RAN ISSUE PAPER

RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMA+)

Extra: Annex with key findings from recent relevant research

G	Goal
A	Audience
M	Message
M	Messenger
M	Media
A	Action
+	

If you want to develop effective alternative and counter-narratives, then these guidelines are for you!

The RAN´s Communication and Narratives working group (RAN C&N) has developed the following practical guidelines for carrying out effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns. The guidelines combine lessons learned and key elements from the RAN C&N meetings with an easily accessible overview of relevant research.

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Introduction

The GAMMMA+ model comprises the following key elements: **G**oal, **A**udience, **M**essage, **M**essenger, **M**edia, **A**ction **plus** Monitoring and Evaluation. It combines key elements and lessons learned from RAN C&N meetings with an overview of relevant research.

This issue paper describes the GAMMMA+ model; Annex 2 provides a tangible overview of the key findings for effective alternative and counter-narratives from recent relevant research.

RAN GAMMMA+ Essentials

- Effective communication campaigns have **goals** that are clear, realistic and measurable.

- The promoted **messages** are relevant and the target **audience** considers the **messengers** credible.

- The campaign works with the target audience's preferred **medium** or online platforms, and is also present when the audience communicates offline.

- Narrative campaigns in the form of monologues are unlikely to meet the needs of an audience that wants to talk, or is upset or outraged about a real or perceived injustice.

- Campaigns should offer a **call to action** for those wishing to become involved in the issue at hand, which will facilitate monitoring and evaluation.

- Campaigns aiming to change minds and behaviours offer opportunity for sustained **dialogue** (both online and offline) with those in their audience who wish to talk.

- Campaigns which ensure they have **monitoring and evaluation** components in place from the start can then adjust ongoing activities if needed, and once completed, can learn whether they had the desired impact.

- Campaigns that produce a **constant stream of content** for their target audience to interact with increase their chances of having an impact. Authenticity and quantity are more relevant than technical quality.

- Alternative narratives promote positive alternative perspectives, courses of action and role models, and foster critical thinking. **Counter-narratives,** which aim at debunking extremist propaganda, should only be directed at a well-researched and understood audience which is already engaged with extremist content.

- **Prepare** for success and remember to take into consideration all security risks for your organisation and partners.

- **Don´t reinvent the wheel** — check the RAN collection for inspiring practices or for example the Hedayah Counter Narrative Library or the study for the EP LIBE Committee on Countering Terrorist Narratives.

Before you start, make sure you **do no harm**!

Don´t spread extremist propaganda. Studies indicate that raising young people's awareness of an issue which authorities disapprove of or consider inappropriate or harmful may actually stimulate (more) interest in the issue rather than dissuade them (Hornik 2008). Therefore, highlighting the danger of specific extremist or terrorist groups can prove counterproductive. Counter-narratives in particular should only target a well-defined and understood audience that is curious about extremist content or sympathises with it already.

Avoid stigmatisation. When trying to increase the resilience of a specific target audience against extremist propaganda and recruitment, be aware that you might be perceived as stereotyping and mistrusting this group. Ensure you have a good understanding of the sensitivities and concerns of your target audience, so as not to foster polarisation inadvertently.

The GAMMMA+ Model

GOAL: What do you really want to achieve?

Why are specific goals important?

When planning a campaign, you must be clear about precisely what you wish to achieve. Sounds like common sense, surely? Yet many people have a hard time breaking down their overall goals into concrete and measurable objectives. How can measure your success if you are not certain what your success should look like?

Setting **clear, realistic and measurable goals** helps you clarify what kind of resources, time, staff and funds are required to successfully carry out your campaign.

Note: Goals that can´t be measured are *visions.*

G Goal

Check: What do you need to know?

Do you understand the root causes and contributing factors to radicalisation processes of your target audience? Have you distinguished whether your aim is to strengthen their resilience or to counter extremist content? Have you identified clear, realistic and measurable indicators in this process, so as to understand the response of your audience? Are you using a 'theory of change' that explains why you think your intervention will work, on whom, how and in what way?

An example of how the GOAL-defining process might begin is shown below.

