

Why are conspiracy theories doing so well? The case of *Charlie Hebdo*

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Diogenes
2015, Vol. 62(3–4) 8–16
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DOI: 10.1177/0392192120924532
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



Conspiracy theories are in the process of becoming a hardy annual for the conventional press. After the murders committed by Mohamed Merah and Mehdi Nemmouche, the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 or the just-averted massacre on board the high-speed Thalys train in August 2015, many commentators noted with astonishment the vitality of the conspiracist imagination. Since then, numerous news events have led to the writing of scornful and astounded articles on this aspect of the domain of human imagination, which nevertheless has a very long history. That this tendency, well known to sociologists and anthropologists, should become a recurrent issue is no more than one of the indicators of the important place occupied by naïve interpretations of the world in the public forum. The question which I will ask in this article and to which I shall propose certain answers is thus the following: why are conspiracy theories so alive and well?

At the first sight, it could well seem incomprehensible that a theory as far-fetched as, for example, the one claiming that a group going under the name of the Illuminati¹ is secretly controlling the world should be endorsed by 20% of our contemporaries.² However sceptical one may be of certain surveys, one is nevertheless obliged to recognize that the comparability of their results in relation to these subjects strengthens the impression that the extent of conspiracist beliefs is reaching worrying proportions in France and in a number of other Western countries. That this type of mythology can acquire such popularity in prosperous countries with high levels of education constitutes a sociological enigma which demands to be taken seriously. Conspiracy theory lurks like a sea serpent within the human imagination, and it has not awaited the 21st century to reveal all the power of its deadly seduction. Despite that, and with a few rare exceptions, its manifestations have remained confined to the extremes, even if certain best-selling novels have permitted it from time to time to acquire a considerable audience. Setting aside these occasional literary potboilers, the principal means of diffusion of conspiracy theories has in the past always been by word of mouth, seeing that such subjects were rarely taken up by the conventional media. Given this, the cognitive products formed by conspiracy theory showed the classic characteristics of the non-conventional propositions of the ‘cognitive market’³ which cannot easily penetrate the public domain. I will evoke three of these characteristics to illuminate the metamorphoses which are emerging from new configurations of this market. These metamorphoses broadly explain the vitality that certain conspiracy theories enjoy today: but it should go without saying that the explanations which

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draw them together, and which I will develop here, in no way exclude other, more historical and political, explanations.

Deregulation of the cognitive market

The deregulation of the cognitive market depends on several criteria, the most obvious being the political ones. Totalitarian regimes always imply a close control over their cognitive markets, at least for certain areas. From the political point of view, it may be said that the cognitive market in contemporary Western societies is broadly deregulated to the extent that, with a few rare exceptions, cognitive products do neither incur taxation nor fall under state prohibition. This cognitive liberalism is consubstantial with the very way in which democracies are constituted: it was regarded in 1789 as a fundamental human right. It has been authorized by political decisions and made possible by technological innovation. The Internet is the most recent and most emblematic expression of this. But this political and technological freeing up of the cognitive market unflinchingly leads to a massification of the spread of information. Let's think about this for a moment: in 2005, humanity as a whole had generated 150 exabits⁴ of data, a stupendous quantity; but in 2010, it produced eight times as much! In summary, the spread of information is growing so great and in such proportions that it has effectively now become a major characteristic of the history of humanity. One can say that this market has been further deregulated in comparison with what governed the diffusion of information before the appearance of the Internet. Prior to that, those whom communication theory calls the 'gatekeepers' (journalists, official commentators, etc.) took care to ensure, for better or for worse that certain ideas could not circulate easily within the public domain. On this basis, conspiracy theories were rarely invited to the newsrooms of the conventional media. Today, however, these ramparts have been largely eroded ... again for better or for worse. Thus it was that, after the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, one could read on 7 January 2015, the very day of the terrorist incident, online texts passing themselves off as news media sites which were developing theories suspecting the 'official account' (attributing the attacks to an extreme Islamist ideology) of being false. This was notably the case of the Réseau Voltaire site, on which Thierry Meyssan, one of the leading French-speaking activists in the conspiracy theory world, posted an article under the title: 'Who was behind the *Charlie Hebdo* attack?' (voltairenet.org/article186408.html).

