

Humans of New York: Digital Mediation of Emotional Reflexivity's
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Anthropology of New Media

Abstract

Digital entities and social networks in online spaces create evident algorithmic and filtered divides in populations. Through modulations, system networks, codes, and data files, technological advances aim towards projecting the field into robotic mannerisms. The anthropocentric identity of all technologies is crucial in the survival of technologies in relation human functionality. If technologies are not mediated or created for the true expression of human realities, then the existence of such technologies and its outlets will provide a blank space with minimal upward movement for technological evolution or transcendence of the true constitutions of human beings. The literature surrounding digitization aims to study patterns of impact and the psychological aspect of digitization but does not incorporate the true meaning of being human and absorbing such entities within a digital context of the internet world, a world which is entirely malleable and highly manipulated. Through this study I aim to fill the gap in such literature by providing an anthropological insight on the epistemologies of photography, relaying of information through this medium and emotional reflexivity as presented on the blog called Humans of New York. How this blog aims amalgamate digital and emotional capacities to produce open global sharing capacities. I situate the blog in a technological mediated methodological framework to understand the place it holds in the world wide web. I then develop on the notions of submerging identities and meanings in the exchanges of interpretation of images, supported by the idea of the interaction between the self and environment as it pertains to photography and the real world. I aim to canvas the affect and emotions that are created by the metastable individuation of the self as it interacts within these online environments. Furthermore, I aim to prove the significance of the blog as it allows for a true surfacing of human vulnerability and emotions in digital networking spaces.

Introduction:

In modern societies, information technology and media forms are rapidly reshaped and proliferated in constant revolutionizing mannerisms. Many aspects of the human being can now be searched through the lens of the internet, through rapid communication and abundant entities of facts and data available at the instantaneous movements of the fingertips, societies are highly

mediated by the new world of digital technologies. The idea of the world without the internet and wireless networking is beyond the imaginaries of its avid users. Accessibility to such forms of technology allows users to mediate their knowledge perceived and knowledge exchanged. Educational platforms, social networking and several functional applications allow for the user to write, produce, recreate, and exemplify their understandings of the world.

In this Research Project I aim to analyze the mediation of personal narratives through images on the Humans of New York Blog, a popular Facebook phenomenon. Developing on the ideas of Markham and Baym, Azoulay, Gurzel, Nash and Simondon, I intend to understand the power of imagery, the affective reaction it creates and the surfacing of emotions that it produces through its digital assemblages in the Humans of New York Blog. With tools and power of photographic mediation, and its presentations on social media platforms, the blog aims to provoke an array of humanistic emotions and feelings through its portrayal of real, heart wrenching and relevant stories of the citizens of New York. Brandon Stanton, a financial corporate worker, turned photojournalist started his blog to document 10,000 photos, in 2014 to capture the spatial sense amongst the citizens of New York City. The blog then transformed into a mini ethnographic series in which Brandon captures the participants story in the moment of time and creates a bold imagery with photographic and textual content. The blog now has over 18,000,000 followers on the Facebook webpage, its devoted following displays the meaning of the content that is channeled.

Framework for Accurate Analysis of Mediation:

As one scrolls through the Humans of New York Facebook web page, they are presented with an institution consisting of thousands of empowering images and more expressively a rippling humanistic dialogue initiated underneath each form of photographed content. Facebook

users all around globe, from different continents, actively participate in the constitution and functioning of the blog. Highlighted by Markham and Baym in their text “Internet Inquiry: Conversations About Method”, the accurate methods of observing new media can be comprehended through four paradigms; *media convergence*, an amalgamation of different media, the notion of *mediated identities*, which entails the self in another medium, *redefinition of social constructs or boundaries*, the limitless edges of the online space, and the *transcendence of global boundaries* which explain the function of media as vision beyond a certain local definition of communicative population.

Utilizing these four paradigms of interpreting new media, I began to embody the content of the HONY blog through the lens of a personal user, then shifted the perspective to questioning the meaning of the platform to others. Several components of this blog are mediated and converged. Mediation begins when a conversation is conducted by the artist and a photograph of the subject is captured. The images are edited, Brandon then mediates a few compelling sentences and compiles the image and words to produce a stimulating narrative. When the viewer embraces the image, they mediate their thoughts and emotions through the Facebook platform and converge their responses into the thread of the image post. In this digital capacity of HONY, several forms of media are amalgamated, they coincide to produce content and experience that is valued by the subject, the storyteller and the reader.

