



■ REACHING OUT: When Sen. Richard Durbin decided to write a broadband bill, he also signed up to be a blogger.

Blogging On

■ By Bara Vaida

In late July, Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., tried a new approach to writing legislation. The 62-year-old majority whip logged on to a computer in his Capitol Hill office and began chatting on the Web about his plan to expand broadband services in rural America. ■

The standard method for writing a bill would have had Durbin and his aides calling in consumer groups, telecommunications lobbyists, and technology experts to hash out the details. Instead, Durbin reached out to the editors of two online political blogs so that he could hear directly from their readers. One was the progressive *Open Left*, a natural place for the pugnacious liberal to turn. But the other, *RedState*, caused Durbin

some trepidation—he couldn't be sure how its conservative subscribers would respond to him.

In a series of evening postings on the two blogs (videotaped by his staff to prove that the senator was indeed doing the typing), Durbin connected with academics, California hip-hop artist Baby D, free-market advocates, rural Internet users, and many others. The conversations yielded more than 500 comments.

Lawmakers and lobbyists can't decide whether blogs will end up as another passing fad, or become the real thing.

“It was an interesting national drafting session,” Durbin says. “The reality is that most people feel that unless you can hire an expensive lobbyist, you can’t get to the table to write a bill. This is a ‘small d’ democratic approach [to legislation], and I think it is a valuable approach that we ought to try more and more.”

For Durbin it was also a process that took on a life of its own. Initially, his staff approached Matt Stoller, a 29-year-old political consultant who is a co-founder of *Open Left*. But when Durbin started blogging on *Open Left* on July 24, several conservative bloggers took to their websites to complain about being shut out. They invited the senator to blog with the Right, too. After some thought, Durbin agreed.

In an interview, the senator recounted how the process unfolded. “I was invited to *RedState* and they had to warn everyone that ‘Durbin was coming,’ that ‘We’ll have a real Democrat here—and, calm down, he is talking about an issue.’ [But] they were good. There were a few who couldn’t resist the urge to punch me verbally, but I thought it was a good exercise.”

Durbin’s aides have been studying the comments as their bill-drafting effort continues. Meanwhile, National Public Radio, a stream of newspapers, and now *National Journal* have taken note of the senator’s venture into the world of blogs. And Durbin has garnered respect from the bloggers, even among ideological foes.

“When he wanted to reach out to the Right online, he came to *RedState* to do it,” says the blog’s managing editor, Erick Erickson, a 32-year-old GOP political consultant based in Georgia. “We appreciate his willingness to let us be involved in discussing the issue as he writes legislation.”

It’s unclear whether Durbin’s bill-writing-through-blogging exercise is a sign of things to come. But what is clear is that lawmakers, their staffs, and other professionals in the nation’s capital are making use of blogs (short for “weblogs”)—a handle describing websites that feature entries from individuals or groups of writers, and the back-and-forth discussion among folks responding to one another’s musings.

Liberal and conservative activists began using blogs for fundraising and political organizing during the 2004 election cycle. Now policy makers are trying to figure out how to use them to advance their goals.

Many of Washington’s practitioners of politics and public policy—K Street’s contract lobbyists, corporate government-affairs executives, and trade association representatives—have their hands full in keeping up with the rapid changes in technology. No sooner had lobbyists figured out how to use websites and e-mail for advocacy campaigns than grassroots activists and decision makers moved on to blogging.

“The more that politicians are reading [blogs],” says lobbyist and

former Rep. Robert Walker, R-Pa., chairman of Wexler & Walker Public Policy Associates, “the more that lobbyists know they will be using” them too.

No one knows precisely how many Washington lawmakers are blogging. But, according to *National Journal’s Beltway Blogroll*, at least 19 members of Congress, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., have created blogs to help them in their legislative work. In addition, Hill leaders from both political parties, and several committee chairmen, have created staff positions to reach out to the “Internet media,” and to contribute to various blogs.

Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., used blogs as a way to bypass traditional media and to build grassroots opposition as he led an effort to derail an immigration reform measure in the spring. Rather than issue a press release opposing the bill, DeMint’s staff coordinated conference calls and leaked information to conservative bloggers to fan citizen uproar against the bill.

