



Pranks, Frauds, and Hoaxes from Around the World

It's pretty easy to hoax people. We all want to be deceived, but only up to a point. Some hoaxes are fun and pleasant, others malicious and unpleasant. We'd like a way to tell the difference.

ROBERT CARROLL

We want to be deceived. — Blaise Pascal

I think Pascal is right. We want to be deceived. Deception is an essential tool for the survival of our species. We might well be hardwired for deceiving others and taking delight in being deceived. On the other hand, there are many times when we don't appreciate deceiving or being deceived. And most of us feel uncomfortable when we're not sure whether we're being hoaxed. Is there any way to reconcile our love of a good prank or magic trick with our hatred of being defrauded or made to look foolish? Is there any surefire way to avoid being hoaxed?

Gerald Fried

Maybe. Maybe not.

Most of us have been victims of pranks, hoaxes, or frauds. We may even have mistaken one for the other. For example, in April 2002, in Loomis, California, two teenagers got inspired by the MTV reality show *Jackass*. One of them videotaped his buddy as he ran along a rural road wearing handcuffs and an orange jail jumpsuit that he'd bought at a flea market. Unfortunately, some local citizens and law enforcement officers didn't know it was a prank, and they pursued the "escapee" with tracking dogs, patrol cars, and a helicopter. Folsom Prison ordered a full-scale lockdown and did a head count. They also did head counts at the jails in Placer and Sacramento counties, at some expense to the taxpayer.

It's sometimes hard to know whether something is a prank or a hoax or whether we're being defrauded. The jackass could well have been an escapee. If you saw someone in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs running down the road and you didn't see the cameraman, your first thought probably would not be: "Ah, another *Jackass* prank."

Most of us have heard of the 1938 Halloween Eve radio broadcast by Orson Welles of an adaptation of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* that many took to be an announcement that Earth had been invaded by Martians. Announcements that the story was fiction were made four times during the broadcast. Welles ended the show by announcing that the broadcast was a "holiday offering": "the Mercury Theater's own radio version of dressing up in a sheet and jumping out of a bush and shouting boo." The disclaimers did little to prevent many people from believing we'd been invaded by Martians. It's been called the hoax of the century, but it wasn't even a hoax. It wasn't a prank, either. It wasn't intended to fool people but to entertain them. Yet it fooled many people for several reasons.

1. It was presented realistically and authoritatively.
2. The story itself was credible at the time. There were flying machines, and the possibility of interplanetary travel was easily conceivable. It was not farfetched that some other race of beings might be more technologically advanced than we were.
3. Radio would have been the medium used to announce such an invasion.

Fooling the Experts

We can excuse ourselves, I think, for being taken in by some hoaxes because they're so believable. But others are so unbelievable, we have to wonder how anybody could fall for them. For example, how could Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, have fallen for the Cottingley Fairy hoax? Two children, Frances and Elsie, photographed cutouts of fairies that shouldn't have fooled anybody. And how could the King's surgeon and the most famous obstetrician in eighteenth century England be duped into believing that the servant girl Mary Toft had given birth to rabbits?

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How did the children and the servant fool such eminent men? It was easy: (1) The hoaxers put on a good game face. The kids didn't let on that they were making it all up—and we all know that children don't lie. Frances maintained until her death in 1986 that at least one of the photos was genuine. It wasn't until Elsie was a grandmother that she gave broad hints that the stunt was a hoax. And Mary Toft must have been a pretty fair actress as well. (2) The hoax fit with the beliefs of the eminent men. Doyle was a believer in the occult and paranormal, so the idea of fairies appearing to children and allowing themselves to be photographed did not strike him as obviously preposterous. He corresponded with Elsie and even wrote a book about the fairies (*The Coming of the Fairies*). The event was within the realm of the possible for him. And once Doyle gave his nod to the belief, others would follow.

The belief that a human could give birth to rabbits is a bit more complicated, yet the same principle applies. The medical establishment seemed to be willing to believe in this absurdity because of another false belief that was consistent with the rabbit-birth hypothesis: the theory of maternal impressions.

