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The West and Islam in the Mass Media:

Cornerstones for a New
International Culture of
Communication in the
21st Century

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The West and Islam in the Mass Media

Cornerstones for a New International Culture of Communication in the 21st Century

1. Introduction

While Samuel Huntington has forecast a "Clash of Civilizations" for the 21st century, problems between Islam and the West are often more the result of a "lack of communication." While traditional stereotyping and problems of perception between both spheres are old and the result of a problematic history of crusades, expansion and religious rivalry, the 20th century has generated and reinforced distorted perceptions on a large scale. With the development of technology and economy in the post-Fordist era, information and communication have become prime resources for all states and economies. The mass media have helped to transform the world into a "global village," bridging distances and tearing down all sorts of walls of ignorance and prejudice. However, the media also portray many erroneous or one-sided images that misrepresent the West in the Islamic world and the Islamic world in the West. The large-scale dissemination of world-views that are deeply rooted in the stereotypes and ideologies of religious and cultural conflict poses a serious threat to peace in the globalized world of the 21st century.

After the Gulf War of 1991, criticism of problematic aspects of foreign reporting was raised by many scholars and intellectuals in the Islamic world, in Europe and the United States alike. The European Union has repeatedly pointed to the problems arising from erroneous international and

intercultural reporting. In 1991 it demanded a revision of the negative image of the Islamic world as projected by European mass media (*Conseil de L'Europe*, Doc. 6497, Recommendation 1162), and in 1995 the Forum Civil Euromed following the Barcelona-conference repeated that the economic and political ties between the European Union and the Mediterranean would flourish only if cultural stereotypes could be diminished and media performance on all sides improved. The Gulf War was a turning point for a number of intellectuals, scholars, media-watch groups and critical journalists. The dehumanized form of electronic warfare, where the bombing of Baghdad was a mere flash in the programs of CNN, has started to generate a silent revolution.

Not all conflicts can be solved by improving international communication but many problems will be understood much more clearly, and since knowledge and understanding are vital for positive relations between Islam and the West, the improvement of media performance must be considered a prerequisite for future development in this field.

2. The Symptoms

The current state of foreign reporting in Western and Islamic mass media is characterized by many distortions and misrepresentations. Western media share a certain common vision of Islam and the Muslims, like the media in Islamic countries do concerning the West. It cannot be ignored that neither Western nor Islamic mass media represent a homogeneous entity. Western media images of Islam and the Islamic world—and vice versa—are, in fact, conglomerates of complex national media cultures, and there are vast differences in the representation of "the other side" in the media of either Western or Islamic countries.

However, there are certain symptoms of outright image distortion that seem to support the idea that there are certain generalizable traits of a Western "media-Islam" and an Islamic "media-West":

1) *The West's coverage of Islam*

There is a strong tendency in Western mass media to characterize Islam as a fanatic and violent religion cutting-off hands, repressing women, and representing a clear antagonism towards Western ideas of freedom, human rights and democracy. Islam is equated with politics (a); Islamic politics is equated with fundamentalism (b); fundamentalism with terrorism (c); and political violence is interpreted without taking into consideration its social and political context (d). Such images of Islam and the Islamic world touch upon real problems that must be solved. Extremist fundamentalism and the resort to intolerance and dogmatism in the name of religion pose a serious obstacle to development in the Islamic world and to the improvement of relations with the West. However, media images that are confined to such negative impressions do not represent a balanced perception of Islam, which is at the same time a spiritual religion; a religion of harmony and historically proven tolerance and a religio-cultural system incorporating one fifth of mankind.

2) *The Islamic world's coverage of the West*

In the mass media of the Islamic world it has become widespread to depict Western societies and culture as dehumanized, commercial, sexist, and violent. And while it is certainly true that Western policies reveal double-standards, anti-Western argumentation is often overly generalized. Ideas of an anti-Islamic conspiracy of the West ignore that the West—even though mainstream media and culture usually focus on negative aspects of Islam—is not a homogeneous bloc. Just as they do in the Islamic world, many scholarly, cultural, and political traditions exist that are not hostile but friendly towards the Islamic world and seek cooperation not confrontation. There is no such thing as a Western bloc in international relations acting against Islam. However, during the last decades it has become obvious that an anti-Western mood that has survived from colonial times has fueled anti-Western cultural views in the media of the Islamic world. A spill-over effect from fundamentalist to mainstream

public opinion and media can be observed. At the same time, many critical—usually secularist or liberal-reformist Islamic views held by Muslims have been banned from the mainstream media and public opinion. In the case of Salman Rushdie many—not all—mass media in the Middle East and other parts of the Islamic world easily accepted the ban of Rushdie's book (although only a minority supported the death verdict of Ayatollah Khomeini). Censorship and self-censorship are part of the image problem the West has in the mass media of the Islamic world.