“Several pretty significant blogs are becoming a direct line between elected officials here in Washington and the American people,” said DeMint in an interview with *National Journal*.

But as is typical with any change, K Street’s embrace of blogging has been slower. To be sure, some lobbyists are moving full-speed ahead to incorporate blogs into their campaigns and websites, but the more skeptical are hanging back, unsure whether blogs will turn out to be a passing fad. Only 8 percent of trade associations and corporations said they either monitor blogs, post on them, or host them, while 29 percent said they have someone reading blogs, according to a March 2007 study conducted by the Policy Council, a research arm of National Journal Group. About 52 percent of associations and corporations reported that they were not doing anything with blogs.

Underscoring the skepticism is that even the firms that specialize in Internet advocacy have a hard time coming up with specific measures to gauge the influence of blogs. Further, precious few examples exist of legislation either passing or failing because of blogging activity.

“Right now,” Walker says, “I think K Street is still trying to figure out who the [blog] audience is.”

Uncontrolled

Part of the problem with “figuring out” the blogosphere—the catchall term to describe the approximately 70 million websites featuring conversations about everything from romance to politics—is determining which ones matter. One way to do that is to learn which blogs the mainstream media are reading. Another technique is to find out which sites Capitol Hill aides are following.

Search engines measure the popularity of blogs; popularity, in turn, drives media coverage, says Kevin Wallsten, a political science professor at the University of California (Berkeley). “There are these popular blogs



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—Erick Erickson of *RedState*



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- Lobbyists are using blogs to cement relationships—and to whip up the grassroots.

that serve as hubs for interesting stories, and then those stories tend to get picked up broadly,” he says. “Blogs create a stir because they are read by journalists, people on the Hill, and people engaged in the political debate.”

To refine the question of readership on the Hill, the Policy Council in March surveyed 266 chiefs of staff, communications directors, legislative directors, and other congressional aides on how often they read blogs. Just 7 percent said they read blogs several times a day, 22 percent said they read blogs about once a day, and another 21 percent said they read blogs about once a week. If, indeed, 50 percent of Hill aides are reading blogs regularly, lobbyists and other advocates need to pay attention. But getting the notice of blog editors and authors as a direct route to Capitol Hill is not so easy. A lobbyist can’t do it with just a phone call.

Those who write political blogs tend to be skeptical of power, Wallsten says. “Their antagonistic attitude makes them difficult to organize.” But if a lobbyist, an industry, or an advocacy organization “could get all of these people on the blogs writing and coordinating their messages in the same direction, it would be a tremendous force,” he says.

Many lobbyists who are accustomed to using fundraising events, dinners, one-on-one conversations, and other tightly controlled tactics to show progress to clients tend to avoid the uncontrolled blogosphere.

John Castellani, president of the Business Roundtable, is one of the skeptics. He has used the Internet to communicate with roundtable members and to spur grassroots e-mail efforts for lobbying campaigns on taxes and other issues. Although he is considering using blogs as part of his Internet strategy, Castellani isn’t sure that blogs are of much use beyond grabbing the media’s attention.

“I see blogs as amplifiers, rather than multipliers,” he says. Blogs can act as a

megaphone, in other words, but as for evidence that they help to build support among anyone other than core activists already engaged on an issue, “I think the jury is still out on that.”

Being Provocative

Some on K Street are experimenting with the blogosphere and liking the results. Marc Lampkin, a lobbyist with Quinn Gillespie & Associates, is one.

Lampkin, 43, sees blogging as a way to get media attention for his client, itself an important achievement. He was hired last spring as executive director of Strong American Schools, a \$60 million lobbying

and public-affairs campaign funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Broad Foundations. The group’s aim is to prod Congress and the presidential candidates to embrace education reform, including improving teacher quality through merit pay and other measures. As part of its Internet strategy, Strong American Schools made Lampkin, who enjoys a heated debate, a blogger.

“Being provocative is important in the culture of blogs, because it is all about starting and sustaining a debate,” says Lampkin, a former Capitol Hill aide and a deputy campaign manager for President Bush. “The blogosphere is like the guys who gather around the counter at the local diner. Everyone’s got an opinion and an audience who will listen and respond.”