Maternal impressions is the notion, widely believed in eighteenth-century England, that a pregnant woman's experiences could be directly imprinted on her unborn child. The theory was used to explain birth defects. A child being born deaf was due to the mother having been shocked by a loud sound during pregnancy. If a pregnant woman looked at a blind person her baby might be born blind. Toft, who had been pregnant but miscarried, claimed to have had an intense craving for roast rabbit. She said she admired rabbits, dreamed about them, and spent time trying to catch them. Thus, her claim of giving birth to rabbits fit with the notion of maternal impressions and didn't seem absurd to the local doctor, the King's surgeon, or a famous obstetrician, and with their support for the claim Mary's hoax took root.

Now, I may not have fallen for any *whoppers* lately—to use Marvin Minsky's description for unbelievable beliefs—like the Cottingley Fairy or the Rabbit Birth hoaxes, but I've been hoaxed more times than I care to remember (actually given the state of my memory, more times than I can *hope* to remember).

For example, I was once hoaxed by my online editor John Renish, who sent me a link to a Web site with the cryptic note "I do like the part about how women are different from men." I looked at the Web site (at <http://objective.jesussave.us/creationsciencefair.html>) and it claims to be a report on the Fellowship Baptist Creation Science Fair 2001. I went right to the part about how women are different from men and found an essay that supposedly won second place in the Middle School Division called "Women Were Designed for Homemaking" by Jonathan Goode (grade 7):

- physics shows that women have a lower center of gravity than men, making them more suited to carrying groceries and laundry baskets;
- biology shows that women were designed to carry unborn babies in their wombs and to feed born babies milk, making them the natural choice for child rearing;
- social sciences show that the wages for women workers are lower than for normal workers, meaning that they are unable

to work as well and thus earn equal pay;

- and, exegetics shows that God created Eve as a companion for Adam, not as a coworker.

Given other things I believe about fundamentalist creationists, it was not outside the bounds of credibility for me that some poor kid might actually believe this stuff and be encouraged to believe it by his elders.

The caption under the first-prize winner's picture reads, "Patricia Lewis displays her jar of non-living material, still non-living after three weeks."

Even the notion that such an experiment would be thought relevant to the belief that life doesn't come from non-life isn't that farfetched when you consider some of the other things some creationists teach their children.

But if you dig around a bit on the Web site, there are some giveaways that this site is an elaborate hoax, such as the advice to dress up like John the Baptist on Halloween and scare kids when they come trick-or-treating before sending them off with no candy and a Bible tract. Somebody (actually a man named Chris Harper) had gone to an awful lot of trouble to make fundamentalist Christians look very silly.

Being hoaxed by my editor reminded me that it is people you trust who can most easily mislead you, because you let your guard down and aren't critical enough. If you're trying to avoid being hoaxed, here's lesson number one: *Don't trust people you trust!*

Whoppers

I think it goes without saying that *anybody* can be hoaxed. Nobody is exempt. Even famous newscasters can be duped. Tom Brokaw and many others were hoaxed by David Rorvik in 1978 when Rorvik claimed he had proof of human cloning. Twenty-five years later we saw the same hoax perpetrated by the Raelian Bishop Brigitte Boisselier, who claimed a group she headed called Clonaid had cloned five humans and that proof would be forthcoming. (That's *proof*, not *truth*, that would be forthcoming.) The leader of the group, Rael, was a race-car driver and sports journalist who was known as Claud Vorilhon until he was picked up by aliens near a volcano in France, taken to a planet in the Pleiades, and sent back to start a UFO cult. He says the cloning hoax was worth millions in publicity. Who could doubt him?

The idea of a human cloning is not as farfetched today as it was twenty-five years ago. Human cloning doesn't deserve to be categorized in the *whopper* class of beliefs. The whoppers are ones we should recognize immediately as 99.99 percent likely to be hoaxes. The hoaxes I'm going to go over with you now I think are of the whopper variety.

For example, there's the Indian Rope Trick. How could any rational person believe such a story, which, on its face, is as absurd as that of a woman giving birth to rabbits? This alleged trick involves an Indian fakir who throws a rope to the sky, but the rope does not fall back to the ground. Instead it mysteriously rises until the top of it disappears into thin air. A young boy climbs the unsupported rope, which miraculously supports him until he also disappears into thin air. The fakir then pulls out a knife and climbs the rope until he, too, disappears.