Now it might have been reasonable to expect that the freeing up of the cognitive market should favour the more robust of its intellectual products. In this market environment where these compete alongside beliefs and hypotheses are far-fetched or even dangerous, the truth should always come out on top, the most optimistic would always suppose. But on many points, reality severely dashes such pious hope.

It turns out that certain false or dubious ideas dominate, persist and sometimes meet with greater success than more reasonable and balanced ones because they may capitalize on the processes of inference drawing which, though rationally dubious, are attractive for the mind. The propagation of what might be called 'cognitive demagogy' (Bronner, 2014), which sees the gradual dominance of intuitive and often erroneous points of view over all sorts of subjects, is very favourable to conspiracist theories because, as several specialists of the issue have noted (Campion-Vincent, 2005), conspiracist mythologies draw their strength from mono-causal, Manichean reasoning and are based upon a revelatory effect (Bessi et al., 2015) which appeals to the least worthy but at the same time the most intuitive inclinations of our minds.

Apart from the inherent issue relating to cognitive demagogy, to which I will return because conspiracy theories elicit it through their demonstration, the way in which the power relations are organized within this deregulated information space is just as essential for understanding the current vitality of conspiracy theories. I have been able to show (Bronner, 2013) that, on various

matters, those who believe such theories have succeeded in rendering their arguments more visible and accessible than those who seek to counter them with more methodical structures of thought. On a number of issues, among the 30 initial sites brought up by a Google search, one finds a large majority maintaining notions that are usually classified as belonging to the field of personal beliefs (Loch Ness monster, astrology, etc.). It is also known that well-organized groups, such as *Égalité & Résolution*, which are great disseminators of conspiracy theories, systematically set out to create dominant relationships across the forums, social networks and even on Wikipedia pages (D'Angelo and Molard, 2015). In the same way, a militant extremist explained in an interview granted to the newspaper *Midi Libre*⁵ that certain cell groups were engaged in a constant occupation of forums offered by all news sites. These forums use the pretext of articles published in a such and such daily newspaper to pass comment on the news. As a consequence, the high level of motivation of these militant groups – and thus their visibility – enables them to massively occupy these spaces of electronic exchange. Their point of view may certainly not be representative of public opinion in general, but they can create the illusion that they represent a silent majority which takes advantage of the anonymity of the web to finally enable ‘common sense’ points of view to gain a hearing. Without necessarily being led by the nose, whoever reads these exchanges or whose emotions are aroused by some event but who at the same time feels uncertain as to the conclusions that should be drawn from it has every chance of letting himself be influenced by the argumentative discourse relations imposed on these forums.

This was exactly the tactic employed by the 9/11 conspiracy theorists. Furthermore, these individuals and groups directed a form of harassment against those who contradicted them publicly (e.g. by obsessively sending letters to the co-workers, colleagues or associates of these contradictors in the hope of discrediting them), a tactic traditionally undertaken by certain sectarian groups.

Several studies arising out of what is called the ‘new science of networks’ (Watts, 2004) or ‘web science’ (Hendler et al., 2008) tend in this direction. By drawing upon very large databases, they show that a very limited number of motivated individuals are able to influence opinion on the Internet much more than they could do in the regular life of society (Watts and Strogatz, 1998), leading to some giving them the name, in reference to the Columbia School propositions, of ‘super opinion leaders’ (Gladwell, 2002). All these studies show that, whereas certain authors see in the Internet the hope of democratizing democracy (Cardon, 2010; Flichy, 2010; Leadbeater and Miller, 2004), the type of democracy in question does not necessarily correspond to the ideal that they seem to make of it: some use the Internet to vote a thousand times, whereas others never vote. In relation to this, those motivated by their conspiracist beliefs and those militants who defend conspiracist ideas do ‘vote’ a lot.

