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# BOOK REVIEWS: 40th Anniversary Edition

For almost all of the lifespan of the *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, libraries have operated in the context of what Manuel Castells called the 'information technology revolution'. Successive waves of technical change – the foundation of systems science; the personal computer; local networking; the Internet and most latterly Web 2.0 – have transformed Librarianship and Information Science beyond the imaginings of the founders of the journal. Paradoxically, however, these developments have also spawned a literature of the demise of the library, which envisions a profession and its institutions swept aside by the technology, economic models and culture of the digital age.

As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the *Journal*, such anxieties are once again prominent in the literature of librarianship and information science. How can the profession respond to a digital economy and culture and the democratization, commercialization and degradation of knowledge that it entails? Do these developments mark the beginning of the end of the 'library' as an institution, or can libraries survive and prosper by developing viable material, electronic and hybrid service models? In this reviews section we feature three recent publications which offer diverse perspectives on these issues: David Nicholas' and Ian Rowlands' *Digital Consumers*; Bill Crowley's *Renewing Professional Librarianship*; and John Bowman's double-volume *British Librarianship and Information Work*, a revival of a much missed series that many thought had run its course. Maybe the renaissance of this latter title, like the continuing vigour and popularity of *JOLIS* itself, is a portent of positive times ahead.

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Book Reviews Editor

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## **Digital Consumers: Reshaping the Information Professions** edited by David Nicholas and Ian Rowlands

2008, London: Facet, xiii + 226pp, £39.95,  
ISBN 9781856046510

In the 'Extinction timeline 2000–2050' at the front of *Future Files* Richard Watson (2008) dates the end of libraries at 2019 – a year or so later than village shops and DVDs, but

before the extinction of house keys, bank notes and ties. After reading *Digital Consumers* one feels that, unless librarians change their ways, this estimate of longevity could be on the optimistic side. Make no mistake, this book is a challenge to the information profession, and failure to meet this challenge 'will result in eventual professional melt-down, the signs of which are already there for all to see'. Librarians in particular come in for a lot of criticism – we are 'insular and tribal', in danger of becoming 'decoupled from the user', in a state of 'shock and denial', 'becoming increasingly rudderless' and in a 'perilous situation'. Furthermore, the editors stress, this is not simply about the future – the focus is on today 'because the real problem is not what tomorrow will bring but what today has already brought with it'. As such, this book should be regarded 'as an essential survival kit'.

This is a collected work, the focus of which is the 'behaviour of people visiting the virtual space for information'. The contributors are members of, or linked with, the CIBER (Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research) research group at University College London. The essential premise of the book is that users of digital information are essentially consumers, behaving in the same way as e-shoppers, and moreover, they are now in charge, because they can connect directly to information resources, at any time, without the need of traditional gatekeepers or guardians of information. To understand how they behave we need to appreciate, and respond to, what is happening in the wider world of digital commerce. This implies a wholesale rejection of traditional models of information-seeking behaviour or what the authors call the 'obsolete information paradigm'. Hence the work is interdisciplinary, with early chapters covering the psychology of online communication, the economics of the digital information industries and the world of e-commerce before the book moves into the traditional librarianship territories of user behaviour and information literacy.

The key chapters are 6 and 7. Chapter 6, 'The information-seeking behaviour of the digital consumer', is the longest and rightly described as the 'lynchpin chapter'.

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Previous chapters provide the context (i.e. how consumers behave in the digital environment) and subsequent ones follow on from its conclusions. The authors draw on an extensive evidence base of 'deep log analysis techniques' which track the way in which scholars use digital resources – such as pages viewed, quantity of downloads, time spent at a site, number of searches and search terms and range of journals consulted. Based on this analysis a picture is constructed of the typical user who finds links through Google, flits from one site to another, spends only a few minutes at any website, is 'power browsing' rather than 'reading', prefers shorter articles to longer ones and is always looking for quick wins. In other words, is adopting the behaviour of the e-consumer rather than the approach traditionally advocated by the librarian.