Rather than start its own blog, Lampkin’s group reached out to the popular left-leaning *Huffington Post*, which was looking to add Republican voices to its list of guest bloggers. Founder Arianna Huffington said she wanted to expand the number of topics being discussed on her site and noted that few blogs were discussing education. Huffington’s blog, which gained celebrity as an anti-Iraq war, anti-establishment site, wouldn’t seem like an obvious place to launch an online lobbying effort. Huffington said she has no qualms about having lobbyists blog on her site, however, as long as they are transparent about their motives.

“Lobbyists wanting to use blogs is another sign of the growing power of the blogosphere,” she says. “It’s also another sign of the recognition that the press release is dead. No one reads them, and it’s a real waste of energy for anyone with a cause.”

Lampkin, who states on his postings that he is a Quinn Gillespie lobbyist, began blogging on June 27. At first, he says, he was a bit apprehensive about going into the “belly of the beast,” but “I just had to make sure I had all my facts straight. If you go in with an argument

■ Top Political Blogs

Blog search engine Technorati bases popularity on the number of blogs that link to one another. From that list, the most popular blogs focused on politics are:

The Huffington Post	18,759 links
Daily Kos	12,983
Think Progress	8,068
Crooks and Liars	7,886
Michelle Malkin	7,301
The Drudge Report	6,932
Talking Points Memo	5,174
Instapundit	4,720
Wonkette	4,537
Powerline	4,431

As of Oct. 2, 2007

SOURCE: Technorati

that is flawed, you are susceptible to getting your legs cut out from under you.”

Given the conversational nature of blogs, Lampkin uses a personal tone in his posts. Although he has so far made only eight entries, one of which discussed his frustration with media coverage of education and the lack of discussion of merit pay for teachers, he has generated more than 200 comments. In one post, he encouraged people to look at a video by musician Kanye West that calls on viewers to join the “Ed in ’08” campaign to reduce dropout rates among high schoolers. West’s foundation has partnered with the education reform campaign.

In the week following Lampkin’s post, the video got 160,000 views. Whether it was Lampkin’s blogging or West’s fame that sparked the interest, Lampkin can’t say. What matters to him is that “this was a huge number of people that took the time to open it up and watch it. That ability to talk to many people at once is really powerful.”

Lampkin also points to the play that his client and the push for merit pay is getting in the mainstream media. Not long after he began blogging on *The Huffington Post*, the Des Moines, Iowa, news station WHO-TV called Strong American Schools and asked Lampkin to contribute to its *Iowa Votes 2008* blog, which the Iowa media widely read. Lampkin hopes to capture the attention of presidential campaign aides in the key caucus state.

“Blogs are another tool in the toolbox to influence the process,” he contends. “It broadens the number of voices heard on public policy.”

Building Ties

Blogs can also help to cement relationships between companies, opinion leaders, and government officials. Cisco Systems, which employs more than half a dozen lobbyists in Washington, started its own public policy blog in February 2005. “It was the easiest way to connect with others out there with similar viewpoints” and to put the Silicon Valley-based company’s ideas in front of policy makers, says John Earnhardt, Cisco’s senior manager for global media operations.

Contrasting with the chatty tone of many blog posts, Cisco’s entries are dry and policy-heavy. In their posts, the company’s lobbyists discuss computer security, patent reform, telecommunications reform, pending Federal Communications Commission actions, and other company priorities.

Although Cisco’s postings have generated fewer than a dozen comments this year, the site gets about 45,000 page views a month, and more than 136,000 users have signed up to keep track of changes on the Cisco blog, Earnhardt says. Mary Brown, Cisco’s director of technology and spectrum policy, says, “I get e-mails from bloggers and others in the policy community who have read the blog.”

Brown has blogged several times to support actions by FCC Chairman Kevin Martin on telecom policy that she thought deserved a spotlight and hadn’t got attention in the mainstream media. “The FCC doesn’t have a vehicle to say, ‘Gee, look at the good job we are doing,’ ” Brown says. “I’m hoping my blog helps to highlight that.”

Earnhardt says that it’s too early to say what all the blogging has added up to: “Is it game-changing? I don’t think so yet. But you won’t know what will be a game-changing event necessarily. That is why you just have to keep doing it.”