The swiftness of myth constitution

The cognitive market as it is constituted is characterized by the opportunity for anyone to launch a piece of information into the public domain. This situation has increased in exponential fashion the competitive pressure on this market. In mechanical terms, this pressure has notably accelerated the speed of dissemination of non-selective information, a phenomenon which nurtures the vitality of the belief sphere. Henceforth, conspiracy myths emerge within days, or even only a few hours, after the events which inspire them. One can certainly advance the hypothesis that conspiracist myths have always followed upon significant news events, but, before the Internet, they took on the evanescent form of the informal interchanges of regular social life (conversations, etc.). In such a form, therefore, they rarely coalesced into consistent narratives, and even when they did, the time they took to spread through society greatly exceeded the interest in the event which had inspired them. Thus, one can conclude that conspiracist hypotheses underwent drastic selection in

Table 1.

Events	Lag-time
Kennedy assassination	27 days (the first article by Mark Lane, 'Defense Brief for Oswald', published on 19 Dec 1963 in the <i>National Guardian</i>)
11 Sep 2001 attacks	27 days (publication of a claim on voltairenet.org/article7633.html)
Haiti earthquake	6 days (a report on the <i>Radio Nacional de Venezuela</i> claimed that the earthquake was 'the result of a test by the US Navy', vivr.gob.ve/actualidad?id_not=15464)
Mohamed Merah	0 days (publication of alterinfo.net/Mohamed-Merah-vrai-terroriste-idiot-utile-ou-victime-d-un-complot-étatique_a73372.html)
<i>Charlie Hebdo</i> attacks	0 days (publication of the text voltairenet.org/article186408.html)

the cognitive market and it is easy to observe the brief duration of these theories except when they were related to major historical events (the Kennedy assassination, whether man really walked on the moon and so on). Today, the 2012 Toulouse and Montauban shootings of policemen and Jewish children by Mohamed Merah, the 2014 death of Christophe de Margerie (the Chief Executive of the French oil company Total) in a plane crash in Russia and the near-massacre on the Thalys train, among other headline-grabbing events, all ignited the conspiracist imagination in a very short time. Table 1 indicates for a few chosen examples the lag-time between the event and the first conspiracist posting in the public domain.

It is likely that the *Charlie Hebdo* killings, due to the world-wide revulsion that they stirred, would have inspired conspiracy theories in any event; but had they taken place 20 years earlier, is it conceivable that on the very day of the massacre, conspiracy projections were already circulating? Yet, as we have seen, Thierry Meyssau took up the pen on the 7 January itself, as did Damien Viguière for the website *Égalité & Réconciliation*⁶ which promotes the theories of the conspiracist Alain Soral. Propositions of the same stripe were also found on the same day on the sites info-resistance.org, stopmensonges.org, chaos-controle.com, lamatricejuive.net, [fascismmeetislamophobie](http://fascismmeetislamophobie7)⁷ and others. Some developed the proposition that the attacks took place under a false banner or claimed astonishment at the change of colour of the rear-vision mirrors of the assassins' get-away vehicle.⁸ To these different sites must be added the tweets and videos posted on the same day, such as those of a certain 'Scady Adit',⁹ a regular poster of 'anti-system' videos and someone open to the 'paranormal', in which he reiterates eight times that he is not a conspiracy theorist but demands nine times to know 'who benefits from this crime?' – running the classic argument *cui prodest?*, which serves as an introduction to practically every conspiracy theory. All of this accumulated to such an extent that I was able to identify 27 distinct arguments in favour of a conspiracy theory on the very day of the attacks.

What the Internet offers to conspiracy mythologies is also a much shortened incubation period, which ensures the persistence of these fables for, as soon as they are formally laid out on the web, they will remain there. This has a further significant consequence that the range of issues capable of generating beliefs, rumours and conspiracy theories is much broader, automatically increasing the sum of the various beliefs permeating the social space.

The swarm effect

The diverse manifestations of credulous belief (rumours, conspiracy myths, etc.) have long been dependent upon the power of the conversational domain: such stories being spread through the social space by word of mouth. This remains broadly the case, but the Internet offers them a new

mode of distribution. Whereas previously the costs of gaining entry to this market could be considerable (publishing a book, writing an article for a platform that commands a sufficient audience, etc.), the Internet allows anyone to advance a line of argument which is available to all (in the form of a text, a photo, a video, etc.) with three major consequences for the belief universe. Firstly, the Internet allows the slippage factor of any conversation to be limited. This slippage in precision of the original information is what characterizes information exchange between individuals, as the famous studies of Allport and Postman (1947) on rumour have shown.