Mediated identities are mutual in the understanding of the context Humans Of New York, the purpose of the blog is to view and embody the self in another medium. Participants are displayed through their mediation of self and identity in the means of an image and a series of descriptive sentences. The viewer, the average Facebook user, has an identity that is compressed and organized within blue and white brackets, with personal photos and social ties, which they

use as their navigation profiles in digital networking spaces. This transitions effectively into the point of redefinition of social constructs or boundaries, online spaces provide a space for open thought and expression, and an evident theme and question in this research is How does HONY allow you to embrace your true emotional reflexivity's?

Throughout the fieldwork process I noticed individuals relaying their emotions towards the content of the photograph and story, and initiating dialogues produced by the vulnerable content of the imagery. This notion allows for redefinition of social boundaries and constructs to occur. The thoughts and comments that were relayed onto the platform were not entirely socially acceptable in real life networks, but the blog comes with a tinge of anonymity, thus allowing the individual to be truthful and reconstituting their social boundaries and constructs. The Humans of New York Blog is a confident example of the transcendence of global boundaries, with its multi national approach and the stories it aims to captures, followers are disseminated throughout the globe. The power of sharing in through this digital social network allows one to connect with humans across the globe and may even allow for formulation of meaningful bonds within closer geographical positionality. It provides a place for the broadening of networks and expands spaces of digital social capacities.

Relaying an Imagined Narrative

In her novel *Image Brokers*, anthropologist Zeynep Gursel elaborates on the industry of images, their production and the process and meaning of delivery behind each photograph. Conducting her fieldwork in different networks of the Image production world, Gursel provides an insight towards the meaning of photographs. In the process of this ethnographic research, reading *Image brokers* provided a deeper comprehension of the value and significance of mediated imagery and imaginaries in photographic forms. In chapter four of the text Gursel

induces the reader to understand the power of text and imagery, and how within the shift of recent ideologies of photography, photos have made a return to the platform of appealing performance. In *Humans of New York*, each post consists of an image of an individual being interviewed, and above the image are a few sentences describing a personal narrative in that moment of time. The photographer in this case acts the image broker, the editor and publisher and as described by Gursel, presenting an image requires a relay of information and remodelling of the content for a photograph to reform into an image. “Photography has to sell the story because the reader perceives the photo first.” Brandon manages to maintain a fine balance between the text and imagery within the entirety of each narrative. The stories are clear and concise, and the image accurately depicts the narrative of the individual in that moment of time. HONY creates a dichotomous relationship of words and imagery to provide an assemblage of story and life phenomena, inducing concurrent connectivity.

Another node to analyze the accurate relaying of such narratives is through the unification of words, language, expression and accurate physical encapsulation of the subject. In HONY this amalgamation of thought and creativity leads the viewer to receive a balanced understanding of the subject, their persona and imaginaries. The image and storytelling also reflect the lens and perception of the photographer, the way one chooses to frame a situation, a person and their story is displayed by the vernacular of the artist. Through the experience of storytelling, capturing and deciphering, HONY acts and recreates a series of digital social networks.

In her book “*The Civil contract of photography*” Ariella Azoulay explains the shift in interpretation of images as provoked by the bubble of political imagery;

“Artistic discourse turned out to be an obstacle to seeing what was in the photograph, but it was not the only one. Postmodern theorists —such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard,

or Susan Sontag—who bore witness to a glut of images were the first to fall prey to a kind of “image fatigue”; they simply stopped looking. The world filled up with images of horrors, and they loudly proclaimed that viewers’ eyes had grown unseeing, proceeding to unburden themselves of the responsibility to hold onto the elementary gesture of looking at what is presented to one’s gaze (11)”

Through the idea of image fatigue, one can recognise that the average individual may not be compelled to view war or political imagery, because of the lack of relationality and common patterns presented in such genre of photos. In the case of Humans of New York, it is difficult to reach a state of image fatigue, because the content of the blog entails experiential narratives that are appropriately relatable, thus providing a sense of civil contract of understanding the imagery. Zeynep Gursel describes the imagined reader as being intimidated by world news since the subject is generally beyond their realm of experience and she explains that the goal is to attach a face to a name, and provide visuals so that a reader can attach to person. The imagery displayed on the HONY blog, provides visualization and imagination to the story being conveyed, and the threads created on the social media platforms allow for an exchange of visuals and embodiment with the subjects.