Chapter 7 looks at the information-seeking behaviour of young people, the so-called 'Google generation'. The research described here will already be familiar to readers of the CIBER (2008) report, published earlier in the same year. The key conclusion is that, whatever their IT skills, young people now are no better at retrieving and evaluating information than their predecessors and there is thus an urgent need for an effective information and digital literacy programme, at school rather than university level. More generally, many of the assumptions about the distinctive behaviour of the Google generation are unfounded and their uniqueness is illusory – when it comes to shallow searching and minimal effort, it seems that we are all part of the Google generation.

This review has focused on the core chapters of the book although the multi-disciplinary approach does bring in some interesting and varied discussions on topics such as online sales promotions on Christmas Day, whether or not the library has a role as a social space and the way in which we assign crude characteristics to those we communicate with anonymously online. At times one feels that some of these discussions could have been curtailed somewhat and that some necessary contextual points could have been made more briefly. That said, there is a clear argument and narrative thread that runs throughout the book, the contributions all relate to this argument and it is clear that this is a collaborative work carefully steered by David Nicholas. Nicholas, in particular, writes well – some might find his tone a little hectoring but this reviewer enjoyed his direct, punchy, witty and conversational style.

It is a testament to the book's ability to engage that you are left wanting more. The final chapter 'Where do we go from here?' gives us six routes out of our current difficulties. Academic librarians might disagree with the suggestion that institutional repositories and open access are, like Internet cafes, mere fashions that will disappear. That aside the points made (e.g. 'live with the prospect of constant change', 'keep it simple' and 'demonstrate outcomes') are all lessons we might take to heart. But further consideration of the next steps and some alternative perspectives would have been appreciated. We lack the viewpoint of the digital information provider, for example. For library managers keen to recommend this work to their staff, some consideration of the implications for the design of information literacy programmes would have turned this into a more practical survival kit. I would also argue that getting close to users and monitoring their behaviour should not be restricted to digital information but should be broadened out to encompass their use of library space and reference services (other areas where we frequently make assumptions about usage without the necessary data to support them).

Overall, this is an important, even seminal work. Power-browsers with insufficient time on their hands, might legitimately skim parts, but the key messages need to be absorbed by the profession. The book is well designed and easy to read with a clear layout and a good index. At one point, somewhat flippantly, the authors suggest that for many serious reading is only undertaken on holiday; if that is the case you could do worse than to pack this enjoyable read in your luggage.

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## **Renewing Professional Librarianship: A Fundamental Rethinking by Bill Crowley**

2008, Westport CT: Libraries Unlimited, 174pp,  
£25.95, ISBN 978 1 59158 554 1

In *Renewing Professional Librarianship* Bill Crowley sets forth his concerns about what he sees as 'the misapplication of information models to the predominately learning-centered realities of professional academic, public and school librarianship' (p. 7). He argues that as a result of this misapplication and because of the 'triumph of information', librarians 'are now facing the very real prospect of having their profession redefined out of existence'. In five variable chapters, he introduces the topic, discusses library professionalism and library education, considers the past, the information-library conundrum and the ebbing of information science. In his final chapter, he offers some solutions and indicates what we should and should not do. At the end of his text, he summarizes his thoughts and provides a handy checklist for the reader, and any reviewer, by claiming to have provided a statement of the problem, its relevant history, a range of analyses and a few recommendations for change.

He approaches the topic as a 'cultural pragmatist'. Fundamental to this method is his belief 'that the true test of any theory lies in the ongoing analysis of experience'. Thus, the matter at the heart of his text is 'the relevance of information theory to library practice'. This leads him to consider 'the implications for library practice and relevant library education flowing from the loss of co-cultures previously shared among faculty, practitioners, and elected officials, as well as other ... library stakeholders' (pp. 67–8). He is pessimistic about what the future holds but offers a way out through the adoption of 'lifecycle librarianship'. This rather inelegantly named concept concerns library services from 'the lapsit to the nursing home'.