The cultural and religious stereotypes mentioned here represent only a small number of the problems of image distortion in the relations between Islam and the West. Most political, economic and cultural conflicts that have occupied the Islamic world and the West, like the Suez crisis of 1955/56, the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, the oil crisis of 1973/74, the Iranian revolution of 1978/79, the Rushdie affair of 1989, the Algerian crisis of the nineties, or the Gulf war of 1991, had a public opinion dimension. In all these cases, many mainstream media tended to represent international affairs from one-sided perspectives of national or other ethnocentric or religious perspectives.

Even if differences in the quality of reporting are visible in the coverage of different media systems and media, foreign reporting often focuses on conflicts, on wars, and on a limited set of "hard news," like the Arab-Israeli conflicts, that seem to swallow the space capacities of many mass media in the West and the Islamic world. Images and information about the politics and society of "the other" have remained highly selective and fragmented. They are mostly confined to politics while other spheres of every-day life are underrepresented (a); political news is often confined to conflicts and crises instead of providing a thorough representation of bilateral relations between Islamic and Western countries (b); media coverage of conflicts is in many cases limited to national and ethnocentric perspectives instead of representing argumentations from both sides and contributing to conflict resolutions (c).

The West and Islam in the Mass Media

The problem is not that Islam and the West are represented in a negative way—but that they are hardly represented in a positive manner. Criticism cannot just focus on what is reported but should also name those aspects of reality that are left out. Mass media should start to report about progressive aspects of the political culture and culture in general as often as possible. In the West, liberal aspects of political culture are hardly recognized. Political thinkers like Abu Zayd or Soroush became interesting only after they had become dissidents. Islamic media often focus on sex and crime in the West, dedicating much less time to the positive achievements of democracy and the welfare state.

Since the early nineties many observers of the mass media have hoped that the new satellite TV-boom in North Africa, the Middle East and the Islamic world would open up media spaces. But the experience of the 19th century where the Industrial Revolution turned into a social, political, and cultural revolution can not be transferred easily to the field of contemporary international communication. The best evidence for this argument is Western media development itself: the boom of satellite TV in the West since the 80s has not substantially improved the negative image of Islam and the Middle East. While it is true that in many countries of the Islamic world Western programs can be directly received, this has neither resulted in short-term democratic development nor has it altered the often one-sided image of the West. The reasons for this inefficiency of satellite media are manifold. Because of language barriers and perceived cultural barriers, Western programs are only seen on a permanent basis by small elites. The middle classes, especially the lower middle class (teachers, students etc.), who have in many cases generated political changes in recent decades and would be most important for generating image changes, are hardly ever regular consumers of Western programs. Instead, they tune into new indigenous vernacular satellite TV or radio programs that have come into existence in recent years. In Western societies satellite programs from the Islamic world do not reach larger audiences, except among Oriental minorities.

It is still too early to draw final conclusions about the effects of satellite broadcasting on globalization. However, for the time being it seems that

expectations of electronic media breaking up political and cultural misperceptions between Islam and the West were premature. The key to changes in international perception is the transformation of foreign reporting as part of the indigenous and vernacular media.

