

# **The Survival of Malaysia's National Television Within a Changing Mediascape**

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### **ABSTRACT**

National television is the term used to describe television broadcasting owned and maintained for the public by the national government, and usually aimed at educational, informational and cultural programming. By this definition, *Radio Televisyen Malaysia's TV1* is the national television in Malaysia and until 1984 was the only television broadcast offered to Malaysians. With the privatization policy, new and private stations were established, and *RTM* eventually faced competition. The advent of direct satellite broadcasting saw another development in the country—the establishment of *Astro* in 1998. The direct-to-user satellite broadcaster currently carries over 100 channels, including 8 HD channels, thus creating many more choices for viewers. More importantly, *Astro* carries the global media directly into our homes. International offerings such as *CNN, BBC, CCTV, HBO, MTV, FOX, ESPN, Star Sports, and Star World* are now within the push of a button for most Malaysians. *Astro* is a success story, but there were also a few failed attempts along the way such as *MetroVision, MegaTV* and *MiTV*. Currently there are new channels such as *Unifi* television and also *Al-Hijrah TV* battling for a share of the market. Aside from these, there are also web television stations such as *tonton.com.my* which is owned by *Media Prima, KRU TV* and others. This article discusses the survival of *TV1* vis-à-vis television broadcasting developments in Malaysia, public perceptions on the station, and other new challenges.

**Keywords:** national television, government monopoly, privatization policy, broadcasting, narrowcasting, niche programming, new technology.

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### **Introduction**

Television was introduced in Malaysia in late 1963 with the broadcast of *RTMI* by the government. Thus, in the beginning, Malaysian television broadcasting was government-based and was playing the role of national television. National television is the term used to describe television broadcasting owned and maintained for the public by the national government, and usually aimed at educational, informational and cultural programming. By this definition, *Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM)* is the national television in Malaysia, especially its *TV1* and, until 1984, it was the only television broadcast offered to Malaysians. In short, television broadcasting in Malaysia was a government monopoly for almost twenty years.

This article discusses the survival of *RTM* (particularly *TV1* which we have identified as the national television channel because of its ownership, mission and objectives), vis-à-vis television broadcasting developments in Malaysia and examines its ramifications. Is *RTM* losing its audiences? Has the advent of the global media in the country pressured *RTM* to reinvent its identity in order to remain competitive? What are the consequences of this reinvention,

especially in terms of programming? What happens to *RTM*'s original mission and objectives upon this reinvention? Can *RTM* remain nationalistic amidst the dynamics of globalization? What of national cultures and identities if national television is compromised? These are some of the pertinent issues explored in the article in an effort to understand the present situation and forecast the outlook of national television in the future, especially in Malaysia.

To view this in perspective, the article traces the introduction of new channels in Malaysian television, the rise of narrowcasting vs. broadcasting, and the introduction of new, user-friendly technologies as strong competitors and current threats to national television. Further, the article reports reception analyses of three focus groups conducted to scrutinize the viewership of *TV1* vis-à-vis other channels. These focus groups were conducted separately and they are segmented according to age and occupation: the first group is made up of housewives above 40 years of age, the second group consists of male and female young urban professionals or executives in the age range of 24 to 30, and the third group is composed of 19 to 21 year-old male and female university students.

### **National television in Malaysia**

As mentioned, national television in Malaysia is operated under *RTM*, particularly *TV1*. Although *RTM* runs both *TV1* and *TV2*, *TV1* focuses more on national programming whereas *TV2* has more diverse, multicultural programming. *RTM*, being a government body, presents government information and policies to the people and, with that, the dominant ideology (Azizal & Kartini, 1997).

*RTM* has an overriding objective that is consistent with the country's development plan: the achievement of national unity. In addition, *RTM* aims to stimulate public interest and develop civic consciousness, while providing information and education. With the beginning of the new millennium, *RTM* is emphasizing the "infotainment" concept, i.e., providing information and entertainment as a public service broadcasting station.

Vogel and Frost (2009) stressed the need for the public sector to reinforce itself within its own initiatives. Without the competitive pressure, there are tendencies for the public sector to underperform and be inactive. In line with the importance of initiatives toward strengthening its position and acceptance, *RTM* had undertaken a few reimagining exercises.

