

Article

Panopticism is not Enough: Social Media as Technologies of Voluntary Servitude

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Abstract

This article aims to integrate the existing theoretical framework for about thinking the power relations between individuals and sociotechnical systems in social media. In the first section, the authors show how Panopticism found breeding ground in social media studies. Yet they claim that, despite an expanding critical literature, not much seems to be changing in prosumers' practices online. Their hypothesis is that this is happening not only because individuals are forced or cheated by the sociotechnical systems, as it has been usually argued, but also because they voluntarily submit to them. For this reason, in the second section, the authors introduce the notion of voluntary servitude, coined by Étienne de la Boétie in the 16th century. Voluntary servitude is a paradoxical notion because it represents the attempt of tidying up two opposite facts: human beings' free will *and* their reiterated submission. In the third section, they make the notion operative in the context of social media by focusing on privacy as the counter-discourse of surveillance. In conclusion, the authors deal with the emancipatory character of voluntary servitude, as well as with the concept of subjectivity it entails.

Introduction

This article aims to integrate the existing theoretical framework for thinking about the power relations between individuals and sociotechnical systems in social media.¹ In the first section, we will present the evolution of the literature on the topic. In the first wave of digital studies, scholars used to consider virtual environments as technologies of choice, freedom, and emancipation. As argued by boyd (2001: 3), “in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many academics [...] imagined that virtual environments would offer an utopian world where sex, race, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation ceased to be relevant.” “On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog” is the famous adage of a cartoon caption, which is somehow representative of the expectation of those times. The shift from anonymity to “nonymity” has been one of the main consequences of the development of the social web during the 2000s. Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008: 1818) stressed: “the online world is not entirely anonymous. Family members, neighbors, colleagues, and other offline acquaintances also communicate with each other on the Internet.”

¹ The term “sociotechnical” will be used here in the sense of Bruno Latour's “sociotechnical ensembles,” in which “material infrastructure” and “social superstructure” are entangled.

Researchers started to consider social media as technologies of mutual control and surveillance. In particular, Panopticism found breeding ground in social media studies. Samuel Bentham conceived the Panopticon as a circular prison allowing a single watchman to observe all the cells at once, but impeding the prisoners to know whether or not they are being observed. His brother, Jeremy, made it clear that in addition to being an architectural form, Panopticon could be seen as a figure of political technology. In Foucault's interpretation, Panopticism represented a carceral power that spread outwards in the 19th century "into complex networks of disciplinary training" (Los 2004: 16). In social media, the Panopticon is reversed, because the controlled—the user—is alone in the middle of the prison—the sociotechnical system—and the controllers—the other users—are all around her or him.

For some time now, most of the internet platforms started to collect and analyze users' data; on the basis of these data collections and analysis, they created a new business model. Moreover, in 2013, the Guardian revealed that the US National Security Agency obtained access to the systems of Google, Facebook, Apple, and other US technology and internet companies. The NSA access was part of the PRISM program, whose existence was revealed by Edward Snowden, which allowed officials to collect material concerning search history, email contents, file transfers, etc.² In this general atmosphere of re-centralization of the web and new vertical surveillance, academics started to treat social media as a more classic form of Panopticon. For them, the problem is not the relations among individuals *in* a sociotechnical system, but rather the relations between the individuals *and* the sociotechnical system.

For us, it is surprising that despite an expanding critical literature, and despite the fact that people are increasingly aware of surveillance exercised by and through social media, not much seems to be changing in prosumers'—users and consumers (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010)—practices online. Our hypothesis is that this is happening not only because individuals are forced or cheated by the system, as it has been usually argued, but also because they voluntarily submit to it. For this reason, in the second section, we will introduce the notion of voluntary servitude. Étienne de la Boétie, a young member of the Parliament in Bordeaux, coined this political category in the 16th century.

Looking at the French people, he pondered on how was it possible that a single man—the absolute monarch—could succeed in subjugating millions of people. It was certainly not by his own strength, as he was not more than a man. On the contrary, it was because the oppressed themselves provided him the support. Voluntary servitude is a paradoxical notion because it represents the attempt of tidying up two opposite facts: human beings' free will *and* their reiterated submission. La Boétie's perspective has often been misunderstood because he wanted to condemn all forms of political domination *and* blame people's attitude. For us, it will be worth stressing that all attempts of externalizing the reasons for servitude prevents a proper understanding of submission itself.

In the third section, we are going to make this notion operative in the context of social media. In particular, we will focus on privacy as the counter-discourse of surveillance: if surveillance is the capacity to exercise control over the individuals, privacy is the ability that these individuals have to seclude themselves or withhold information about themselves. In recent years, literature on privacy in social media is shifting from the issue concerning the relations among peers to that about the relations between the peers and the sociotechnical system. In this respect, it has been noticed that Facebook (and other social media) users became increasingly careful in protecting their data from their peers; however, they ended up "increasing their personal disclosure to other entities on the networks as well: third-party apps, (indirectly) advertisers, and Facebook itself" (Stutzman, Gross, and Acquisti 2012: 8). And yet academics generally attribute this either to the strategies of the sociotechnical system or to a complex interaction between these strategies and the users' behavior. Instead, we will suggest that interpreters should at least consider the eventuality that

² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/us-tech-giants-nsa-data>. Accessed August 28, 2015.

surveillance in social media cannot be entirely attributed to these reasons. In other words, we will argue that a Panoptacist perspective on social media might not be enough.

In the conclusion, we will consider two issues that have not been addressed. First, we will examine if voluntary servitude is just a theoretical tool to *interpret* a specific condition or if it can be also seen as an instrument for *changing* it. Second, we will ponder on whether voluntary servitude suggests a notion of subjectivity that is not entirely compatible with Panopticism in social media.