Body parts fall from the sky into a basket next to the base of the rope. The fakir then slides down the rope, empties the basket, throws a cloth over the scattered body parts, and the boy miraculously reappears with all his parts in the right places. Thousands of people claim to have witnessed this trick that never happened.

Actually, the only thing needed for this trick is human gullibility. According to Peter Lamont, a researcher at the University of Edinburgh and a former president of the Magic Circle in Edinburgh, the Indian Rope Trick was a hoax played by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1890. Lamont claims the newspaper was trying to increase circulation by publishing this ridiculous story as if there were eyewitnesses to the event. The *Tribune* admitted the hoax some four months later, expressing some astonishment that so many people believed it was a true story. After all, they reasoned, the byline was "Fred S. Ellmore." They hadn't reckoned that their audience, many of whom believe in magicians with miraculous powers, wouldn't find this story that hard to accept.

Our next hoax is about an event that really did happen in India. Ramar Pillai astounded the world when he announced that he could change water into diesel fuel. He claimed he had some magic herbs that, when added to boiling water, could produce a virtually pollution-free diesel fuel or kerosene for about twenty-three cents a gallon—not quite as impressive as Pons and Fleishmann's cold-fusion claim, but impressive nonetheless. Pillai was promoted on the Internet as the new Isaac Newton. To produce his fuel, Pillai cooked leaves and bark from a special plant for about ten minutes in hot water. He stirred the mixture and let it cool down. The liquid fuel would float to the top and be separated by filtering. The entire process took less than thirty minutes.

His fuel was allegedly tested at the Indian Institute of Technology and was shown to be a pure hydrocarbon similar to kerosene and diesel fuel. Engineers conducted tests and concluded that the herbal fuel offered better fuel economy than gasoline. One scientist tried to explain the magic by offering the theory that atmospheric carbon dioxide might be sucked in during the reaction. The carbon dioxide combines with hydrogen liberated from water and forms the hydrocarbon fuel. A better explanation seems to be that Pillai's stirring stick is filled with fuel and when his mixture is heated up, a wax plug at the end of the stick melts, liberating the fuel. Pillai, it seems, was part of gang who hoped to trick people into buying fuel they'd stolen from Indian oil companies. Pillai was very convincing in his role as a peasant-genius. I remember reading one news account in which he described how he'd been kidnapped and tortured by a gang trying to wrest from him his secret recipe. He described how he'd been hung from a ceiling fan and burned with cigarettes. Poor fellow.

Cabrera's Stones

Next, we go to Peru and Dr. Javier Cabrera's stones. Dr. Cabrera gave up his medical practice in 1996 to open a museum for some stones he bought from a local farmer that depict stylized men who look like ancient Incas or Aztecs.

What is unique about these stones is that they depict activities such as astronomy and surgery, indicating a very advanced civilization. Furthermore, there are also stones that are said to show extinct fish and humans riding dinosaurs. The stones are said to provide evidence that the ancient locals not only had an advanced civilization, but they lived at the time of the dinosaurs. The stones call into question just about everything science has taught us about the origin of our planet, ourselves, and other species. The farmer who sold Dr. Cabrera the stones at first claimed that he had found them in a cave, but later admitted that he made them himself to sell to tourists.

Even though this hoax was created for a tourist trade, there are three groups in particular who have endeavored to support the authenticity of the stones: (1) the followers of Erich von Däniken (author of *Chariots of the Gods?*) and those who believe that extraterrestrials are an intimate part of Earth's "real" history and were the ones who brought advanced civilization to the ancient Indians; (2) fundamentalist creationists who drool at the thought of any possible error made by anthropologists, archaeologists, or evolutionary biologists, and who relish the thought of evidence that humans, dinosaurs, and extinct fish lived together a few thousand years ago; and (3) the mytho-historians, followers of Immanuel Velikovsky or Zecharia Sitchin who claim that ancient myths are accurate historical records to be understood literally.

Any rational person examining all the evidence should conclude that the probability is about zero that these stones are evidence of extraterrestrials or the validity of ancient myths or proof that men lived with dinosaurs. But if you already believe that extraterrestrials have been among us for millennia, then you may well find the extraterrestrial account plausible or even probable. Likewise, if you believe that Earth is only a few thousand years old and are well-versed in Flintstone science, then the idea that these stones depict actual events may well be believable to you.

