

An Intervening Intermediary: Making Political Sense of Media Influence

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INTRODUCTION

The core idea of this book, studying how political actors use news, adds emphasis to an emerging perspective in literatures that deal with the relationship between media and politics. Focus is directed at political actors and their strategic motives in the face of mediatised politics. The first chapter sketches a systematic theoretical account of the functions that the media perform in this actor-centric model. Before we start to explore the model empirically, this chapter elaborates on the concept of media influence on politics attempting to put political actors' news use into a broader political science context. All of the chapters in this volume speak about media influence on politics, as each and every study of media and politics have done before us. But what is it? The slightest hope of reaching an answer to this question inevitably involves defining what 'the media' is, what politics is and what influence or power is. The latter two questions, although involving numerous discussions and scholarly texts, are—we will argue—not the real challenge here. Rather it is the first

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one which introduces a puzzle: How can we—from a political science perspective—make sense of the media, and thus of media influence?

The simple argument in this chapter is that media influence on politics should be distinguished from other types of influences that are typically under study in political science. Despite the increasing acknowledgement of media as a political institution and actor (e.g. Cook 2005; Page 1996; Schudson 2002), the media differ significantly from other institutions and actors in the political system. It is an indispensable institution in democratic politics, but still unelected and with no formal authority or responsibilities. And it is a powerful actor in the political sphere, but still does not represent a particular group or a particular interest in the private sphere—as other organizations or associations of civil society do—because its primary goals are journalistic and commercial and not political. These are hardly controversial claims. But they nevertheless hold important implications that studies of media and politics sometimes lose sight of. If we say that politics is about “who gets what, when and how”, then the distinct character of the media as a political actor and institution should remind us that media influence is not about what the media “gets”. Rather, the media intervenes in politics and the processes that determine who gets what, when and how. Media influence on politics is therefore—from a political science perspective—first of all about how the media affects the distribution of power between *other* political actors and institutions.

We start the chapter with a brief presentation of the literature on political agenda-setting as it could serve as a case illustrating the need to make more “political sense” of media influence. Second, different approaches to the media as a political actor and institution are discussed in more detail, before making the argument that the media is an intermediary political institution and actor that owes its political significance mainly to its ability to intervene in processes where the power of *other* political actors and institutions are our key interest. Next, we suggest distinguishing between two layers in the concept of media influence on politics, focusing respectively on the way in which the media influences (first) and the political consequences of this influence (second). Furthermore, existing research is interpreted in light of these layers, and we return to the case of political agenda-setting and the constitutive idea of this book, looking at how the motives of political actors are central if we would like to make political sense of media influence. The final section summarizes our argument and provides examples of research questions that we think make a lot of political sense.

POLITICAL AGENDA-SETTING: A (MODERATE) SUCCESS, BUT “SO WHAT”?

Many studies have delved into the crucial and positive role that news media play in representative democracy, for instance through informing citizens, supplying different opinions, providing information on issues and scrutinizing those in power (e.g. Asp 2007). Such a role of course means that the media is a considerable source of power and influence in politics, something that has attracted a lot of attention in studies of the mediatization of politics (e.g. Esser and Strömbäck 2014). The process of mediatization reflects how the media has become the “most important source of information and channel of communication between the citizenry and political institutions and actors” (Strömbäck 2008: 236). This so-called first dimension of mediatization is the cornerstone for any perspective on media influence or media effects in political communication. Together with the increasing independence of the news media from other political institutions (Strömbäck and Esser 2014: 22), this development has made both news content and political actors less dictated by a political logic and more influenced by the journalistic and commercial “media logic”.

The literature on political agenda-setting, originally often labelled policy agenda-setting (e.g. Dearing and Rogers 1996), have come at the media-politics relationship from a different angle. The key goal has been to investigate why some issues manage to get the attention of decision makers. Such a topic initially attracted more attention from political scientists than from communication scholars. The approach was originally focused on the limited attention of political actors for a wide range of political issues. Building on the insights of Schattschneider (1960), Cobb and Elder (1972) were among the first who investigated why some issues rise on policy agendas, while others do not. The media was seen as one of the possible factors that could influence the agenda of policy makers, but not a very important one. Gradually the media got more attention in the study of political agendas, but it was seldom the main focus of attention (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 2003, but see Linsky 1986). The more recent stream of research which I address here—*political agenda-setting*—focuses explicitly on the relationship between news and the agendas of political actors (c.f. Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006).