Surveillance and Panopticism in social media

The goal of this section is to give an account of the evolution of the literature on the relations between individuals and sociotechnical systems in social media studies. Our attention will be directed to surveillance and Panopticism, since they played and still play an important role in this context. In our view, surveillance and Panopticism are not just matters of power and control over individuals; they are means for constituting individuals as such. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault described disciplines as “techniques for making useful individuals” (Foucault 1978: 210). Scholars often refer to the “conduct of conduct”: “The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome. Basically power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or the linking of one to the other than a question of government” (Foucault 1982: 221). More generally, we argue that in social media it always comes to the configuration and reconfiguration of the self.

For Georges (2011: 40), digital identities are declarative, active, and calculated. The declarative element is made of all data voluntarily introduced by the user, notably during the process of inscription to the service—on Facebook, for instance, information about “Work and Education,” “Contact and Basic Info” (birthdate, gender, religious view, etc.), “Family and Relationships,” etc. The active element consists of all the messages about the user’s social activities—“x and y are now friends,” “x and y shared z’s photo,” “x and y like z,” etc. The calculated element is represented by all the numbers resulting from the system’s calculations, which are generally visible on the user’s profile—“you, x and y and n other like this”; “Friends n”; “view activity log n+”; “n more pending items”; “home n,” etc.

During the 1980s and the early 1990s, the declarative element was dominant in the online configuration of the self. Academics used to believe that virtual environments could free people from physical and social constrictions IRL (In Real Life). boyd (2001: 4) pointed out that “[a]s digital pioneers, Donna Haraway, Sandy Stone and Sherry Turkle imagined the possibility of life online as a way to transcend physical identity and marked bodies. Cyberspace became a site, or series of sites, in which identity might be deliberately and consciously performed (a la Judith Butler).” In her *Life on the Screen*, for example, Turkle presented several cases where simulation games and MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) gave the users the opportunity to experiment different roles and situations, usually with positive effects IRL: “The anonymity of most MUDs [...] provides ample room for individuals to explore parts of themselves. [...] MUDs imply difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation. [...] MUDs thus become objects-to-think-with for thinking about postmodern selves” (Turkle 1995: 185).

The birth and development of the social web during the 2000s strengthened the active element of digital identities. Donath and boyd (2004: 72) presented social networking sites as “on-line environments in which people create a self-descriptive profile and then make links to other people they know on the site, creating a network of personal connections. Participants in social networking sites are usually identified by their real names and often include photographs; their network of connections is displayed as an integral piece of their self-presentation.” For them, social networking improves realism and reliability of the information provided, making dissimulation more difficult: “In theory, the public display of connections found on networking sites should ensure honest self-presentation because one’s connections are linked to one’s profile; they have both seen it and, implicitly, sanctioned it” (Donath and boyd 2004: 73-74). As Cardon (2008: 20) argued, personal

engagement on social networking sites ended up with a general loss of privacy. Consequently, scholars started to treat social media as technologies of mutual control and surveillance.

In social theory, there are two distinct approaches to surveillance. Neutral surveillance approaches define it as the systematic collection of data about humans or non-humans. Negative surveillance approaches consider surveillance as “a form of systematic information gathering that is connected to domination, coercion, the threat of using violence or the actual use of violence” (Fuchs 2011: 135). The best-known negative approach to surveillance is that of Foucault, which considered disciplines as general formulas of domination, enclosing, normalizing, punishing, hierarchizing and excluding.

There has been an important debate on the applicability of Foucault’s Panopticon to the contemporary social and technological developments in surveillance and society. Some scholars accused Foucault’s Panopticon of being unidirectional and static. Hence, it would fail to account for a situation where the few see the many (Mathiesen 1997) and where disparate arrays of people, technologies, and organizations become connected to make “surveillant assemblage” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000; Ball 2006). Contrary to the intention of going beyond Foucault’s Panopticism (Lyon 2006), which is mostly based on a Deleuzian turn in surveillance studies, Caluya (2010: 629) argued that “any attempt to displace Foucault’s panopticism with Deleuze’s assemblage must take heed of the extent to which the latter is formed in relation to the former.”

Panopticism found breeding ground on the internet and social media studies (Fuchs et al. 2012). Academics used terms like “dataveillance” (Clarke 1987), “superpanopticon” (Poster 1990), “panoptic sort” (Gandy 1993), and “electronic panopticon” (Lyon 1994). In non-academic publications, expressions like “participatory panopticon,” “virtual panopticon,” “digital panopticism,” “omnipticon tool,” “social media panopticon,” etc. abound. Scholars treated social media as forms of reversed Panopticon. In social media, the Panopticon is reversed because the controlled is alone in the middle of the “prison” and controllers are all around her or him. Interpreters named the phenomenon “lateral surveillance” (Andrejevic 2005), “social searching” (Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield 2006), “social surveillance” (Joinson 2008; Tokunaga 2011), and “liquid surveillance” (Baumann and Lyon 2013). Marwick (2012) agreed with the idea that social media are instruments of social surveillance, but also insisted on the fact that these new forms of control are classical in their effects. A tiny minority considered mutual surveillance in social media positively. For Albrechtslund (2008), for example, “participatory surveillance” contributes to empowerment, subjectivity building, and mutuality (sharing).

In recent years, the calculated element has emerged as a key aspect of digital configuration of the self in social media. Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) presented the “Like economy” as a general process of re-centralization of the web. Thanks to the “Like” button, Facebook is expanding beyond its platform. Moreover, the “Like” button permits Facebook to monetize data flows and links that are created. By asking users to express different affective reactions to web contents by clicking on links, the variety of these reactions is domesticated and transformed in a mere quantifiable number. Data generated in this manner becomes profitable as it is used for personalized advertising or to show users, through recommendations, what their contacts have liked and engaged with.

Datafication and monetization are global processes of the web nowadays. First, since the introduction of the Open Graph in April 2010, which allows external websites to link to the platform and its social connections through external “Like” and “Share” buttons, Facebook has been expanding to the entire web. Second, because all other internet platforms and social media are tailored to this model. Furthermore, as we said, in 2013, the Guardian revealed that the US National Security Agency obtained access to the systems of Google, Facebook, Apple, and other US technology and internet companies as part of the PRISM program. As a consequence, social media is being treated more as a classical form of Panopticon. For several academics, the problem is not the relations among individuals *in* a sociotechnical system, but rather the relations between the individuals *and* the sociotechnical system. Or, to use Foucault’s words (1982: 200), in this form

of Panopticon each individual “is the object of information, never a subject in communication.” Web 2.0 platforms like Facebook are Panoptic machines because they are based on identification, classification and assessment of great amounts of data concerning the users (Fuchs 2011: 137).

