

# **Democratization and the Challenge of Private Broadcasting in Nigeria\***

**by Jubril Bala Mohammed\*\***

## **Abstract**

This paper reviews the proposed privatisation of the Nigerian broadcast media, notably radio and television. In doing this, the paper is divided into three components.

In the first part, a considerable effort is made to examine the historical and political economic backgrounds of privatisation in general and as it relates to the broadcast media in Nigeria in particular.

The second part identifies and critically discusses crucial issues, *viz.* the national interest, the need for quality programming, diversity in ownership and the preservation and promotion of our diverse cultures which, we argue strongly, must be acknowledged and resolved in as much as any meaningful effort to privatise the broadcast media in the country is concerned.

In the third part, the paper considers as a challenge the necessity to resolve those issues aforementioned and concludes by recommending a policy option to guide the work of the newly formed National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) in resolving these knotty issues. This policy would facilitate the smooth take off of private broadcasting in the country and at the same time ensure that our national interest, the need for qualitative programmes, diversity in ownership, and the protection and development of our numerous cultures are not compromised.

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# **Le Défi de la Privatisation des Media Electroniques au Nigéria**

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## **Résumé**

Cette étude passe en revue les propositions relatives à la privatisation des média électroniques au Nigéria en prêtant une attention particulière aux projets de privatisation de la radio et de la télévision. Elle est divisée en trois composantes. Elle procède, en premier lieu, à une étude assez approfondie, des origines historiques, politiques et économiques de la privatisation en général et examine plus en particulier, les rapports de celle-ci avec les média électroniques au Nigéria. L'étude tente, ensuite, de relever et d'analyser les questions les plus importantes dans ce domaine en ce qui concerne les intérêts nationaux, la nécessité d'offrir des programmes de qualité, d'avoir une variété de propriétaires, de préserver et de promouvoir nos diverses cultures qui doivent à notre avis, être reconnues et résolues si l'on veut donner un sens à toute tentative de privatisation des média électroniques dans le pays.

Pour conclure enfin, l'étude reconnaît que la recherche de solutions à ces problèmes ne sera pas une tâche aisée et avance certaines recommandations en matière de politiques susceptibles de guider les travaux de la National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) dans ses recherches de solutions à ses problèmes épineux. Ces politiques auraient le mérite de faciliter le démarrage (d'émissions privées dans le pays), dans les domaines de la radio ou de la télévision et d'assurer que nos intérêts nationaux, ne soient pas compromis la qualité des programmes, la diversité des propriétaires ainsi que la protection et le développement de nos cultures.



## Introduction

Behind chronic underdevelopment, the problem of growth has continued to preoccupy successive regimes in most African, indeed Third World countries. The crippling weight of debts, unemployment, low literacy figures are some of the crucial characteristics of their underdevelopment coupled with bleak price forecasts for most raw materials that have constituted the bases of the economies of these nations, including Nigeria.

Consequently, packages of economic recovery programmes have been called to the rescue, several though not all, with the assistance of international monetary institutions, notably the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In his address to the nation on the occasion of the country's silver jubilee, President Babangida identified the major economic problems facing Nigeria as huge foreign and domestic debts; rapidly declining levels of income for Nigerians; high rate of unemployment; shortages of raw materials and spare parts; and high inflationary rates.

In order to ameliorate the situation, Babangida said it was necessary to introduce an "Economic Emergency Programme" aimed at visibly turning around the economy and laying a firm foundation for a healthier long-term development.

This desire to resuscitate the national economy also found expression in the 1986 budget which included goals for the reduction of public expenditure; restructuring and diversifying the economy; promotion of exports and self-sufficiency in food production; and the creation of more job opportunities for Nigerians.

Since then, the Federal Military Government had drawn specific programmes for the attainment of the aforementioned objectives. One such programme is privatisation and commercialization of public corporations.

Though by no means original to this administration, scholars believe that the programme, first mooted under President Shehu Shagari and retained by the regimes of Generals Mohammadu Buhari and Ibrahim Babangida, is an advantageous measure in our economic recovery efforts.

Allor (1986) has highlighted that the programme would relieve the government of unnecessary financial burdens; ensure profitable management of corporations so privatised or commercialised and; and that it would achieve a more equitable distribution of wealth within the country, among others.

