OPENING PANDORA'S BOX: A CRITIQUE OF PEER REVIEW PROCESSES

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Abstract
Publishing procedures in all scientific areas have been in constant flux to ensure articles' formal unity and most importantly significant contribution to respective research fields. Scientists but more specifically higher education professionals across the globe have joined a race for "points" to warrant their standing in academic communities or to comply with promotion or tenure requirements. Publishing scientific/ academic work in high-ranking journals is today the norm in most universities worldwide which has imposed on editorial teams methods of selection relying almost exclusively on the authority of reviewers.
This article will present a brief overview of recent concerns regarding the peer review practice in different publishing fields and the issue of less than collegial behaviours that have also emerged. The paper examines the importance of unbiased feedback of specialists which ensures the quality of published materials and highlights authors' apprehension about bullying in peer review processes. The present critique will also mention the need for golden rules of conduct for peer reviewers and the necessity of editorial boards to supervise and address inappropriate aggressive comments from reviewers.

Keywords: peer review, ethics, feedback, bullying.
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1. Introduction

The mythological reference included in this paper's title intends to invite caution on the author's part regarding the sensitivity of the topic addressed. The present article represents an opportunity for academics, editorial staff, and other interested parties to ponder on the volatility of peer reviewing methods used across disciplines. The paper's main research objective is to verify whether publishing bodies might need a more consistent code of conduct according to which both authors and reviewers should operate. To assess the need for a common framework for peer review this paper relies on examples of good practices as well as illustrations of problematic situations encountered in diverse disciplines and research fields in recent years.

If in the past reviewing of research papers was transparent and had a high collegial attribute, today peer review is in most of the cases blind, double, or triple

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(sometimes quadruple) and there are signals that it might have somewhat strayed from the purpose of ensuring scientific progress. As this article will further discuss, academic peer review processes need a common code of conduct, one which on the one hand protects authors from being intimidated if not bullied and denied the opportunity to improve their work, and on the other motivates and protects reviewers. Some publishing houses and journals[2] have already started a return to transparency in peer reviewing processes to give authors more control over publishing their work as well as foster a communitarian spirit for scientific progress.

2. Quality assurance in publishing

To ensure formal unity and most importantly significant contribution to respective research fields, publishing houses have had to implement quality control procedures on all published content. The role of peer reviewers has been crucial in this process. No matter the scientific area, editors rely on the expertise, availability, and support of notable experts who contribute to maintaining a high standard of the scientific content in the published works. This is not a recent trend; it is a well-established practice that certifies the fact that research results are thoroughly verified before being released to the public (Rennie, 1998).

However, with the emergence of more quantifiable criteria for either promotion or tenure in the academic world, researchers have had to carefully plan and sometimes look for funding[3] before submitting their work to a journal. Pressure to publish in high-ranking journals indexed in prominent databases has become the norm (Powella & Lindob, 2019: ii) and academics, as well as journals are making considerable efforts to achieve international visibility.

International databases for scientific published works have emerged with the initial purpose of storing scientific papers. One of the oldest databases is ISI (Institute of Scientific Information) of Thompson Scientific, currently Clarivate, which was launched in the 1960s "serving as a data provider […] especially for citation analyses" (Falagas et al, 2008: 338). In 1971, Medline was launched to cater to the medical field specialists and in 1997 it was merged with "Old Medline" (a database covering published medical works between 1950 and 1965) and released as PubMed, one of the most reliable online databases for medical publications (Falagas et al, 2008: 338). Scopus and Google Scholar were launched in 2004 and today they are among the most utilized platforms for researchers worldwide. Other databases such as Ebsco, ProQuest, JSTOR, and many others have soon joined the

[2] One such example is the journal *Nature Human Behaviour* which announced in 2019 that the entire publishing process will be made transparent so that peer reviewers' comments, as well as authors' replies, can be made public if authors opt for this.

[3] Most high-ranking journals request considerable fees for publishing.

World Wide Web and are now considered reputable sources of information and citation analyses.

Creating frameworks for academic and scientific worth based on international visibility relying on citation quotas has been considered a useful tool to encourage better research methods and innovative research avenues to explore; yet, it has also pushed both journals and authors into a race to reach index hierarchies. This in its turn has meant that journals and publishing houses have had to increase their selectivity of papers considered for publication and the need for objective peer reviewing transformed from a scientific need to ensure quality to a prerequisite to be considered for journal indexing.

