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ARCHIVISTS AND USERS AT THE TIME OF COVID19: TOWARDS NEW FORMS OF MEDIATION

Abstract

The relationship between archivists and users has always consisted either in the reference service that the archivist offered and offers to users in the research room, or in the construction of research tools that guide the user in his studies. The first of these activities was canceled (or in any case largely reduced), by the outbreak of the Sars-Cov2 pandemic and the lockdown that ensued first, and the restrictions imposed on access to the reading rooms later. Consequently, the mediation between the archival fonds and the user, which has always been recognized as one of the inherent tasks of the archival profession, has been forced to take on different forms and has been adapted (mediated) by the tools made available on the internet (information systems, web portals, institutional sites but also social networks). This sort of 'mediated mediation' was already at work and gradually increasing in the years leading up to 2020, but the pandemic imposed an acceleration on the process that is impossible to ignore for those who are at the center of this sudden change. This paper aims to analyze if and in what way the pandemic has changed the relationship between archivists and users, but in addition to providing the picture of the current situation, we want to question what the outcome of this process will be and if we can really talk about the development of a new model of archival mediation.

Key words: archivists, users, mediation, Sars-Cov2 pandemic, research, information system, ICT

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ARCHIVISTI E UTENTI AI TEMPI DEL COVID19: VERSO NUOVE FORME DI MEDIAZIONE

Sintesi

Il rapporto tra archivisti ed utenti è sempre consistito o nelle consulenze che l'archivista offriva ed offre agli utenti in sala studio, o nella costruzione di strumenti di ricerca che orientino l'utente nelle sue attività di studio e ricerca. La prima di queste attività è stata cancellata, o comunque ampiamente ridotta, dallo scoppio della pandemia Sars-Cov2 e dal lockdown che ne è derivato prima e dalle limitazioni imposte all'accesso nelle sale studio poi. Tutto questo ha fatto sì che la mediazione tra complesso documentario ed utente, che è sempre stato riconosciuto come uno dei compiti fondanti della professione dell'archivista, ha dovuto assumere forme diverse e, a loro volta, mediate dagli strumenti messi a disposizione dalla rete internet (sistemi informativi, portali, siti istituzionali ma anche social network). Questa sorta di "mediazione mediata" aveva già iniziato a diffondersi negli anni precedenti il 2020, ma la pandemia ha imposto una accelerazione tale al processo che è impossibile da ignorare per quanti, archivisti e ricercatori, sono al centro di questo improvviso cambiamento. L'intervento qui presentato vuole appunto analizzare se, e in che modo, la pandemia ha cambiato il rapporto tra archivisti ed utenti, ma, oltre a fornire il quadro della situazione attuale, si vuole interrogare su quale sarà l'esito di questo processo e se alla fine si possa veramente parlare dello sviluppo di un nuovo modello di mediazione archivistica.

ARHIVISTI IN UPORABNIKI V ČASU COVID19: K NOVIM OBLIKAM MEDIACIJE

Povzetek

Odnos med arhivisti in uporabniki je bil vedno bodisi v referenčni storitvi, ki jo je arhivar ponujal oziroma jo ponuja uporabnikom v raziskovalni dejavnosti, bodisi v konstrukciji raziskovalnih orodij, ki uporabnika usmerjajo pri študiju. Prva od teh dejavnosti je bila odpovedana (ali pa v veliki meri zmanjšana) zaradi izbruha pandemije Sars-Cov2 in omejitev, ki so sledile kasneje, vključno z omejitvijo dostopa do čitalnic. Posledično je bilo prehajanje gradiva med arhivskimi fondi in uporabnikom, ki je že od nekdaj prepoznano kot ena od inherentnih nalog arhivske stroke, prisiljeno dobivati drugačne in nove oblike, tudi s pomočjo orodij, ki so na voljo na internetu (informacijski sistemi, spletni portali, institucionalna spletna mesta, pa tudi družbena omrežja). Tovrstna 'posredna mediacija' je sicer bila prisotna že prej, se v letih do leta 2020 tudi postopoma povečevala, vendar je pandemija pospešila proces, ki ga tistim, ki so v središču te nenadne spremembe, ni mogoče prezreti. Namen tega prispevka je analizirati, ali in na kakšen način je pandemija spremenila odnos med arhivarji in uporabniki, vendar se želimo poleg prikaza slike trenutnega stanja tudi vprašati, kakšen bo izid tega procesa in ali lahko res govorimo o razvoju novega modela arhivskega posredovanja.

