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THE BATTLE OF THE GIANTS DIGITAL PLATFORMS: BETWEEN MANIPULATION AND MARKETING

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Abstract: The Internet, described as a new era by Manuel Castells, due to the profound social, economic and cultural changes that were on the horizon, also meant an economic reconfiguration. The fact is that the big digital platforms today are the main economic conglomerates in the world, with the consequent political strength that this has given them. The new millennium found in the digital ecosystem a space of dispute between advertising and manipulation.

A turning point came in 2007 with the emergence of so-called smartphones. Political campaigns have integrated digital advocacy strategies among their main tools. Obama's 2007-2008 presidential campaign is considered a landmark moment, when he included former CEOs of major digital platforms on his team. Thus, strategies moved from segmentation to microtargeting, possibly their main contribution to the world of political marketing. Subsequently, the appearance of Trump in 2016 with an aggressive strategy, the apparent support of the company Cambridge Analytica and the role of the Facebook platform, current Meta, brought the enormous power accumulated by the digital ecosystem to the center of the debate. Facebook's collaboration with Cambridge Analytica in sharing the information of millions of users, combined with the involvement of Russian hackers, further complicated the election process. The Internet has clearly emerged as the new locus of power. The subsequent impeachment proceedings against President Trump sparked a debate about the Meta platform's involvement in the political dispute. Finally, we review the role of social networks in manipulating the electorate and the necessary regulation of networks. Clearly there are new giants on the economic and political scene, perhaps it is time to accept it.

Keywords: digital platforms, political marketing, social networks, framing (*framing*) and *priming*.

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

The Internet age, which was heralded in the late 1990s, has brought about immense social changes. Manuel Castells argued that these changes would transform the way we communicate. Castells' warning timidly predicted what is happening today with the Internet and social networks and the relationship that a large sector of the population is establishing with their consumption. With the development of the Internet, two major insights into its potential quickly emerged. In the first are the "cyber-optimists", because for them the web opened the realm of freedom, allowing the participation of a large number of users in debates and exchange of information. From another angle, the "cyber-critics" of the way the web has evolved, especially the business-driven transformation of the economy and its impact on wider areas of life ranging from the job market to what is called surveillance capitalism. (ZUBOFF, 2021). The main objective of this document is to describe, discuss and analyze the impact of political advertising on the web and its probable and necessary regulation.

Firstly, regarding social media, with Facebook being one of the most prominent, Adam Kucharski mentions that "just as the financial industry was excited about new mortgage products in the 1990s, social media was seen as something that would change policy towards ever. But, like opinions about these financial products, this attitude would not last" (KUCHARSKI, 2021, p. 247). This "flood of digital technology in society", warns William Davies, "makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish what "is up to the mind and what is up to the body".

In the blurred space between mind and body, between war and peace, lie nerve states: individuals and governments living in a state of constant, acute alert and relying more and more on feelings rather than reality, p. 15).

How do we separate these altered states from the internet flooding our lives? The current phase is totally different from the others insofar as individuals are super informed. Exposed as at no other stage in human history to the torrent of information that flows through platforms and social networks. For some platforms, such as Google, this phenomenon means that the company:

> it would direct its own (and ever-growing) cache of behavioral data, as well as its computing power and know-how, towards a single goal and a single task: matching ads with searches. A new rhetoric began to prevail to legitimize this unprecedented maneuver. If there was no choice but to introduce advertising, then it would have to be 'relevant' to users. Ads would no longer be tied to the keywords used in a search query, but would be "targeted" to each individual in particular. Obtaining this holy grail of advertising would provide relevant ads for users and valuable visibility for advertisers (ZUBOFFf, 2020, p. 83).

The extraction of navigation data from specific searches, with the initial argument that this action responded to the platform's concern to process information to improve services, actually opened the door to microtargeting, that is, to personalizing advertising. This digital footprint is unique, as each user's navigation on the different websites reveals a trail that allows the platforms to get a sense of the consumer's personality and, based on this typology, program and offer products, services and websites, all through the micro segmentation.