In the words of David Coniam "the peer review process is […] the gatekeeper by which the body of knowledge in a given discipline is built upon and verified" (2011: 540). Quality assurance in scientific publishing is vital today, as the number of research papers has increased in all fields. Besides encouraging academics to pursue new research paths and thus contribute to scientific development, the pressure to publish has engendered a cluster of problems among which even the emergence of predatory journals. In his 2021 editorial for the *Annals of Dentistry*, Rahman raised this issue and encouraged policymakers to engage with this reality and raise awareness among the scientific community to stay alert (2021: 32). According to Tom Culley, a director of Clarivate's Science Group, the most prominent identifier of predatory journals is the lack of peer review, "a quality control method that helps to maintain the trustworthiness of published literature" (2017). In the absence of peer review, "the credibility of the entire research is called into question" (Culley, 2017).

Relying almost exclusively on peer review has pushed the peer reviewer's role into a prominent position in the publication process. As this paper will further discuss, the dynamics established in the triad editors – reviewers – authors is essential for scientific publishing. Transparency, cooperation, and collegiality are mandatory for research advancement to manifest. However, unfair and counterproductive attitudes of either authors or reviewers matched with a degree of complacency on editors' part create uncomfortable, even inappropriate results which stray from the common effort to release to the scientific community relevant and valuable research.

As presented further in this article, the position of power held by reviewers over authors has sometimes engendered unethical and inappropriate behaviours in reviewers. On the other hand, where the anonymity of reviewers was not ensured, some of them have been subjected to attacks from authors whose papers had been rejected.

A question remains as to finding the 'perfect' peer review method which upholds three tenets: (1) quality of published papers, (2) unbiased, objective, and collegial

attitude of reviewers, and (3) authors' willingness to accept editorial decisions without retaliating against reviewers.

2.1 A short outline of peer review methods

The multitude of peer review methods, as it will be next summarized, is proof of the constant effort of editorial bodies to uphold a high level of professionalism in their field. As with most methodologies, peer review has seen an evolution that speaks about the need for objectivity on the one hand and of accountability on the other: from an open approach to a closed one and recently back to open, peer review methods mirror editorial and scientific needs as well as concerns that belong to ethics and collegiality.

Parveen and Watson (2016) synthesize the characteristics of each type of peer review used across all disciplines in their paper "Peer review and the publication process". In their attempt to isolate an ideal peer review method, Parveen and Watson conclude on advantages and disadvantages of each peer review method as follows[4]:

Closed peer review

Single blind (only reviewers' identity is protected)

Advantages: Reviewer anonymity is ensured, therefore they can give honest feedback. No risk of intimidation from authors.

Disadvantages: Reviewers may give harsh comments or give negative feedback as they are protected by anonymity.

Double blind (both reviewers' and authors' identities are protected)

Advantages: The manuscript is judged on its quality and content rather than the author. No risk of intimidation from authors.

Disadvantages: Reviewers may give harsh comments or give negative feedback as they are protected by anonymity.

Open peer review

Open (reviewers' and authors' identities are disclosed)

Advantages: Reviewers are more tactful and constructive while giving feedback. Reviewers are more rigorous as their name appears in the published article.

Disadvantages: May make the reviewer fearful leading to a less honest and less critical review. Reviewers can be intimidated or threatened.

[4] The following summary is based on the detailed analysis of Parveen and Watson (2016), page 197.

Post-publication peer review (PPPR) (manuscript published after editorial checks and reviewers publicly make suggestions)
Advantages: A wider group of people is able to comment on the paper. Transparent.
Reviewers can be more rigorous, tactful, and constructive as their name is published alongside the article.
Disadvantages: People can be unnecessarily harsh or negative. People may comment on how the study should have been done rather than looking at the strengths and limitations of the approach used.

In 2003, Turner drawing on Godlee (2002) was signalling that anonymous reviewing (i.e. closed peer review) was losing its "sacrosanct status" and she was announcing a need for more accountability in peer review (Turner, 2003: 181). Kowalczuk et. al (2015) compared the quality of peer review in two medical journals with similar audiences, but which employed open peer review and single blind peer review, respectively. Their results showed that from a scientific point of view the quality of reports was marginally higher in the open peer review journal than in the single blind one. However, authors' satisfaction with reviewer comments and their helpfulness was significantly higher in the case of the open peer review journal (Kowalczuk et. al, 2015: 7).