Secondly, the narrative stability which is enabled by the written document automatically implies the potential to assist memory. The easy accessibility of the information acts like a memory-enhancing tool for individuals.

Finally, and most importantly, this accessibility and this persistent retention of the information favour processes of accumulation: ‘a mutual sharing of the arguments in favour of the belief’.

Of course, such belief phenomena do not have a monopoly over information-sharing processes on the Internet. Such processes can provide certain usefulness when there is a need for assisting the aggregation of data which are disconnectedly scattered throughout the world – those relating to rare diseases, for example (Loriol, 2003). The downside is that it is these same mechanisms favouring the accumulation of knowledge, which are in play in the constitution of cognitive products, that present themselves in the form of multi-layered stacks of argument, which, by virtue of this form, become powerfully convincing. Until this revolution in the cognitive market brought about by the Internet, the conspiracy narrative, when it did not lead on to the publication of a book, remained relatively informal, able to be based only on a few specific arguments that believers in it could retain, and because of this tended to take on a rather exotic character. For example, the Marlboro cigarette brand was accused of being under the sinister control of the Ku Klux Klan (Campion-Vincent and Renard, 2002: 369), purely on the basis that, viewed from a certain angle, this brand’s packets seemed to be etched with three red Ks on a white background. The presence of this triple letter was, therefore, held to be a sign of the influence of that white racist group over Marlboro. Yet in itself, this argument was manifestly too meagre to ensure a massive and unquestioning dissemination. Contemporary conspiracy narratives, on the other hand, have been able to maximize the potential offered by the new information technologies to greatly increase their audiences. An even cursory examination of conspiracy websites – whether they are dedicated to elucidating the 9/11 attacks or the death of Michael Jackson, to take two examples among many – leaves the reader struck by the sheer amplitude of the argumentation developed and hence by the difficulty faced by the non-prepared mind to find rational responses to this mass of pseudo-proofs. I recently proposed labelling these multi-layered argument stacks ‘Fortean products’ (Bronner, 2012), in reference to Charles Fort, the author of the *Livre des damnés* [Book of the Damned], which caused a great stir when it was first published, due to the sheer incongruity of the hypotheses it advanced. What should claim our attention here is the method put forward by the author for convincing people and which he defined in extremely metaphorical imagery in the preamble to his work (Fort, 1955: 23–24):

Battalions of the cursed, led on by the deathly-pale facts that I have exhumed, will begin their march. Some ghastly grey, others the colour of flame, a few already putrifying. Some are corpses, mummies or skeletons, screeching and stumbling, revived by all those who were condemned while alive. Giants shamble through their sleep, ragged shreds and theorems will march on like Euclid alongside the spirit of anarchy [...] the spirit of the whole will be that of a procession. The power which decreed that all these things should be damned is Dogmatic Science. And yet they march on [...], their parade achieving the impressive solidity of the things that happen, and go on happening, and never cease happening.

Expressed less dramatically, Fort's aim was to show how such multi-layered argument stacks could be built up; each of the individual layers which contributed to their elaboration could be very weak, as he admitted in the passage quoted, but the overall construction would be so tall that it would generate by its very presence an impression of truth. A conclusion of the type: 'everything cannot be false'.

The conditions governing the spread of information in our contemporary world thus bring a technical underpinning to all the legends which could benefit, for the effectiveness of their dissemination, from a variety of such Fortean argumentation. Such conditions favour all those conspiracy believers who wish to aggregate elements of argument which, taken individually, can appear minuscule and easily invalidated, but which, agglomerated together, form a corpus of arguments which it becomes costly, in both time and energy, to seek to annihilate. As a specific example, if we note that the conspiracy narratives which claim that the official version concerning the 9/11 attacks is false, we may observe that these narratives draw upon over 100 different lines of argument! Some theories are based on the physics of construction materials, others on seismology or on an analysis of stock market rates (Anfossi, 2010). To set up counter-arguments to all these would require competencies beyond any one individual.

