management in a small Midwest County in the US representing both the Democratic and the Republican party. Based on these interviews, Atkinson et al. (2023) diagnose an increased *mediated fusion* of alternative news and mainstream politics. While not all interviewees used alternative news media, several interviewees from both parties used alternative news media for personal purposes or to inform themselves. Furthermore, leaders of both parties used alternative news sharing strategically. Their aim was to generate outrage and emotional reactions from their party members.

Research on the role of alternative news for political mobilization indicates that this strategy might pay off. A two-wave panel from Malaysia found that using alternative news predicted more positive attitudes towards a pro-democracy movement (Selvanathan & Lickel, 2020, p. 13) Similar relationships between using (progressive) alternative news and protest participation have also been found in Hong-Kong (Chan, 2017, p. 673; Leung & Lee, 2014, p. 325) and the United States (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009, p. 12).

Taken together, alternative news provides new opportunity structures for participation and (political) activism. Yet, these opportunity structures not only serve marginalized communities but also enable the expression of authoritarian and hateful worldviews. Furthermore, politicians from different camps and with varying degrees of establishment do



strategically employ alternative news media for mobilization. Hence, focusing on (seemingly) commercially unattractive target groups is also not enough. Alternative news must also be studied as an opportunity structure for powerful actors.

### **Audiences as being Misinformed and Manipulated**

One central concern around alternative news is that they contribute to the spreading of misinformation and misperceptions (see also the comment by **Strömbäck (2023)** in this issue). Particularly since the US presidential election in 2016, the term alternative news has sometimes been used as a quasi-synonym for *fake news*, itself an ambiguous term. On the one hand, fake news has been used as a *label* to denigrate journalism that is disliked, as is regularly done by former U.S. president Donald Trump (see Coll, 2017). On the other hand, fake news describes a certain *genre* (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, p. 100), content that “mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent” (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094). In that sense fake news is a specific form of intentional disinformation (Tandoc et al., 2021). In the aftermath of Donald Trump's election as US president in 2016, hyperpartisan alternative news media have been particularly subjected to being labeled as disinformation or fake news (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p. 21), and their users were often characterized as being misinformed or not having enough media literacy (Introne et al., 2018, p. 1).

However, the relationship between alternative news and the dissemination of falsehoods is complex. On the one hand, websites that spread falsehoods often present themselves as alternative news (Robertson & Mourão, 2020, p. 14), and alternative news do contribute to the spreading of conspiracy theories (Starbird, 2017; Yablokov, 2015). On the other hand, the share of falsehoods within alternative news' overall coverage is often small (Boberg et al., 2020, p. 16), with distorted half-true news rather than completely false stories dominating the coverage (Mourão & Robertson, 2019, p. 2086). The equating of alternative news and ‘fake news’ also often neglects larger developments within established journalism

such as tabloidization (McDowell-Naylor, Thomas, & Cushion, 2020, p. 173), ‘clickbaiting’, or other examples of poor journalism that audiences perceive to be part of the ‘fake news’ problem (Nielsen & Graves, 2017).

Nevertheless, alternative news can contribute to users’ misperceptions. Experiments have shown that users who read a ‘distorted’ alternative news article instead of a traditional journalistic report about a so-far unknown political candidate have more biased attitudes towards that candidate afterwards (Frischlich et al., 2021, p. 34). Using alternative news is also associated with an increased recall of COVID-19 related misinformation (Frischlich et al., 2022, p. 13), and a stronger belief in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories (Ziegele et al., 2022, p. 111), although the latter associations are small and cross-sectional. Taken together, these studies are consistent with pressing concerns for alternative news’ failed contribution to and even diametric effects on a cornerstone of democracy, correctly informed citizens (see the comment by **Strömbäck, 2023** in this special issue).

The **fifth article** included in this special issue by **Reiter and Matthes (2023)**, examines another central measure for evaluating alternative news’ performance in this context: The fostering of political knowledge and political interest. In their study, Reiter and Matthes (2021) analyze a two-wave panel conducted in the ‘hot period’ between six and one week before the Austrian parliamentary election in 2019. Their findings show that those who consumed alternative news six weeks before the election were more interested in politics when surveyed one week before casting their votes. No surge in interest was found among mainstream news users. However, there was an interesting interplay between alternative and mainstream news use. For those users who consumed mainstream news, but no or only little alternative news (i.e., traditional news users), political interest increased as the election came closer. Yet, for those who consumed a lot of alternative news together with mainstream news, political interest decreased closer to the election, potentially due to the conflicting worldviews users were exposed to. Remarkably, neither mainstream nor alternative news use predicted

changes in political knowledge over this rather short period of time. This study suggests that the effects of both established and alternative news should be studied more often in concert with peoples other media-related behaviors.