Since then, the government has promulgated the Privatisation and Commercialization Decree No. 25 of 1988 to give legal backing to its

proposed disengagement from affected public corporations. Subsequently, a twelve-member technical committee was constituted to chart the modalities for and oversee the implementation of the exercise across the nation.

However, this paper would concentrate on only one public corporation—the broadcast media. In it, we shall attempt to examine the historical background to private ownership in general under capitalism and the implication of this to the broadcast media in Nigeria. The paper will also identify and examine some issues that may arise from the privatisation and commercialization of the broadcast media in the country and the challenge(s) the exercise may pose in the context of the unfolding political programme of transition to democracy. It would also recommend what should be done to consolidate and or improve the situation.

### **Historical Background to Privatisation**

Tukur (1986) has identified mid-18th century liberalism as the philosophy underlying privatisation which held that the sole duty of government is to defend the territorial integrity of the country and ensure law and order within while at the same time leaving all other aspects of national social life to entrepreneurial forces. This liberal thinking was enunciated in the concept of *laissez faire* coined by the 18th century British physiocrat, Adam Smith. As an economic principle *laissez faire* was a contradiction of the economic principle of the decadent feudal social order. Revolutionary capitalism then was equated with economic prosperity and state ownership with retrogression, symbolised by total and absolute monopoly over material means of production by the feudal class and the Catholic Church. Breaking state control over means of production became the main thrust of capitalist economic thinkers of the period.

Thus, the slogan "liberty, equality and fraternity" became equivalent to the attainment of the socio-political and economic stakes of the capitalist class in ascension. Liberty and equality became the motto requisite for the rising capitalist class to wrest away and participate in the ownership of the means of production from feudal dominance. Fraternity implied fraternity of the rising capitalist class around capitalist private property.

The driving law of capitalism, it must be stated, is the maximization of profit over and above anything else. Thus, with ample theoretical and philosophical justification, privatisation, or *laissez faire*, became a social necessity in stimulating greater economic prosperity, culminating in the industrial revolutions of the late 18th and 19th



centuries in Europe.

Liberal democracy provides the political cloak in respect of participation in the act of governance. The monarchical regimes of old gave way to republican constitutions enabling the people to exercise the right to determine who should rule them and how much power they should exercise in that regard.

The ideological and cultural correlates of this libertarian principle found expression in the position and role accorded the media. They are seen as instruments necessary for the success of (liberal) democracy. Mansfield (1979) has pointed out that:

The people must be supplied with the knowledge they thirst for. But this must not be done in such a way as would interfere with their judgement... The media report what is said and pass on every allegation.

Thus, apart from the peoples' right to information in democracy, such information must be neutral and objective. If the message is tilted towards government, then it is deemed that the peoples' right to judge events for themselves is breached.

From the above discourse, the following implications are evident. First, privatisation as an economic principle is rooted in the libertarian philosophy of the 18th century period and the ascension of the capitalist social order and the decline of feudalism in Europe. Second, privatisation was prosperous in Europe of the 18th century only as an antidote against feudal authoritarian control. Third, to guarantee the right of the people to truthful information which is essential in democracy, there must be individual equality of access to the mass media in terms of ownership and content.

Thus, in the final analysis, it was held that plurality in access and ownership would lead to truth which would then guarantee the citizens' right to judge and determine things for themselves in a democracy. In this situation media content would be said to be qualitative if it considers all views and present them to the public without colouration.

Later periods in the growth of capitalism, the period of monopoly capitalism, shows a dominance in the monopoly concerns with tentacles in various countries of the world. The sphere of economic production and distribution came under monopolist control. This did not exclude the media.

The contemporary situation under capitalism in Europe shows that ownership of mass media, both print and broadcast, is dominated by large monopoly organizations with diverse investments.