This Fortean process is particularly patent in the case of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. The 27 arguments favouring a conspiracy which appeared on the very same day as the shootings were not coming from a single source, as has been seen. They came about from a non-coordinated activity which might be regarded as the blind collaboration of thousands of brains motivated by the desire to bring to light anomalies in the official version of the facts about the massacre which were only just beginning to emerge. We can speak of thousands, for although the first interventions were made by certain known conspiracist bloggers, the baton was soon picked up by numerous members of social networks who began scrutinizing the photos, videos and available recordings of the incidents. And if one searches, he/she will find.

Some online contributors became amateur ballistics experts by expressing their doubts, based on certain images, that Ahmed Merabet, the policeman shot on the sidewalk with a Kalashnikov bullet to the head, was really dead. Others brought attention to the claim that the French President, François Hollande, had arrived too quickly on the scene (implying thereby that he was aware of the impending attacks even before they happened). Still others noted that the journalists who had taken refuge on the rooftops were wearing bulletproof vests (so how could they be prepared in this way for an event which they were supposed to have known nothing about?). By 11 January, one could already list more than 100 arguments which supported a conspiracy theory! The graph shown in Figure 1 presents the rate by which these arguments grew day by day.

In conformity with the notion which one can form about a Fortean product, these ideas were disparate, incoherent and sometimes even incompatible. Online commentators pointed out, for example, that it seemed strange that the Kouachi brothers had left their ID cards in their car (which allowed for a miraculously swift identification of them), adding that if this was not an oversight on their part but a deliberate act, it was difficult to understand why they should have committed the crimes with their faces masked. Others pointed to the verbal slip made by Caroline Fourest, a prominent French essayist, when she mentioned in a television interview the comment made by a young woman threatened by the guns of the Kouachi brothers, that: 'he had very beautiful blue eyes'. Fourest corrected herself immediately, but the damage had been done – she had let slip a piece of information which she should not have revealed. If the killer had blue eyes, then it could not be one of the Kouachi brothers, which then further implied that Caroline Fourest herself was implicated in some way or other in the plot. Without any difficulty, one could find even more bizarre assertions like the one which claimed to point out that in Hebrew, 'I am Charlie' was the acronym of 'I am Israel'. And speaking of Israel, whose presence was detected everywhere in

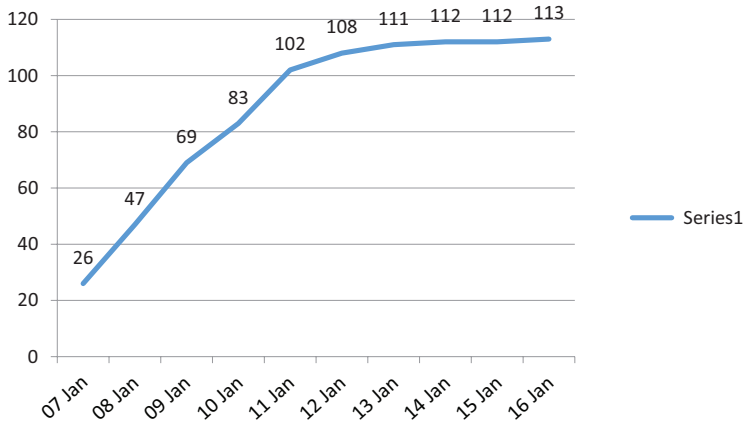


Figure 1. Number of arguments day by day favouring the idea of a conspiracy. In all, 151 arguments were identified until 31 July 2015.

certain conspiracy theories, what could be made of those who pointed out that the route of the huge demonstration of 11 January represented an inverted map of Israel? This particular Fortean product was a grab bag of everything. Granted, certain conspiracy arguments were to be dismissed with contempt by the leading conspiracists themselves; but despite that, the absurdity of certain components of the Fortean product would not affect their overall growing conviction. On the other hand, these elements would contribute to the alarm of certain minds sensitive to the power of numerology or to coincidences of every sort. All such contributed elements, as mentioned earlier, lead to a form of mental confusion in the end, encouraging those inclined to accredit this kind of mythology to conclude that ‘everything cannot be false’.

Conclusion: conspiracy myths are worrying symptoms

Such disparate arguments coalesce together and transform rapidly into a narrative. In the case of *Charlie Hebdo*, I have been able to identify two types of narrative which, once again, are not completely compatible, but which could be adopted at the same time by the same people.