Ključne besede: arhivisti, uporabniki, mediacija, pandemija Sars-Cov2, raziskave, informacijski sistem, IKT

1. INTRODUCTION

«Now [...] regarding culture and its lack, imagine our condition in the following way. Think of men in an underground cave [...] Do you think, in the first place, that they have seen something else of themselves and their companions, but the shadows cast by the flame on the cave wall in front of them? [...] So, if you talk about what you imagine to each other, would they not consider it real to see them? [...] Then for such men reality would consist only in the shadows of objects» (Plato, 1990, pp. 539).

Those who were accustomed to going to places of culture to carry out their research dealing with original documents, with archivists and librarians and with other scholars, suddenly found themselves excluded from those places because of the lockdown caused by the Sars-Cov2 pandemic (*Misure urgenti per fronteggiare l'emergenza da COVID-19*, 2020), and forced to carry out their work alone and through a computer monitor. Plato's Myth of the cave well represents the feeling that has taken hold of them.

Even after the relaxation of the restrictions enacted by the Italian government to combat the virus, the attendance of libraries and archives⁵ continued to be subject to the quota of presences in the reading room and for the consultation of individual 'pieces', and to the need to quarantine the pieces consulted by researchers⁶. Before 2020, the research work was punctuated by a precise routine that saw researchers and archivists involved in a continuous exchange that enriched both with new suggestions and interests on the topics covered by the consulted documents (Vitali, 2015, pp. 61–64).

The pandemic and the subsequent limitations of availability have forced an acceleration of changes that were already taking place in the world of archival mediation. Information technology and the Internet brought change in the languages and descriptive methods of archives, and above all created a new way of carrying out the function of mediation between user and documentary heritage that has always been intrinsic to the role of the archivist (Vitali, 2001, pp. 189–192). The following considerations focus precisely on this sort of continuous transition that has questioned and revolutionized one of the key aspects of the archivist's work: this began at the end of the twentieth century, and is now undergoing a quick and unexpected acceleration, to the great risk of making forever disappear word mediation from the professional vocabulary of archivists (Valacchi, 2020, pp. 18–20).

5 A first easing took place with the Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri [DPCM] of 26 April 2020 *Ulteriori disposizioni attuative del decreto-legge 23 febbraio 2020, n. 6, recante misure urgenti in materia di contenimento e gestione dell'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19, applicabili sull'intero territorio nazionale*. (GU Serie Generale n.108 del 27-04-2020) when the so-called "phase 2" began, however, the closure of the places of culture remained in force. The reopening of the places of culture took place with Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri del 17 May 2020, *Disposizioni attuative del decreto-legge 25 marzo 2020, n. 19, recante misure urgenti per fronteggiare l'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19, e del decreto-legge 16 maggio 2020, n. 33, recante ulteriori misure urgenti per fronteggiare l'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19*

6 Based on the technical data sheet attached to the Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri of 17 May 2020, to reopen to the public, they had to follow a series of prescriptions: define an access plan for users by specifying opening days and times, maximum number of visitors and system booking; establish a protocol for access to the facility (measurement of body temperature, obligation to wear a mask and provision of the hand sanitizing solution). Inside the structure, if needed, it is necessary to set up specially marked paths and areas to avoid crowds and clearly indicate the entrance and exit. The technical data sheet recommends adequate cleaning and disinfection of surfaces and environments and frequent air exchange; the use of air conditioning systems with the air recirculation function is not recommended. The indications also concern the treatment of documentary collections and book material for which, since they cannot be subjected to disinfection operations because they are harmful to the supports, storage and isolation procedures are envisaged after consultation.

2. THE ARCHIVIST'S MEDIATION BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

«Archives are intertwined with words. Sometimes inextricable tangles of words. Screamed words, whispered words, hidden words. Archives live on words, like all of us. Yet, often, those who care for them, cannot speak, or speak a language incomprehensible to most» (Valacchi, 2017, pp. 9), in these words by Federico Valacchi we find all the importance of archival mediation and above all the languages on which the communication circuit, starting from the archive, is built and understood as self-documenting memory (Zanni Rosiello, 1987), to reach the user through the synthesis and narration that the archivist makes of it.