3. Concerns regarding peer review

Publishing is a process involving four subject positions: the author's, the reviewer's, the editor's, and finally, the reader's. In scientific publishing, as opposed to other genres (literature, journalism, etc.) the latter, the intended audience is not necessarily an active participant in the publishing process[5]. The purpose of research publication is mainly to contribute to the respective scientific field regardless of the subjectivities mentioned above. However, perfect objectivity is unlikely to be reached in either conducting research and reviewing and then publishing, unless Artificial Intelligence is involved (a topic approached in the final part of the present article).

This section will discuss the first three subject positions involved in scientific publishing, namely the author's, the reviewer's, and the editor's with a focus on the challenges they face as the publication stages unfold.

3.1 Difficulties for authors

[5] Except for papers published in journals using post-publication peer review.

The phrase "publish or perish" has become a symbol of the pressure on academic staff whose achievements in the field are not only supposed to be mirroring a high level of professionalism but are dependent on criteria that can be measured and calculated to fit metrics to ensure a more objective[6] stance. The original purpose of the "publish or perish" phrase, as it appeared in the 1932 book entitled *Archibald Cary Coolidge: Life and Letters* was to support the idea of making public the decisions of the (at the time) newly formed Council on Foreign Relations via articles published in a magazine the council was sponsoring (Coolidge & Lord, 1932: 308). "Publish or perish" might have stood for the necessity of involving the larger public in the affairs of the council to improve transparency and public awareness. Today, the phrase refers mostly to the world of research publishing in academia which has been frequently called a "publish or perish" culture (see Rawat & Meena, 2014; Codreanu, Muresan & Panait, 2019; van Dallen, 2021).

However, the irony is not lost on the creators of the PoP (Publish or Perish) software. The programme is yet another metrics analysis tool next to Google Scholar, Microsoft Academic Search, or Altmetrics. It is becoming apparent that a lot of effort is being put into creating algorithms and indexes to measure the impact of research papers worldwide based on citations. Todays' academics and researchers are seemingly on a quest for points that determine the level of success in their careers.

Without disregarding the value and necessity of quantification in what research results are concerned it is necessary to point out that this academic cultural turn has meant that universities are sometimes not focusing enough on teaching ability (Abbott et al., 2010), and remarkable results in training and teaching students is rarely rewarded (Rawat & Meena, 2014). Furthermore, professors whose mentoring abilities are highly valued by their students but who rarely publish could face difficulties in securing higher academic positions (Rawat & Meena, 2014).

Against this backdrop under the sign of "publish or perish", researchers and academics also face the difficulty of having their papers published. The second subject position involved in the publication process, the reviewer's is vital to ensure that the submitted paper is valuable and meets the journal review criteria. It is well-known in the scientific community that reviewing research papers for publication "is a kind of moral duty" (Casnici et al., 2017: 1763). Relying on Mulligan's, Hall's, and Raphael's 2013 study, Casnici and colleagues also highlight that quality of published articles is dependent on the reviewers' assessment and suggestions (Casnici et al., 2017: 1763). A study conducted in 1994 by Goodman et al. had previously shown that the quality of submitted manuscripts

[6] The topic of assessment criteria in academia deserves its own study, therefore this author will only mention it as part of the larger topic of publication pressure.

had demonstrably improved due to peer review comments (Goodman et al., qt. in van Rooyen 1998: 187).

In a study published in 2019, Bianchi, Grimaldo, and Squazzoni (dwelling on Casnici, Grimaldo, Gilbert, Dondio, et al., 2017 and Casnici, Grimaldo, Gilbert, & Squazzoni, 2017) emphasize the essential role of peer review to enhance the "knowledge value of manuscripts" (Bianchi, Grimaldo & Squazzoni 2019: 79). The extensive use of peer review in academic publishing, no matter the type embraced by the editorial boards from open to blind peer review, has resulted in improved value and quality of research papers due to the reviewers' input.