It helps that blogging is an inexpensive tool. Several low-



RICHARD A. BLOOM

cost programs on the Internet allow anyone to create and maintain a blog. The software also makes it easy to monitor comments that may be inappropriate because of profanity, for example. The big expense, at least for Cisco, is the time it takes the company’s lobbyists to write an entry, if they are so inclined. “Some of the lobbyists like to do it more than others,” Earnhardt says.

In the nonprofit advocacy world, Environmental Defense has used blogs as a way to build bipartisan support for legislation. The group’s blogging story begins with Tucker Eskew, who served in the Bush White House and worked on the president’s 2004 re-election effort. Hardly your typical “green” activist, Eskew, who founded public-affairs firm ViaNovo, nonetheless believes that climate change is real. In 2005 he began helping the 500,000-plus-member Environmental Defense organization boost its relationships with Republicans. Eskew and the group’s leaders decided that blogging was an important tactic to advance the strategy.

Eskew blogged during the 2004 election and says he found the blogosphere “a good place to be for emerging issues, especially where there’s a gulf between public opinion and officials.” He recruited three other environmental conservatives—Whit Ayres, a Republican pollster; the Rev. Richard Cizik, vice president for government affairs at the National Association of Evangelicals; and William Tucker, a conservative journalist—to write a blog they named *Terra Rossa* (“Red Earth”) as a nod to the conservative states. The idea was to



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—Mary Brown of Cisco

provide a forum for Republicans to discuss environmental issues.

“The other side of the aisle has bludgeoned people on climate change,” says Eskew, and *Terra Rossa* gives Republicans a place “where there can be discussion without feeling like they are being bludgeoned” into taking a position.

Environmental Defense, which spent less than \$100,000 to launch the blog at the end of 2006, continues to provide financial support. The group, however, has no control over content and stays out of the conversation, says Keith Gaby, a senior communications specialist for the group. An independent Internet services firm maintains the site. The measure of success, Gaby says, is that a growing number of conservatives are talking about legislation to reduce carbon emissions and that Environmental Defense “created a forum to get the debate going in a constructive way.”

Eskew sees momentum building. He persuaded Doug Wilson, chairman of *Townhall.com*, a popular conservative policy blog, and retired Lt. Gen. Larry Farrell, a respected military analyst, to post on *Terra Rossa*. Further, *The Oil Drum*, a blog written by energy academics and focused on the environment, posts a link to *Terra Rossa*, driving up traffic. *The Wall Street Journal* in June described the blog as one of four worth reading on environmental issues. Eskew says that Rep. Roscoe Bartlett, R-Md., a member of the House Science and Technology Committee, also recently asked to blog on the site.

Whipping the Grassroots

Some business lobbyists have jumped into the blogosphere to try to activate conservative and libertarian bloggers to help stave off tax proposals in Congress. The chairs of the House and Senate tax-writing committees have proposed raising taxes on the income earned by managers of private equity firms, hedge funds, and other business partnerships. Fighting the proposals are Americans for Tax Reform and other anti-tax groups, along with such traditional business groups as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

A hedge-fund lobbyist who was part of the chamber's strategy sessions said that reaching out to conservative bloggers is part of the plan to foster grassroots opposition. The chamber's message to bloggers is that the legislation is “a backdoor way to raise capital-gains taxes,” the lobbyist said.

Among the foot soldiers in the blogging world is Phil Kerpen, policy director at the free-market group Americans for Prosperity. Although he isn't paid directly by any of the lobbyists, Kerpen says he has “coordinated” strategy with them and hopes that some will “recognize the work we are doing” by making financial donations.

Kerpen is also friendly with conservative Robert Bluey, the

blogger at the Heritage Foundation and with *RedState's* Erickson. With Kerpen's encouragement, Erickson and other *Red State* contributors wrote about a dozen blog posts on the topic. Erickson urged his readers to call on the ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, Charles Grassley of Iowa, to oppose the measure. “This is an issue that Republicans can get fired up about,” Erickson says.