Andrejevic and Gates (2014: 190) introduced the term “big data surveillance”: “Big data surveillance, then, relies upon control over collection, storage, and processing infrastructures in order to accumulate and mine spectacularly large amounts of data for useful patterns.” Lyon (2014: 6) affirmed that there are three key ways in which Big Data seems to be having an impact on surveillance online: (1) an increasing reliance on software for surveillance and a concomitant reliance on what might be called a “human-algorithm” relationship; (2) Big Data has been increasingly practicing tilt surveillance operations to focus more on the future than on the present and the past; (3) adaptation, i.e. the propensity for analytics to be treated as if methods can be transferred successfully and with little risk from one field to another. According to Boellstorff (2013), from a Foucauldian perspective, the master metaphor for making Big Data should not be the Panopticon, but the confession: “the confession is a modern mode of making data, an incitement to discourse we might now term an *incitement to disclose*. It is profoundly dialogical: one confesses to a powerful Other.” In reality, from Foucault’s viewpoint, surveillance and confession are strictly related. The latter might be understood as a means by which individuals take an active—but not a voluntary—role in their own surveillance.

Today abundant literature is available on surveillance in social media. Furthermore, several national and international initiatives have been implemented in order to make people aware of the risks related to digital tracking. Let us consider, for instance, “Do not track,” a personalized documentary series recently produced by the French-German channel Arte and other partners, whose purpose is to explore how subjects’ data flows online are collected and used by private companies and public institutions.³

For us, it is surprising that both the man in the street and the man in the laboratory are increasingly aware of the surveillance exercised by and through social media, but not much seems to be changing in their daily practices. In this context, critique of ideology, i.e. any discourse aiming to upset the mainstream debate for the purpose of individuals’ and social groups’ emancipation seems to be feeble; precisely because, despite all critical thinking, people still accept surveillance and hence, submission. In this respect, Panopticism goes further, pointing out all the complexity of the constitutive relation between subjectivities and the sociotechnical systems. Yet we believe that it fails to account for an eventuality. Of course, over time, social media has developed complex strategies in order to improve surveillance over individuals, and individuals themselves are undoubtedly disoriented by several factors. We will discuss these points in the third section of this article. However, this might be just part of the truth. Our hypothesis is that in addition to the fact that users are forced and cheated by the system and are distracted by other factors, there is also an element of voluntary submission. Put differently, Panopticism does not go as far as breaking the direct relationship between awareness and emancipation—a relationship as old as Plato’s allegory of the cave. This is, by contrast, at the core of the provocative category of “voluntary servitude.”

Voluntary servitude

Voluntary servitude is a political notion first coined in the 16th century by Étienne de La Boétie, a young member of the Bordeaux’s parliament, and a refined intellectual. La Boétie is best known for a brief, incisive political essay he wrote as a young adult: the *Discourse of voluntary servitude*.⁴ The work circulated unpublished as a manuscript among the best European men of letters, and led Michel de Montaigne to want

³ <https://donottrack-doc.com/en>. Accessed August 28, 2015.

⁴ The French title *Discours de la servitude volontaire* is commonly translated as *Discourse on voluntary servitude*. Nevertheless, this translation does not fully account for the original meaning, which is twofold: a discourse “about” voluntary servitude, and a discourse where “voluntary servitude” itself takes the floor.

to personally know the author: their meeting turned into one of the strongest, most moving friendships in the history of literature.

Stolen by Huguenot activists and fraudulently published by them in 1574 and 1576—long after La Boétie’s untimely death by plague—the *Discourse* was soon condemned as outrageous and libelous and burned at the stake in 1579. Its content, however, continued to be circulated underground among European thinkers. It influenced personalities such as Richelieu, Rousseau, and Marat; and, more recently—after its publication become legal and translations started to flourish—Tolstoy, Gandhi, Thoreau, and Gene Sharp. New editions were printed and discussed during the most thrilling moments of the European political history: the French Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the Paris Commune, the Bavarian Council Republic, the French Resistance in 1943-44, the Russian opposition to Stalin during the 1950s. Four hundred years after its composition, its ideas were still so disturbing that, when Nazis invaded Belgium in 1939, they included it in the list of prohibited books: it was the only text written before 1800 to suffer such a measure. But what is then the “unbearable” content of La Boétie’s *Discourse*?

Written between 1548 and 1553, the *Discourse of voluntary servitude* deals with the links between obedience and power. Looking at the French people, subdued and oppressed by its tyrant, La Boétie sees “an endless multitude of people not merely obeying, but driven to servility; not ruled, but tyrannized over” (La Boétie 2008: 42). He wonders how was it possible that one single man could succeed into subjugating millions of people. It was certainly not by his own strength, as he was nothing more than a man. By contrast, it was because the subjugated themselves provided him the support:

I should understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could them absolutely no injury unless the preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him. (La Boétie 2008: 42)

Servitude is not a matter of coercion, but rather of voluntary submission: the strength of the tyrant is nothing but the strength of his serfs. In La Boétie’s *Discourse* a conception of servitude takes shape like an active, aware and self-destructive product of one’s own oppression. The shocking evidence consisted precisely in the fact that though controlled, beaten, robbed, killed, and humiliated, subjects continued to grant their support to the tyrant *de facto* constantly recreating the power that oppressed them:

Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you? What could he do to you if you yourselves did not connive with the thief who plunders you, if you were not accomplices of the murderer who kills you, if you were not traitors to yourselves? (La Boétie 2008: 48)

From La Boétie’s perspective, this was a paradoxical situation that could not be simply attributed to some degradation of the souls and minds of individuals like cowardice: “Two, possibly ten, may fear one; but when a thousand, a million men, a thousand cities, fail to protect themselves against the domination of one man, this cannot be called cowardly [...]” (La Boétie 2008: 44). Nor it could be attributed to some external constriction or fascination.