But what does mediation involve? What are the languages and techniques that the archivist uses to tell the archives to experienced users, able to move on their own within that tangle of representation of facts and deeds that are documentary complexes? What happens if a third element of mediation creeps into the relationship between user and archivist, which could become the ICTs? Answering all these questions was complex even before the Sars-Cov2 pandemic forced archivists and users to stay out of the research rooms. About a year later it is still not possible to define how the changes - occurred in the communication of archives - have definitively changed the circular relationship that has always existed between archives, archivists, and users, or whether the acceleration in making descriptive resources available online was just a flash in the pan destined to go out as soon as things return to normal pre-Covid.

The mediation of the archivist before the advent of information technologies (ICT) and the internet was explicit not only in the production of research tools, but above all in the guide work they carried out in the research room, directing the user to what best suited their needs of research. The meeting between archivist and user creates a difficult job of communication. To understand one must in fact interpret the question, often asked by users in a vague and generic way, then translate it into archival terms and, finally, suggest to the user, based on the accumulated experiences and knowledge of the conservation institute, possible research paths. At the same time, it is necessary for the archivist to propose and make the user understand the cognitive, theoretical, and practical tools, to orient himself and independently decode the archival context in which they must move, also guiding them in the use of the research tools and indicating them the possible access keys to the searched material.

In addition to this, so to speak, interpersonal aspect of the archivist's mediation, there is another aspect that originates from the relationship that the archivist establishes with the fund that they are about to rearrange and from the words they use to describe it. The description of the documentary complexes, and the consequent production of research tools, is one of the main tasks that the archivist carries out to make the papers and the relationships that are established between them, with the producer and with other archives and subjects, understandable.

The centrality of the description and production of the research tools, as mediation tools between documentation and users, is already evident in question number 9 that the Ministry of the Interior asked the Cibrario Commission⁷ in 1870, namely «Uniform rules

7 The Commission was established with the Decree on the reorganization of the State Archives issued by the Ministries of the Interior and of Public Education on March 15, 1870. The Commission, chaired by Senator Luigi Cibrario, was composed, in addition to the President, of dai senatori Michelangelo Castelli e Diodato Pallieri, dal Soprintendente generale degli Archivi toscani, Francesco Bonaini, dal Direttore generale del grande Archivio di Napoli, Francesco Trincherà, dal Direttore dell'Archivio generale in Venezia, Tommaso Gar, dal Direttore dell'Archivio governativo di Milano, Luigi Osio, dal Bibliotecario della Nazionale di Firenze, Giuseppe Canestrini, dal Capo sezione dell'Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Cesare Guasti e dal Segretario dirigente l'Archivio di Stato di Parma, Amadio Ronchini.

must be established for all Archives of sorting?». From the answer given by Cesare Guasti in the final report of the work of the same Commission: «It remains to talk about the organization and the officers (questions sixth, seventh and ninth); two things that the Commission sees as being very connected.

It is undoubted, Your Excellency, that in order-to-order things you must have men in order. Sorting of archives, it is easy to say; and laws are made in a flash: but who puts his hand to them?»⁸. From 1870 onwards there were many indications given by the Ministry of the Interior for the correct drafting of the inventories, drafting intended, above all, as a correct communication of the archival documentation to the users of the study rooms but not only⁹. The description and communication of the archives presuppose technical knowledge in the field of ordering and inventorying but also the sociological knowledge, so to speak, of what the target audience is, that is, the possible audience of the archive being dealt with.