Our relationship with devices, whether smartphones, tablets or PCs, indicates that we spend more and more time with them in work or leisure activities. According to studies by Google, we check our smartphones every nine minutes, which is about 100 times a day on average. Last year 2020 and part of 2021, due to the COVID pandemic, which meant long periods of home confinement, time spent on the internet increased to an average of 7 hours a day. The number of social media users has also increased to a community of 4.2 billion users and an average consumption of 2.5 hours a day. Of the 5 most used platforms, 4 belong to Facebook (Facebook, Youtube, Instagram and Whatsapp), that is, to Mark Zuckerberg (WE ARE SOCIAL, 2021). These big platforms, like Facebook and Google, are powerful technological giants as well as political ones.

"This Google is the superpower that imposes its own values and pursues its own ends by putting them ahead (and going over) the social contracts that bind others" (ZUBOFF, 2020, p. 91).

FROM MARKETING TO *MICROTARGETING*

Let's get into the discussion about the impact of advertising through the main platforms: Google/ Apple/ Facebook/ Amazon/ Microsoft (hereinafter GAFAM) using different microtargeting strategies. Since 2000, political campaigns have seen the web as a new platform to promote candidates through political advertising. Internet growth reached a tipping point with the launch of smartphones in 2007. Media consumption with software developed to process browsing data has meant that:

> Google's invention revealed that the company had acquired new capabilities for inferring and deducing the thoughts, feelings, intentions and interests of individuals and groups, thanks to an automated architecture that works like a one-way mirror and acts independently of whether the monitored individual or group knows and consent or

not, thus allowing privileged secret access to behavioral data (ZUBOFF 2020, p. 90).

Among the various changes that we will mention in this regard that are specifically related to what is discussed here is the transformation of targeting in campaigns. In 2007-2008, the Obama campaign, with the incorporation of former platform managers and a skillful microtargeting strategy, managed, along with other strategies, to position the candidate and achieve victory. The milestone of this successful campaign forced many candidates to consider the digital advertising strategy as inevitable.

The participation of former employees of the Google platform in the Obama campaign also meant the arrival of the algorithm as a major decision maker in micro-segmentation. Nowadays, the development of what is known as cyberpolitics, understood as the set of political actions carried out through different platforms, is considered a milestone in campaigns. Algorithms, understood as the set of instructions with which a system is programmed to process data (a user's browsing preferences) in order to carry out tasks or activities, in this case, the creation of profiles of sites that are considered of interest to the user. That's how filters are built, says Eli Parisier, based on your identity (according to Google or Facebook, of course).

> Most custom filters are based on a three-step model. First you find out who people are and what they like, then you provide them with the most appropriate content and services for them, and finally you fine-tune the function to get it right. Your identity shapes your media. There is only one flaw in this logic: media also shapes identity and, consequently, these services can end up creating a good match between you and your media, changing... you. (PARISIER, 2017, p. 115.)

BIG DATA: FROM CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA TO RUSSIA GATE

For the 2016 presidential campaign in which Trump won, the role of the company Cambridge Analytica was discussed, which, with the support of Facebook, obtained the information of 50 million users. This information was used in the campaign strategies of the republican candidate's team. Jorge Aguilera points out that Steve Bannon, who was a vice president at Cambridge Analytica, processed the information he obtained from Facebook through a:

> Bannon's methodology, developed through Cambridge Analytica (which) consists of obtaining data from social network users about their emotional classifications (likes, dislikes, likes, topics of interest) in order to make a psychological profile of individuals in a society and manipulate them emotionally with algorithms. From this they cause hatred, anxiety, anger and then channel these emotions through the micro-segmentation of messages; thus, the person acts in reality based on information with which he was manipulated on social networks (AGUILERA, 2021, pp. 296-297).