In the second and third part of the *Discourse*, La Boétie describes at length the conditions of maintenance of power and submission. For the author, “the essential reason why men take orders willingly is that they are born serfs and are reared as such” (La Boétie 2008: 62). He explains how tyrants have constantly used

panem et circenses—bread and games—in order to distract people and exercise power undisturbed: “Plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates, these were for ancient peoples the bait toward slavery, the price of their liberty, the instruments of tyranny” (La Boétie 2008: 65). He also points out that people accept servility for personal ambition in order to occupy a better position in the pyramid of power. Yet he offers several counter objections for each of these justifications. He shows, for instance, that people themselves created the mysteries they now adhere to. Even habits is not a satisfactory explication: “there is no heir so spendthrift or indifferent that he does not sometimes scan the account books of his father in order to see if he is enjoying all the privileges of his legacy [...]” (La Boétie 2008: 55).

Voluntary servitude, then, rejects the traditional explanations of the phenomenon of political obedience: coercion, deceit, and distraction. At the same time, the acknowledgement that people want to obey to power is not a justification of the power itself: La Boétie contests any form of domination, especially when it justifies itself with paternalistic attitude.

For us, it is very important to stress that all attempts to externalize the reasons for servitude prevent a proper understanding of servitude itself. Voluntary servitude is paradoxical because it represents the attempt of tidying up two opposite facts: men’s freedom of will *and* their reiterated submission. The *Discourse* is in turn a condemnation of any political domination *and* a reproof for people’s choice.

Interpreters often misread this treatise. Some of them understood it as a simple, although powerful, “rhetorical exercise” (de Sainte-Beauve), a pamphlet for blaming tyrants and pushing people to revolt (Vermorel). Some others argued, against all evidence, that La Boétie was a political right-wing traditionalist blaming people for their own condition (Harry Kurz). An opinion that is still shared by some scholars. Buron (2015), for instance, recently presented La Boétie as a monarchical thinker. In our opinion, these interpretations fail to give consideration to both sides of the notion, whose co-presence makes up its specificity.

Several authors explicitly refused voluntary servitude. Moral intellectualism played an important role. In its classical version, for instance in that of Socrates, moral intellectualism allowed that one would do what is right or best for oneself and for the others, just as soon as one would truly understand what is right or best for oneself and for the others. From this point of view, voluntary servitude would be clearly untenable: people could not consciously choose their own bad. Indeed, the idea that freedom is the condition of happiness and there is no “happy servant,”⁵ was one of La Boétie’s main assumptions.

It is surprising that two different philosophers like Hegel and Foucault rejected voluntary servitude for this same reason. For Hegel it is nonsense to say that men can leave someone to govern them against their interests, goals, and projects, because human beings are not that stupid. The German philosopher believed that submission was not the consequence of a constriction or a pervert desire, but rather the effect of the recognition, implicit or explicit, of the extreme rationality of the monarchical state. Like Hegel, Foucault argued that there are not properly free and rational bad choices. In his opinion, rational and free will is not an acceptance, but rather a critique of the established powers: “critique is the movement by which the subject gives itself the right to interrogate truth about its effects of power and power about its discourses of truth; [...] critique would be the art of voluntary inservitude, that of deliberate indocility” (Foucault 1990: 39). Despite this difference, however, he also believes that voluntary servitude is untenable: “The relation between power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated. *The crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slave?)*. At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom”

⁵ Even the tyrant’s favorites and pushovers are described as unhappy, since all their privileges depend on the tyrant’s will, which might change anytime.

(Foucault 1982: 221-222, emphasis added). Voluntary servitude is an outrageous notion, because it shows a contradiction in human behavior without any pretention to explain and resolve it. Just few thinkers went as far as La Boétie did in the *Discourse*.

Representatives of an approach in social psychology called System Justification Theory conducted empirical surveys to study outgroup favoritism among the members of disadvantaged groups. Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004: 885) demonstrated that there are cases where “hierarchy is maintained not only through mechanisms of ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation exercised by members of dominant groups, but also by the complicity of members of subordinated groups, many of whom perpetuate inequality through mechanisms such as outgroup favoritism.” For them, existing social arrangements are maintained and legitimized even at the expense of personal and group interest. This means that disadvantaged people can choose to adopt the same prejudices of the existing system, even if those prejudices bring them to consider themselves responsible for their own condition. This causes severe psychological pain, and, of course, prevents these people from challenging the system.

In an older study, Cohen (2001) gave a possible explanation of such paradoxical behavior. He made a distinction between Freudian negation and “denial.” Negation consists of dislocating an element of knowledge in the subconscious. Denial, by contrast, is a paradoxical, semi-conscious reaction to some very disturbing information: a sort of voluntary forgetting, in which “we know, but at the same time we don’t know” (Cohen 2001: 5). Denial not only allows for not to take charge of the consequences of disturbing information, but also leads to immobility. Voluntary servants act as if they were not aware of the damages they are inflicting on themselves, but they are actually choosing their unawareness. Cohen’s denial is closed to Orwell’s doublethink in *1984*:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, [...] and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself—that was the ultimate subtlety; consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed.” (Orwell 2003: 120)

In conclusion, we can highlight four elements of voluntary servitude: (1) disadvantageousness—submission is a radical form of uncertainty because it always depends upon power arbitrariness. Serfs are always dependent on decisions taken by those in power, who can choose to behave well or badly, as he or she pleases; (2) collective subalternity—servitude presupposes a condition of submission to a form of power, a submission that singles out a collective dimension. In fact, submission to a specific power always entails a form of—or a lack of—social relationship; (3) potential awareness—submission cannot be reduced to a form of constriction, deceit of the power or miscalculation of the subjugated. Servants are aware of their own condition or at least they could easily become aware if they chose to; (4) abstainability—if the serfs choose submission, then freedom is just a matter of abstention from those actions that produce and perpetrate subjugation. We will consider this element in the conclusion.