As is evident in the review in Chap. 1, a range of work in political agenda-setting has produced models and results that give us a good sense of when and how the media could affect the issue agenda of

political actors and institutions. Hence the literature has, despite being modest in volume compared to *public* agenda-setting, been somewhat successful in explaining patterns of political attention to issues. Yet the claim in this chapter is that it could still do better in terms of its broader contribution to the explanation of political power. Our findings and discussions often seem to suggest that we are interested in the media as a political actor on a par with other actors: we discuss how different aspects of news content and political context increases and decreases *the media's influence* on politics. But who is it that profits when news becomes politics? What are the concrete implications for political power? These “so what” type of questions are crucial if studies of media and politics are to contribute to political science. Our hope is that they will get more attention if we simply start by explicitly discussing how to understand the media as an actor and institution in the political system. And so this is what we will do.

A POLITICAL ACTOR AND INSTITUTION

As mentioned in the introduction, in order to make sense of media influence on politics we need to be explicit about the concepts involved. We will spend only marginal time on defining politics and influence, simply because it is the role of the media in the political system that is most challenging and crucial to our goal in this chapter. Almost 60 years ago, Harold Lasswell (1936) provided a famous and to the point definition of politics as being about *who gets what, when and how*. Although more of a catch-phrase than a proper definition, it is a surprisingly robust perspective that aligns fairly well with for instance Easton's influential definition of politics as the “authoritative allocation of values for a society” (1965: 3). Or with the more recent reminder from Schmitter (2010: 317), emphasizing that “political science is supposed to explain how power is exercised and what its effects are”.

A concept of power or influence would normally relate to interests or ideas, and the ability of some actors to transfer *their* priorities or conceptions onto others, make others think and/or do what they otherwise would not (e.g. Dahl 1957). Political power has several dimensions and is accordingly studied in numerous ways. For our purpose, it is important to emphasize that the study of media power does not concentrate on formal authority, coercion or control. Nor is it about indoctrination (Schudson 2002: 265). Instead it is the study of influence, and the

way in which the media has the ability to shape political processes and outcomes largely by changing the incentive structures of other actors (c.f. social power in a rational choice perspective; see Dowding 1996). By selecting and framing issues, the news media present advantages (and disadvantages) for political actors. A story on growth offers incumbents an opportunity to claim credit and build support for policy choices, while a story on challenges and decline put pressure on the government to prioritize differently and/or change policies. Conversely, good news could silence opposition actors, while bad news offers incentives to speak up and criticize.

The efforts of political science to explain power, to study who gets what, for a long time neglected journalism and the media. To make things even harder, communication scholars have—in line with journalists—tended to downplay the political role of the media at the expense of an emphasis on journalistic norms of objectivity and impartiality (Page 1996; Cook 2005). Apart from a few notable exceptions (e.g. Cater 1959), the idea of the media as a political actor and political institution is fairly new and arguably long overdue (e.g. Page 1996; Sparrow 1999; Schudson 2002; Cook 2005). But what does it mean that the media is a political actor and a political institution? Page (1996) argues that news organizations and journalists have political goals, goals that are pursued through the production of news. Page's account is arguably most applicable to situations where news media explicitly attempt to affect political decisions. UK news media for instance take political stances in editorials, with the case of Brexit among the most recent and obvious examples.

Other contributions on the political role of the news media have looked less at purposive political behavior, and more at how news production ends up (not necessarily intentional) fulfilling political functions. These perspectives naturally concentrate on how news stories, as opposed to editorials (and partly op-eds), could affect politics. This focus aligns well with many of the contributions in the present volume that look at how political actors use the content of the news, rather than at alliances between parties and different editorial offices. Schudson (2002) emphasizes that the news media's primary contribution lies in their day-to-day production and communication of meanings, symbols and messages that shape the public and politicians, thereby influencing political outcomes. Cook (2005) however, provides the most thorough examination of the news media as a political actor and institution, emphasizing for the most part the latter. The media constitutes an institution because of durable and taken-for-granted

patterns of social behavior resulting in news making processes that are similar from one news organization to the next (ibid.: 84). Moreover, the media is political because politics is implicitly part of its news production values (ibid.: 62). Despite standards of objectivity, those who work in the media “cannot but exert power, because they select and process politically relevant content and thus *intervene* in both the formation of public opinion and in the effects of its diffusion—in agenda setting, or the priming and framing of issues” (Habermas 2006: 419).