This process then creates a digital sphere in which social connections and networks can be formed between the photographer, the subject, and the reader through the mediation of pixilation and presence. With the interaction of the blog, followers also share the content on their personal profiles, producing a rippling affective of the notion of sharing and experiencing capacity. The followers bring an interactive bubble to the HONY community and an exchange of individualization of imagination occurs readily. The platform provokes individuals to express, engage and be truthful of the feelings and vulnerabilities provoked by the narrative content. HONY provides the notion of free space and it adds steeping realities to the social media platforms that are algorithmically designed to display advertisements and popular videos.

Humans of New York provides content that is easily embodied and encourages individuals to connect with their vulnerabilities as well as the vulnerabilities of other humans.

Transindividual Affect and Mediated Emotions

To further comprehend Humans of New York and its spatial abilities and communal affect , I use a text series written by Shannon V. Tettegah along with several other authors (2016) “Emotions Technology and social media” . Using Deluze’s theories of the virtual and Gilbert Simondon’s theory of transindividual, author Adam Nash in chapter 1 “Affect , people and digital social networks” projects to explain how individuation and the continuum of such can occur in digital spaces.

“For Simondon, an individual is always an individuation in process, in reciprocal relations with its milieu, both emerging from and carrying within itself the preindividual or metastable environment. The individual is therefore a multiplicity of individuations, or what Simondon calls a series of individualizing individuations, meaning that the individual, such as it can be said to exist, is always a continuation and reciprocation of the vital or physical individuation that brought into being this individual (Combes, 2013).”

As Simondon states, the individual as it exists, is always a continuation and reciprocation of the vital or physical individuation that brought into being this individual. When one uses this ideology to analyze the constitutions of HONY, they can notice that individual subjects that are being interviewed, the individual who is the artist, as well as the individual interacting with the imagery is not explicitly an individual but rather an inextricable product of its reciprocal individuation through its interactivity within these digital sharing spaces.

Through the very space and modalities of the blog, the individuation of each member is further submerged into the “metastable environment” of the blog, allowing for an array of

affectivity, emotions and expression to be surfaced. The concept of individuation plays a large role in the mediated identities involved on the Facebook platform, through ones own Facebook profile, they are given the codes, programs, and algorithms to create an accurate self depicting identity for themselves. Thus, producing a sense of individuation as stated in Simondon's theory, but through the interaction with the blog and its content, the individuation and mediated identities are constantly transforming and evolving in a continuum, resulting in personal social growth by absorbing the empowering content being relayed by the blog.

With the process of developing the transindividual and its interconnectivity through the blog, followers gravitate towards like minded individuals, this space creates a mass submergence of social networks. The blog holds within it, a characterization of the stereotypical New Yorker, who on most days would not be open for a conversation, but on other occasions will be ready to potently share their lives. With the mediation of such New York character, its assemblages of narratives and ideas, the blog induces a contagious cultural effect on social media platforms. The mannerisms in which Brandon Stanton presents the Humans of New York produces a wave of confidence and relationality in which individuals across the globe feel comfortable to share, release and engage. Nash argues the role of digital spaces in production of affective emotions as follows;

“This is where Simondon's concept of affectivity and emotion comes in to play. It requires an understanding of the process of being in the world as a constant reciprocal becoming, where everything is constantly reconstituted in relation to everything encountered within, and as a constituting element of, the environment.”

The content being portrayed on the HONY blog is affective because its allows followers to question their relationality and positionality within larger social constitutions. Through to content

and stylistic portrayal of the blog, the follower is constantly reciprocal with this environment, they are experiencing and learning in relation to the narratives of other humans. Bold emotional expressivity is induced within the viewer by the narrative realities being portrayed, such affect is channeled and relayed through the digital modulations of the comment sections of the blog, the “like” button, and the “share” buttons.