Monopoly corporations such as Radio Corporation of America (RCA), Schulberger, E.M.I., Phillips, Telefunken, Siemens, Thompson C.S.T., Fernserher, Shibudan, Nippon Electric, and the major western based

news agencies—A.P., U.P.I., Reuters and A.F.P.—virtually control the media system of the world. These corporations form an integral part of the leading capitalist transnational corporations with diversified investments. Thus, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) which began in 1927 as a radio broadcasting service, moved into the record business in 1938 and has since been one of the world's major producers and distributors of recorded music. CBS also moved into television and since 1964, has been in consumer electronics, magazine and book publishing. But despite its diversification in terms of investment, CBS is in itself owned and controlled by the Rockefellers, who own the Standard Oil of New Jersey and one of the biggest American banks—The Chase Manhattan Bank. Similarly, the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is owned by the International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT) while the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) is owned by RCA.

In fact, in June 1986, General Electric of the United States bought RCA at a staggering sum of \$6.3b (*Time*, 1986). Thus, the sphere of ownership under developed capitalism has evidently gone beyond individuals to corporate bodies borne out of diverse capital sources.

The period after the World War II shows that the advances capitalist countries have been persistently caught in economic crises of a cyclical nature often with telling effects on industry, manufacturing and finance. Many economic concerns go bankrupt and even change hands outright. This situation has wreaked devastating effects on the developed economies of those countries.

Governments have been forced to come to the rescue at various times in various ways. Tariffs have been imposed on foreign goods and tax subsidies and other protectionist measures were formulated to resuscitate the economy. Sometimes under great pressure from their respective working classes, governments have been forced to nationalise some economic concerns though often with huge compensations to their owners.

In the mass media, of the three main sources of finances in the 1970s and probably to date—license fees, advertisements and government subsidies—only government subsidies were noted to be on the increase (McBride Report, 1980).

The high level of state involvement in the economic life of most European countries in the post war years has given rise to what political economists refer to as state capitalism, a point when the capitalist state is not only a guarantor of the capitalist social order but also an investor in capitalist monopoly concerns.

The 1980s have witnessed the return of the conservatives to power in such countries as the United States, Britain, (West) Germany,



Greece, Australia, Italy and Spain all leading industrialized countries of the world. The triumph of these conservative forces was to bring to the fore, once again, privatisation as a policy for their political revival. This was subsequently adopted by the IMF and the World Bank as these agencies elevated it into a critical element of their Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) often recommended to Third World countries, including Nigeria, as a means of resolving their economic crises of the period. It was in the context of this prevailing global political economy of the 1980s that Nigeria conceived of, and embarked upon, the deliberate execution of its own policy of privatisation and commercialization as (governed by market forces). It would serve to keep organizations, entrepreneurs and corporations alert to their responsibilities to their consumers hence quality of services would presumably improve. But critics have dismissed this logic as being as simple as it was shallow. What kind of competition, motivated by the profit motive—the so-called market forces—could be said to be healthy, a little less lead to improvement in services? they asked. Competition between what and what—individual stations or between monopolies and conglomerates? They then proposed that the idea that private ownership of broadcasting organizations would encourage diversity in programmes had not been borne out by available evidence.

What is involved in the issue of diversity in programming and production is that viewers often distribute their time widely between different types of programmes. Hence, programmes would be expected to be as broad in range as to make the viewing time interesting throughout. This would mean that in so far as the viewers are concerned, programmes would have to be tailored to suit their interests. It is this factor that gave rise to the idea of "consumer interest" in programme production.

However, critics have described this logic of consumer interest in programme production as being spurious. Citing the findings of the Peacock Commission that looked into the problems of the Britain Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1985, they stated that the choice of what programme was produced and screened on television or aired on the radio was governed more by the need to finance the programme from advertising revenue than from so-called consumer interest (Peacock Report, 1986). Critics have noted this revenue consideration, more than anything else, has always down-played consumer interest in programming.

The implication of this, they pointed out, was that broadcast media stations scramble for those periods when they could reach larger audiences; hence, periods with potential of larger viewing audience often see overload programmes. The result they said was "copy-

catting" to satisfy the perceived needs of viewers and listeners at those prime periods of the day. This then nullifies the idea of range or diversity in programming to satisfy consumer interests by the broadcast media, stressing that instead of diversity there was copy-catting; instead of consumer interest there was advertising revenue considerations.

On the possibility of improvement in the credibility rating of broadcast media content that may arise from privatisation, critics observe that this expectation was predicated on its economic recovery programme.