In April 2005, *RTM* celebrated its 59<sup>th</sup> anniversary and went through a rebranding exercise which made some cosmetic rather than substantive changes. New names and new looks were launched with the hope of increasing its popularity and squaring off the competition. However, the role and responsibility of *RTM* as an agent to disseminate information on government policies to the *rakyat* (people) remain intact.

In 2009, *RTM* attempted another rebranding approach, and still focused on its original mission and objectives. It remains very much a carrier and a disseminator of the national agenda. This is seen as the very essence of *RTM*, always important and relevant to nation-building. Competitors are seen as healthy as they may help enhance the quality of content and programming, although this remains to be seen. Among the key approaches of the new rebranding concept include renaming the main stations as *TV1* and *TV2* as opposed to *RTM1* and *RTM2*, and focusing on

documentaries, magazine and talk shows. They have introduced new programs such as *Dialog@1*, *Blog@1*, *Apa Kata Wanita*, *InTrend*, *Agro Journal* and *Gen X*. There is also a strong concentration on showing quality magazine and documentaries from overseas. The question arises, however, of the extent to which *RTM* can perform its national function if more and more competitors are taking the audience away?

### **The advent of new channels**

*TV1*'s biggest threat came in 1984 when *TV3*, the first private television broadcasting company came on the scene. Ever since then, *TV1* has been struggling to compete with other new channels that have been entering the market.

There have, of course, been a few private television broadcasting companies that tried to enter this oligopoly yet failed after a few years of operation. The first victim was *Metrovision*, which was introduced in 1996. Its limited coverage failed to bring it enough revenue to compete. Television channels such as *TV9* (formerly Channel 9) almost succumbed to a similar difficulty; however, it survived through a change of ownership to *Media Prima*. Under new ownership, *Media Prima* has become a powerful media house that not only controls four major stations, including *TV3* and *8TV*, but also owns various print and online media as well. *Mega TV* was the first subscription-based television channel introduced in Malaysia. It was operated by *TV3* and went on air in 1995. It was popular in the urban market; however, it failed to compete when *Astro* commenced operations in 2001 and offered a greater variety of channels at a more reasonable price.

*TV3* is considered as the biggest threat to *TV1*. *TV3* is a subsidiary of *Media Prima*, which is now the largest media conglomerate in Malaysia. *Media Prima* has a very high equity interest in *8TV*, *NTV7* and *TV9* and *New Straits Times Press (Malaysia)* and *Bhd* (one of the biggest publishing groups in Malaysia that publishes *New Straits Times*, *Malay Mail*, *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro*).

*TV3* holds on proudly to its signature products such as the daily *Buletin Utama*, *Majalah 3*, *Melodi*, *Nona*, and *Mentor*. Aside from that, it has also introduced various local slots for dramas such as *Zehra*, *Akasia* and *Samarinda*, which have showcased critically acclaimed and highly popular dramas such as *Nur Kasih*, *Tahajjud Cinta*, *Ustaz Amirul*, *Juvana* and also *Nora Elena*.

In 1998, the Malaysian audience was introduced to *NTV7*, the new "feel good channel". The mission of *NTV7* was to create a happier and more enlightened group of Malaysians. It came up with a new style of media management by looking at the station as a media brand instead of just another television station. The programs are listed as products under each specific brand and the company was controlled by brand managers. It has organized various belts of programming such as dramas, comedies, entertainment programs and more.

*8TV*, which was launched in January 2004, aims at serving those who were unable to be served under *TV3* due to airtime limitations (<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?Title=NTV7>). *8TV* aims at the young urban audience and also at the Chinese market. It seems to be the choice of young professionals with its popular imported programs such as *CSI*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *American Idol*.

Apart from the channels mentioned, *TV1* also faces stiff competition from subscription-based competitors such as *Astro*. *Astro* broadcasts its programs using the DTH satellite system and offers over 100 television channels. It packages its products into various categories such as Sports, News, Variety, Fun, Learning, Dynasty, Emperor, etc. It offers very low prices for the decoder sets, and this has enabled more Malaysians to subscribe to *Astro*. On the list of international channels shown on *Astro* are *Star World*, *National Geographic*, *Discovery*, *ESPN*, *HBO*, *MTV*, and *CNN*, while its local channels include *Ria*, *Oasis*, *Wah Lai Toi*, *Vaanavil*, *Hitz.TV*, and *TVIQ*. The programs shown on the international channels are very current and among the higher rated shows shown abroad.