The Humans of New York provides lines of interconnectivity that one may not be familiar with on their digitized social profiles, it allows users to expand their knowledge and social circles by actively engaging with the material of each image and the thread that follows each image.

“Digital social networks are starting to lay universal claims of being constituted by humanity itself. Such a constitution should, rather than alienating itself, transcend itself by offering the means not only of production, but also of open access to digital networks themselves. For this to happen, we will all have to become what Simondon calls “technical poets” (Chabot, 2003, p. 141). In other words, we need to stop thinking of ourselves as users, with all the negative connotations of drug addiction, and start thinking of ourselves as interactors” (21-22)

In the preceding passage Nash argues that there needs to be a shift in the production and consumption in the world of digital networks. He proposes that instead of individuals “using” these networks created by digital capitalists and allocating their time to a networked regime, they ought to regain their ontology and presence within the digital networking worlds through interacting with the systemization. Through Humans of New York, Facebook users are transformed into Facebook interactors, they are behaving as though such interactions are occurring in the physical world and the vulnerability produced by the content of the blog creates the wave for engagement and interaction.

In chapter 5 of the text, “Understanding Emotional Expressions in Social Media through Data Mining”, Ranellucci et al aim to study social media websites through data mining to better understand how portrayed emotions navigate the world wide web. One study found:

“Specifically, Kramer et al. (2014) manipulated exposure to positive or negative emotions in friends’ posts on Facebook by limiting what content was visible on ones’ “news feed.” In the first experiment, exposure to positive emotional content was reduced; whereas, in the second experiment, exposure to negative emotional content was reduced. Results indicated that participants who were exposed to more positive emotional content posted more positive and less negative content than participants in their respective control group, with the opposite pattern arising for the participants exposed to more negative content.”

Relating to the idea of contagion of emotions within social networks and the findings of the preceding study, it is evident that a platform such as Humans of New York creates a serial progression of expressivity. A pattern of vulnerability is invoked within the narrative subject and provoked amongst the followers. No distinct patterns of negative or positive emotions were studied, rather various thread suggested high engagement of followers relating to agreement/disagreements surrounding certain phenomena or topic. The blog gains its value as a platform for a strong digital sharing capacity because individuals are comfortable to express emotions that may not be socially acceptable in the physical world, people are involved in arguments, active discussion and several disagreements. Albeit, individuals are highly motivated and touched by each story and choose to engage with profound insightful meaning.

Discussion and Conclusion

In one interview a participant explained that he believes in the idea of the human mosaic tile, with each person presenting a different version of themselves within the blog. He and

several others explained that the space of HONY creates a sense of vulnerability within the followers, explaining the popularity of the blog.

P1 Describes ;

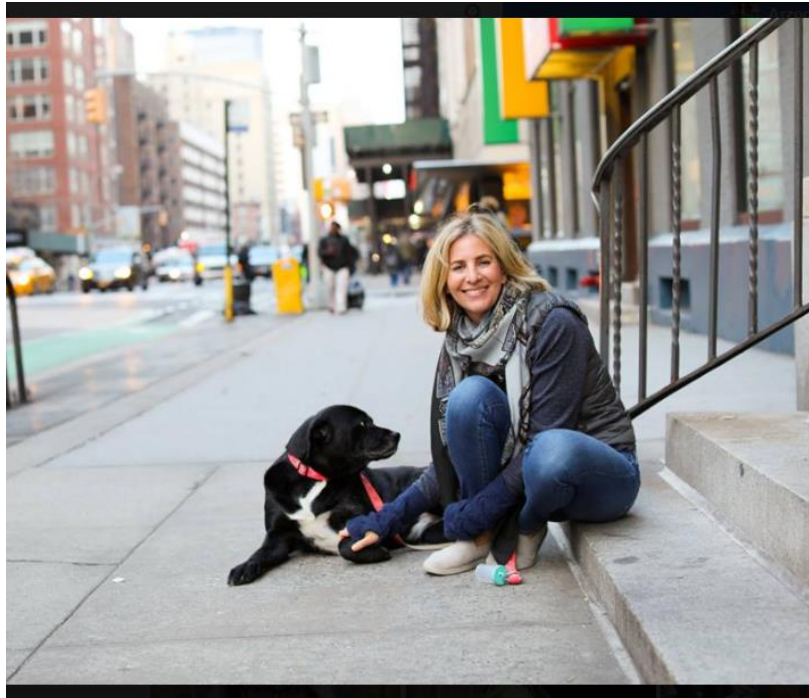
“Uh, I think HONY does something other platforms don't: it invites the viewer into a deeply intimate moment (..) including profound honesty and suffering, and asks the reader to be mature, respectful, grownup and kind. (...) the clear majority of readers are so honored by this challenge that they rise to meet it (..) it such a rare opportunity to awaken our charitable side that his audience is deeply grateful for the gift (..) it is satisfying and elevating(..) Brandon had a simple goal : document 10,000 faces in New York (..) but it quickly evolved into something significantly more spiritual and profound : let people reveal themselves so we can all see are essentially one(.) every tile unique but part of a singular mosaic(.)”