The Visions of Catalina Rivas

Catalina Rivas of Cochabamba, Bolivia, was a "fallen-away Catholic" until 1993, when she went to see a woman named Nancy Fowler. Fowler is from Conyers, Georgia, and for several years claimed that the Virgin Mary appeared to her on the thirteenth of each month (à la Fatima). Rivas claims she went to Conyers and had her first stigmatic experience there. You may have seen Rivas in the July 1999 Fox television special "Signs from God: Science Tests Faith." A more apt title would have been: "Dollar Signs: Fox Tests Gullibility." In that program, reporters Giselle Fernandez and Michael Willesee took viewers on an uncritical tour to "scientifically" examine weeping and bleeding statues, rose petals with "miraculous" images of Jesus and Mary, and the stigmata of Katya Rivas, among other things.

Rivas is hailed by her thousands of admirers as the spiritual mother of not one but two international religious movements, The Great Crusade of Love and Mercy and the Apostolate of the New Evangelization. In 1996, she claimed she was getting messages from God, not only in Spanish but also in Greek,

Latin, and Polish. These allegedly divine messages were photocopied and sold at religious rallies. Her bishop, René Fernández Apaza, authenticated both her stigmata and her messages from God.

On June 22, 2001, I received an e-mail from a man named José H. Prado Flores, who told me that he was "a writer of books oriented to forming leaders in the Catholic Church." Several years ago, he wrote, he had co-authored a book with Salvador Gómez called *Formacion de Predicadores* ("Training Preachers") and that Katya Rivas had rewritten their book as "messages from Jesus 'dictada a la sierva de Dios' ('dictated to God's servant')." He told me that when Rivas, "the famous 'visionary and stigmatic'" was scheduled to appear at a religious rally in Guadalajara, Mexico, where Prado Flores lives, a friend showed him a set of books that were to be sold during the convention. "You can understand my total amazement," he wrote, "when I put two and two together and figured out she was the same lady that had 'stolen' my book. We then went to the bishop of Guadalajara, Juan Cardenal Sandoval Iñiguez, who, after seeing our study on her material, immediately cancelled her participation."

Why, you might wonder, would a Catholic author contact an atheist who is skeptical of all things miraculous about this matter? José had read my rather unflattering review (at www.skeptdic.com/refuge/bunk9.html#stigmata) of the Fox special, and said he wanted any information I might have that would help prove that Rivas "is a compulsive and professional liar."

For over a year and a half, I exchanged e-mails with José and his wife Susan about Catalina Rivas. I obtained copies of his book and copies of her messages. I established that he and Salvador Gómez had written hundreds of pages that are nearly identical to the material being published by Rivas, and that the pair of Mexican authors had written some of the material at least sixteen years before Katya's "messages." My edition of *Formacion de Predicadores* is dated 1992, four years before her messages, which have page after page of nearly verbatim plagiarizing.

To her followers who ask me how it is possible for a peasant woman with no formal education to write books in Spanish, Polish, Greek, and Latin, I say it is simple: *she copies them*. It seems obvious that she did it for her Spanish messages from Jesus, and I suspect that if the Bishop who authenticated her stigmata would have put a little more energy into authenticating her messages, he would find the same is true for her works in other languages as well.

Channeling Dr. Fritz

Another whopper began with Zé Arigó (1918–1971), a Brazilian faith healer who, in the early 1950s, claimed to channel the spirit and healing power of Dr. Adolf Fritz, a German doctor who allegedly died during World War I. Arigó developed quite a reputation as a faith healer and psychic surgeon, but his ploy seemed to have been aimed at directing business toward his brother, a pharmacist. He would write out illegible prescriptions for people that only his brother could read. People came from far and wide to be cured by Arigó. His reputation soared after it was alleged that he did a bit of psychic

surgery and removed a cancerous tumor from the lung of a well-known Brazilian senator. For twenty years, Arigó's fame spread as he "cured" and "operated" on thousands of people, including the daughter of Brazil's president. Despite his fame, he was twice convicted of practicing medicine illegally.

Arigo performed his psychic surgery with a pocketknife and a heavy German accent, perhaps to misdirect people so they wouldn't notice his lack of concern for medical hygiene.