Voluntary servitude in social media

In the third section of this article, we are going to make voluntary servitude operative in the context of social media. Before to do that, the change of context must be legitimized. For La Boétie, voluntary servitude had to do with political domination; for us, it is a theoretical tool for understanding surveillance and control in social media. In recent years, several academics in France (Durand 2004; Dejours 2014; Gori and Del Volgo 2009; Marzano 2010; Hamraoui 2010; Chaignot 2012) have used voluntary servitude for explaining some aspects of post-modern capitalism, such as the “new management” and the “evaluative attitude.” Despite inaccuracies (Emmenegger, Gallino, and Gorgone 2014: 125-129), they have demonstrated that voluntary

servitude can be applied to any context in which there is a power relation between a group of individuals on the one hand, and a political, economic or technical force on the other hand. This is precisely the case of social media, which incidentally are at the intersection of these three domains.

Moreover, one might argue that there is a relevant difference between the personalistic character of the tyrant's power, and the distributed, convergent, and multi-agent nature of social media surveillance. For instance, Trottier (2012) distinguishes among four kinds of actors in social media surveillance: individuals, institutions, marketers, and police. As a consequence, any application of voluntary servitude, a notion that has been developed in response to the specific issue of tyranny, to the domain of social media, would be inappropriate. Yet we would reply that there is no power that is exercised by a single person.

Foucault (1982: 207) stresses that the Panopticon is an open structure: “the arrangement of this machine is such that its enclosed nature does not preclude a permanent presence of the outside: we have seen that anyone may come and exercise in the central tower the functions of surveillance [...]” However, Foucault erroneously sees an “historical transformation” from the relations of sovereignty and those of discipline, we may say from the “verticality” of the former, and the partial “horizontalty” of the latter. Instead, Callon and Latour (1981: 279) have opportunely suggested that the Leviathan, the tyrant in Hobbes’ terminology, is a micro-actor who has operated alliances and translations (i.e. “all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes [...] authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force”) in order to become a macro-actor. His or her power entirely depends on a combination of alliances, translation, and the creation of “black boxes”:

An actor grows with the number of relations he or she can put, as we say, in black boxes. A black box contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference. The more elements one can place in black boxes—modes of thoughts, habits, forces and objects—the broader the construction one can raise. Of course, black boxes never remain fully closed or properly fastened [...] but macro-actors can do *as if* they were closed and dark. (Callon and Latour 1981: 285)

In other words, sovereignty, historically and ontologically, for human beings and other species—Callon and Latour use the example of baboons—is never a matter of one single actor, but rather of a network of actors in which the macro-actor occupies a central position. Such a position gives him or her the illusion of an intrinsic aura—let us think of the image of the Sun King. For this reason, we would say that, long before disciplinary society and social media, it has always been hard to detect and reply to the real sources of power and coercion. Voluntary servitude does not deny this difficulty. On the contrary on closer inspection, it rather assumes that the throne of the sovereign is (almost) empty. And although it makes believe that power relations depend in large part on us, it also does not underestimate, as we will see in the conclusion, the difficulty of an emancipation that must always be collective.

In this section, we are going to consider, without any ambition to be exhaustive, the issue of privacy on social media. Privacy is for us the counter-discourse of surveillance: if surveillance is the possibility to exercise control over the subjects, privacy is the ability that the subjects have to seclude themselves or withhold information about themselves.

Several examples will be taken from Facebook and the literature related to it. Facebook, however, is not treated as a case study, but rather as a paradigmatic case. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) singled out four elements in what they call the social media logic: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. It is noteworthy that social media differ from each other in relation to the first three elements, but not with regard to the last one. Programmability, popularity, and connectivity have all to do with the presentation of the self online via an interaction between the user, his or her peers, and the sociotechnical system. In this respect, each social media has its own form: Facebook requires a single, verifiable, and

persistent identity; Tumblr, Reddit, and Twitter allow pseudonyms; on Snapchat, identity is ephemeral, etc. Yet datafication has less to do with visibility online than with the possibility of extracting and monetizing data from it. In other words, datafication is not concerned with the multiple forms that identity assumes in social media, but is interested in obtaining profitable information from it. The differences between the materialities and the practices related to the technologies in question, then, pale into insignificance before a uniform desire for predictive and real-time analytics.

Tunick (2014: 24-30) gave a list of possible definitions of privacy: the right “to be let alone,” seclusion or physical isolation, being anonymous, the ability to control who has access to information, and right to do as one pleases. Informational privacy is the one we are interested in here. Westin (1967: 337) defined it as “the claim for individuals, groups or institutions to determine for themselves when, how and to what extent information about themselves is communicated to others.” Informational privacy has some overlap with the other definitions, especially with the last one. Indeed, by lacking in informational privacy, the subject loses part of the control over his or her life and becomes potentially vulnerable. Or, as Garfinkel (2000: 4) said, “privacy isn’t just about hiding things. It’s about self-possession, autonomy, and integrity.” Against those who believe that privacy is not a problem, or “it is no longer a social norm,” as Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg said in 2010, Tunick (2014: 30) affirmed that “it is the rare person who, like Dostoyevsky’s Marmeladov, delights in telling complete strangers about their deepest secrets and moral depravities.” Similarly, Trottier (2012: 21) stressed that informational privacy is informed by Goffman’s notion of stigma. Such a term refers to personal attributes that an individual wishes to hide from others, ranging from biographical details, a physical trait or a social quality. Informational privacy is always valuable because we all have something to hide.