Using the relaying of imagery, textual narrative forms, the affective notions produced, and the thread of dialogue initiated by such, one can notice that the commonality in all humans is the art of expression, the notion of feeling and embodying emotions, and the importance of interactivity. The participant states that the vulnerabilities produced during this process, allow individuals to learn about themselves and the world, and with each expression, humans can all assemble as different forms of one kind of being.

Conclusively, as one studies the array of vignettes embedded in the Humans of New York blog, they can formulate the characterization of New York in each post and narrative, and within each vignette a contagion of emotions and feelings are surfaced. Followers embody themselves in the experiences and dialogues of the stories. The artist aims to create a canvassing

of personal, heart wrenching realities, which then produce a series of affective reactions within the followers, allowing for the surfacing of personal authenticities and sentiment. The platform of HONY brings forth a powerful sphere of expression, exchange and production of knowledge, Brandon targets to spread awareness, to provide light and voice to many who may not have it. The blog has a video series called “Humans of New York: The series”, in which ten episodes consist of a compilation of 4,000 interviews, divided and organized thematically and with its significant capturing credibility produces a profound comprehension of what it means to be a human not only in New York city but on a global level.

This platform provides a sense of release for the subject, the photographer and the millions of followers that are connected by the content being transmitted. Humans of New York provides an in-depth correlation and questioning of personal values, communal cultural constructions of ideas and reshapes the positionality of all its members. The blog allows for an intersection of digital capacities, imaginative and affective emotional capacities multiplying to produce an empowering sharing capacity. Humans of New York allows for the isolative boundaries and mediated identities of the internet to be broken. Though this project was aimed at studying the utopic sense of the blog, it quickly surfaced that HONY was more than a positive bubble of thought and reflexivity, instead it holds its worth because of the raw reality being portrayed and the raw reality being consumed. With the power of social media and the global sharing capacities of the internet, combined with the bold embodiment of human emotions, Brandon Stanton has created an online space for simplistic human exchange, vital in the well being of most humans.



Humans of New York
Page Liked · December 7, 2017 · 🌐

“My husband had a sudden heart attack a few months ago. It was just a few blocks from here. They called me in to identify his body and then just let me walk right out onto 7th Avenue. I felt so lost. My friends were wonderful and supportive but eventually everyone moves on with their lives. I don't have children. And I'm not a workaholic. So I was left with this intense loneliness and void. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. Then one day I started researching dogs that are good for grief and depression. And 'poodle' kept popping up. But when I went to the rescue fair, all the poodles were gone. There was this one old dog in the back that nobody was looking at. She was skin and bones. She was trembling and scared and mucus was running out of her eyes. She seemed so fragile. She reminded me of myself. I named her Grace because I think my husband sent her to me. She's my first dog. She's been pure joy. We spend all our time together. She's gained her weight back. She comes with me to therapy. We're getting better together.”