This change in the understanding of the media might very well be one of the factors increasing political scientist’s attention to news (Schudson 2002: 250). But although the media is a political institution and actor—it is very *different* from many of the key actors and institutions that political scientists are used to working with. First of all, it is an unelected institution with no formal position in political processes, no authority and no responsibilities. This is also the foundation of several media-sceptic and critical analyses of media influence. Some portray media as an exogenous force, a colonizer of politics, arguing that “by marginalizing parties and the intermediary system, the media diminish the opportunities that civil society might have to exert influence on political inputs” (Meyer 2002: 108). Concerns about the potential negative effects of mediatised politics are, to varying degrees, shared by most scholars interested in media and politics. But the institutional perspective on media’s role in politics nevertheless approaches these questions from the notion that the media is an integral part of politics. Instead of marginalizing the intermediary system, the media is conceptualized as part of this system. It is an intermediary institution that shares characteristics with other intermediaries, most notably political parties and the interest group system (Cook 2005: 109–110). Cook emphasizes the similarities between these intermediaries in his effort to establish the media as a political institution. But for our purpose, it is the distinction between them that is of most interest: parties and interest groups “are formed and maintained for the strategic and collective pursuit of openly and specifically political aims. The news media are not” (ibid.: 110). Despite sharing a position as simultaneously inside and outside government, the media is set apart from other intermediaries because it is an “unauthorized” yet influential outsider and insider in politics. This makes it all the more difficult to make political sense of media influence, which is why it is crucial to understand the media’s placement in society, to understand the link between this intermediary institution and the signals that it communicates to and within the political system.

Newton (2006) offers a starting point for this discussion, noting that many defenders of the “media as a strong force” assume that:

the media are quite separate and distinct from society, firing their poison arrows into it from a distance. In fact, the mass media are an integral part of society, sharing many of its values, operating within many of its constraints (organizational, economic, cultural and legal), drawing its journalists from it, and reflecting its concerns to a greater or lesser extent. In other words, the media are deeply embedded in and part of society. (Ibid.: 215)

Not only then is the media embedded in politics, it is also embedded in society. But as an intermediary in politics, the question is whether it should be treated as other “embedded” actors in the intermediary system. On one hand, one could argue that news media in representative democracies are functional equivalents to interest groups and political parties. They act as mediators located between the private sphere and the state, communicating interests or social problems to the political system. On the other hand, the media differ from interest groups and parties in several crucial aspects making the above perspective hard to sustain. Most importantly, the link between news institutions and the interests or problems mediated by them is weak, non-institutionalized and grounded in a commercial and professional principle, rather than a democratic principle.

As an actor in the political sphere then, the media does not represent particular groups or particular interests in the private sphere. It does not function as an interest aggregator or a champion of specific values or causes, unlike other actors in civil society. Parties and interest groups link the private sphere and the state, and the interests and ideas that they represent structure their political role, determine their input to the political system and legitimize their position as political actors. Admittedly, many news organizations still have strong links to particular groups and clear political leanings. Moreover, their audience often shares parts of their political worldview. The media is consequently a political actor, as already discussed and as can be witnessed through their explicit political stances. But unlike for other political actors, political goals are not the primary goals of news organizations. The primary goal is professional and commercial: they make and sell news. Other actors might also have commercial goals as primary goals, but when they act in the political sphere they then seek to influence policies in order to achieve these goals. For news organizations, professional and commercial goals might also overlap with political orientations sometimes producing news that potentially could

fulfill a variety of goals. But this is not given, as journalistic norms and commercial considerations will produce news that sometimes communicates the voice or interest of one group and at other times another. If there indeed is a consistent political goal or political self-image in news organizations, one that is part of and consistent with both professional and commercial goals, it is the idea of the media as a *vox populi*, a voice of the people in opposition to political elites (Petersson 1994). This is also an interpretation which figured in the debates about the role of the news media in the Brexit campaign. But even this important part of journalism does not allow for a consistent political voice in news organizations when principles are translated to concrete news stories; the “voice of the people” on Monday oftentimes contradicts the one on Tuesday.