3. *The Causes*

The reasons for the malfunctioning of international mass communication and the problems connected to foreign reporting between the West and Islam are manifold, complex and vary from case to case. However, several factors influencing media output can be generalized:

- 1) The individual political orientation, perception, stereotypical thinking, theories and ideologies of the journalist all influence media coverage. Journalists are not merely professionals but human beings with their specific cognitive and affective experiences. Political and value orientations are accumulated in the course of the individual's socialization process. Since socialization usually takes place within a specific national and cultural environment, attitudes can be unbalanced, ethnocentric, full of religious bias, or even racist. The protection of the media and of consumers from the influence of certain journalistic ideologies is a matter of early prevention: especially schooling and education must provide sufficient and balanced information about Islam and the West.
- 2) Professional role models can influence media coverage. While political orientation and ideologies influence the interpretation of world events on the cognitive and affective level, professional socialization adds an operational element to it. In other words: how the journalist thinks of his profession influences the way he presents facts, interprets the world, writes, speaks, or acts. If he considers himself a "neutral reporter," he will probably be less inclined to let personal ideologies dominate the text than if he considers himself to be a "co-creator" of foreign policy. The way such role models are designed is to a certain degree influenced by professional codes of conduct. However, the existing codes of conduct are hardly capable

of improving foreign reporting between Islam and the West (s. ch. 5: Remedies).

- 3) Media organizations influence foreign reporting in a variety of ways, especially in the West where state control of the media is usually low and private ownership dominates media systems. Media organizations influence media coverage in a number of ways: a) The production of mass communication is usually profit-oriented, which implies that the press, radio, and TV display a certain tendency to reconfirm consumer orientation rather than enlighten their audience through balanced information. We may suppose that news about violent fundamentalism (in the Islamic world) or criminality (in the West) sells better than news about regular political events or social developments. b) The press and TV are usually dependent on external sources of information, especially on the large international news agencies like Reuters, Associated Press (AP), Agence France Press (AFP) and United Press International (UPI), which provide a gross average of 50 per cent or more of the information transferred between Islam and the West. The agencies function as the eye of the needle for the information flow, which is dangerous since these agencies themselves receive large quantities of information from all kinds of public relations sources, mostly from governments. The chain of international information, PR—news agencies—media—consumers is vulnerable to all sorts of "public diplomacy" and state propaganda, which is handed down in large quantities to the consumers and can distort the image of political developments. c) Another organizational aspect: Media organizations usually have some sort of ideological orientation. It can make an enormous difference whether and how a left or a conservative newspaper writes about foreign affairs issues since the left is usually more sensitive to questions like colonialism, social disruption, and human rights, while conservatives may display more sensitivity to religious questions and the like. In the Islamic world differences in the coverage of the West are often dependent on whether the media display a religious-conservative, liberal, or secular orientation. d) Organizational

influences make themselves felt through foreign correspondents who, due to the large credit given to them, sometimes act as opinion leaders inside and outside journalism. While foreign correspondents are surely a valuable source of information and an alternative to the news agencies, Western correspondents often lack the cultural competence necessary to cover their region or they are misused for the provision of information solely on issues the central news room thinks are interesting. Meanwhile many stories that could provide consumers with valuable contextual information are held back. For Islamic media, the basic problem seems that most of them are unable to finance foreign correspondents, which forces them to be dependent on the news agencies and on commentators at home who are unfamiliar with life in the West.

- 4) The interrelation between the mass media, politics and society is another complex of factors influencing media coverage. The media do not operate in a social vacuum. The influence of the politico-economic complex, especially of the state, on mass media is especially felt in many Islamic countries where governments exert censorship and information control. It is not that the image of the West in Islamic countries is necessarily most distorted where governments make their influence felt. Indeed in many countries positive bilateral relations with Western states promote a more positive image of the West, at least in official newspapers, magazines, radio and TV. However, in other cases the states' influence is detrimental. Most countries of the Middle East and the Islamic world are entering the 21st century without any considerable degree of freedom of speech and media freedom. The number of TV and radio channels has grown due to the massive spread of satellite technology. However, with a few exceptions (e.g. Jazeera-TV in Qatar) there is no clearly conceivable move towards media liberalization. On the contrary, in some countries liberalization has suffered from retrogressive authoritarian policies. More than in the West, governments functionalize the media whenever they want to activate or de-activate negative images of the West. The improvement of the situation of media freedom in North Africa, the

Middle East and the Islamic world is the most important precondition for any future changes in Western-Islamic image making. If the forces of open and critical debate are not unleashed in Islamic societies, any effort to improve the image of the West in those countries will be doomed to fail. On the other hand, case studies of Western media coverage of the Middle East have revealed that Western policies and interests are often treated more favorably than non-Western interests (especially in times of crisis, see below); however, criticism of government is usually much more elaborate in Western than in Islamic public opinion, because the critical voices of public discourse are allowed to speak out. Yet even Western media freedom is sometimes more an ideal goal than reality. Usually more than 50 per cent of mass media are supplied by news agencies which themselves receive more than 50 per cent of their information from government sources and other "public diplomacy" (PR-) offices. This trickle down effect of state influence on the mass media poses a threat to critical foreign reporting in the West. Diversification of the sources of media organizations is needed to escape the semi-dependency on state PR (s. ch. 5: Remedies).