Furthermore, alternative news can jar people's trust in established news media as the **sixth article** in this special issue shows. **Andersen, Shehata and Andersson (2023)** used a four-wave panel survey conducted in Sweden to examine the relationship between alternative news use and the trust in legacy news. They show that decreased trust in mainstream media predicts an increased alternative news orientation and using alternative news media decreases trust in mainstream media over time. Particularly younger and lower educated male audiences, with low levels of media, social, and political trust, combined with high interest in news, were more likely to orient themselves towards alternative news and thus are at the highest risk of losing trust in legacy news. This loss of trust can result in users rejecting counterevidence from established news media and thus increase the risk that users retain misperceptions (Stubenvoll and Matthes, 2022).

Taken together, stereotypically labeling all alternative news users as being uneducated and lacking media literacy is not justified by evidence. However, alternative news use can increase misperceptions and reduce trust in established news media, thereby threatening the democratic cornerstone of an informed citizenship (Stömbäck, 2023). Thus, expanding on the call from Swart et al. (2022), we should examine what users experience as informative, what does or does not inform users, and respectively what misinforms them in a far more comprehensive manner.

### **Audiences as Critical Users**

The rise of alternative news must be seen within the larger trend of declining levels of trust that users have in established news media (Ries et al., 2022, p. 5). Alternative news users often curate their media repertoires to balance what they perceive as critical shortcomings of established news (Schwarzenegger, 2020). For instance, Meadows et al.

(2007) showed that people turned towards Australian community broadcasting as alternative news due to two central motives reflective of this trend: this type of alternative news style, was perceived to be accessible, ‘friend-like’ (p.12), and non-traditional (p. 21); and they covered stories that were underrepresented in the ‘mainstream’ (p. 13), including information that could be used to organize community life for indigenous and ethnic minority communities (p. 15, 17). Audiences' use of alternative media resonates with a dissatisfaction with ‘mainstream’ news and a thwarted need to make ‘sense of the world’ (Harcup, 2016, p. 693). Ihlebæk and Holter (2022) recently showed that one source of this dissatisfaction are emotions. Based on interviews with media users who had commented in a hostile, xenophobic manner on established news sites, they show high levels of fear related to Immigration and particularly Muslims among their interviewees. The commenters were angry that apparently the mainstream media did not share their concerns and thus turned to alternative news media for more “objective and detailed” (p. 1158) information. Disappointment and distrust are recurring motifs found in qualitative studies of the audiences of alternative news in the US (Atton, 2002, p. 128), Latin America (Harlow & Harp, 2013, p. 33), and Norway (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022, p. 1026).

Dissatisfaction matters among right-wing leaning and left-wing leaning audiences (Rauch, 2019, p. 32), and is also confirmed by quantitative studies. For example, it has been shown that individuals scoring higher on media skepticism in Israel (Tsfati & Peri, 2006, p. 179) and lower on media trust in Czechia (Štětka et al., 2021, p. 102) are more likely to use alternative news media. When contrasted with those who rely on legacy news sources only, alternative news users seem to be motivated by a dissatisfaction with whatever they understand ‘mainstream’ news to be in their particular contexts. This dissatisfaction seems to be particularly driven by a perceived lack of representation of topics and opinions in mainstream news that these audience groups are highly engaged in, but it can also be driven by a dissatisfaction with how legacy news media present the stories they do cover

(Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022). In Western democracies, alternative news users were furthermore found to be highly interested in politics but feeling personally deprived and perceiving their external political efficacy to be low (Schulze, 2020, p. 13). They were also found to have a stronger conspiracy mentality (Frischlich et al., 2022, p. 11), more populist attitudes (Müller & Schulz, 2021, p. 287), a more immigration-critical stance (Schulze, 2020, p. 13), and more ultra-conservative attitudes (Guess et al., 2020, p. 473 ff.), than non-users.

As evident from the different facets of the audiences of alternative news reviewed so far, there is not “one” homogenous alternative news audience. Instead, different types of alternative news users can be distinguished. For instance, Noppari et al. (2019) identified three types of users with varying levels of distrust and opposition to the ‘mainstream’ as well as different types of motivation and gratification for engaging with alternative media|.

The **seventh and final paper** in this special issue by **Schwarzenegger (2023)** diversifies our understanding of alternative news users even more. Based on guided interviews with 35 alternative news users from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, he provides deep insights into the multifaceted motivations and both the informational and social gratification alternative news offers their audiences. Exploring alternative news user’s agency, he found that alternative news is not consumed “accidentally or due to a lack of media literacy” (p. 9) but intentionally, and because users were fully aware of these outlets operating “beyond the usual spectrum of journalism” (p. 9). The concrete motivations were manifold (see p. 10 for an overview). Some users acted as “awakened infowarriors”, identifying strongly as alternative news users and connecting with others ‘for the cause’. These users were very critical, and even hostile, towards what they perceive to be “the mainstream”. Albeit also very critical, “community seekers” were motivated primarily by alternative news’ social function, searching for a sense of belonging, approval, and recognition. Others reported more informational motives, such as the “completists” or “critical curators” who strived for a rich and diversified media repertoire. Finally, “reconnaissance users” were best understood as

counter-activists, who aimed at exploring what's going on "behind the enemy lines". Likely, these reconnaissance users are the ones contributing to the counter-comments observed in the study by Roslyng and Blagaard (2023) in this special issue.