Goals: increase the number of calls/emails from your audience to your prevention/exit website/helpline by 50 % within 6 weeks; have 20 conversations, 50 % of which will lead to increased participation in your event;

WHO: males and females, aged 16 to 23, who follow/are members of online groups that promote right-wing extremist ideologies and right-wing music and right-wing fashion/brands (*narrow target audience*).

WHERE: they reside in geographically defined radicalisation hubs (Vidino 2017that have had a disproportionally high number of extremists in the last 3 years (*further defined target audience*).

HOW: by using curiosity/mystery/redirection/humour/facts and by pushing videos/memes/posters into their online echo-chambers. This will stimulate them to comment/share/like/want to talk *and* might have an impact on their thinking/feeling, because of reasons X, Y, Z, etc. (*theory of change*)

Audience: Who do you *really* want to reach out to?

A Audience

Why is detailed knowledge about the audience important?

Having a detailed understanding of your target audience will be the key to your success. Most groups, communities or milieus have their own 'language', narratives, signs and (sub-)cultures. Interventions need to be based on an understanding of what your audience cares about, how and where they communicate with each other, and why they would react to your campaign.

> **Tip**
>
> Local alternative or counter-narratives from communities struggling with extremism are more likely to be effective than interventions from well-intended outsiders. Often, local actors can provide relevant messages plus credible messengers: try to partner with them. Selecting the right partners is key (see the 'enemy of my enemy' fallacy).

Check: What do you need to know?

Can you define the key characteristics of your audience? Can you narrow down and clearly identify their age range, gender, cultural background, 'group language' and place of residence? Do you understand why they would care about your intervention, why would they interact with you? Do you understand what could change their thinking and behaviour? Where do they get their information from? Where are their echo chambers that you need to access with your message? If your aim is to reinforce the resilience of your audience, understanding them also means understanding their vulnerabilities. What makes them vulnerable?

How to better understand your audience

Most conflicts start within communities. Extremists initially attempt to 'awaken' peers, e.g. Sunni extremists target other Sunnis, and white supremacists target the other white members of a community. Try to reach out to the community members who oppose these extremists. Contact civil society organisations (CSOs) working in specific neighbourhoods: youth worker associations, youth centres, sports and martial arts clubs, etc. Invite them to participate or to contribute to your campaign.

Common errors to avoid

Carrying out research on one's target audience is key but this does not necessarily mean you have comprehended your audience. Overestimating ones' capacity and understanding of the complexity of the audience is quite a common error. In the best case scenario following such an error, you might have lost or failed to capture your audience; in the worst case scenario, you might have introduced extremist propaganda to an audience who was indifferent to it, prior to your campaign.

> **Advice**
>
> If really understanding the target audience seems too complex and time-consuming, please strongly consider replacing it with another target audience which better matches your understanding and your team's expertise. **Ill-prepared interventions might lead to unintended consequences** (see 'do no harm').

Message: What are you talking about?

M Message

Why is your message important?

Your aim is to stimulate people's thoughts and feelings, and maybe even elicit a shift in their opinions and behaviour, right? Then your narrative needs to resonate with the target audience. It must be relevant to them and have social currency. Why else would they listen? Your message has to pull people in (Green, 2017), and make people think 'This makes sense to me' or 'I want to do that.' Having an in-depth understanding of your target audience will allow you to create messages that address issues people feel strongly about, from a different angle.

Check: What do you need to know?

Why would your audience care about your message? Why would they share it with others and make it a topic of conversation? Are you using the appropriate language style, along with dialect(s) and slang? Do you build on keywords and terms that your audience often use themselves? Are you aware of the risks of miscommunication? Why would your message change their thinking and behaviour?

> Tip
>
> The more radicalised your audience is, the more their individual identity, morals and sacred values are 'fused' (Atran 2017) with that of the extremist ideology or group, the less effective a confrontational approach will be (see the 'backfire effect'). Alternative or counter narratives are more likely to resonate with such an audience if you take an indirect approach, for example utilising surreal contexts like those of science fiction/adventure/mystery (Green 2017): since this does *not feel* like an attack on their morals and identity, they remain open-minded to some degree, to new input (Kaplan 2016).
>
> Many conflicts are based on differing moral preferences, rather than detailed political or religious issues. If this is the case for your campaign, consider reframing your message so it connects with the moral foundations of the targeted audience. For example, highlight *shared* morals or values (Feinberg 2015) like justice, equality and tradition, and use these as a bridge to connect opposing camps.