For our purposes, one can distinguish two tendencies in the literature about privacy on social media. The first one, which was dominant at the beginning, put the accent on several issues depending on the relations among individuals and groups within a social media. One can then draw a parallel with the “reversed” Panopticon which we have presented in the first section. Most of these early researches have given empirical evidence of a high degree of disclosure within the sites. In one of the first academic studies on privacy and social media, Gross and Acquisti (2005: 78) analyzed 4,000 Carnegie Mellon University Facebook profiles and noticed that “the population of Facebook users we have studied is, by large, quite oblivious, unconcerned, or just pragmatic about their personal privacy. Personal data is generously provided and limiting privacy preferences are sparingly used.” In Stutzmann (2006: 15), students demonstrated to be generally “OK” with friends, family, classmates, and even strangers accessing to their social networking sites’ profiles. boyd (2006) pointed out that on MySpace US teenagers wanted to be visible and searchable for their friends, but not for their parents. In boyd and Ellison (2007), a brief summary of these approaches has been proposed, and many publications have followed (Lenhart et al. 2007; Thelwall 2008; Livingstone 2008; Fogel and Nehmad 2009; Brandtzaeg, Lüders, and Skjetne 2010).

The second approach to privacy in social media, which seems to be dominant today, is more concerned with the fact that marketers, government agencies, and the media themselves are collecting and using data about us. The parallel in this case is with the classic form of Panopticon that resurfaced in the last years in the literature about surveillance in social media, and that we have presented in the first section. On the one hand, empirical evidence has been found that social media users became increasingly careful in protecting their data from their peers (Madden 2012; Stutzman, Gross, and Acquisti 2012; Madden et al. 2013). On the other hand, however, it has also been said that users “ended up increasing their personal disclosures to other entities on the network as well: third-party apps, (indirectly) advertisers, and Facebook itself” (Stutzman, Gross, and Acquisti 2012: 9). To be more precise, these authors observed:

In short, two contrasting dynamics emerged from our analysis. Over time, Facebook members in our panel disclosed less information publicly. However, and in parallel, Facebook users seemed willing to disclose more and more diverse information privately to

friends. In doing so, however, they disclosed more to other entities as well (Facebook, third-party apps, and indirectly advertisers)—often without awareness or explicit consent. (Stutzman, Gross, and Acquisti 2012: 29)

As a consequence, Fuchs affirmed the need to develop a socialist conception of privacy. For him, the liberal conception of privacy “protects the rich and their accumulation of more wealth from public knowledge. A socialist conception of privacy as a collective right of workers and consumers can protect humans from the misuse of their data by companies” (Fuchs 2012: 141).

Now, researchers have considered a range of reasons for this new form of disclosure in social media. Some of them attributed the loss of privacy to the strategies of the sociotechnical systems. Over the years, social media like Facebook have developed complex strategies in order to exercise better surveillance over its users. The introduction of specific default settings is an example. McKeon created a visualization of the changes made to the default visibility settings on Facebook between 2005 and 2010.⁶ The continuous updating and the general complication of the privacy policies are other important examples. It has been noted that when Facebook actually simplified some profile settings in 2010, it “also removed many of the controls that allowed users to limit what content could be restricted” (boyd and Hargittai 2010). Privacy Basics, the tool made available by Facebook in January 2015 to “learn about ways to protect your privacy,” can be considered another stratagem. On the one hand, it effectively gives to the users the opportunity to better manage one’s own visibility on Facebook; on the other hand, however, it does not influence the possibility for Facebook to collect, analyze, and eventually sell one’s data. According to its data policy, Facebook collects all the digital traces voluntary or involuntary left on the system. These traces are used in order to “provide, improve and develop Services,” “communicate with you,” “show and measure ads and services” and, last but not least, “promote safety and security.” These data do not belong to the user. In the event of a change of ownership, for instance, “we may transfer your information to the new owner.” As explained in the paragraph on “how can I manage or delete information about me,” the company reserves the right to retain the data “as long as it is necessary to provide products and services to you and others.” Even deleting one’s own profile does not guarantee that Facebook will stop making use of this information: “information associated with your account will be kept until your account is deleted, *unless we no longer need the data to provide products and services*” (emphasis added). According to a report published by the Centre of Interdisciplinary Law and ICT at the University of Leuven in Belgium, by updating its privacy policy in November 2014, Facebook has done nothing but expand its old practices. Facebook is still violating the European consumer protection law.⁷

Some other academics attribute the general loss of privacy to a more complex interaction between individuals’ involuntary and non-rational behaviors and the conscious strategies of the sociotechnical system. Acquisti, Brandimarte, and Loewenstein (2015) have recently summarized and drawn connections between different empirical studies on privacy behavior, focusing on uncertainty, context-dependence, and malleability: (1) When informational privacy is at stake, people experience uncertainty about whether, and to what degree, they should be concerned about privacy. This happens for at least two reasons: incomplete and asymmetric information, and uncertainty about one’s own preferences. Among the several elements that interfere with preferences on privacy, there is human social nature, the desire to be public, share, and disclose; (2) Although privacy seems to be a universal human need, “people often search for cues in their environment to provide guidance. And, since cues are a function of context, behavior is as well” (Acquisti, Brandimarte, and Loewenstein 2015: 511). Depending on the situation, individuals can exhibit anything ranging from extreme concern to apathy about privacy. Culture, other people’s behavior, past experiences, etc. have an important impact on privacy concerns; (3) Finally, “while people are often unaware of the

⁶ <http://mattmckeon.com/facebook-privacy/>. Accessed August 28, 2015.

⁷ <http://www.law.kuleuven.be/icri/en/news/item/icri-cir-advises-belgian-privacy-commission-in-facebook-investigation>. Accessed September 14, 2015.

diverse factors that determine their concern about privacy in a particular situation, entities whose prosperity depends on information revelation by other are much more sophisticated” (Acquisti, Brandimarte, and Loewenstein 2015: 512). With the emergence of the possibility for companies to make profit from data collection and analytics, it is not surprising that some entities are interested in promoting disclosure. Specific default settings, frustrating and confusing design features, not to “ring alarm bells” when it comes to data collection—e.g. not to exaggerate with personalization of advertisement—to provide users with the means to manage access to their personal information, and even to increase the transparency of companies’ data policies can reduce users’ privacy concerns (Acquisti, Brandimarte, and Loewenstein 2015: 512-513).