As more competitors join in, the audience becomes larger, but the market is more fragmented. It is further segmented with the rise of niche programming or narrowcasting in television, something *TV1* has also to be very concerned about.

### **The rise of narrowcasting**

Narrowcasting is the opposite of broadcasting, where programs are aimed at specific, specialist audiences or special social interest groups. Just as we can find a wide variety of magazines in the store, there is now a wide range of specialty stations targeted at small and specific markets that might be defined on the grounds of age, gender, ethnicity or interests (Rayner, Wall & Kruger, 2001). It is as if the people running television stations had just suddenly realized that audiences for different types of programs tend to be very different and relatively intractable in their choices.

*Astro* and *Unifi* have channels that narrowcast. There are channels devoting themselves to sports only (*Astro Supersport*, *ESPN*, *Star Sports*), music only (*MTV*, *Hitz.TV*), movies only (*HBO*, *Star Movies*, *Cinemax*, *Celestial*), news only (*CNN*, *Al Jazeera*, *BBC*), children only (*Disney*, *Nickelodeon*, *Cartoon Network*), and so on. In addition, ethnicity is another choice factor in narrowcasting; thus, Malaysians of different ethnic origins are spoiled for choice with satellite television. If audiences know the type of program they want to watch, whether based on interest or ethnicity, then a channel that provides them a variety or an assortment of programs is no longer attractive and worthwhile. Channel-hopping may happen, but evidence suggests that it is minimal in any one evening of television viewing (Rayner, Wall, & Kruger, 2001). Why should they hop if they can indulge in their favourites?

Niche programming has changed the way we watch television. Previously, television viewing used to be communal or familial, where everyone in the *kampung* or the home could enjoy it collectively. Television sets were the “altar of the living room” (Katz, 2003) but, with niche programming, it is worth having more than one set, and they can be placed in other parts of the house where different members of the family can enjoy their own favourite *genre* or channel. And with that, multiprogramming television, such as *TV1*, loses more and more of its allure.

*TV Al-Hijrah*, which was launched in 2011, focuses on the ability to obtain Muslim programs which promote the teachings of Islam. This was considered to be a competitive move to *Astro Oasis* which has had a significantly stronger following with the internationally renowned *Imam*

*Muda*. It has been able to fill a demand in the market for more Islamic programming from the Muslim Malay community.

Thus, narrowcasting has the potential to steal other television markets, especially channels that broadcast. The national television in its current format might stand to lose much in this context. As well, the coming of other more sophisticated yet consumer-friendly technologies presents further strong competitor to national television.

### **The challenge of new technologies**

When the first automatic electronic digital computer was introduced in 1939 by John Vincent Atanasoff, no one thought that it would have the potential to define popular entertainment, then dominated mainly by radio, film and live performances. Perhaps due to the huge room-sized mainframe systems coupled with sophisticated programming language, computers seemed too intimidating then. Furthermore, computers required advanced training to operate compared to the electronic media which could be operated with the flip of a switch or the turn of a dial.

That, however, was before Microsoft and the Internet were born. Now, people consider personal computers as natural communication devices and essential tools for living. Fast broadband connections enable rapid exchange of data and information from all around the globe. This phenomenon is very distinctive because it was so quickly and widely accepted and used. It has been said that it takes approximately 30 years for a major technological advance to reach full social acceptance (Gershon, 2001), yet the Internet took only four years (Pollack, 1999).

Today, the Internet allows us to engage in exciting and enjoyable activities like watching movies, downloading music, searching for pictures and graphics and even shopping just at the click of a mouse. These are some of the added features that *TVI* cannot offer. Plus, the market is now flooded with mobile laptops and tablets to assist these activities. "The prevailing trend has been to continually make computers more powerful, but now there is a countervailing movement to make them simpler and more compact" (Straubhaar & La Rose, 2004).