- 5) Domestic policies and internal discourses of society make themselves felt in foreign reporting. The interpretation of world events is not merely the result of journalists, the media, news agencies and states competing for visions and influence in international relations and foreign policy. If foreign policy is partly dictated by domestic policy, then it seems likely that foreign reporting can also be influenced by domestic political culture. One of the classical cases for such an interrelation was the pro-Israeli bias many German mass media displayed when covering the Arab-Israeli conflict because they connected the issue with Germany's Holocaust past. In the same way we may assume that media coverage of Western "decadence" in the mass media of the Islamic world is partly motivated by internal problems and debates about whether the value orientation of Islamic societies, should be religious or secular or otherwise. The same can be said for the Western "obsession" with

Islamic fundamentalism, which seems to touch upon Western fears about the loss of political values and is used to revitalize the ideas of humanism, secularism, and democracy for a generation of Western citizens that takes such achievements for granted. While external stimulation of domestic debates is surely productive, domestic views should not be allowed to distort the mass media's images of other countries, religions, and cultures.

- 6) Crisis and conflict dynamics are among the most important aspects influencing foreign reporting. Therefore, the particular constellation of factors influencing today's media content has to be studied. In crises three pressing factors make themselves felt in the media: time, interest, and fear/protection. "Time" because journalists have to act quickly when responding to world events—wars, for example—usually without being prepared for them. "Interest" means that especially in those cases when their home country is involved, crises may touch upon vital or other national interests of the medias' home base. "Fear" points to the fact that media coverage is often based on minimal information and the idea of maximal "protection" from all possible damage that could be done to oneself, one's own country and population. Therefore it is highly likely that Western media would report about nuclear weapons in some Islamic country—even when no consolidated news on the issue is at hand. Such foreign reporting in times of crises or wars can add more tension to conflicts instead of de-escalating them. The experience of the Gulf War of 1991 shows that information and communication are in fact the "second front" of all conflicts and their solutions, and that military apparatuses have perfected their capabilities to control public information, even in Western democratic societies. We must therefore search for means to enhance journalistic crisis management (s. ch. 5: Remedies).
- 7) Media and transcultural communication: Culture is based on systems of symbols (language, religion, tradition, rite etc.) and attached or related meanings. The main task of foreign reporting is to interpret—or "decode"—symbols developed in a foreign context, to compare them with domestic, national, or local cultures and explain them to

their audiences. Journalists therefore have an important role as translators of culture but like all translation it can be done in a multiplicity of ways. Journalists can choose very different strategies for cultural deconstruction, promoting, for example, "essentialist" positions which focus on the incompatibility of certain cultures or alternatively emphasizing "syncretist" positions by showing how certain interpretations of cultural meaning fit into transcultural patterns of meaning. Samuel P. Huntington's paradigm in a "Clash of Civilizations" of the resurgence of cultural conflict as the ideology of international conflict of the Twenty-First century, is essentialist. The same is true for the "cultural invasion" view often displayed in the mass media of the Islamic world. In contrast, the idea of human rights being based on the common cultural heritage of the world and on human values promoted in both Western and Islamic cultures can be considered syncretist. By emphasizing one interpretation or the other, the mass media can become either agents of international and intra-national cultural conflict or of transcultural communication and world peace.

4. *The Consequences*

What are the potential consequences of the problems of foreign reporting in the relations between Islam and the West for politics and society?

1) *Stabilization of the nation-state*

The production, reproduction, and distribution of stereotypes and other distorted images in international coverage can stabilize the nation-state since they tend to reinforce nationalist or ethnocentric public perceptions of international affairs. Foreign reporting provides significant counter-evidence to the belief that the current trend towards economic globalization could be followed by political unification and a fading-away of the system of nation-states since national interests or national cultural perceptions often prevail.