THE INTERVENING INTERMEDIARY

The discussion so far serves to highlight that the political role of the media, the reason why we think of the media as a political actor and institution, is disconnected from many of the core concepts (like representation, accountability, delegation etc.) used to make sense of and study other intermediaries in the political system. Despite arguments about media’s role in communicating societal problems to the political system, feeding signals into politics that can help government do a better job, there is not a strong basis for perceiving the political role of the media as a democratically based ‘input’ function. The news media do serve functions that potentially *support* processes of political representation and accountability (e.g. Asp 2007), but it is not a representative or accountable political institution in itself. Admittedly, this is slightly self-evident. But we still think it is important to discuss it explicitly as it holds implications for the way we understand and study media influence on politics.

The point is that our perception of the media as a political actor and institution is based first and foremost on *the impact* that the media has on political outcomes and political processes. When political scientists talk about how actors influence politics, it is usually based on the—perfectly sensible—assumption that this influence serves these groups themselves (or someone represented by these groups). Businesses, interest groups, parties or other actors affect politics, meaning that they (“who”) get some sort of values, resources or benefits (“what”). Studies of media influence on politics are not—in the same way—studies of what the media “gets”. Note also that even when journalists create their own stories, for instance through investigative journalism, this still does not

mean that the media “gets” anything. Not to say that the distinction between waiting for authoritative sources to say something and self-made stories is irrelevant. It clearly matters for the media’s role as an independent and autonomous agenda-setter (Sevenans 2017). The point is just that even when self-made stories have political consequences, the origins of the story is not necessarily sufficiently interesting in itself: in order to make political sense of such a case we must know how it affected who got what or the allocation of values in a society.

This distinction between the media and political actors that “get” something should not be conflated with the debate about the media’s ability to exercise an independent influence on politics. We are *not* saying that the media merely reflects the positions and views of other, “real” political actors. If that was the case, the task of identifying how the media affects political power most likely would be much easier. Many scholars agree that the media rarely initiate the coverage of political stories (Kingdon 2003; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). Cook (2005) brings up a similar interpretation when debating Kingdon’s perspective: “Kingdon was partially right. To the extent that journalists wait for authoritative sources to do or say newsworthy things, their role in agenda setting is unlike that of other political actors.” However, the media not only reflects or convey the interests and messages of others. The work of journalists and news organizations transform the signals communicated from “authoritative” (as well as less authoritative) sources. As a bare minimum, even the most media “sober” scholars emphasize that news play a role in magnifying or amplifying issues. Cook is furthermore quick to stress that this is not an exhaustive framework for understanding media influence because “the news media do more than reflect or merely pick and choose from among what others are doing” (ibid.: 12). Both “authoritative sources”, i.e. parties and interest groups, and journalists affect which issues and problems get media attention simply because news must be both *important* and *interesting*.

Politicians dictate conditions and rules of access and designate certain events and issues as important by providing an arena for them. Journalists, in turn, decide whether something is interesting enough to cover, the context in which to place it, and the prominence the story receives. (Ibid.)

In effect, even though powerful political actors—from politicians to organized interests—are by far the most important suppliers of input to the media, these actors usually cannot control how their interests and

ideas are presented and interpreted in the media, or how other actors receive and respond to them (Jarren and Donges 2006). The issues—and frames—that at any point in time are deemed newsworthy will be communicated. Although fairness and balance are important norms in news-making, the news criteria applied by the media (e.g. power/relevance, negativity, competition/conflict, personalization etc.) shape news content in a way that never sums up to a mirror image of the interests and ideas of other political actors.