Mobile phones, too, are developing very fast. Mobile phone companies have introduced and developed generations of cell phone technologies that make it possible for users to check email, surf websites and watch television with a wireless connection. University campuses, airports, hotels, sidewalk cafés, *kopitiams* (local cafés) and even petrol pump outlets have installed wireless Internet connections to keep pace with the swift movement of the new technology and as valuable marketing tools as well. It is, indeed, an upcoming trend to watch television and movies, or to read books from cell phones. This definitely provides a huge competition to television as cell phones are mobile, interactive and convenient to use.

Web television operations such as *tonton.com.my* have changed programming as viewers can now catch repeats of *Media Prima* programs at their own convenience. *KRU TV* has recently been launched giving more options to alternative media. Moreover, *YouTube* viewership has increased in popularity and downloading from *torrents* allows individuals to watch television shows almost immediately after they have been released in the United States or another country of origin. This has also caused a concern as new blockbuster movies also become victims, in the same way as pirated DVDs and VCDs.

Bogart (1973) explains that, as technology changed and new media were introduced, the old media does not disappear, but simply adapt to new competitive conditions. Looking, however, at the current situation, especially as it is being influenced by new technologies, television—especially national television—needs to work extra hard to retain its popularity and hence its existence.

We have examined the various competitors of the Malaysian national television—new channels, niche programming formats, and new technologies ever growing in the market. What about television audiences themselves? This is an extremely important matter to explore, and we now turn to it by looking at findings of three focus groups and considering their views about the future of the national television, *TV1*.

### **Audience perceptions**

All three focus groups that were conducted demonstrate similar perceptions about *TV1* and its competitors. *Astro* and private television channels seem to be the preferred choice compared to *TV1*. The housewives, the young executives, and the university students all found *TV1* to be old-fashioned, boring, not technologically-driven, not sensitive to changing market needs, and simply lagging behind in attractive programs.

The housewives said that among the reasons they like watching *Astro* is the variety of channels and wholesome information it provides. All of them agreed that the whole family benefits from *Astro* channels. For example, their children can watch education channels such as *National Geographic* and *Discovery Channel* as well as enjoy other family entertainment shows such as the maddeningly popular *Astro*'s format-licensed reality TV program, *Akademi Fantasia*.

Most of the housewives are not motivated to watch *TV1* programs for various reasons. They felt that the programs are weak, dull, cold and uninviting. They also said that *TV1* hosts are old and boring as opposed to the young, bubbly and cheerful *TV3* hosts. Some respondents voiced the need for *TV1* to replace their old hosts and assign them to other non-on-air assignments. The housewives also commented on the makeup and dressing, citing it as unattractive and not aggressive enough.

The housewives also found dramas on *TV1* illogical and difficult to relate to. Some of the respondents were concerned with the storylines of dramas on *TV1* which are more focused on marriage crises and do not portray enough moral values. They felt that the programs on *TV1* were supposed to help instill good examples for their children and young viewers. Some of them compared these local dramas with Asian dramas on *Astro*'s channels, saying that Asian dramas are more logical and better exemplars for viewers.

Although *TV1* has been rebranded and much improvement was seen, the housewives still thought that the content quality is still far behind other *TV* stations, and that the competition is too vast for it to compete. On choosing *TV* stations, the majority said that *TV1* would be their last resort. There is, however, a specific program on *TV1* which all of the respondents love watching. The program is *Forum Perdana Ehwat Islam*, an Islamic-based talk show, which is aired live on Thursday nights.

On why *TVI* program standard is so bad, the housewives said that one of the reasons was probably the low salaries of the staff. In addition, as a government body, *TVI* is believed to be constrained by many bureaucratic restrictions and guidelines. Therefore, the respondents claimed that *TVI* is just trying to be "safe," and is therefore slightly behind other television stations.

As for the young executives, they acknowledged the importance of *RTM*, and especially of *TVI* in today's media industry. They believed that *TVI* promotes the national agenda and is able to cater for certain groups in the society. It is beneficial to have a national broadcasting channel so that government messages can be communicated to the public effectively. *RTM* is equated to the *BBC* in England in terms of its importance, tradition and more conservative approach.