He argues that 'the progressive dominance of information over library' began around 1950. In particular, he cites the work of Robert Leigh and the *Public Library Inquiry* and the connection it made between librarianship and communication. He suggests that Leigh's theorizing may have inspired 'information science successors to achieve their contemporary dominance within ALA-accredited professional education'. (p. 108). This is a matter of conjecture and it could equally be argued that the *Public Library Inquiry* indicated links with 'lifecycle' roles. It certainly emphasized the educational function of the public library and also stressed its social agenda. In addition, it

is quite possible to associate libraries with communication without reducing them to a simple information role. Indeed Crowley himself when attempting a definition of library studies places 'emphasis on the processes of reading and other forms of *communicating*' (p. 132: my emphasis).

Unlike many writers from the United States, he considers sources from outside its borders. While this is a welcome development, it is doubtful if all those mentioned will be pleased with his testimony. For instance, he uses European events, particularly those from the UK, as a warning for his American colleagues. He argues that the recent history of British library education 'forms a disturbing cautionary tale for North America's library communities' (p. 20). Bob McKee the Chief Executive of CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) and, with rather more justification, United States resident Blaise Cronin, who Crowley says openly views librarianship with disdain, are given as examples of those who have embraced the information rhetoric. He claims that this and other 'disquieting developments have worked to lower 21st-century library professionalism in the United Kingdom'. CILIP is accused of a formal retreat into a guild-like approach to educating librarians 'when an antique structure that had seemingly become more of a means of formally recognizing achievement ... once again became critical for imparting basic instruction in professional librarianship' (p. 82). CILIP might well respond by saying that this is a very partial view of a system that places emphasis on keeping up to date and involves a variety of learning activities.

The state of professional education is fundamental to his analysis. In addition to his trenchant criticism of CILIP Crowley also claims 'that many ALA (American Library Association) accredited programs ... are providing a required information education that is largely irrelevant to many of the fundamental concerns of academic, public and school libraries' (p. 138). They are applying an inappropriate information theoretical lens to library realities. Crowley believes that library studies and information studies need to be seen as separate cognate areas and that the ALA 'needs to change the current definition of library and information studies to specifically include a commitment to lifelong learning and reading'. In short, it should adopt 'lifecycle librarianship' (p. 131).

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Crowley's style ranges from the folksy, sometimes using arguments based on anecdotes involving conversations in hotel lobbies, to the academic, as in his explanation of his adherence to cultural pragmatism. He is at his most entertaining, if not always at his most rational, when he presses the pedal marked polemic, becomes angry and names and shames individuals and institutions. John Leslie King, who is said to exemplify the 'unpardonable sin of intellect', and 'the privileged University of Michigan' are subjects of particular opprobrium. The world of information academics is a favourite target. It has, he claims, been colonized by those 'unable to achieve their career aspirations in the disciplines where they received their advanced degree' (p. 113) while at the same time 'the ongoing abandonment of relevant librarian education by British universities . . . has become the proverbial canary in the mine shaft for North American professional education and practice' (p. 21).

As someone who taught at the University of Sheffield on a Masters in Librarianship, with dedicated modules for academic and public libraries, this reviewer does not recognize Crowley's picture of Britain. Library education has not been abandoned. Academics with a strong library background and a passion for its values can be found teaching at Sheffield and other British universities, including one where the subject was once viewed with disdain. Moreover, the discipline, the students and the profession have benefited from the presence in departments of those with degrees in non-library subjects. Similarly, whilst it is true that the CILIP framework for qualifications indicates that it is possible to achieve 'fellowship' 'without earning any type of university degree' (emphasis in text) his reference to 'a guild-like structure' for educating UK librarians grossly overstates the situation. The most common route to Fellowship still involves a university degree plus practical experience.

As indicated above the author often spoils what is a valid argument by hyperbole and a less than balanced approach. For example, even if, as he maintains, it is true that 'faculty theory need not have any discernable connection with library . . . realities to be of benefit to the careers of academic researchers' (p. 27), he should also mention those academics who work to 'get research into practice and policy' and have to do battle with the anti-intellectualism that is still all too prevalent amongst some library practitioners and policy makers. As this review was being written council officials in one of the UK's largest cities were reported to have considered re-branding public library staff 'audience development officers' and members of CILIP's recruitment agency were arguing against keeping the L word (Naming or shaming?, 2009). Such actions, as Crowley argues in another context, ignore 'the importance of [the word] "library" on campuses and

in communities' but they have little to do with the academic community.