In 2018, Rigby, Cox, and Julian found a direct connection between the peer review process and the "citedness of papers" focusing on the social and behavioural sciences (2018: 1088). Their study concludes that "[…] peer reviewing has a constructive and not merely judgemental function in relation to the papers submitted" (Rigby, Cox & Julian, 2018: 1101). Interestingly, Rigby and colleagues also establish a connection between the papers' number of citations and the reviewers' effort to give constructive advice and the authors' willingness to accept it" (Rigby, Cox & Julian, 2018: 1101). Also pondering on the importance of peer review, Codreanu, Muresan, and Panait mention that sometimes authors relinquish their initial perspective to fit the reviewer's in order to be published (2019: 13) which opens a discussion about the intersectionality of the two subjectivities (the author's and the reviewer's) and the result of their negotiation during the publishing process[7].

Without disregarding the crucial importance of peer review, a *sine qua non* step in the publishing field today, the (usually) anonymous relationship established between authors and reviewers is not always under the sign of collegiality and cooperation. As anticipated in the first part of this article, the position of power held by reviewers cloaked in anonymity (in the case of blind peer review) can sometimes be detrimental to the authors and the publishing process itself.

The trope of 'reviewer 2' as a monster is well-known in academic circles and it has become the symbol for intimidation of biased reviewers. It is now also part of social media; the Facebook group *Reviewer 2 Must Be Stopped* currently has 65,600 members[8] and its popularity seems to be increasing (in June 2019, Rachel Pells mentioned it had 20,000 members) (Pells, 2019). The community is built on the apparent discontent with the frequently aggressive comments of reviewers worldwide.

[7] This particular topic might deserve additional attention for future investigations.
[8] The group members on January 3rd, 2022.

Examples of inappropriate reviews were gathered by Rachel Pells in her article "Research intelligence: how to deal with the gruesome reviewer 2" published on *Times Higher Education.Com*. Here is a selection: "'This work is useless. Nothing is presented'" (a comment received by a lecturer in education at the University of Dundee), or "'The author writes like a drunken after-dinner speaker'" (a comment received by a professor of development politics at the University of Birmingham) (Pells, 2019).

To further illustrate the sometimes-unhealthy relationships established between journals and authors via reviewers, a group of academics set up a website for the *Journal of Universal Rejection*. Meant as a humorous and ironic creation, the web site's description of editorial methods echoes the level of frustration of academics: "The JofUR solicits any and all types of manuscript: poetry, prose, visual art, and research articles. You name it, we take it, and reject it. Your manuscript may be formatted however you wish. Frankly, we don't care." (*Journal of Universal Rejection*).

Humour and irony aside, the issue of aggressive remarks in reviews as well as cases of bullying[9] in academia call for a serious reconsideration of collegial and academic behaviour, one closer to what Jason Werr calls a "scientific conversation" (Pells, 2019).

3.2 Difficulties for reviewers

Stepping away from the mostly negative stance presented above, when considering the second subject position involved in the publication process, the peer reviewer's, several challenges, and difficulties deserve attention.

Becoming a reviewer for a publishing house or a particular journal is by invitation only. Editors select specialists in their fields of interest and rely on their expertise and willingness to read, analyse, and make suggestions that will lead to publishing valuable scientific work. The tasks of reviewers are guided by certain rules laid down by editorial boards, however, the complexity of peer review is sometimes overlooked. The axes on which the challenges faced by reviewers unfold can be labelled as competence, time, and incentives.

In terms of competence, as Codreanu, Muresan and Panait have shown, besides the understandable scientific acumen proven by reviewers they should also display

[9] In Germany, for instance, following a major scandal in 2018 taking place at the Max Planck Society involving a case of academic bullying, the society conducted a huge survey on this topic. The results are troublesome, as 17.5% of the 9,000 respondents reported they had experienced bullying over a long period of time (a result similar to those reported by studies in the USA, the Czech Republic, and the UK). (Abbott, 2019).

plurilingual competence (Codreanu, Muresan & Panait, 2019: 28). When reviewers need to work with multiple languages (e.g., their native language, the language of the paper to be reviewed, the language of the review form which is usually English) they need to display a fair amount of "availability to navigate competently among languages and documents" (Codreanu, Muresan & Panait, 2019: 28). While this might not pose a problem for some it is however a difficulty for reviewers, one which is linked to the second axis mentioned, namely time.