After that, Bannon became Trump's campaign director. The campaign is believed to have also conducted numerous focus groups, which allowed it to identify the contours of what would later become the "anti-establishment" narrative. The campaign framework was constructed this way. It must be remembered that "broad frameworks and inclusive accounts tend to favor rational decisions" (KAHNEMAN, 2020, p. 484). For Lakoff, framing reminds us of a metaphor, "framing is choosing language that fits your worldview. But it's not just about language. It is, first and foremost, ideas. And language conveys these ideas, evokes them" (LAKOFF, 2007, p. 7). What better way to find out which words the electorate will resonate with than to do some research beforehand. Thus, with

the anti-system narrative obtained through Facebook and discussion groups, they would find the citizens who would be the base of support for the republican candidate. Angry citizens, manifesting themselves on their profile "walls", enraged by the massive bankruptcies during the 2008-2009 crisis. The loss of jobs, their homes and the constant relocation of production plants to other countries, to save wages and environmental controls, found in candidate Trump a figure who, through bombastic speeches, attracted more and more citizens who considered themselves abandoned by the political system. The Republican candidate would play the role of vigilante politician against the traditional politicians of the nation's capital, those who have abandoned the citizens of at least half of the country.

The subsequent impeachment process against the already president Trump led to the debate about the involvement of external actors (Russian hackers) through promotional campaigns in favor of the republican. Both phenomena (Cambridge Analytica - Russiagate) generated an intense debate about the role of social networks in manipulating the electorate in favor of a certain candidate. The Cambridge Analytica case per se has many rough edges.

> the advertising industry helped normalize Cambridge Analytica for years. It's unclear whether that will change, even after a global scandal. In its year-old press release, the firm openly stated that it had "succeeded in identifying persuasive voters, uncovering the issues that would drive their voting decisions" and that it had "focused on undecided Democratic female voters after building models of Donald Trump and support for Hillary Clinton in ten swing states". To its peers, Cambridge Analytica operated in broad daylight (THE INTERCEPT, 2018).

Perhaps since the involvement of former employees of the Google platform and their successful campaign, through cyberpolitical strategies, it has become clear that political campaigns, at least the larger ones – presidential and congressional– would never be the same again. For political parties this has been established, but also for Silicon Valley. The thriving sector of the digital economy – GAFAM– has become aware of the force it mobilized to support the democratic president to reach the presidency, either through the strategies he mobilized, or through economic support. Power must be wielded, and that is what GAFAM would do from now on. In an interview with the BBC, Robert Hannigan, former Director of British Intelligence until January 2017, warns that:

> Facebook is a "potential" threat to democracy if "it is not monitored and regulated. But these big companies, especially where monopolies exist, cannot reform. It will have to come from outside," he noted. Politicians have realized that Facebook can be as powerful as governments (ECONOMÍA Digital, 2018).

RUSSIA GATE

The unusual movements, or "digital intrusions" as the National Security Agency (NSA) and the FBI have called them, are believed to have been recorded since the summer of 2015. In 2016 they identified Wikileaks and DC Leaks as sources of disclosure of e-mails obtained from the Democratic National Committee that were obtained by Russian hackers "Information about Russian meddling has caused deep concern in the Obama National Security Council. Over time, the information improved and became more convincing" (WOODWARD, 2018, p. 55).

> In the fall, intelligence reports showed that Moscow — like just about everyone else — believed that Clinton was likely to win. Russian President Vladimir Putin's influence

campaign has shifted gears and focused on undermining his next presidency. Clapper and Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson were in a great hurry to warn the public about Russian interference. At 3pm on Friday, October 7th, they issued a joint statement officially accusing Russia of trying to interfere in the US election, although they did not mention Putin publicly (WOODWARD, 2018, p. 56).

Russian intervention in the US elections was established as an unlikely thesis to be discussed, perhaps in reality it is up to internationalist experts to decode the meaning of hacker intervention by one country in the electoral processes of another. This is a dynamic that is increasingly recurrent because social networks make it possible. The truth is that perhaps the most questionable aspect of such an intervention is the act itself, that is, the intervention in the sovereignty of a country seeking to influence debates and tilt the result towards a given candidate, affecting the opponent.

Adam Kucharski acknowledges that there was a lot of Russian marketing on networks like Facebook circulating that year, as well as a lot of other content. "US users viewed close to a billion items of content on that same platform. For every Russian comment an individual was exposed to, he or she was exposed to an average of ninety thousand other content" (KUCHARSKI, 2020, pp. 248-249). He goes on to say that Trump's biggest support actually came from the media: "It has been estimated that in the first year of his campaign, Trump got the equivalent of $2 billion in free media coverage. In just 6 days, the New York Times included as many front-page stories about Hillary Clinton's emails as about every other political issue combined in the sixty-nine days leading up to the election" (IDEM). Perhaps this was indeed the Russian intervention in the process, providing the Democratic candidate's unencrypted emails to sites like Wikileaks, which in turn disseminated them to various media outlets. The controversial information it contained irreparably damaged the campaign.