As Feliciati argues,

If you want to choose the aspect that more than others distinguish archivists from other professionals in documentary memory [...], one will probably focus on descriptive practice. Beyond the terminological distancing, albeit significant, with respect to cataloging and filing, the archival description has in common with the similar activities of the cousins essentially the function of guaranteeing the discovery of the objects described. [...] First of all, the archival description, [...] is configured as a deductive procedure in which the structures of archival sedimentations are represented, from general to the specific, rather than returning the content of individual files or documentary units. [...] The medium, the type of communication, so to speak, through which archivists have traditionally transmitted their descriptions is the inventory, a term that well summarizes the function of protecting the integrity of documentary collections and that of research, of selection within these sets to recover the constituent elements. (Feliciati, 2007, pp. 1–2)

Over the years, with the advent of description standards (Vitali, 2013, pp. 179–210) first, and then with the advent of the internet and the first information systems (Valacchi 2013, pp. 395–492), the description has undergone some changes, even if not decisive ones, in the production methods, especially for adaptation to the communication models dictated by the network. Technologies substantially change the communication system of archival information, which must therefore be rethought, right from the design stage, according to a new approach to research, influenced and determined by ICT (Carucci & Guercio, 2021, pp. 165–171).

Starting with the development of the web, the way in which archivists relate to the description of the collections has therefore changed, even if this has not always produced a change in language that would have made it possible to adapt the content to the container: in fact, often what has been done, was the transposition of paper information resources on the web, without considering the need for immediacy and simplicity of

8 "On the reorganization of the State Archives". Report of the Commission established by the Ministers of the Interior and of Public Education by decree of March 15, 1870, the text is available on <https://www.icar.beniculturali.it/biblio/pdf/Studi/cibrario.pdf>.

9 For example, see the descriptive methods adopted for the preparation of the Guida Generale degli Archivi di Stato Italiani and Ministero degli Interni, Direzione generale degli Archivi di Stato, Ufficio studi e pubblicazioni, circolare n. 36/1966 *Norme per la pubblicazione degli inventari*, the text is available on https://archiviodistatorino.beniculturali.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ASTO_SPA_circolare-ministeriale-inventari.pdf

language that the internet requires. In fact, archival research today has a new starting point which coincides with the search engines present on the web; where previously endless bibliographies and paper inventories were consulted, today we start by inserting a keyword in any search engine which, with more or less background noise, still returns a series of results that help to circumscribe the research object and to identify the places in which to carry it out, for example archives or libraries. The situation described so far would seem to be an established and consolidated research process: the user starts his research from home by arriving in the archive with a research project, whether it is in an embryonic state and not yet well circumscribed or well defined and clear in the documents to consult, research that they will be able to deepen in any case in the research room (Vitali, 2015, pp. 64–68). The network, or rather the archival information that the network makes available, does not always put the user in an easy situation to carry out their research. In fact, it is here - in the research tools made available by the network - that the first, and certainly more serious, short circuit of this mediation, so to speak not mediated, is generated, in which the only form of communication between archivist and user is the information resource, not always adequate to the needs of an inexperienced user, but which in some cases makes it difficult for even the most experienced researchers to carry out their activities (Valacchi, 2012, pp. 61–88).

Within a wide range of web tools, the user can move from an information system to a digital archive in an easy and linear search path.

An archival information system unlike traditional research tools, as Feliciati argues, «must represent, on the one hand, a powerful tool available to the archival community for the protection and management of heritage and, on the other, a knowledge platform, which fully enhances the documentary memory, making it “navigable” and interrogated by all users, professional or not» (Feliciati, 2009, pp. 14).

This evolution, if we analyse the archival information systems, seems to be the result not so much of policies aimed at spreading knowledge of the archives within an ever-wider audience but of a sort of presence anxiety, which has led to the creation of sites and port them in some cases superimposable to those already existing¹⁰. The creation of new web tools, not always necessary, also results in the waste of resources that could have been more fruitfully used in updating and restyling the existing ones¹¹. This sort of overexposure that the network gives to the research tools does not make the archives more usable for non-expert users or more ‘visible’ for those unfamiliar with conservation institutes. On the contrary, it considerably complicates the researcher’s activity, even for the expert, who finds himself tossed between one site and another, without understanding where this navigation will land him, as it is not controlled by him, but by a third and extraneous will, which decides almost autonomously what the arrival point of the search will be.

10 For example, see the creation between 2018 and 2019 of the SAN-Research tools portal, which in the intentions of the Istituto centrale per gli archivi was to be a «unitary access point for consulting inventories and other research tools that describe the funds kept in the State Archives and in other public and private institutions» (<https://www.icar.beniculturali.it/attivita-e-progetti/progetti-icar-1/il-portale-san-strumenti-di-ricerca-online>). The portal offers an overview of the search tools present on information systems, sites, and portals, often in image or .pdf format and therefore difficult to navigate without downloading the relative files.