## **Privatisation and Commercialisation of the Broadcast Media**

It was behind this economic background that in 1986 the then Information and Culture Minister, Prince Tony Momoh, dropped hints on the privatisation of the Nigerian Broadcast Media, notably the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation (FRCN), which have always been the absolute preserve of government.

This indication was later to be the subject of public discourse as observers argued for or against the proposal.

Nwosu (1986), in associating himself with the Minister's intentions, identified several reasons in favour of privatizing in the broadcast media in the country. These reasons include the possible avoidance of undesirable government influence on the (broadcast) media once privatised; the possibility of healthy competition which may lead to improved services; and possible diversity in programming and production in event of privatisation.

Other reasons, Nwosu added, were that the credibility rating of broadcast content would improve if private ownership were allowed and finally, that privatisation would lead to greater investments in the broadcast media industry.

Critics have, however, pointed out that although studies (Sobowale, 1986; Uyo, 1977) confirm undesirable government influence on government-owned media contents, the same may be said of the privately-owned media too. They cited the case of the *Concorde* newspapers, owned one hundred percent by the then politician and member of the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Chief Moshood Kashimowo Olawale Abiola, which in 1980 when the chief was hatching his presidential ambition, were more of NPN newsletters than credible national and regional publications. This case is often seen as evidence enough of the degree of influence the chief, the private business man, could exert on the papers' content. They then argued that what was important was not the absence of any kind of owner influence on



content but the nature and character of such influence. After all, said the critics, the media must be owned one way or the other, either by individuals, corporate bodies or a mixture of the two and, with significant influence in shaping the direction of the content.

As for the healthy competition and diversity in programming and production that may arise from privatisation of the broadcast media, this too seemed more fictional than real, particularly considering available evidence in contemporary times. That there would be healthy competition arising from privatisation of media was predicted on the assumption that the competitive ownership had to be diversified if only to expose the audience to the various sides of an issue during coverage. The fact of government sole ownership of the broadcast media in the country is seen by proponents of privatisation as a mechanism to obfuscate the other side of issues and only the official government side would often be brought out leaving other views suppressed, or at best, neglected.

But then, critics point out, the question of sides should not be viewed in a mechanical sense, but stressing instead that the question of sides as fundamental as it was, must be viewed in the context of the prevailing social composition of human society. Accordingly, they continued, the so-called official side may, on the surface be seen to differ with other views. The appropriate question to be asked, however, was which other views? Citing Oso (1988) these critics stated that on minimal terms, the view expressed in government-owned media and those in the privately-owned media may differ on more fundamental questions such as those bordering on the destiny of the existing (capitalist) social order in the country, both the government and the private owned media, as capitalist institutions, were united. They added that this was quite glaring in the negative character of coverage accorded by both government and privately owned media on labour related issues in the polity, submitting that so far, in the absence of a sustained working class (political) organization with a working class medium, working class interests were very much at the mercy of the capitalist state and the dominant bourgeois media.

Critics of the privatisation of the broadcast media in the country therefore conclude that given the crucial role of the mass media institution in the nations social and political life, the media should not be entrusted to private individuals who may utilize them for selfish commercial, political, religious and ethnic ends to the detriment of national unity, national interest and peaceful co-existence.

The thrust of this presentation is not so much which side in the controversy is desirable for the country. What is utmost here is to attempt to generate crucial issues that must be considered and what

challenge they pose to the future of broadcasting in the country. This is necessary in view of the unfolding pattern of development on the subject, and it is quite evident that government is poised to take the plunge.

As far back as 1989, a 15-man sub-committee of the Technical Committee on Privatisation and Commercialization (TCPC) headed by S. O. Asabia had recommended the partial commercialization of the NTA, FRCN and NAN (TCPC, 1989). Commercialization and privatisation are respectively defined as "the reorganization of enterprises wholly or partly owned by ...government in which such ... enterprises shall operate as profit making commercial ventures without subvention from ... government...." and; "the relinquishment of part or all of the equity or other interests held by ... government or its agency in enterprises whether wholly or partly owned by the ... government" (Privatisation and Commercialization Decree; 1988).