Another model of the role of hackers and successful manipulation campaigns is represented by Brexit. Kuckarski himself argues that there is little evidence that Russia manipulated the process. However, in this case as in the previous ones, the "successful" emancipatory role of social networks was established, perhaps through intense marketing campaigns in the media, such as the press and television. I refer, for example, to the so-called Arab Spring conducted between 2010-2012, in which apparently there were smart-mob strategies, that is, protests called via smartphones, an unlikely fact if we consider the low internet coverage in the countries where these mobilizations took place – Syria, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya–. Added to this is digital illiteracy. Castells himself (2012, p. 66) points out that this is what happened, that the population, bored with the excesses of the region's dictators at the helm of political power, organized itself through social networks, especially Facebook. These very popular theses, especially among "cyber-optimists", have become almost a fact; the truth is that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support these arguments, which are incredible and unlikely in countries with so much poverty and backwardness, the very causes of unrest.

COMMUNICATION AND MANIPULATION STRATEGIES IN NETWORKS

a) algorithm and manipulation

Political marketing finds a new space for dissemination in social networks. We consider that it is not necessarily that the possibilities of influence of digital advertising are being reinvented and oversized; we must avoid endorsing the theoretical assumption of 20th-century interwar studies (the bullet or hypodermic needle theory) that posited total manipulation of the Internet user and absolute effectiveness of advertising. Of course, we cannot deny that there are manipulation phenomena that are achieved through a combination of various targeted communication strategies. This is exactly what we will discuss in the following lines. Let's start with the scenario in which Google decided to take ownership of user information.

> In 2016, 89% of its parent company Alphabet's revenue came from Google's targeted advertising programs. The scale of commodity flows is reflected in Google's dominance of the Internet, where it processes an average of over forty thousand queries every second: more than 3.5 billion searches a day and 1.2 trillion searches worldwide at a time. throughout 2017 (ZUBOFF, 2020, p. 103).

The numbers are impressive, the platform has accumulated a power that has rarely been seen in the history of the media. Now, let's focus on the strategies. In her review of the digital advertising debate, Samantha Bradshaw of the Oxford Internet Institute identifies "cyber troops", understood as "governmental or political party actors responsible for manipulating public opinion online". They utilize a variety of strategies to achieve their goal:

a) The involvement of bots to amplify hate speech;

b) Dissemination of manipulated content (fake news and post-truth);

c) Illegal collection of data;

d) Microfocusing;

e) Troll armies designed to intimidate political dissidents/opponents or online journalists (BRADSHAW, 2019, p. 1).

Each of these five strategies that Samantha Bradshaw points out generates a wide debate; they are now the necessary coordinates to address the debate on the digital dimension of advertising and its impact on public opinion. Regarding the third strategy, that of illegal data collection, which Google and other GAFAM companies are identified as executing, Shoshana Zuboff points out that "the predictions about our behavior are Google's products and the company sells them to its real customers, but not for us. We are the means used to serve the ends of others" (ZUBOFF, 2021, p. 134). In this regard, Robert Hannigan, who was head of British spy intelligence until January 2017, said in an interview with the BBC's Today program that "Facebook's main objective is to squeeze every drop of profit it can out of its user's' data" (DIGITAL ECONOMY, 2018).

GAFAM members have accumulated so much economic and political power that perhaps it is time to ask ourselves whether it is still relevant to speak of a "free market" –in light of its evident monopolistic presence– or to ask ourselves whether it is still possible to speak of political freedoms, the very essence of contemporary liberal democracy. Perhaps it is time to recognize that we are today facing a clear Cyber-Leviathan, but not as proposed by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, since the current "biblical monster" finds today in Silicon Valley the new locus of power.

We know that absolutely all of our activity on the web generates what Zuboff herself calls "behavioral surplus", which serves a variety of purposes. Among them are personalized commercial campaigns, but also to "bring us" political information according to the profile that GAFAM companies make of us. Through the filters and the bubble or loop that forms around us, there is obvious bias.