That said, all of them denied watching *TVI* regularly. The existence of *Astro* has actually diverted this group of people to a more contemporary, global and interactive form of entertainment. Among the popular channels within *Astro* are *Star World*, *MTV*, *ESPN* and *National Geographic*. Even so, the declining popularity of *TVI* is not solely because of *Astro*. Most of the group had not watched *RTM* shows since *TV3* began in 1984. It was clear that these young executives are more interested in Western programs as opposed to the local ones. *TVI* consists mainly of local productions, dramas, talk shows, and religious programs. The group felt that the shows are not up to international technical standards and that the content of the shows does not have any appeal.

For example, dramas shown on *TVI* are not of the best quality, and in comparison to *TV3*, *TVI* is still left far behind. The talk shows are also quite conservative. The programs lack charisma, power and a good marketing approach that could attract people to watch the shows. The documentaries are still of the "old school" and lackluster, hence unable to attract the groups' attention at all.

Although these young executives hardly watched *TVI*, they felt that *TVI* is the most valid and reliable channel in terms of announcement. For example, in determining the date of the beginning of Ramadan and Eid, they prefer to hear the announcement through *TVI*, even though it is a pre-recorded message that is shown simultaneously across all channels. They felt as though that it is part of their tradition to watch it on *TVI*. Even during Ramadan, while waiting for the *Azan Maghrib* (the call for evening prayers) to break their fast, they prefer to rely on *TVI's Azan Maghrib* more than any other channels.

Generally, the young executives felt that *TVI* is not targeted to them, and that they felt unconnected to the channel. They believed, however, that its existence is very important in Malaysia to communicate the national agenda. They felt that it is a channel still being favoured by the older generation. They even mentioned that, at this age, the programs do not appeal to them, but they are certain that when they do reach their early 40s, they may be tuning in to *TVI*.

The third focus group, the university students, believed that satellite television is a stiff competitor to national television because of the multi-channel programming and the niche formats of most channels. The *Astro* channels were cited as most popular in their homes because of the various local, ASEAN and Asian dramas that are shown on these channels. *Akademi Fantasia* was also cited as the most exciting entertainment program that they have ever seen.



Since “authentic” Indian and Chinese programming are lacking on free-to-air stations, the ethnic-based channels on *Astro* are seen as refreshing and fulfilling. Among the free-to-air channels, *NTV7*, *8TV* and *TV3* are listed as their favorites. This is because these stations are perceived as young-oriented, vibrant, and colorful and have original, unique programs as well as recent and highly-rated imported English programs.

The students in this focus group admitted that they hardly watch *TVI*. They felt that it is “unattractive”, “boring”, “unglamorous”, “old” and “*kampong*” (rural-oriented). In fact, they perceived *TVI* as targeted to their parents and not at all meant for the younger generation. They felt that it has failed to connect with contemporary viewership since the programming is kept traditional and uninspiring.

When asked about the news program, the students claimed that only their parents watch *TVI* for news because some of them have been conditioned to do so as if it was customary. In the event of a national crisis, they would still not watch national television first because other channels such as *TV3* and *NTV7* would carry it anyway and somehow do a better job. However, they would not mind watching the live telecast of *Laporan Belanjawan Negara* (National Budget) on *TVI*, because it presents a government agenda. Other than that, they felt that *TVI* has dull game shows with unappealing titles and unfunny hosts, dragging drama serials, and awful weekend programs. They would rather watch repeat foreign sitcoms than sit through a half hour unimaginative local program. They acknowledged that *TVI* and *RTM* have a responsibility to promote local production companies, but they wished that these producers would come up with better ideas and scripts that appeal to the younger generation.

Still, these young respondents believed that *TVI* must remain the national television as it is important to have one for the sake of the country. Government television must exist as a national necessity. *TVI* has been in existence for a long time, and it is a good measure of the country’s history and continuity. Even so, it must make some adjustments to the time and should attempt to lure the younger viewers too. *TVI* should not be content with a veteran audience because, as national television, it should vie for a more comprehensive audience.

Finally, the students thought that *TVI* should be placed under a different administration or a new management system. It needs to remain under the government for national programming, but the management must be more market-driven, with promotional activities like the private stations. New ideas must be injected in the programming of *TVI* and changing administration might just be the answer. New talents must be explored not just for the front line, but the back line as well. Although *TVI* must remain as national television, this does not mean that it cannot be changed for a more refreshing outlook, a younger and more dynamic staff, and modern and contemporary techniques of production.