Similarly, Babangida had, in a response to an address by a visiting delegation of the Association of Advertising Practitioners of Nigeria (AAPN), declared that he would like to go down in history as the first Nigerian President to make private broadcasting possible and assured that his administration would do everything to fulfil this pledge by the end of the year (NTA NETWORK News, January, 1992).

This public declaration by Babangida has since been interpreted to connote that in addition to partially commercialising NTA and FRCN, interested parties may also be granted licence in due course to establish private broadcasting organizations in the country.

## **Issues in Private Broadcasting**

While the nation anxiously awaits the commencement of private broadcasting, the following issues must be considered, indeed resolved, in the interest of a vibrant, healthy sustainable and progressive mass media system that is serviceable to democracy in the country.

### **National Interest**

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979), (chapter II), spells out the fundamental objectives and principles of state policy. Copious emphasis is placed on national unity, all round economic development and freedom, equality and justice to all citizens of the country.

It is hardly in doubt that these goals are worthy of attainment. It is in pursuance of these goals that the objectives of mass communication or the mass media in the country are designed.

Similarly, the guidelines of the Third National Development Plan



1975-80 (1973) and the 1986-90 rolling plan are stated in the objectives of mass communication in Nigeria to include the provision of a strong and efficient information media to achieve national reconciliation after the war, mobilization of support for national development and the transmission of a balanced, unbiased and immediate information about conditions in the country.

The Decree No. 24 of 1977 (see Ugboajah, 1980), which established the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), stated the objectives of television in the following words:

Television transmitting and receiving stations; to plan and co-ordinate the activities of the entire Television network; to ensure an independent and impartial service which will operate in the national interest; to give adequate expression to culture, characteristics and affairs of the different parts of Nigeria....

Similarly, the statute establishing the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) (Ugboajah, 1980) designed its objectives to include, among other:

- a) The provision of efficient broadcasting services in the whole country based on national objectives and aspirations;
- b) The provision of professional and comprehensive coverage of Nigerian cultures through broadcasting; to promote cultural growth through research into indigenous culture and disseminate the result of the same; and finally
- c) To contribute to the development of Nigerian society and to promote nation unity by ensuring a balanced presentation of news from all parts of the country.

Thus, every line in these documents dwells on an aspect of our national goals, specifically, national unity in diversity and the role of the broadcast media in their attainment.

However, since privatisation and commercialization would liberalize ownership of broadcast media industry to include corporate bodies and private individuals whose primary motive is profit-making, to what extent then can the unity of the nation be safe-guarded, promoted and guaranteed? Wither national interest in a profit governed environment?

### **Quality in programming**

It has been argued that privatisation, of necessity, leads to quality in media content, the premise being that no capitalist (media owner) would want to produce substandard commodities (media content) and still expect maximum patronage.

It has been argued that the privatisation and quality are strange

bedmates. The drive for greater profit margin lends itself to a persistent fall in the cost of labour. Hence, where profit increases, the cost of labour takes a nose-dive. Consequently, retrenchment, robotization and automation in the production process are seen as plausible ways of cutting down the cost of labour and rising profit margin. In this situation quality becomes sacrificed in so far as it comes to the question of profits. Sex, violence, crime, etc., become the mainstay of media output because they appeal to a sizeable audience regardless of the significance and relevance to their (social) condition of existence.

Quality is seen here as the direct result of a productive system that considers the welfare of the consumers first before anything else. Any media organization that holds the maximization of profits as its driving principle rather than the interest of the audience and the polity, would most probably, not guarantee quality in content.

For instance, since the emergence of Channel Plus as the first private television network in France in 1985, a writer in the *Democratic Journalist* (1986) commented on the nature of the programming; thus:

It offers no original programmes save a motley collection of films, mainly American sports matches and advertisement.

Furthermore, the commentator noted that slogans promoting professionalism, creativity or pluralism—used by private television to advertise itself—might sound attractive, but they are mainly gold mines for owners and shareholders.