Nevertheless, returning to our main point, the selection of issues and frames is neither a reflection of what journalists and news institutions want. It reflects their professional priorities and the many values, criteria or norms that shape the news production process. By extension then, when for instance voters adopt frames or issue priorities from the media, their opinions, attitudes or political actions do not reflect the political interests of the media. The media hold the power to make other actors think or do what they otherwise would not. But since this power mostly does not reflect the political priorities of news organizations, nor in a straightforward and consistent way those of other actors, the media's role in politics is best captured as *influence by intervention* in political processes.¹ The news media is an intermediary institution in the political system that by mediating and transforming (amplifying, muting, distorting) signals from other actors acquires the ability to change political processes. Not only by affecting their existence (initiate, stop) and pace (slow down, speed up), but also by altering the stakes involved or redistributing the advantages and disadvantages of the actors that take part in the processes and that seek to influence their outcome. To once again repeat our main point, these are interventions that—from a political science perspective—first of all are interesting because they affect the distribution of political power. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of media influence on politics we therefore need to know which actors, interests or ideas that are served by the media's *intervention* in political processes.

TWO LAYERS OF MEDIA INFLUENCE ... AND HOW TO APPROACH THE SECOND ONE

We think it is fruitful to summarize our claim by distinguishing between what could be framed as two layers in the concept of the media's political influence. The media should be considered—as we have seen—a political

actor and institution because the selection and framing of news is inherently political: the choices that journalists and news organizations make do not equally favor all actors and messages (e.g. Cook 2005: 165). The media therefore has *the ability to influence political processes and outcomes*. The first layer is about the media's ability to influence *in itself*, more so than the actual outcomes in terms of 'who gets what'. The mediatization literature often speaks to this layer, as it studies the increasing influence of media in politics for instance through changes in communication media, such as the development of new media and increasing spread or use of different media. But also agenda-setting research that concentrates more concretely on identifying the conditions under which the media can set political agendas, and less on the implications that this has for different political actors or interests, contribute to this layer.

These are important research fields, but as we have argued above, the distinguishing characteristics of the media as a an intermediary and intervening—but not representative or accountable—political institution and actor simply means that such a focus does not necessarily provide us with sufficient information about “who gets what”. The second layer therefore directs attention to the *outcomes*, explicitly studying which actors and interests win and lose when media intervenes in political processes. Much of the framing literature speaks to this layer, because framing processes are often theorized from the point of view of political actors and political power. This is evident in studies of media slant/bias (e.g. Druckman and Parkin 2005; Watts et al. 1999) and in a range of contributions on issue-specific framing (e.g. Cohen and Wolfsfeld 1993, Shah et al. 2002), where the research questions that motivate the studies all start with the idea that media content favored some political actors or ideas at the expense of others.

Studies of agenda-setting indicating that specific issues in the news, or generic news frames or issue attributes like conflict or economic consequences, increases the likelihood of political attention are not equally informative from the perspective of the second layer. This challenge is related to how the agenda-setting literature has promoted a shift “from the issue of power to the power of issues” (c.f. Dearing and Rogers 1996). Arguably, this shift has delivered contributions in terms of research showing that news coverage of issue content matters for political agendas. Nevertheless, it has also entailed that that research questions often have been formulated on the basis of news content and that studies naturally have

focused more on media influence in itself, and not so much the outcome of this influence or the distribution of power between political actors.

Admittedly, the analytical distinction between the two layers is not always clear-cut. Very often both mediatization and agenda-setting studies that start off with a focus on the first layer still bring forward important and interesting perspectives on how media influence alters political processes when implications of the research are being discussed. But there are ways in which to explore the second layer more systematically. If the media's role as a political actor and institution rests mainly on its impact on political processes and outcomes, on how it distributes power between other actors in politics, the systematic study of media influence on politics should to a greater extent use this as its *starting point*. It is our contention that this book, and the perspective that it builds on, is an important path towards such a goal. Focusing on the motives and strategies of political actors that deal with news means paying attention to politics, political processes and political outcomes. As pointed out repeatedly, ultimately media influence is not about what the media gets. It's about what other political actors get. The motives of these actors therefore need to be centre stage in theoretical arguments.²

Returning to the case of political agenda-setting again, there are examples of this approach in recent works that apply theories of party competition to understand how the media's agenda-setting power influences politics. One example is the political agenda-setting literature's use of the issue ownership theory, showing how political parties use news to shift the political agenda towards favorable issues (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011; Thesen 2013). The information and arena model adds to this stream of research, providing a theoretical framework for thinking about how political actors could benefit from news content. It furthermore effectively demonstrates how the agenda-setting theory depends on theoretical supplements. In order to make the leap from investigating the power of issues to addressing the issue of political power, political agenda-setting research should to a larger extent use the second layer of media influence as a starting point and collect theoretical input from other fields of study where the question of power and influence are closer at hand. If we manage this, it is our belief that studies of media and politics would be better equipped to fend of "so what" questions and contribute even more to political science.