Taken together, alternative news users are not only particularly active (online) news users (Castro et al., 2021, p. 15; Schulze, 2020, p. 13), they also must be understood as "active agents" (Swart et al., 2022) responsible for their (alternative) media choices in our current high-choice hybrid media environment (van Aelst et al., 2017). Clearly, the selection of alternative news can be driven by various motives and fulfill several distinct needs.

Advancing a radical audience turn in (alternative) news research means that we must embrace and understand this complexity.

### **Moving forward: Advancing an Audience Turn in (Alternative) News Research**

Perspectives on alternative news audiences have shifted repeatedly over time (see also the comment by **Rauch, 2023** in this special issue), for instance, from optimistic ideations of alternative news users as "ideal participants and activists" at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to dystopian concerns of "misinformed and manipulated" audiences since the 2016 presidential election in the US. The question of what audiences are or are not, is not unique to alternative news but reflects a larger challenge to advance an audience turn in journalism studies more generally.

The articles and comments included in this special issue helped us to advance such an 'audience turn' by substantially contributing to different perspectives on the audiences of alternative news. Jointly, the contributions paint a complex, multifaceted image of alternative news users and demonstrate the value of moving beyond a "(mainstream) media-centric" approach (Swart et al. 2022) to explore the new opportunity structures emerging outside of established journalist institutions. They also make a strong argument for asking what users perceive to be "alternative" (Steppat et al. 2023, Rauch, 2023) or "mainstream" news and to

examine the influence of context factors such as polarization and media fragmentation on these perceptions.

Expanding on another demand by Swart et al. (2022), namely, to examine (seemingly) commercially unattractive audiences, the papers included in this special issue show that alternative news do provide new opportunity structures for disempowered communities (Roslyng & Blaagaard, 2023), but also how powerful actors such as politicians can take advantage of these openings (Atkinson et al., 2023; Nordheim et al., 2023). Consequently, an audience turn in (alternative) news research must also account for these strategic exploitations.

Furthermore the articles included in this special issue suggest that it is not only relevant to ask what users perceive as informative (Swart et al., 2022), but also to examine the potentially diametric effects of alternative news on its users including alternative news' contribution to misperceptions (Strömbäck, 2023), and an increased distance towards established news media (Andersen et al., 2023) and politics (Reiter & Matthes, 2023).

Overall, the contributions in this special issue demonstrate that alternative news users irrespective of their political orientation must be clearly understood as “active agents” (Swart et al., 2022). They are not a homogenous “good” or “bad” audience, but must be approached as complex human beings embedded in a larger social, political, and historical context. Thus, understanding them requires fine-grained examinations of their multiple types and motivations, gratifications (Schwarzenegger, 2023), cultural, social, and political contexts, and media routines. As such, the audiences of alternative news must indeed be understood as “hybrid” (see Rauch, 2023) on multiple levels.

The contributions in this special issue open several venues for future theorizing and empirical research. Several of these venues have been highlighted in an excellent manner by Rauch (2023, in this issue), including the need for (i) more studies and comparisons that go

beyond the Western context; (ii) questions around the definition and operationalization of “alternative media”; and (iii) the examination of alternative news audience perspectives on approaches to reform legacy journalism including slow or constructive journalism. We agree with these beliefs, as well as with Strömbäck’s (2023) call for a nuanced distinction between alternative news as opposed to “alternative facts” (or more bluntly: lies).

Beyond these scholars' valuable perspectives, we think that the articles included in this special issue make a strong argument for examining the boundary conditions for the different facets of alternative news audiences more closely. For example, future research should consider in which contexts do users engage with alternative news to mobilize others and when are they mobilized themselves? Are there differences in the likelihood for the use (or abuse) of alternative news’ opportunity structures and if so: which factors shape them? How can mainstream journalism become less suspiciously perceived and more trustworthy by (alternative) news users, particularly in light of reinforcing spirals of distrust? When and for whom does alternative news contribute to misperceptions, and who is resilient to such effects? Or, more broadly put,: which factors on the macro-meso-micro level contribute to alternative news living up to their democratic potential of giving voice to the voiceless and fostering media diversity, as we asked in the editorial for the first special issue (Ihlebak et al., 2022). And when does alternative news become a challenge for democracy as Strömbäck (2023) cautions? From our point of view, these, like several other open questions, underscore the need for a radical audience turn – in alternative news media research as much as in journalism studies more generally.



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