Also in Italy where private television has been in existence, the television magnate Silvio Berlusconi, who at one time owned nearly 80 per cent of the country's private television stations, runs most of them on foreign programmes. These stations further had an average of 108 minutes of advertising daily instead of the 18 allowed state-owned networks (*Democratic Journalists*, 1986). It is therefore little wonder that programmes may be easily interrupted at any time for commercials as the practice was in several American television networks.

Viewed from the foregoing, how then can quality in programming and production be ensured in our competitive environment where the quest for the delivery of the majority unsuspecting populace to advertising barons, is the order of the day?

### **Ownership**

A columnist in the New York based conservative magazine *Forbes* (1986) once observed that "running a private business is also one of the handiest ways to get rich in our (American) society... Half of the 26 billionaires in the U. S. derive their wealth from private companies".



Still in the same publication, Stanley Gault, then Chief Executive of Rubber Maid (Inc.) and Chairman of the National Association of Manufacturers, said "more people are working, but fewer people are making \$20 an hour. More people are making \$5, \$6 or \$7 an hour. That is a survival wage. They buy no boats. They buy no appliances" (*Forbes*, 1986).

What is implicit here is that privatisation and commercialization serve the end of making the rich richer and the powerful more powerful while persistently rendering, the poor, poorer. Naturally, only the few who are rich can afford to buy substantial shares in those corporations that may be privatized and commercialized.

What safeguard would there be then against concentration of ownership of the broadcast media in a few hands when the multitude sinks into poverty, penury, hopelessness and want and whose voices, as a result, may never be heard over the privatised and commercialised air waves? In other words, how can ownership be truly liberalised such that, for example, the trade unions, women groups, community organizations, township councils, revolutionary organizations of the oppressed who may not readily have the requisite material resources, also benefit?

### **Cultural preservation**

Arising from the far reaching report of the McBride Commission (1980), it was evident that information flow pattern globally corresponds to definite patterns of international relations. For instance, the rich nations of the North are more reported than the less developed south; hence the cultures of the former are more transmitted than those of the latter.

Consequently, it has been observed that an analysis of the cultural flow between countries shows how serious the imbalance is. The media in developing societies take a high percentage of their cultural and entertainment content from a few developed countries, and chiefly from a few large producers in those countries" (McBride, 1980).

Consequently, in a diverse and multicultural setting like Africa, in particular Nigeria, it may be pertinent to ask, how can each of the nations' diverse cultures be assured of preservation, promotion and protection in a privatised and commercialised media system? In other words, how can our indigenous cultures be preserved against the onslaught of foreign cultures in a privatised and commercialised media system?

## Conclusion

These are some of the most crucial issues that must be grappled with and whose resolution should challenge the imagination of African patriots.

With a revised transition table for the military to hand over power to a democratically elected civilian administration in the country, the outgoing administration has already established the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) to oversee the privatisation of the broadcasting. Part of the commission's duties include receiving, processing and considering applications for the ownership of radio and television stations including cable television services, direct satellite broadcast and any other medium of broadcasting; recommending applications through the minister to the President for the grant of radio and television licenses and; establishing and disseminating a national broadcasting code and setting standards with regards to the contents and quality of materials for broadcast (NBC, Decree, 1992).

These are no doubt heavy responsibilities. In discharging its functions the commission must, at all times, place the interests of the nation first before any other. National unity, all-round economic development, freedom, equality and justice to all citizens and cultural preservation, promotion and protection must not be comprised under the exigencies of the moment. Thus, effort must be made by the Commission to create a conducive environment for private broadcasting within the defined limits of the principles and objectives of state policy in the country.

To check the likelihood of concentration and centralisation of broadcast stations, as well as quality in content, the Commission should, apart from relying on legal instruments, accord priority to corporate rather than individual applicants. Such corporate applicants such as pressure groups, higher institutions and communities that have developed oriented interests other than profit-making should be encouraged.

The Commission should also avoid abrogating unto itself all wisdom in handling its crucial responsibilities. It should liaise with relevant professional groups, learned bodies and higher institutions for expert advice. This is all the more necessary as the last decade of the twentieth century, which has been described as the decade of democracy, a concept so universally recognised yet so nebulous in meaning, has already occasioned both tolerable and intolerable experiences with serious lessons, sometimes too terrifying to contemplate, for Nigeria, for Africa and the rest of the Third World.



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