In our opinion both these perspectives are correct and useful in this age of the re-centralization of the web. In particular, they have the merit to show how social media work as apparatuses in the Foucauldian sense of the term. In the short essay *What is an apparatus?*, Italian critical thinker Giorgio Agamben suggested to expand this concept: “I shall call an apparatus (*dispositivo*) literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (Agamben 2009: 14). In other words, an apparatus is whatever is able to exercise power and control over individuals on the one hand, and forge attitudes and expectations of individuals on the other hand. This is precisely the case of social media, insofar they create the conditions of their own exercise of surveillance. Social media exploit individuals’ digital identities, and at the same time creates the conditions that make (digital) identities exploitable. At present, there is no room for such a discussion, but it is clear that voluntary servitude could be easily extended to the topic of digital labor (Scholz 2012; Fuchs 2014).

Yet the question that arises here is whether there is a third element in this process that is not ascribable to external reasons or to the internalization of these reasons. This is precisely what we have called voluntary servitude, which refers to an awareness, and a positive manner users adhere to the surveillance exercised by and through social media. It is very important to stress that for us voluntary servitude does not represent an alternative to the many external explications that researchers have already proposed. Rather, it is a sort of integration of the existing framework. Moreover, the theoretical approach of this paper prevents us to go beyond an hypothesis that must find empirical evidence in other researches.

In this context, then, it is not our intention to give a definitive answer. We consider it more important to pose the question. Nevertheless, we want to suggest at least one avenue to explore. Within the context of capitalism, Dejours (2014: 75) described the phenomenon of zeal: “Discipline, order, obedience, and even more so submission, would inevitably paralyze enterprises and administrations. It is not so much the discipline that makes up their force, but rather it being passed as a zeal, i.e. all the infractions and cheatings that the workers introduce in the work process in order to make it work. It is the subjective mobilization of their intelligence that is decisive.” There is zeal, for instance, on part of the Wikipedia’s active users, where it seems that even vandals, in the end, have the essential function of increasing reflexivity and vigilance within the group (Casilli 2012). There is also a form of zeal in social media like Facebook: whenever people contribute actively to the improvement of its business. Let us consider, for instance, the ad preferences introduced by Facebook in 2014. Facebook explains to users why they see a specific ad:

One of the reasons why you’re seeing this ad is because [name of the company] wants to reach people who are similar to their customers. We think you’re similar based on what you do on Facebook, such as the Pages you’ve liked and ads and posts you’ve clicked on. There may be other reasons you saw this ad. For example, Facebook is always able to use information about your age, gender, location and the devices you use to access Facebook when deciding which ads to show you.⁸

⁸ This explication appears as one, after having clicked on the drop-down menu near the top-right corner of any ad on Facebook, selects “Why am I seeing this?”

Moreover, ad preferences are a way to give users the possibility to have “more control over the ads,” to have ads that “are more relevant and useful” and to see “things you’re interested in.”⁹ However, Facebook makes clear that “[c]hanging your ad preferences influences which ads you see, *but it will not change the total number of ads you see*” (emphasis added).¹⁰ According to Facebook, ad preferences represent a great opportunity for the users. But it omits to say that it is also a good business for advertisers and the company itself. We struggle to think that people are not at least partially aware of this. In fact, it is common sense that advertising brings more advantages to the companies than to their potential clients who might choose on the basis of other sources of information. According to Wikipedia, for instance, advertising is “a form of marketing communication used to persuade an audience to take or continue some action, usually with respect to a commercial offering, or political or ideological support.”¹¹ Hence, we can say that any time that Facebook users manage their ad preferences, they are being zealous toward the sociotechnical system, and they are assuming an active role in their own submission. For this reason, we agree with Bauman who, explicitly referring to voluntary servitude, affirmed that “we may be ‘bound’ and ‘caught’, but we also ‘jump in’, plunge and dive in of our own will [...]” (Lyon and Bauman 2013: 145).¹²

Before concluding this section, a potential critique must be taken into account. There are, indeed, several good reasons for using social media: social capital (Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe 2007), connecting to friends and acquaintance (Quan-Haase and Young 2010), political activism, civic engagement, and news gathering (de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012), jobs and education opportunities, attention and visibility, etc. In this sense, individuals are not merely “cultural dupes,” in Adorno and Horkheimer terminology, neither are they voluntary servants, as we have suggested in this article. It is certainly fair to say that social media are not sources of alienation, coercion, and submission per se. Social media can also be sources of self- and social empowerment. We can go even further, and say that social media are somehow constitutive of our own nature. Human beings are “artificial by nature,” in the sense that, because of our incompleteness, we make artifacts, and then artifacts “make us.”

Similarly, there are for sure several good reasons for remaining within social contexts such as the State, the factory or the family, since they have both constitutive and empowering consequences on individuals. But the fact remains that each of these contexts has its own perversions that must be opportunely analyzed and criticized. This was precisely the aim of this article. In our opinion, to generally oppose the benefits to the drawbacks of social media is nothing but a blackmail disguised as a tradeoff: since there are evident benefits, one has to eventually accept the unavoidable drawbacks; if one does not accept the latter, then it is pretentious to want the former.¹³

It is not by chance that marketers have often claimed that users give out information about themselves as a tradeoff for benefits they receive. In Turow, Hennessy, and Draper (2015: 3), a 2014 Yahoo report is cited, according to which online Americans “demonstrate a willingness to share information, as more consumers begin to recognize the value and self-benefit of allowing advertisers to use their data in the right way.” But the same authors suggest, on the basis of a phone survey of 1,506 Americans age 18 and older, that users are rather resigned to giving up their data—and that is why many appear to be engaging in tradeoffs: “Resignation occurs when a person believes an undesirable outcome is inevitable and feel powerless to stop

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/about/ads>. Accessed on September 14, 2015.

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/help/247395082112892>. Accessed September 14, 2015.

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advertising>. Accessed September 18, 2015.

¹² It must, however, be said that Bauman reduces voluntary servitude to the consequence of “a desperate attempt to escape abandonment to loneliness, read impotence” (Bauman and Lyon 2013: 145). That is another way to look for external justifications for this users’ behavior.