Grassley has gotten some 40 letters on the issue, all from Iowa constituents, but an aide said that the office is uncertain whether the blog activity sparked the comments. Rep. Tom Reynolds, R-N.Y., a member of the Ways and Means Committee, created his own blog on the private equity issue to provide an easy access point for other bloggers to comment.

“We've gotten a lot of positive feedback from the financial community but have only received an occasional call from” constituents, says Reynolds's spokesman L.D. Platt. “We are using our blog most as an information resource on the issue rather than something to spur action.”

Others are using blogs as a membership-building tool. One is the left-leaning think tank Center for American Progress. When Congress debated energy legislation in June, the center advertised on blogs to build name recognition and to let bloggers know about its efforts to promote the availability of ethanol fuel at gas stations. The think tank created a series of short videos and posted them on more than a dozen energy policy blogs, such as *Green LA Girl* and *Life After the Oil Crash*. The ads directed bloggers to click on a website called *Clean MyRide.org*. The center says it signed up 10,000 activists for its campaign and spurred 15,000 people to send e-mails to the Hill calling for legislation to expand access to flexible fuels. Total cost for the effort: \$10,000.

“We were looking to reach influential people in energy policy areas, and we think it was successful, in terms of click-through rates and new e-mail addresses secured,” says Brian Komar, the center's director of strategic outreach and alliances.

When it comes to advertising, blogs are cheap in comparison with mainstream media. The cost of placing a prominently displayed ad on all 133 of the most popular liberal blogs for four weeks runs about \$100,000, says Henry Copeland, founder of BlogAds, a company specializing in website advertising. In comparison, *The New York Times* charges \$142,083 for a one-day full-page black-and-white print ad. The Internet also provides the potential to track how many people react to an ad, known as the “click-through” rate. The number of people who see broadcast or print ads is harder to measure.

“Old media is passive,” Copeland says. “With new media you can have a relationship with the reader” because readers can directly respond to a Web-based ad.

“Right now, I think K Street is still trying to **figure out who the [blog] audience is.**”

—Robert Walker of Wexler & Walker



RICHARD A. BLOOM

For giant lobbying and PR firm Cassidy & Associates, successful use of a blog as a crisis communications tool convinced Vice Chairman and COO Gregg Hartley that the firm should do more with its blog. At the beginning of this year, Cassidy launched its blog in anticipation of a 25-part *Washington Post* series about Cassidy’s founder, Gerald Cassidy.

Almost all of the articles, some of which included criticism of Cassidy’s personal and professional choices, ran on the *Post* website. To drive readers to Cassidy’s side of the story, the firm paid approximately \$15,000 for a week of banner ads that ran with the *Post* stories, directing readers to the Cassidy website and blog. Traffic on the firm’s site tripled. Hartley believes that making it easy for readers to immediately get Cassidy’s personal responses blunted the sting of *The Post*’s stories. “This showed us that this is something we should be talking about and marketing to our clients,” he says.

Hartley is working on a strategy to get the firm’s 60 registered lobbyists to post entries and to use the blog as a marketing tool to highlight the firm’s expertise in communicating with staff on Capitol Hill. “This doesn’t turn into something overnight,” says Cassidy spokesman Tom Alexander. “We have just started the process of engaging people internally.”

Let’s Not Exaggerate

For the most part, bloggers are enjoying being part of the legislative process but don’t believe they have the vaunted power that the mainstream media have suggested. The bloggers emphasize that they can’t control what excites their readers and that blogging is thus an imprecise tool for building grassroots support.

Glenn Reynolds, editor of the conservative political blog *Instapundit*, says he likes his role in directing people to call their lawmakers and shape public policy, but adds, “I think it’s easy to exaggerate bloggers’ importance. We have ‘influence,’ sometimes, but not real power. Blogs—usually working together—can put things on the agenda, but that’s not always the same as making particular things happen.”

Stoller, co-founder of *Open Left*, says that blogging is a way to help his readers bring about social change, “but I would not be so bold as to pretend that I am playing some sort of gatekeeper

role.” Blogs, he says, are “a great organizing tool,” and he foresees a day when more lobbying could be conducted online “and not behind closed doors.”