A resource whose value is difficult to measure, time is an element directly impacting the reviewers' tasks. Whether it is lack of time in general that leads to "reviewer fatigue" (Kovanis et al., 2016) or the complexity of the reviewing process itself, peer review quality is directly influenced by different perceptions of time.

The third aspect which impacts the peer review process is the lack of incentives. Since reviewers' work is limited by expertise, specificity of research papers, and availability, there are few efforts of publishers to properly reward peer review activities. An aspect supported by many analysts of peer review is that the process itself brings benefits to reviewers "as it helps them develop knowledge and expertise in their specific field" (Pierson, 2011: 195).

However, experiments in incentivizing peer review have also been carried out. In 2013, Squazzoni, Bravo, and Takács published the results of a study on offering material rewards for peer review. Their study informs that this practice "decrease[d] the quality and efficiency of the reviewing process". (Squazzoni, Bravo & Takács, 2013: 287) Similar conclusions were drawn by Zaharie and Osoian in their 2016 study "Peer review motivation frames: A qualitative approach". Their findings revealed that "reviewers' internal motives are diminished in the presence of external rewards" (Zaharie & Osoian, 2016: 78). Both Squazzoni et al. and Zaharie and Osoian make the same final remarks and emphasize the importance of professional recognition for reviewers. Acknowledging the value and the contribution to the field of peer review together with well-established institutional criteria which reward this activity to the benefit of reviewers could function as better incentives than the material ones. This is in line with Pierson's view who points out that "[a]cting as a peer reviewer may also be recognized as an example of 'contribution to the profession' in individual performance reviews" (Pierson, 2011: 195).

In 2013, a *PR Newswire* article was pointing out that when it comes to the reviewing processes of research grant applications there are benefits that might have been previously overlooked. The article brings into discussion the results of Irwin's, Gallo's, and Glisson's survey (2013) that had revealed a staggering number of scientists in the field of biological sciences finds the peer reviewing activity highly rewarding from a scientific perspective: "more than 70 percent felt that their participation in peer review was particularly useful in exposing them to

emerging scientific areas and technologies". (Irwin, Gallo & Glisson, 2013) Irwin and colleagues conclude their article with the hope that more scientists will become aware of the benefits of the peer reviewing activities which offer opportunities "to share ideas, learn from others, and embrace the collective effort to move science forward" (Irwin, Gallo & Glisson, 2013).

3.3 Difficulties for editors

The third subject position involved in the publishing process is the editor's. As previously mentioned, today's academic and scientific journals are also under pressure and in the race to be included in high-ranking databases. The quest for points that underlies authors' efforts is also valid for journals. Quality of published materials is at the centre of this effort, therefore having a team of suitable peer reviewers is key.

According to Bunner and Larson, members of the editorial staff of the *American Journal of Infection Control*, editors strive to ensure the quality of the materials published by using two expert reviewers at the minimum for each paper. This means a lot of effort goes into identifying "a sufficient pool of reviewers" (Bunner & Larson, 2012: 701) with appropriate expertise. This is not an easy task since, as mentioned in the previous section, the availability of time for peer reviewers is sometimes scarce.

Receiving divergent recommendations of reviewers on the same article is another challenge faced by editors in the publishing process. While time-consuming for the editorial staff, acting as buffers between sometimes aggressive reviewers and authors should be a role to be seriously undertaken by editors. In the words of Jason Werr, lecturer in criminology and criminal justice at De Montfort University interviewed by Rachel Pells, the role of academics "[…] is to engage in the conversation of [their] fields – not to stifle those conversations […]" (Pells, 2019). Ensuring that this scientific conversation takes place is part of the editors' role.

To increase the level of responsibility and dedication of the referees, Squazzoni, Bravo, and Takács building on Alberts et al., 2008 and Hauser and Fehr, 2007, state that journal editors should implement a "reform of peer review" (Squazzoni, Bravo & Takács, 2013: 287). In the following section of this article, a few solutions for better practice in peer review will be presented.