That said, many of his arguments are worth considering and will strike a chord with some in the profession including this reviewer. He rightly stresses the dangers of using commercial models in public service organizations and the reductionist nature inherent in an info-centric view of academic, public and school libraries. He repeats, and clearly supports, Harold Lancour's view 'that all libraries are educational institutions and . . . all librarians are educators'. That remains a significant and valid statement at a time when, as Barack Obama (2005) told American librarians, there is 'a general culture that glorifies anti-intellectualism'. Crowley draws on numerous and varied sources and provides many quotable quotes. Few professional texts refer to Harry Potter and Margaret Thatcher but his book manages to encompass both. Library or even information academics looking for quotations to use as essay titles followed by the word 'Discuss' will find a great deal of material.

Indeed most readers will find something of interest while many will be stimulated, enraged and/or engaged by Crowley's opinions. Moreover, when a current dean of an ALA accredited programme and former Head of a British school opines that 'there is [a] pretty solid academic justification for spinning off librarianship programs from the major research universities and locating them in vocational education institutions' (Cronin, 1995) there is a need to hear from those who want to maintain and justify the value and values of the library profession. Crowley clearly cares passionately about the future of the profession and those it serves. Some will find his voice a little strident, his analysis a tad unbalanced and his worldview a little less than accurate but most will conclude that he is well intentioned. Library and information professionals should read his rumbustious text and, where they feel he has made a valid case, take up his challenge to do something about it.

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## **British Librarianship and Information Work 1991–2000**

**edited by J.H. Bowman**

2006, Aldershot: Ashgate, 582pp, £70,  
ISBN 978 0 7546 4779 9

## **British Librarianship and Information Work 2001–2005**

**edited by J.H. Bowman**

2007, Aldershot: Ashgate, 554pp, £70,  
ISBN 978 0 7546 4778 2

For most of the 20th century, *British Librarianship and Information Work* (hence *BLIW*) and its predecessors provided an unparalleled chronicle and contemporary assessment of the progress and vicissitudes of librarianship in Britain. Begun in 1928, under the auspices of the Library Association Council as *The Year's Work in Librarianship*, it was published annually until 1950. *Year's Work* aimed ambitiously to include 'as much as possible of the important work in librarianship and bibliography which has been undertaken in the world during the year in review' (Munford, 1947). Under its editors Arundel Esdaile, J.H. Pafford and W.A. Munford, it attracted contributions from the most distinguished professionals of the day, and it established itself as both authoritative and critical in a positive sense. In 1951, it was replaced by the five-yearly surveys *Five Year's Work in Librarianship* (1951–65); *British Librarianship and Information Science* (1966–75) and finally *BLIW* (1976–90). These surveys usually comprised 20 or so 'expert' chapters reviewing the development of contemporary librarianship in Britain and, at the time, they provided indispensable guides for researchers, students and any self-educating professional seeking to understand the field. They also, perhaps unintentionally at first, developed into a popular sourcebook for overseas librarians looking for information about Britain and, more latterly, came to be recognized as a kind of meta-archive of the contemporary history of the LIS profession.<sup>1</sup>

Unaccountably, Library Association Publishing (as it then was) ceased to publish *BLIW* after 1990. No doubt commercial and financial considerations played a part in this decision; no doubt also heed was taken of those voices critical of the immediate utility of volumes which were often two or three years 'out of date' on publication. Whatever the reason, British librarianship temporarily lost not only an important practical resource, but also a

significant marker-buoy and reflection of its own identity and progress. True, the increasingly 'post-modern' 1990s spawned the emergence of any number of monographs, columns, blogs and think pieces competing to put the library and information world to rights. But there was nothing quite like *BLIW* to set the record down and provide a narrative foregrounding facts rather than rhetoric and opinion.

In this context, therefore, the revival of *British Librarianship and Information Work* is an event profoundly to be welcomed. Two volumes, *BLIW 1991–2000* (2006) and *BLIW 2001–2005* (2007), have more or less been published simultaneously, the latter covering contemporary matters, the former seeking to cover the 'lost years' of the nineties. Both are published by Ashgate and edited by John Bowman, latterly of University College School of Library, Archive and Information Studies. They include contributions from around 50 or so well-respected professionals, academics and consultants from across the library and information community in Britain. All involved should be congratulated for reviving what is, or deserves to be, a significant symbol of professional self-esteem.