11 Think of the time elapsed for the reconstruction of the SIAS portal (Sistema informativo degli archivi di Stato) which only in 2019 was re-engineered and made available to users in an updated version which, however, still excludes some State Archives of primary importance such as Rome, Venice, Turin, and Naples. <https://sias.archivi.beniculturali.it/cgi-bin/pagina.pl>.

3. MEDIATION IN TRANSITION: THE PANDEMIC AND THE JOB OF THE ARCHIVIST

This evolution of the mediation relationship, as described in the previous paragraph, was in an intermediate phase, if not really stalled, when the research rooms were closed in March 2020 due to the outbreak of the Sars-Cov2 pandemic. Users and archivists have suddenly realized how much archival communication on the web was insufficient and scarcely useful for carrying out research started with traditional tools.

With the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers of 9 March 2020, *Ulteriori disposizioni attuative del decreto-legge 23 febbraio 2020, n. 6, recante misure urgenti in materia di contenimento e gestione dell'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19, applicabili sull'intero territorio nazionale*, the provisions relating to the closure of places of culture were extended to all of Italy¹². The user who had research in progress was forced to review his own work plan and, if possible, reshape it based on the resources and documents available on the web, SAN (Sistema archivistico nazionale), SIAS (Sistema informativo degli archivi di Stato), SIUSA (Sistema informativo unificato delle soprintendenze archivistiche), thematic portals become known and frequented with an intensity never encountered before, in the search for news on the fund studied or digital reproductions of documents.

If on the one hand there are the users, on the other there are the conservation institutes and archivists who find themselves facing a completely exceptional situation, such as the impossibility of welcoming scholars and supporting them in research. Activities that until a few weeks earlier had an ordinary recurrence, in the aftermath of the closure, seem difficult, if not impossible to carry out, as well as all the enhancement activities that were periodically carried out to make the preserved cultural heritage better known.

The network is configured as a tool at the service of archival institutes, to continue those activities towards the exterior aimed to enhance the knowledge of their heritage, thus addressing not only the scholars who usually frequent them, but to a wider audience, which can be identified as that of social networks. There are many archival administration institutions that, in addition to the institutional website, have opened accounts on the main social networks over the last few years.

The government also relies on communication via web and social networks by organizing the communication campaign *I stay at home* with the hashtag #iorestoacasa.

The Ministry of Culture is also organizing its virtual communication campaign with the initiative *Culture does not stop!* hashtag #laculturanonferma involving all places of culture. A special section was created within the institutional website of the Ministry, from which it is possible to access the contents of the initiative. There are several sections, one for each area ('Education', 'Museums', 'Cinema', 'Archives and libraries', 'Music' and 'Theater'); in the section 'Archives and libraries' it is possible to consult the initiatives organized by State Archives, Archival and Bibliographic Superintendencies and by State libraries; the events are grouped by regions and provinces.

These initiatives, especially *Culture does not stop!* and *I stay at home*, have populated, and animated the social profiles of the State Archives and the Archivio centrale dello Stato and the Archival Superintendencies, with numerous digital contents, images, photographs, and audiovisual material of the archival heritage preserved or supervised. For conservation institutes, this new condition required the rescheduling of the provision of services. In the first months of the pandemic (March and April) the State Archives worked to ensure remote searches and document requests; with the reopening in May, they adapted the interior spaces and research rooms to the provisions contained in the

12 For the legislation issued by the Italian governments during the pandemic, see <https://www.governo.it/it/coronavirus-normativa>

decrees to avoid gatherings and regulated user access using the booking system. The measures adopted by the institutes have allowed users to resume their study and research activities, albeit with some limitations in terms of days and opening hours and the number of pieces to be consulted daily. But has the mediation activity that took place through social initiatives also resulted in the offer of new points of access to users? The attempt resulted in a better preparation and enrichment of the web pages of the various archives but also in the recovery and publication on the net of the inventories present in the research room.