2) *Reinforcement of international political and economic conflicts*

The mass media have a dual nature: they can promote peace or deepen conflicts between states. Most content analyses agree that one of the main features of foreign reporting is the overrepresentation of news about crises and conflicts. In general, international coverage tends to create a highly negative, conflict-laden image of the world and international affairs. The slogan "good news is bad news" means that news reports about international crises sell better than about regular or long-term developments. Without the Gulf War of 1991, CNN would probably still be making financial losses. In a world of more global economic ties, there is an increasing danger that the media will reinforce rather than defuse conflicts if they do not improve their crisis management (s. ch. 5: Remedies).

3) *Reinforcement of international cultural conflicts*

Huntington's vision of a "Clash of Civilizations," especially between the West, China, and Islam, does not take into consideration the effects of international communication on cultural relations. For the Harvard professor, international cultural conflicts are inborn antagonisms between collective value systems and lifestyles. However, this essentialist view of intercultural relations ignores the important dimension of inter- or transcultural communication (s. ch. 3: Causes). A "transcultural" search for meaning is necessary for globalization and for the standardization of values such as human rights. Western European media coverage of the Islamic world has revealed grave deficits in dealing with the human rights issue. European mass media have shown they are capable of defending the basic values of the Western constitutional state against totalitarian-theocratic world views. However, they have also promoted the idea of an inborn contradiction between "Islam" and "human rights." While mass media are, in principle, instruments for creating a global consensus on human rights, the current state of media reporting between Islam and the West leaves the impression that it is, at least

partly, an obstacle to an intercultural dialogue about human rights between the West and Islam.

4) *Reinforcement of domestic ethnical conflict*

Globalization has an external as well as an internal dimension. If international media coverage has a potential effect on international cultural relations, the same must be said about the relationship between mass media, ethnic minorities, and mainstream culture. Images of the world, whether they be wrong or right, fragmented or comprehensive, can influence the public's image of minorities. In times of considerable migration especially from the developing to the developed countries (for example Turks and Arabs immigrating into Europe), images from abroad shaped or reinforced by the media can lead to internal social repercussions, and vice versa. The recent waves of social unrest against immigrants in Germany and other European countries point to the fact that media coverage of Muslims might help to undermine European multi-cultural societies. The same is true for the growing persecution of Christian minorities in some countries of the Islamic world.

This catalogue of potential effects of the mass media's international coverage of politics and society is not comprehensive. Of course, we should not completely ignore the effective promotion of globalization by the mass media. Mass communication, for example the coverage of the historical shaking of hands of Yasir Arafat, Shimon Peres and Itzhak Rabin in Washington in 1993, provides moments of shared experience for the Islamic world and the West. However, empirical evidence gives weight to the argument that these stimuli are probably not the most significant effects of everyday reporting. Instead, particularism seems to prevail and international and domestic conflicts could be reinforced.

As a result, inadequate international reporting might increase public pressure for inappropriate political decisions and social developments. If we are really living in an age of mass democracy, foreign policy is no longer the privilege of monarchs, governments and diplomats but is the

responsibility of society as a whole. Foreign policy gains as well as losses are therefore part of the shared responsibility of policy makers, the public and the mass media.

5. *The Remedies*

What can be done to improve the media performance of both Western media and the media in the Islamic world ?

1) *Creation of critical domestic media environments*

The first element of reform could be the creation of critical domestic media environments. If it is true, as we have outlined above, that the interplay between the media and their respective national elites and audiences influences foreign reporting, any reform should start from inside these environments. Within the domestic environments it seems most likely that it is not the general audiences but certain elites which could initiate changes. Most research shows that about two-thirds of the public pays little attention to foreign and international affairs, while a comparatively small segment of "opinion leaders"—together with the government and the mass media themselves—actively shape public opinion on foreign policy and world affairs. These elites might consist, for example, of the representatives of political lobby groups, prominent personalities with a reputation for knowledge of international affairs, scholars and experts of all kinds (subject or area specialists), representatives of ethnic or religious minorities, or critical journalists and media watchdog initiatives operating from outside the media. In democratic societies the main problem will be to overcome the particularism of the mainstream culture—for example, the "Orientalism" or "Occidentalism" of mainstream academia. Under authoritarian rule, the principal challenge is to reinforce the role of civil society and the NGOs.