Each volume comprises just over 30 chapters which aim to review both the institutions and functions of contemporary UK librarianship. In each roughly half of the contributions take library institutions as their starting point, beginning with overview chapters on national, public and university libraries and progressing to services of smaller scale and greater specialization: in this latter area it is especially good to see entries on off-neglected areas such as art, map, music, and learned and professional libraries. Cross-sectoral service themes – reference and information; user education; research; training and education; publicity and marketing; the Internet – make up much of the middle section of each volume, but welcome here also are insightful overviews of peripheral areas such as archives and the book trade. Both volumes conclude with five clear and authoritative commentaries on developments in the traditional technical core of library and information work: library management systems; cataloguing; classification; indexing and preservation.

As in any edited work of comparable scope, however, there are variations of coverage and occasional omissions. The most serious of the latter is the lack of any

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specific account of the professional politics of the period. Although 'professional associations' are touched upon elsewhere – for example in a two-page sub-section of the 'Education and training' chapter of *BLIW 2001–2005* (pp. 349–51) – neither volume contains a satisfactory commentary on the merger of the Library Association and Institute of Information Scientists, the formation of CILIP and its consequences or, indeed, the changes at Aslib and its restructuring as a commercial operation. Other fluctuations are more forgivable and perhaps typify the difficulties of compiling overviews of this type, but they disappoint nonetheless. The editor himself in his prefaces points to the omission of previously agreed chapters on industrial and commercial libraries; medical and health libraries; management; and multimedia. 'Colleges of Further Education' and 'Services to Children, Schools and Young People' appear in *BLIW 2001–2005* but not in *BLIW 1991–2000*. Conversely, Joe Hendry's excellent chapter 'Libraries and government' in *BLIW 1991–2000* is not replicated in *BLIW 2001–2005*, and the opportunity to subject New Labour's library policies to critical scrutiny is missed. Sometimes, paradoxically, the concern to cover everything can lead to confusion of content and impede clarity. For example the decision to commission a specialist chapter in both volumes on the public library and social inclusion/exclusion in the end detaches this theme from an overall assessment of the public library's impact.

However, most contributions work especially well in two ways. First, almost all provide a concise (c. 7500 words) yet authoritative survey of the main issues, debates and developments in their field, and they strike in the main a good balance between description and evaluation – Andrew Enyon's chapter on 'Colleges of Further Education' (*BLIW 2001–2005* pp. 82–9), which I used as a source for some recent work of my own, provides an excellent example of this kind of synthesis and evaluation of facts. Second, as the editor notes, all contributors were encouraged to include as many bibliographic references as they wished, with the result that most provide notes linking to around 50 or so key sources in their field (although one or two have as few as 12 and one has as many as 150!). Consequently, *BLIW* functions as an excellent entry point to not only the published LIS literature of the period, but also to the 'grey' world of government and professional reports, URLs and PDFs which increasingly form the common currency of communication in professional matters.

A few of the very best chapters, it must be said, go beyond this basic competence and provide interpretation, insight and wider analysis. Among them are Joe Hendry's contribution on 'Libraries and government' (*BLIW 1991–2000* pp. 22–36) which takes us beyond the conventional litany of official reports and guidelines common in such chapters, and begins to explore the damage inflicted on state-funded library services by the neo-liberal dogmas of the nineties. Bernard Naylor, in an

elegantly written and constructed contribution (*BLIW 1991–2000* pp. 83–101), analyses the forces which resulted in 'dramatic changes' in the university library sector in the 1990s without sacrificing essential detail. David Streatfield and Sharon Markless (*BLIW 2001–2005* pp. 413–30) provide what is probably the best overview I have read to the 'rise of information literacy' in a contribution which is marked by a realistic assessment of impact and lack of hype. Ian Stevenson, writing on the 'Book trade' (*BLIW 2001–2005* pp. 312–27), similarly presents a cogent, expertly written and considered introduction to this fast changing field. If nothing else, all of these chapters (and several others I lack space to mention) testify to the quality of professional and academic writing still current in the literature of library and information work. Claims of professional 'decline' are certainly not evident here.