¹³ This idea is borrowed from what Foucault (1997: 312-313) calls “the blackmail of the Enlightenment,” which consists in the conviction that one can only be “for” or “against” the Enlightenment and that whoever dares to criticize the Enlightenment is accused to escape its principles.

it. Rather than feeling able to make choices, Americans believe it is futile to manage what companies can learn about them” (Turow, Hennessy, and Draper 2015: 3). What they call resignation, we have called voluntary servitude. Voluntary servitude might offer, then, an alternative answer to the privacy-paradox, which concerns the gap between individuals’ declared intentions and awareness about privacy risks and their effective behaviors (Barnes 2006; Utz and Kramer 2009; Taddicken 2014).¹⁴ Such an explication represents a shift from a merely descriptive to a partially prescriptive attitude towards the same phenomenon. But this is precisely the main difference between social science and critical theory. The latter is famous for not only describing the world, but also for paving the way for changing it.¹⁵

There is also a theoretical reason for rejecting such a contractualistic paradigm. In fact, any form of political and economic contract presupposes that something is exchanged with something else, with both the terms being defined. However, in a relationship like the one that exists between Facebook and its users, the latter do not choose to give up a specific part of their data, but *potentially* all of them. It could happen that Facebook does not use one’s personal data, but it has the “potential power” (Timm 2015) to do that as it pleases. More than a contract, it seems a sort of inside-out Pascalian bet: the certainty of an immediate limited good in exchange of a potential total loss. Such a condition strongly recalls the one described in the *Discourse*, in which subjects are ceaselessly exposed to power’s arbitrariness: “it is a great misfortune to be at the beck and call of one master, for it is impossible to be sure that he is going to be kind, since it is always in his power to be cruel whenever he pleases” (La Boétie 2008: 40).

Conclusion

In the conclusion, we focus on two issues that have not been addressed. The first one concerns the good use of voluntary servitude. In this paper, we have suggested that academics should consider the eventuality that surveillance in social media cannot be entirely attributed to external reasons or to internalization of these reasons. In other words, we have argued that Panopticism might be not enough. There is, however, a deeper sense that can be attributed to this sentence. Panopticism describes a situation that cannot be entirely overcome. In “The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom,” an interview that Foucault gave in 1984, the interviewers stated: “There is now a sort of shift [in your thought]: these games of truth no longer are concerned with coercitive practices but with the practices of self-formation of the subject” (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987: 113). The interviewers considered such a shift the starting point for a possible “work of the self upon self which can be understood as a kind of liberation [...]” (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987: 113). Yet Foucault replied immediately: “I shall be a little more cautious about that.” And the reason is explained few pages below:

I would say that if now I am interested, in fact, in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. *They are patterns that he finds in his culture, and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him* by his culture, his society and his social group. (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987: 122, emphasis added)

From Foucault’s perspective then apparatuses are unescapable.¹⁶ French scholars such as Abensour, Clastres and Lefort offered instead an emancipatory interpretation of the notion of voluntary servitude. La Boétie

¹⁴ Acquisti, Brandimarte, and Loewenstein (2015) prefer to paternalistically attribute the paradox to the users’ naivety, vulnerability and incertitude. Horning (2015) and Ippolita (2015) have recently assumed a perspective, which is closer to ours.

¹⁵ In fact, our article has less to do with critical theory than with a critique of critical theory as the most suitable method for describing and changing our relation with social media.

¹⁶ In the same interview, Foucault affirms: “I am sometimes asked: ‘But if power is everywhere, there is no freedom’. I answer that if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere” (Fornet-

simply excluded any claim for external forces emancipating people, because just “self-emancipation will answer to self-submission” (Abensour 2006: 84). Fuchs (2012: 153-154) suggested the use of alternative internet platforms like Diaspora as an exit strategy from domination on social media. Diaspora is a decentralized alternative to Facebook: data is not stored on company-owned centralized servers, but in user-created nodes (called “pods”) distributed across the world.

In our opinion, however, all *exit* strategies are doomed to fail. “Quitters never win,” Hartzog and Selinger (2013) said. First of all, because especially in the case of social media as popular as Facebook this strategy is not sustainable without great costs in terms of sociability, especially for teenagers and young adults. Second of all, because we believe that any form of Jacobinism or elitism, i.e. any perspective attributing to an enlightened minority the role of emancipating the rest of the human beings, as well as any form of communitarianism does not represent a proper reply to voluntary servitude in social media. According to La Boétie, emancipation is a matter of collective abstention from those acts that produce and maintain oppression. If people are oppressing themselves, then they could free themselves simply by interrupting their support to the tyrant: “in order to have liberty nothing more is needed than to long for it, [...] only a simple act of the will is necessary” (La Boétie 2008: 44). However, there is a strong proximity between desire of freedom and desire of servitude. Such a proximity has two consequences. On the one hand, it suggests that one should never—blindly—trust emancipatory actions and movements, since they could suddenly turn into a new form of domination. As Abensour and Gauchet (1976: 30) pointed out, “voluntary servitude still inhabits the moment of rebellion.” On the other hand, it also suggests that no domination is strong enough not to be reversed from the inside by an act of (collective) will.

This consideration brings us to a second important reflection. As we said in the first section, in our view, surveillance and Panopticism in social media are not just matters of control over individuals. By contrast, they concern the constitution of subjectivity as such. For this reason, we ask ourselves whether voluntary servitude suggests a specific notion of subjectivity, and if such a notion is compatible or not with that of Panopticism. At the end of *What is an apparatus?*, Agamben argued that “[t]he more apparatuses pervade and disseminate their power in every field of life, the more government will find itself faced with an elusive element, which seems to escape its grasp the more it docilely submits to it.” For us, Panopticism is not enough because it also fails to account for the point of intersection between the political techniques and the technologies of the self, i.e. the subjective aspect in the genesis of power (Agamben 1998: 11), where the possibility of its transgression lies as well.

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Betancourt et al. 1987: 123). Hence, for Foucault, it seems that it is not power per se that must be rejected, but rather its perversion, which is domination, and that individuals can positively transform their condition, although remaining within a power relation (Verbeek 2011: 85).

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