## **Discussion**

After exploring the present media scenario and audiences response to *TVI*, it can be safely said that national television is under threat in the midst of new stations, new programming formats, and new communication technologies. Yet, at the same time, it is still very much lauded and welcomed as a keeper of our identity and history. The advent of the global media in the country

has indeed pressured *RTM* to reinvent its identity in order to remain competitive. Although this is a good attempt, its impact remains to be seen.

Despite this reinvention, especially in terms of programming, *TVI* remains almost unchanged. The rebranding exercise did not divert *RTM* from its original mission and objectives, and perhaps this should be so. Indeed, there is nothing wrong for *RTM*, especially in the form of *TVI* to remain nationalistic amidst the dynamics of globalization. After all, *TVI* is a useful tool to buffer or offset the negative impact of globalization. *TVI* has not compromised its national objectives, thus state-defined national cultures and identities are not threatened. Anyway, today's television audiences are not unthinking communities that passively receive media messages.

Nonetheless, national television needs to cope with the changes in the age of global media. The focus group discussions have highlighted how programs aired on national television are seen as unappealing and lagging behind in many aspects. Still, the respondents were able to identify and relate with some signature programs. Therefore the challenge is to rebrand these signature programs so that it would be seen as more modern and attractive, yet maintaining the niche market as its key selling point. Word, Stream and Lukasiak (2011) stressed how public perceptions emphasize the importance of innovation as a key area within the public sector towards development and sustainability. Hence, national television in Malaysia needs to be more innovative in its programming in order to remain competitive and survive, as well as to capture the dynamic younger audience.

Some measures that can help improve the approach include embracing media technology advancement and social media outlets as part of the effort to correct some of the traditional stereotypes associated with *TVI* programs. Although there are efforts to engage with the audience's demand through *Facebook*, for example, public discussions on the *Facebook* wall of *TVI* highlight many shortcomings in its content and delivery. This shows what *TVI* lacks in addressing feedback and improving its image. *TVI* needs to be more proactive in engaging audiences through the social media in order to improve its image and distance the negative stereotypes associated with it. With proper social media exposure, for example in *Twitter* and *Facebook*, national television should be able to reach its audiences directly and has the potential to tap into new or younger viewers.

Ali Salman (2010), who focused his research on ICT in Malaysia, has shown that not only are the urban communities embracing ICT, but even the suburban communities are participating in ICT indicating a larger potential market with which national television can interact by providing more online content and a feedback system. This is an opportunity that should be grasped by the national television in positioning itself as a key player of the broadcasting industry. Nonetheless, the quality of content must also be improved in order to sustain its popularity and compete with similar rival programs in the future.

## **Conclusion**

The trend towards more television and more specialized content seems irreversible. Several consequences of this movement, however, bear scrutiny. To begin, national television, whatever its shortcomings, does provide a national agenda for society and help define a national consensus. It focuses the attention of the nation and mobilizes its resources. Douglas Cater, the

American media critic who was among the first to question whether media specialization was beneficial to society, asked in a 1973 *Wall Street Journal* article: “What happens when each minority group listens to its own prophets? When there are no more Walter Cronkites each evening to reassure us that despite its afflictions the nation still stands?”

Mass communication scholar Wilson Dizard (1994) described the traditional mass media as a kind of social “Elmer’s glue” that bound people together. Communication researcher Gladys Ganley, in a 1991 *Washington Quarterly* article, speculated that the growth in the number of specialized and personalized media might have political repercussions. Increased access to a greater range of information could serve as a democratizing force, but there might be a downside: “(If) (s)pread to millions of individuals throughout the world, each literally following his or her own agenda, such power could remove the glue of social cohesion. ... Power to the people could mean that nobody is in control.”

Neil Postman (1986), in his provocative book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, suggests another troubling possibility. The proliferation of media and messages could result in a flood of trivialized content that distracts us from the key issues of the day. With so many niche channels and specialized information that are mostly presented in entertainment format, we might, as the title suggests, amuse ourselves to death. Therefore, national television still acts as a fundamental purpose and symbol for Malaysians and for society to keep its feet firmly on the ground. In the face of a changing and fast evolving mediascape, it would seem that national television is a dying product, but it will not die so easily, simply because it is still very much a national necessity.

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