The first would suggest that the attacks had not been committed by Muslims, but rather by those who were their enemies. The hands of Washington and Israel were seen to be conjointly fomenting terrorist attacks more or less everywhere in order to bring about the famous ‘war of civilizations’ finally which, according to the conspiracists, is a confrontation that these two ill-intentioned powers would want to provoke.

The second narrative put more emphasis on a clandestine operation of the French government and more specifically of its secret services whose goal would be to create a situation favourable to the promulgation of laws severely limiting individual and collective freedom, a sort of French ‘Patriot Act’, for which reason the conspiracists never balked at evoking the likelihood of a French 9/11.

In both cases, these narratives paint a vision of the world which, for those who take them on board, legitimately arouses a heightened sense of indignation. If one believes a particular story to be true, it is quite natural to wish to punish the guilty and to be attracted towards radical forms of political expression. Herein precisely lies the problem that conspiracy theories pose for democracies: they can be the escalator that leads to the radicalization of minds. It is fortunate that not all

conspiracists tend towards supporting political violence, but there are few positions expressed by Islamic terrorists, for example, which do not carry a conspiracist discourse.¹⁰ This fact is furthermore statistically established, as shown by the fine article by van Prooijen et al. (2015).

Obviously, it would scarcely be serious to consider that the average citizen of our democracies adheres unconditionally to a conspiracist vision of the world. Nevertheless, the dissemination of these Fortean products can render the slope slippery for those among them who have a disposition to viewing the world in a paranoid fashion. No doubt all this is not foreign to the prominence of the feeling of distrust attested in many opinion surveys carried out in these present-day democracies: distrust of politicians, distrust of the media, distrust of so-called experts and scientists and so on. The distrust that is inspired by power in particular is consubstantial with democracy itself as Rosanvallon (2006) points out, but in the arm wrestle pitting the democracy of the credulous against that of those asserting knowledge, this distrust comes to strengthen the first rather than the second.

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Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. The Illuminati loom large in the imaginative world of conspiracy theory with claims that the German secret society of the luminaries of Bavaria (the 'Illuminati'), which drew its inspiration from the philosophy of the Enlightenment but which, in fact, had been dissolved in 1785, may well have continued to exist underground and to be still dominating the world from a clandestine position.
2. ipso.fr/communiquer/2014-07-04-illuminati-phenomene-inquietant
3. The 'cognitive market' is a metaphor which allows a representation of the fictive space in which cognitive products – hypotheses, beliefs, acquired bits of knowledge, etc. – are disseminated. This term will be used in preference to 'information market', which could just as equally apply to the address of a restaurant or an individual's telephone number, whereas a cognitive product, in the sense that I am giving it here, will imply an organization of pieces of information into an explicit or implicit discourse about what is true and/or what is good.
4. The equivalent of 10^{18} bits.
5. www.midilibre.fr/2012/10/08/un-militant-repent-les-secrets-de-l-ultra-droite.574771.php
6. See: egaliteet-reconciliation.fr/Attentat-contre-Charlie-Hebdo-Omar-m-a-tuer-30103.html
7. See: info-resistance.org/2015/01/charlie-hebdo-attentat-sous-fausse-banniere, stopmensonges.com/la-france=touchee-par-une-attaque-terroriste-charlie-hebdo, chaos-controle.com/archives/2015/01/07/3125786.html, lamatricejuive.net/2015/01/07/charlie-hebdo-un-attentat-cousu-de-fil-blanc and fascismeetislamo-phobie.wordpress.com/2015/01/07/massacre-a-charlie-hebdo-encore-un-coup-des-fascistes-islamophobes
8. Some claimed to notice that the rear-vision mirrors of the car used by the Kouachi brothers did not have the same colour as in the photos, deducing from this that it was not the same vehicle. This alleged blunder by the secret services at the start of the attacks would, therefore, show that two distinct teams were operating. But such a hypothesis did not emerge until several days after the observation of this 'anomaly'. In actual fact, the exterior rear-vision mirrors were chrome plated and changed their apparent colour according to the intensity of the exterior lighting.
9. See: youtube.com/watch?v=DYUV5UVOvp4&feature=youtu.be
10. See certain interviews in Khosrokhavar (2006).

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