> The filter bubble not only reflects your identity, but also shows the possibilities you have. Students studying at some of the most prestigious universities in the United States see job advertisements that may be of interest to them that students at public institutions may not even know exist. Professional scientists' personal news section may include articles about competitions that beginners will never know about. By showing some possibilities and blocking others, the filter bubble plays a role in your decisions. And, in turn, shapes who you become (PARISIER, 2017, p. 116).

The bubble around us exposes us to certain campaigns, including political marketing campaigns, to fulfill "the ends of others", to paraphrase Zuboff. Of the GAFAM companies, Facebook is the most exposed to cyber troop activity. The explanation may be its size, warns Samantha Bradshaw, followed by Instagram and YouTube (2019, p. 2).

b) the opinion leader

Political marketing strategies through opinion leaders are very recurrent. Marketing campaigns are mobilized using profiles of accounts with perhaps few followers, the aim being for a journalist or opinion leader to reproduce the information. If this happens, the strategy will have achieved its objective. Bots, such as fake accounts with programs that mimic human behavior, are widely used in various campaigns. Among the main reasons is the fact that they are very cheap. Kuckarski points out that "mass amplification by politicians or journalists is essentially gratuitous" (KUCHARSKI, 2020, p. 253).

In a recent study, NATO identifies that:

> "manipulation of social networks is the new frontier for antagonists who seek to influence elections, polarize public opinion and divert legitimate political discussions", declares the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the introduction to its recently published study on how digital platforms are failing in the war against manipulation and fake content (ECONOMÍA Digital, 2019, p. 3).

Opinion leaders, recognized on the internet as bloggers and influencers, in the United States tend to become professional, explains Germán Espino, "many go on to become campaign consultants for politicians, for interest groups, for government agencies and even for the traditional media" (ESPINO, 2019, 119). He cited as an example the case of Stephen Banon himself, who he identifies as an ideologue of white supremacist groups, who ran the Breitbart News website.

Type of accounts identified on networks	Definition
Bots	1) Robot contraction. Automation programmed to mimic human behavior.
Trolls	2) Originally a joker, now a detractor (*hater*).
Cyborgs	3) They combine automation with human curation.
Hacked or stolen	4) Cyber troops use them strategically to spread pro-government marketing or censor free speech. They revoke the owner's access to their account.

TABLE 1. Types of Network Accounts

SOURCES: 1, 3 y 4: BRADSHAW, 2019, p. 11.

2. KUCHARSKI, 2020, p. 212.

Managing the huge flows of information generated by platforms is only possible through the development of sophisticated algorithms. However, the bias that is intended to be avoided, in theory, by reducing human interaction, is repeated; however, one of the

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most discussed cases is the one that occurred in recent months and was identified by programmer Joy Buolamwini, from the MIT Media Lab. Using facial recognition software in her search, she noticed that it didn't identify her because she was dark-skinned. The same has happened in programs intended to support the application of justice, for example, which reveal racism, sexism and discrimination of various kinds. This concern is exacerbated by the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) programs in the most diverse areas of everyday life. Thus, network users as a whole are being harassed by bots, trolls, cyborgs and hackers, so that, among other campaigns, they give in to the purposes of political marketing.

c) the framing /priming

Part of the discussion around social networks and the communication strategies they develop revolves around the use of news produced by traditional media, such as newspapers. They take advantage of the research and news they produce through small notes in which, using framing strategies, they synthesize and headline their notes on the subject, aware that the user, saturated with information, will in many cases pass on the information to their contacts without having read the content. We consider that there is indeed a combination of framing and priming. It is not our purpose to discuss the differences between the two theoretical formulations. Framing was mentioned above. Regarding the priming effect, we will say that it postulates the idea that it will activate a reaction that whoever is exposed to the stimulus will also activate, unconsciously, by association. Like any theoretical proposal, it receives a lot of criticism. Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu observes that "the agenda theory posits that the selection of news determines the public perception of the importance of the subject and, indirectly, through priming,

the evaluation of political leaders" (2015, p. 427). However, we believe that particularly in political advertising campaigns, this approach is widely used. Kahneman says that:

> Priming ideas have some ability to make other ideas stand out, albeit to a lesser extent. Activation spreads like ripples on a lake through a small part of the extensive network of associated ideas. Mapping these waves is one of the most exciting occupations of psychological research today (KAHNEMAN, 2020, p. 75).