Heritage Foundation blogger Bluey believes that his think tank’s blog was useful in engaging readers to oppose the immigration reform bill but says that other issues haven’t met with the same level of interest. Heritage has been trying to build opposition to the expansion of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, for example. In an interview in early September, Bluey said that because SCHIP is a narrow topic, “it’s been hard to get other bloggers to write about it.” The SCHIP reauthorization passed both the House and Senate at the end of September with large bipartisan majorities.

So how does a lobbyist get a blogger interested in an issue? The bloggers whom *National Journal* spoke to all said they are open to receiving pitches from lobbyists on behalf of clients, as long as lobbyists are straightforward about the client they represent.

Instapundit’s Reynolds suggested that lobbyists search the blogosphere for the hundreds of niche blogs with small but engaged readerships. Many such policy blogs have sprouted in recent years on issues ranging from agriculture to educa-



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GREEN REPUBLICANS: A founder of the blog Terra Rossa says it is a place where conservatives can discuss environmental issues “without feeling like they are being bludgeoned” into taking a position.

■ Blogging Habits in Washington

Which of the following best reflects your blog reading habits? (percent)

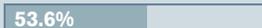
	Capitol Hill Staff	Washington Insider*	Federal Employee
I read only my one or two favorite blogs.	6.1	4.9	3.6
I always read one or two blogs, and skim others occasionally.	27.1	12.1	7.5
I skim a few blogs, but not consistently.	19.7	12.9	8.5
I read blogs only when a link from another website takes me there.	9.8	18.9	13.7
I read blogs only when I hear about them through word of mouth.	8.8	7.8	6.5
I never/only rarely read blogs.	28.5	43.4	60.3

*Includes lobbyists, the media, political consultants, and employees of trade association and think tanks.
NOTE: A total of 532 respondents participated in the survey, which was conducted in July 2007.

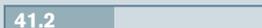
Thinking about the blogs you visit most frequently (that relate to politics, policy, and news), why do you read them?

All respondents

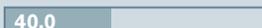
I find them entertaining.



They provide a window into the tone and tenor of issue discussions.



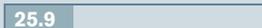
They cover issues and events that the mainstream media don't cover.



They help me anticipate emerging policy debates.



They keep me tuned in to national/local politics.



SOURCE: Policy Council

tion to stem-cell research, according to the Adfero Group, a media strategy firm that has catalogued more than 350 policy blogs.

"If a lobbyist has some bill they want to defeat or see passed, I'd be upfront about it and say, 'Here is why I think the bill is good or bad,' and I think bloggers would be interested," Reynolds says. "You may not generate massive pressure, but it's amazing what a few hundred people can do to influence policy."

Yet, lobbyists need to proceed carefully. Using a PR firm to reach bloggers has become a common tactic, but it may not be effective. Reynolds says he gets 1,500 e-mails a day and erases anything "that looks like spam." He seldom opens a message from someone he doesn't know. John Aravosis, author of the progressive *Americablog*, complained recently that he is inundated with PR pitches that he rarely finds of interest. He suggested that PR firms buy advertising on his site if they want to reach his audience.

"There's been a marked recent increase in the number of people asking me to write about their organization, campaign, or client," Aravosis wrote. "Note: The very best way to get me not to cover a story is to have a PR firm contact me."

David All, a former aide to Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Ga., and now a blogger and media strategist, advises that the best way to use blogs for advocacy isn't to attempt to get popular bloggers, such as Aravosis, to write about an issue, but rather to

search out local- and state-oriented bloggers. Local media use those blogs as resources, he says, just as national media organizations do. "The best way to get to a member of Congress is through their daily paper, it's not through *The New York Times*," All says.

Seasoned lobbyist Dirk van Dongen, president of the National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors, is a trade association leader who is eager for K Street to figure out how to use blogs. This spring, van Dongen lobbied in support of the sweeping immigration reform legislation and was surprised when votes dissolved in the Senate under an onslaught of calls from opponents. Since then, he has spent more time reading blogs.

"What happened with the immigration debate was hugely instructive," van Dongen says. "You had the entire establishment power structure working to keep an immigration reform bill moving, and you had the administration and congressional leadership behind it, and yet they got blown away. Clearly, blogs can be a tremendously potent way of communicating, and you'd darn well better be paying attention to them and figuring them out."

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