Arigo died in a car crash in 1971, but Dr. Fritz didn't go with him. He took over the body of another Brazilian healer who went by the name of Oscar Wilde. (I'm not making this up.) Wilde didn't last too long before he, too, died a violent death. After that, a gynecologist from Recife, Dr. Edson Queiroz, claimed Dr. Fritz was his. The doctor, however, was stabbed to death in 1991.

The current channeler of Dr. Fritz is engineer Rubens Farias Jr., who heals the astral body with energy healing and does some psychic surgery with unconventional instruments such as scissors. Farias is also unique in that he claimed Dr. Fritz came to him in 1986, while Dr. Queiroz was still alive. I had to consult Thomas Aquinas to see whether it is possible for the same spirit to appear in two bodies simultaneously; it turns out spirits don't occupy space so they can be everywhere at once. Anyway, despite the dual channeling and the fact that he has also been accused of practicing medicine without a license, Farias has endless lines of people with faith in miraculous cures waiting for a bit of his magic.

Exposing the Hoaxes

Some skeptics suggest that the best way to undermine such faith and enlighten people is to demonstrate how easy it is to fake the paranormal and the supernatural. I'm not so sure. I think we could expose dozens of fake healers, but it would not make it any easier to expose the next one who comes along because we wouldn't be destroying the underlying belief system that is needed to make the faith healer plausible. I believe this partly due to what happened with a fake psychic and a fake channeler who were sent to Australia to enlighten the people.

In 1986, Mark Plummer, former president of the Australian Skeptics and former Executive Director of CSICOP, and Dick Smith, a patron of the Australian Skeptics, invited magician and mentalist Bob Steiner to come to Australia to perform as a psychic. Steiner often pretends he is an astrologer, tarot card reader, palm reader, or a psychic. After his performances he reveals that he is not psychic but uses trickery and deceit to fake paranormal powers.

For two weeks, Steiner hoaxed Australia as Steve Terbot. He appeared on television programs, gave performances at cultural centers, and in a very short time became a hit. He appeared on *Tonight with Bert Newton* (similar to *The Tonight Show*) three times and in his last appearance revealed the hoax, explaining that he used cold-reading techniques and other tricks to deceive people into thinking he was psychic. The purpose of the hoax was to "warn the people of Australia to beware of people claiming to be psychics." Plummer and Smith had brought Steiner to Australia because of a fairly large

influx of foreign psychics who were being welcomed and accepted with incredible credulity by the natives. They hoped that once the people saw how easy it is to fake being psychic, they would see the error of their ways.

Did it work? According to Steiner, it worked extremely well and effectively put an end to the influx of foreign psychics. Mark Plummer agreed. Here's what he told me in a recent e-mail message when I asked him whether he thought the hoax did any good:

Yes. Before then Australia was regularly visited by "internationally known" psychics. Since then we have only had a couple. Also the organisers are terrified that if they promote someone that person will turn out to be a skeptic.

To put it in a wider international context: Before, there were skeptics groups in most countries [but] individuals had no easy way of checking up on the claims of "international psychics." Once CSICOP could act as a central library and clearing house and the national skeptics groups started talking to each other it became much harder for such charlatans to operate internationally. Then, with the invention of the fax and the Internet, the exchange of skeptical information has become much easier.

Steiner also exposed a man named John Fitzsimons as a fraud, paving the way for a \$64,000 judgment on behalf of one of Fitzsimons's clients. Seventeen years later, however, I found Fitzsimons on the Internet. He runs a New Age group called Aspects in a small town outside of Melbourne. He leads discussions on topics such as past lives, karma, out-of-body experiences, spirit guides, prayer, healing, White Eagle (a channeled being), multiple personality disorder, mediumship, cults, night terrors, spiritualism, psychic readings, exorcism, Ouija, channeling, Seth, aliens, Atlantis, UFOs, and chronic fatigue syndrome. In short, Steiner was about as successful in putting away Mr. Fitzsimons as he and Randi were in putting away Peter Popoff, the faith healer they exposed as a fraud in 1986.