Write a comment... 🗨️ 📷 📺 🗨️

Humans of New York: The Series
by Humans of New York ✓

[@honytheseries](#)

From photo blog phenomenon Humans of New York comes Humans of New York: The Seri... [See More](#)

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Brian Canning My god, that last vignette just ripped up my insides. When's Brandon going to be nominated for Nobel? This work is important.
Like · Reply · 15w 33

Kathleen Green Another extremely powerful and challenging episode. I can't think of anything quite like this that you find yourself thinking about your own independence (forgiveness, mission, purpose and so on) in such a subtle but impossible to miss way... unscripted brilliance.
Like · Reply · 16w 26

↳ 1 Reply

Jessica Rachel Snyder Oh boy, Brandon. I've tried to prepare myself for this one because I knew at some point it was coming. The one mainly about addict's. The two men at the end hit me very very hard. My child's father has been an addict for seven year's. Even if we aren't together, I will always have love for him, like this man's mother has for him. The way that man was talking about his mother reminded me of myself & the fact that his mother never gives up on him. There is so much unconditional love there. I'm so happy I got to see the other point of view. Because at the end of the day, it truly isn't any addicts fault.



Humans of New York ✓
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HUMANS OF NEW YORK
Rohingya Refugee Series

Liked Following Share ...

Status Photo/Video

Write something or tag a friend

Post Attribution Settings **OK**

Posts

Humans of New York shared Humans of New York: The Series's episode.

Arts & Humanities Website in New York, New York

Community See All

- Invite your friends to like this Page
- 18,282,867 people like this
- 17,909,227 people follow this
- Margaret Robson and 76 other friends like this

Bruce Chanen

We've all heard (and maybe used) the expression "at the wrong place at the wrong time" and it's easy to feel that when bad things happen we were unfortunate to be where we were. What I love about this story is that the emphasis is not on his "wrong place, wrong time" but on the fortune turn that someone from a world-away was there to make a horrible situation just a little bit better... a little less horrible. From that fortunate intervention came a saved leg and a changed life. Who knows how many lives will now be made better by this humanitarian. And so on and so on. I often think that these HONY posts are like pebbles in the water of life... they start ripples from which good things can happen.

2 wks Like Reply More

Margaret Robson replied · 18 replies

Amber Cote

With all of these stories lately it makes me want to become a humanitarian. However I have no notable skills that I believe would help nor do I have any idea how to go about it.

Nishi Aggarwal

And now we are approaching the complicated, unresolved, even dark chapters of India 101.

I can guarantee you that if more women in my mom's generation were financially independent and not stigmatized for making their own choices, India's divorce rate would have climbed like our population's growth rate!

Edit: Since this comment is getting a lot of visibility, Dear HONYkers, may I divert your attention to the fact that millions of Indian women in villages and city slums use rags, sand, ash, etc. to deal with their menses... yes they do not even have enough cloth!! Goonj, (started by a Magsaysay awardee) aims to address this. Please donate if you are able or share with others: https://goonj.org/page_id=22576/

Edit 2: Updated link!



Kirk Alan Long

I can empathize and relate so much! I got into better schools but couldn't afford to attend. I ended up going to a state school here in my home state and HATING the first year. I'm from Idaho, so I thought that my life would be relegated to being stuck with a bunch of uncultured farmers and I would never see the world or experience anything different like I wanted to. After I got done sulking I slowly opened up my worldview. I realized farmers aren't all hicks like I thought, and I became the "gringo" of the group of international students. I got to see the world and its cultures through the eyes of my (mainly) Brazilian friends. I also landed a sweet internship with StarTalk Radio and I've gotten to live it up a few times in NYC with Neil deGrasse Tyson and other cool scientists. It taught me that college (and life, I guess) is whatever you make of it, and that although going to a "top" university probably does help you, in the long run if you're motivated and do your best good things will come to you. I'm glad that you opened up to the world and realized that too, and I hope your story helps someone who is just starting this journey realize the same thing so they don't have to experience that anguish!



1 mo Like Reply More

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1 mo Like Reply More



Kirk Alan Long

Here are me and my international friends from our "Friendsgiving" a few years ago.



1 mo Like Reply More



Humans of New York

Page Liked · October 29, 2017 ·

Today in microfashion...

Like Comment Share

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Most Relevant

9,480 Shares

14K Comm



Bruce Chanen Of horse, that's the cutest thing I've seen today! I'm stallion that idea for myself. I could filly this up with bad ponies but I've a haunch that no one likes them so I'll foal before I make a jackass of myself. Bravo kid! Thank you for bringing up the rear!

Like Reply · 25w

829

37 Replies

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