The cognitive sciences, which among others reinforced this interpretation of communicative phenomena, developed many experiences to support the usefulness and potential of this theory. Perhaps among the most outstanding is the one conducted by a group of researchers from the University of California, led by Alan Fowler, recognized co-author of the study ``Connected``: The power of social networks. The team, with the most diverse educational background, was supported by the Facebook platform. On November 2, 2010, in the middle of election day, they presented platform users, estimated at 61 million people, with the message "I already voted" and were shown a photo of 6 of their friends revealing that they had already voted. had clicked the button until that moment. There was a second control group of about 600,000 people chosen at random but who did not receive any messages, i.e. there was no priming effect. I would like to emphasize that the study by Fowler (BOND et al, 2012) does not explain it from this theory, although we consider that it was used because of the effects achieved. Already with the huge database (enviable for any researcher) they estimated that the pure message, without the stimulus (without the priming) mobilized about 60,000 voters. And they estimate that the version with friends (with priming effect) raised it to another 280,000 voters. So, in total, they will mobilize 340,000 voters who probably weren't considering voting that day. Just to

think that the United States just had elections for president, a very close election in some districts in November 2020. Or in Mexico in 2006, an election for president, with very controversial results, was resolved by about 250,000 votes, a difference of 0.56% of the votes, shows that the potential of this type of priming strategy is not negligible. Fowler calls this the contagion effect, but in essence the postulates, and obviously the results, are the same.

THE PENDING AGENDA: IS IT STILL POSSIBLE TO REGULATE GAFAM?

A third objective is to present a brief overview of the proposals to regulate the activity of social networks in various parts of the world (European Union, Australia and in Latin America: Mexico).

Among the first initiatives are the development of sites called fact-checkers. They aim to detect fake news and post-truths.

Year	Type of initiative
2014 a 2018	44 information verification initiatives online fact-checkers
2019	Facebook manages a network of 25 fact-checking companies in 14 countries.
2019	Fact Check Explorer/ Google

TABLE 2. Types of GAFAM regulations

SOURCE– BADILLO, 2019, pp. 80.

One of the last episodes on the networks was the tug of war between the powerful muscle of the great American companies GAFAM and the American president at that moment that led to the "digital silence" of the latter because of the presidential elections in the United States, in November 2020. The issue has generated little debate over the past five years, starting with the November 2017 elections. The emergence of Cambridge Analytica in 2016 has highlighted the need to look into the activities of these new companies.

On the pending agenda is the regulation of GAFAM. Within the work, we note the warnings of national security experts about the need to put limits on digital platforms that have accumulated enormous economic and political power, an immense political force. In his study, Angel Badillo (2019, p. 26) shows us a collection of initiatives developed by ten-member states of the European Union in the period between 2017 and 2019 (see Table 1, p.26).

A BRIEF CONCLUSION

We believe that if there is one aspect shared by any activity aimed at manipulating public opinion on social networks, it is an anti-liberal narrative, insofar as their actions can be framed from various angles as a threat to democracy itself worldwide (they censor, are anti-pluralist and anti-liberal) and thus open the door to different versions of authoritarian regimes (cf. DEMOCRACY Report 2020).

We insist on the accumulated power, especially after 2020, strongly driven, among other circumstances, by the COVID pandemic in internet consumption up to an average of 7 hours a day and around 2.5 of them on social networks. In addition, the confinement has boosted e-commerce, further strengthening GAFAM companies in addition to streaming platforms. Consolidating a digital economy does not necessarily go hand in hand with maintaining political freedoms. Constant political marketing campaigns, whether overt or covert, whether through fake news, post-truth or micro-segmentation with framing or priming strategies, harass us as users every day, not just during election periods. We believe this may have an impact on citizens' fatigue regarding political debate. Maybe that's what its promoters are looking for, to increase political disinterest. The only certainty is that we are facing enormous challenges in the face of Cyber-Leviathan.

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