2) *Establishment of a code of conduct*

Any reform of foreign reporting should start with an internal reform of journalism. Elsewhere researchers have also opted for an improvement of international professional media codes. The concrete proposals for such an ethical code, however, remain to be debated. One proposal for an international code of ethics consists of four paragraphs: a) Prevention of war and promotion of peace; b.) respect for culture, tradition, and values, c) promotion of human rights and dignity, and d) preservation of human associations in the context of home, family, and community. While the promotion of peace and of human rights (support of international conventions on human rights; free access to and distribution of information) are, in fact, central elements of any professional charter, it is debatable whether the toleration of cultural traditions like the home and family and the consolidation of culture-bound identities are desirable. In addition to mere respect for the status quo the right to modernize and transcend norms seems equally important. One of the vital aspects of a media code would be to bridge the ideological gap between different trends in both the West and the Islamic world. The code of journalism must define consensual behavior patterns for journalists in both spheres, like fair treatment of other nations, cultures, and religions; freedom of information; anti-racism; and anti-ethnocentrism.

3) *Diversification of sources*

Only the big 100 newspapers and broadcasting networks in the world can afford extended networks of foreign correspondents to secure direct access to news and information. Even elite media are to a large degree dependent on sources provided by news agencies and PR offices. Without the mass media being freed from such external influence on their coverage, by way of increasing the number of correspondents and using Internet and other electronic sources, neither the West nor the Islamic world will be capable of securing diversified foreign reporting.

4) *Journalistic crisis management*

Conceptualization and establishment of journalistic crisis management for foreign reporting for the de-escalation of international crises with the help of mass media is a real challenge. The performance of the mass media during some of the big international crises or conflicts in recent years, for example the war in the former Yugoslavia or the Persian Gulf, has raised the question of whether "crisis management" is needed. The term has been used for any means which help to overcome one-sided reporting either in or outside the countries involved in a conflict. The criteria for such management are, for example: establishing early warning mechanisms for (violent) conflict; creating a climate for peace; increasing the quantity and quality of information; reminding politicians of peaceful solutions. The obstacles to crisis management are manifold. The media must be aware of the so-called "strategic public diplomacy" and military censored propaganda employed by most of the players involved in conflicts; they should gain access to alternative sources; journalists must reflect on all the players' positions; they should search for, forward and promote those frames most likely to result in peaceful conflict resolution; the media must resist the temptation to sell "bad news;" and they must contact brain trusts and academia dealing with peace research. With all these obstacles in mind, it would be quite naive to expect the realization of a single and universal form of conflict management. It seems more realistic to envisage decentralized, local initiatives supported by the media institutions and the "critical domestic environment." Furthermore, crisis management should not be seen as a means to limit the freedom of the media through political initiatives; what it involves is, first and foremost, improved self-management of the media.

5) *Dialogue*

The establishment of multinational professional dialogues is another very important aspect of a reform project for foreign reporting. There are ways of enhancing international understanding. For example, the

Jemstone program funded by the European Union, which was established to increase contacts and understanding between journalists and media professionals in Europe and the Mediterranean, organized a roundtable entitled the "Image of Islam in the West" in Amman in 1995; supported by the Moroccan embassy in Washington, D.C. the Asilah-Festival in Morocco held a conference on "Arabs and Americans in Arab and American Media" in 1997; the German Federal Press and Information Office promoted the "German-Arab Media Dialogue" which took place in Heidelberg, Germany (1997) and in Amman (1998). Even if most of these international professional meetings do involve the strategic public diplomacy interests of those who organize or sponsor them, the journalists profit from face-to-face contact with their counterparts in other countries.

6) *Mediterranean observatory on the media*

The creation of a Mediterranean observatory on the media is a proposal which was launched by the Forum Civil Euromed held in Barcelona in 1995. The idea should be advanced with regard to communication between North America, Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and other neighboring areas of the Islamic world. The observatory would favor the constitution of an information and documentation network in the context of foreign reporting between Islam and the West. It would stimulate research on international communication (both studies of individual countries and comparative research), and it would serve as a media-watch documentation center that could promote criticism of the media's behavior in international and intercultural relations.

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