Speaking of the Amazing Randi, a tour of world hoaxes would not be complete without a discussion of the "Carlos" hoax. According to Randi, in 1988, channeling was the rage in Australia, and an Australian television program contacted him about finding someone who might go down under and pretend to be a channeler. The plan was similar to the Steve Terbot hoax. This time, José Alvarez would channel an ancient spirit he called Carlos. Alvarez would tour Australia, appear on TV, and appear in various venues, including the Sydney Opera House. At the end of a few weeks, the hoax would be revealed. Again, the purpose was to enlighten Australians by demonstrating how easy it is to fake channeling. Like Steiner, Alvarez was very convincing and he had a large following in a very short time. And, in the end, everything was revealed.

Did the hoax work? Was anybody enlightened? I was able to discuss this question at length with both Alvarez and Randi while at the JREF Amazing Meeting in February 2003. Both think the hoax accomplished its mission. In fact, Alvarez continues to take Carlos on the road in an effort to enlighten people with what he calls "performance art."

What was most revealing about both the Steve Terbot and Carlos hoaxes was how the media didn't bother to check their

credentials or their claims about themselves. The media took it for granted they were who they said they were and did what they said they did. Looking to the media for protection against being hoaxed is probably an exercise in futility. So, here is valuable lesson number two: *Don't expect help from the mass media.*

Nevertheless, I sought the opinion of someone in the Australian media and asked him if he thought there were any benefits or long-term effects of either the Steve Terbot or the Carlos hoaxes. I tried to contact Phillip Adams, a well known Australian journalist, writer, and media personality. Adams wasn't directly involved with either hoax. In fact, he was writing scathing articles condemning the phony psychics plaguing

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the land during the time Bob Steiner was gathering his flock as psychic Steve Terbot. Adams was out in the bush or someplace where they don't have e-mail when I tried to contact him, but his assistant, Amanda Bilson, got in touch with him and relayed this message:

... he asked me to pass on a couple of comments to you. First of all he wasn't involved with the Randi/Terbot hoax[es] and is not convinced [they were] entirely successful. Perhaps the media learned to be a little more sceptical—but they soon returned to their old standards of gullibility. And many people blame the messenger for the message, turning their anger on the Sceptics rather than the charlatans. He thought [they were] great fun but, given the attention span of public and media alike, of little long term significance.

Recently, Michael Shermer, of the Skeptic Society, discovered the same thing: It's easy to hoax people and it's great fun, but rather than enlighten people, it seems that you just anger some of them. Shermer used the cold-reading techniques described by Ian Rowland in his book *The Full Facts Book of Cold Reading* and pretended to be a tarot card reader, a palmist, an astrologer, a psychic, and a medium who could get messages from the dead. He did this on camera with five strangers who did not know who he was or what he was doing. He seems to have been pretty successful in convincing his clients of his paranormal powers. However, when he revealed to them that the whole thing was a hoax, two were so upset that they refused to sign a release to use the material in the show he was filming. Three of his subjects were college students who seemed less concerned about being duped than in finding out when they would be on TV. If any of them thanked Shermer for helping them see the truth about the paranormal, he didn't mention it.

So what can we learn from all this? Well, it's pretty easy to hoax people. Pascal is right: We want to be deceived, and that makes it easy to hoax us. Also, many of us already have beliefs that make us vulnerable to being hoaxed about certain kinds of things. Furthermore, most of us enjoy being deceived by a good magician or by someone pulling off a non-malicious prank or hoax.

But we don't *always* want to be deceived. We don't want to be made to look like idiots or be led into believing something foolish. Nor do we ever wish to be defrauded. And most of us don't like that uncomfortable feeling that rises in us when we're not sure whether we're being hoaxed. We know some

hoaxes are benevolent and pleasant, while others are malicious and unpleasant. Ideally, we'd like a surefire way to tell the difference so we'd never be hoaxed against our will.

That's why I wrote the book *Don't Get Hoaxed*, in which I explain such things as the *hoax-prone personality*: the person who is trusting and honest; attracted to attractive people; believes the believable and the unbelievable; and lacks a good understanding of confirmation bias and cold-reading techniques.

I also reveal that if you map out the locations of the world's greatest hoaxes, you will find that they lay along ley lines that, when connected by a line to the north star at the vernal equinox, form a pyramid with the exact proportions as the Great Pyramid of Giza.

Coincidence? I don't think so.

Trust me, I teach ethics.

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