Quality aside, it is important, I think, to reflect upon the wider significance of *BLIW* and its reappearance. To my mind, what strikes one most instantly about these volumes is their implicit emphasis on the *continuities* of British librarianship and information work in what is generally held to be a period of unprecedented change. These continuities are reflected in the (self-consciously?) traditional structure of the contents-lists – the new *BLIW* differs little in this respect from its predecessors from 1976 onwards. The resilience of core institutions – national, public and academic libraries all able, in spite of everything, to record important innovation and development – is also striking; as is the continuing vigour and range of specialist services like Local Studies, Map, Art, Media and Children's. Of course, the 'information age' in the guise of ICT appears in almost every chapter; in addition Phil Bradley contributes a chapter in each volume on 'The internet and libraries' and in the second volume Streatfield and Markless cover the 'Information literacy' scene. However, its impact commonly turns out to be unremarkable and the changes that come with it gradual. Even a major development like the 'People's Network', for example, is covered in passing only in the *BLIW 2001–2005* public library chapter (pp. 12–28) and it emerges as seemingly unimportant compared with issues such as the decline of adult book issues and social inclusion. This leaves the impression that ICT has had a more marginal impact on the fundamental structures of British library and information work than is often assumed to be the case. Rather, the view from *BLIW* portrays digital technologies which generate efficiencies, improvements and service innovation across a relatively static and unchanging range of libraries and information services.

Of course, a good number of contemporary commentators (like several of the contributors to *Digital Consumers* reviewed in this issue) would no doubt argue that such a viewpoint is symptomatic of a profession 'in denial' about the digital revolution and its effects. They could indeed point, in *BLIW*, to some worrying harbingers of decline: the aforementioned haemorrhaging of public

library book issues; closure of undergraduate LIS courses and departments; rapid run down of news and media 'libraries'. Most of these modernizers, as a consequence, would argue for the rapid digitization of many of Britain's library services, their integration into an emerging information economy and culture, and a reconceptualization of professional library work. A 'luddite' variant of this view (apparent in Bill Crowley's *Renewing Professional Librarianship*, also reviewed in this issue), is equally alarmist about the dangers of decline, but advocates instead a kind of metaphorical divorce between libraries and an increasingly degraded and commercialized digital world, in which librarians take on the burden of guardians of knowledge and culture. In both these scenarios, complacent publications such as *BLIW* presumably do the library and information profession no favours. They evidently dwell on the institutions and services of a passing age; they downplay both the extent and possibility of change. Because of their focus on the continuities of library and information work they lull the profession into an unwitting security, deflecting attention from the digital salvation (or disaster) which looms ahead.

Perhaps such warnings and prognostications have it right; perhaps library and information work is on the verge of meltdown, although I, for one, am not so sure. Writing now at a time when much of the 'digital' economy and its associated free market model are ravaged by the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s, it seems to me especially apt to take seriously what Christopher May (2002) labels a 'sceptical view' of the information society and all its works. Maybe, as May observes, 'when we strip away the shiny new products and services which are available to us in ever increasing quantities, there is much about the world that has not changed' (p. 2). Maybe this

axiom applies to libraries too; maybe change has, over the last 30 or so years, been more measured than we suppose; certainly accommodation and adaptation, not revolution, have been the common currency of professional life. *British Librarianship and Information Work*, to its credit, fairly faithfully reflects this state of affairs, documenting the pragmatic and incremental responses of what is, after all, a cautious profession to the digital age. At a time of new realism in public affairs, the empiricism, clarity and lack of pretence of *BLIW* seems to me to provide the perfect antidote to a librarianship literature preoccupied with technology, change, futurology and gloom in equal measure. Long may these volumes, and the profession whose history they record, continue to thrive.

#### NOTE

1. For an account of the antecedents and publishing history of *BLIW*, interested readers are referred to W.A. Munford's review article 'Our recent past' in the *Journal of Librarianship* of 1983 (Munford, 1983).

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