Certainly, the most interesting aspect of the new forms of mediation born from the pandemic is the massive use of the pages of the institutes on social networks, which was previously quite neglected. The rest of the attempts made by the conservation institutes have often turned out to be unsuitable for the languages of the network. In fact, it is not sufficient to reproduce the inventories and guides present in the research room on the network platforms to make the mediation between user and patrimony effective: a further step would be necessary to ensure that the patrimony of resources made available to users becomes an informative patrimony in the broadest sense of the term, thus allowing users to move independently in the relationships that bind the various parts of the documentary heritage. This new way of interpreting the communication of archives is the real challenge that archival mediation, and consequently the archivist, must face and that the pandemic has brought to the center of reflection. But a real solution, out of the emergency and the will to respond to a moment of crisis temporary. However, it is desirable that what was done in the moment of the emergency is not abandoned but that it continues to be at the center of a reflection. This had already begun to be developed before Covid, but the restrictions imposed by the virus have provided a strong means of accelerating it.

If, as Valacchi says, «The archivist stays in between. Between questions and answers, between silence and the smell of words. The cards are reluctant to give themselves to bystanders. We need a guide, a support charmer who hypnotizes them, makes them docile, even expansive. Suspended between a sometimes abstruse and always complicated past and a present that asks with many faces, the archivist mediates. A discus thrower between earth and sky» (Valacchi, 2017, pp. 45), then the archivist must also be able to mediate between the user and the web not through traditional mediation tools but through the new languages made available by ICT. These descriptive and informative methods, during periods of closure due to the pandemic, proved effective in bringing new users closer to the archives and in keeping users accustomed to research rooms loyal.

4. TO CONCLUDE ... A 'BACK TO THE FUTURE' FOR ARCHIVES AND ARCHIVISTS

Arriving at this point of the discussion and thinking about what conclusions can be drawn from what has been said above, a passage from *Auto da fè* by Elias Canetti comes to mind. Speaking of the destruction of the cards, it expresses all the bewilderment that derives from the loss of memory that in a certain sense coincides with the loss of the individual and collective self:

«A man with his arms raised and his hands folded over his head in a gesture of despair, shouted moaning: "The files are burning! All the files!". "Files are better than men!" I told him, but he didn't care at all, he had only the files in his head, and it occurred to me that perhaps in that building he himself was dealing, perhaps as an archivist, with files, the man was inconsolable, and despite the situation, it made a comical effect» (Canetti, 1999, pp. 539).

The bewilderment and anxiety felt by Canetti's alleged archivist are probably the same ones that archivists and users felt when, with the outbreak of the pandemic and the consequent government measures, they were deprived of their comfort zone, of the certainties they had in carrying out their respective works. The need to use the internet to carry out their business has meant that users became increasingly demanding in requesting and searching for resources that the network did not always make available precisely because until March 2020 it was not necessary to find 'everything' on the internet. It was enough for the network to offer some ideas to start the research, the rest was done in person, in the study rooms. For their part, the archivists and the archival administration had to acknowledge that the online resources (research tools and digitized documents) made available to users were limited compared to what is really owned by the archives, and that the way of communicating the documentary heritage did not correspond to the possibilities offered by the network but was at least inappropriate for the new means of communication.

Having acknowledged the problems to be faced, the archivists and the administration began to study possible solutions both in the immediate future and for farther in the future. Initially, campaigns aimed at bringing to light little-known documentary heritages were proposed or monographic themed events created specifically for the network were used. It was believed and hoped, in fact, that the closure due to the pandemic was short, but after the first few months it was realized that this was not enough, and that the users' requests for remote searches multiplied as well as the complaints for the shortage of information available online. To correct this situation, the idea was to make as many descriptive resources as possible available on the internet, starting from the digitization of inventories and guides available until then only in paper format at the offices of the archives. This process, as well as that of improving archival websites, did not stop with the reopening of the study rooms and it is desirable that it does not stop even when, once the restrictions due to the pandemic have been overcome, the situation returns to complete normal pre-Covid. Indeed, it is necessary to accelerate the digitization processes of the documentary heritage and the production of digital research tools that allow the different parts of the cultural heritage to be put into communication with each other and offer users a truly global vision of the resources available to them for the research.

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