4. Considering solutions for better practice in peer review processes

As early as 2003, Leigh Turner proposed a model for peer review which editors might use to increase the quality of research published as well as to foster a more transparent and collegial backdrop of the entire publishing process. The author calls this model F.A.I.T.H., an acronym of five main principles to be followed in

peer review: "*fairness* in reviewing; *appropriate* expertise, *identifiable* reviewers, *timely* reviews; and *helpful* critiques" (emphasis in original, Turner, 2003: 182).

Turner's principles are self-explanatory and, at least in theory, an ideal that all scholar review processes strive to achieve. *Fairness* is explained as the reviewers' effort not to write comments which are either platitudes with little to no meaningful effect on the respective analysed study, or extremely malicious "that caricature the claims of authors and engage in self-aggrandizement at the expense of authors" (Turner, 2003: 182). Turner also claims that along with the appropriateness of the reviewers' expertise, their recognition by authors and the scientific community is an item of importance for both the acknowledgement of services rendered to the field and the accountability of reviewers. When discussing timeliness, Turner supports a method based on communication between editors, reviewers, and authors. In her view, the three parties involved need "to work together to determine what constitutes a reasonable period of time for preparing a detailed manuscript review" (Turner, 2003: 185). Considering the pressures on all three subjectivities involved in the publication process, Leigh Turner's recommendation could improve their collegial relationship as well as contribute to accommodating authors', editors', and reviewers' responsibilities. The last item in Turner's model, *helpful critiques*, summarizes the reviewers' purpose, namely writing "reviews that are helpful to authors and editors, and ensure that journals maintain high intellectual standards" (Turner, 2003: 186).

Without being a flawless solution, the F.A.I.T.H. model could serve as an inspiration for editorial bodies facing problems in line with the ones presented in the first part of this article.

In a recent article, Gerwig and Rash (2020) pleaded for the necessity of a code of conduct for reviewers, one which is common to all disciplines and is created as a professional code encompassing behaviours that are expected from reviewers. Gerwig and Rash (2020) also make suggestions for possible clauses to be included in this code of conduct which emphasize the collegial and constructive purposes of peer review. The authors agree that to implement these reviewer behavioural regulations will mean burdening the job of editors, nevertheless, in the long run, and in view of the increasing mistrust in science in an age of "post-truth" and "alternative facts" (Gerwig & Rash, 2020: 3) a stricter approach to reviewer conduct will only bring positive results.

Taking a more futuristic approach, Sizoa et. al (2019) building on Burley and Moylan (2017) further the idea that determining the quality of peer review reports might be a task for A.I. (Artificial Intelligence). Sizoa et al. believe that handing the analysis of peer review reports to computers could become standard twenty years from now (2019: 286). Without dismissing the advantages of automated computerized tasks, the authors wonder if a model can be established considering the diversity of quality criteria across disciplines (Sizoa et. al, 2019: 292).

5. Conclusions

Since all scientific output is dependent on peer review regardless of the discipline, it becomes apparent that this process needs attention whether this means a reconfiguration of the bedrock of reviewer and author behaviour or finding a solution to ensure proper motivation is in place for scientists to accept to engage with reviewing tasks as seriously and collegially as possible.

The publication of scientific works relies on three main subject positions, as shown throughout this article, and this intricate relationship should be seen with all its pressures, advantages, and deficiencies. An honest approach to peer review must not disregard the fact that behind the labels of *author*, *editor*, and *reviewer* there are human beings with individual interests and responsibilities. To support effective and efficient collaboration and communication between these parties means to acknowledge a common goal (i.e. publishing works to further the advance of scientific fields) and to show intersectional collegiality. The latter could stand for the three subjectivities' respect for each other's positions in this equation whether that means respect for time, scientific expertise, scientific standards, or a behavioural code. However idealistic, this approach is potentially achievable provided best practices studies are conducted across disciplines and pilot programmes are initiated.

6. Limitations and further research paths

The present article represents the initial step taken by this author as a preliminary analysis of existing research, fair practices, and concerns regarding peer review methods in an effort to isolate the main directions of a wide cross-disciplinary future study on peer review in the field of humanities. Interviews and focus groups (with authors, reviewers, and editors, the three categories discussed in this article) will constitute the main data collection methods to be employed. The anticipated outcomes of the future study might lead to formulating conclusions and recommendations for a possible reconfiguration of the relationship of authors, reviewers, and editors in the process of peer review.

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