WHAT NEXT? SUMMARIZING AND LOOKING AHEAD

In sum, although we agree that the media clearly is a *political* institution and actor, the media is first of all an intervening and intermediary institution in the processes that determine who gets what, when and how. The concept of media influence involves a broad and continuously changing communication of a variety of interest, opinions and problems in society and in politics. We have stressed that the signals that news media communicate do not reflect their own political interests, and that they are not linked to these signals in the same way that other political actors are, actors that aggregate and represent. Neither is this communication a straightforward reflection. Their role as an intermediary does not equal a function as a mirror image of other political actors, simply because the media filter, magnify and frame issues, according to both how politically important and how publically (commercially) interesting they are. Through this negotiation of ‘newsworthiness’ (Cook 2005), the media *intervenes* in political processes by shaping political debates, affecting opinion formation and decision-making. Our goal has been to emphasize that this second layer of media influence—the outcomes of media intervention—deserves more attention in studies of the relationship between media and politics.

One of the reasons for this is that we have only started scratching the surface in terms of showing how the media matters to politics. To use an overstatement, the point is that in this era of mediatized politics—which one might define differently, but which no one disputes—you will hardly find any field of political science that, either explicitly or implicitly, does not rely on assumptions about the relationship between media and politics. In many cases, there is room for political agenda-setting and related fields of study to empirically put these assumptions to the test, and thus contribute to the task of explaining who gets what, when and how. Recent studies of opposition parties’ policy influence (Seeberg 2013), support parties and minority rule (Thesen 2015), party support (Walgrave and De Swert 2004; Thesen et al. 2016) and the lobbying of interest groups (De Bruycker and Beyers 2015) serve to illustrate this potential. But there are more questions out there, more changes in political systems and political behavior that could do with alternative or supplemental explanations.

One example relates to how mediatized politics interacts with the way different political systems handle the demands of organized

interests through traditions and institutions of corporatism and pluralism. In more corporatist systems, for instance, it has been argued that the negotiated consensus reached by interest groups through corporative institutions work to constrain their party political counterparts in parliament (Nørgaard and Klemmensen 2009). Thus, the level of party competition and conflict on typical corporatist issues (i.e. work environment, labor market policies, pensions and benefits) is reduced. Does this mean that such issues are less prone to media-based politicization by competing parties, and that pluralist systems are characterized by political issue debates (on such issues) where the media plays a larger role? Furthermore, to what extent has the mediatization of politics over the last decades made the media more able to stir party competition on corporatist issues also in corporatist systems? Could it be argued that the media thus have contributed to the weakening of consensus politics, ultimately playing a part in the decline of corporatism experienced in, for instance, Scandinavia (Rommetvedt et al. 2013)? It is our ambition that more attention to the “second layer” of media influence hopefully will allow us to answer such questions, thereby increasing the political science relevance of political agenda-setting and other fields of study where media influence on politics is center stage.

Finally, it is worth underlining that that goal here has not been to claim that only certain perspectives merits attention in this field of study that is necessarily situated at the intersection between political and communication science. We need more and better research related to both layers of the media’s political influence, as a focus on each separately in itself would be insufficient. Rather the motive has been to re-focus on the issue of power in order to understand how we could make more political sense of media influence in representative democracies. A task which is all the more complex and all the more important given that we are studying an institution that might be partially protected by constitutions but that is nevertheless not designed according to democratic rules or ideas about representation or accountability.

NOTES

1. Note that this is related to, but different from, the concept of media interventionism (e.g. Strömbäck and Esser 2009), which refers to a purposive reporting style where journalists play a more dominant and visible role.
2. Although we focus on the motives of political actors like parties, interest groups and the like here, they are of course not always centre-stage.

News content has political consequences regardless of the motives of such actors, not least because it is the public that lies at the heart of media's influential role in politics.

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