How do you know your message will resonate?

We recommend observing the responses of a small sample of your target audience before rolling out your full-scale campaign. If you don´t have team members who are close to your target audience, test your message using a focus group comprising members of your audience or people very close to your audience. You can also test your message on a small scale, by initiating targeted discussions in an online forum frequented by your audience. Alternatively, you can buy small-scale advertisements on Google, Facebook or Twitter (or ask for free ad credits), and sample the reaction of your audience. Check the feedback you receive, and adjust your message if, for example, the wrong audience responds or the response is very different from what you had hoped.

> **Be aware of the 'backfire effect'**
>
> Research shows that using confrontational approaches (fact-based or emotional) will most likely strengthen the convictions of your target audience. This is especially the case if your message is perceived as an attack on the core values or identity of the individual or its in-group. See *The Debunking Handbook* for more information.

Messenger: Who will speak for you?

Why is it important to pick the right messenger?

People are more likely to listen to someone they can relate to. There are many potential messengers considered credible by a specific target audience: 'victims', family members, 'formers', celebrities/influencers, regular peers or community leaders. Your target audience determines who is credible for them. As suggested with your message, discuss different options with members of the target audience (focus group) or those very close to it.

> Tip
>
> If you don't have credible messengers in your network, partner with an organisation more closely connected to your target audience.

Check: What do you need to know?

Why should your target audience listen to, believe and trust your messenger? Are there any messenger-related risks to your organisation (e.g. reputation or credibility) or to the messenger himself/herself (e.g. trolling or security concerns)?

Be aware of the 'enemy of my enemy' fallacy

When aiming to prevent or counter violent extremism, make sure you don´t promote non-democratic/anti-pluralistic actors, even if they oppose violent extremist/terrorist organisations. Working with right-wing populists or Islamists to counter respective violent extremists will very likely undermine the overall credibility of your campaign (see 'do no harm').

Media: How can you reach your audience?

M Media

Why is it important to select the right media?

To reach your target audience directly, you need to know which media or other means they use to communicate with each other and how they receive information. Directing your target audience to your preferred platform is an option, but it is much more effective to address them where they are. Don't shy away from platforms you've never used: the RAN C&N collection of accessible and user-friendly toolkits and tutorials (available online) can help you familiarise yourself with various platforms.

Your research, in coordination with your focus group, will determine which medium is most likely to be effective for reaching your target audience. It is important to determine the medium early in the process, as this will affect the type of content you produce.

Check: What do you need to know?

How does your target audience communicate? Where do they get their information from, and where are their echo chambers? What is your capacity in terms of budget and time for becoming active on one more platforms, or offline? Will you produce content for mobile screens or for PC screens, including sound or subtitles? How can you ensure your campaign does not get highjacked by audiences outside your target group?

Common errors to avoid

Certain social media platforms are more familiar to you, your colleagues, partners or funders than other platforms. For example, many projects use Facebook, Twitter or YouTube as their main social media outlets, despite knowing that their target audience is not particularly active there and in fact prefer to use WhatsApp, Snapchat, Telegram or Reddit. If you do not use the platform(s) your target audience is using, you will probably not be heard.

Action: What do you want your audience to do?

A Action

Why do you need a call to action?

Most major extremist narratives make the claim that 'your' people are suffering from a great injustice and that you should help them in any way you can. Those who feel they belong to the suffering in-group and sympathise with these narratives often feel an urge to act. They may be angry or upset, so only telling them what not to do will have little or even an unintended effect (see 'the backfire effect'). Your campaign, if it addresses those grievances, should therefore offer concrete calls to action to channel emotions and ideas into productive measures.

Check: What do you need to know?

Which key issues does your audience care about? What kind of emotional response will your audience have to the issues you are addressing? Which calls to action resonate with your audiences' emotions and make it possible to channel some of their feelings into productive actions?

Possible calls to action

Donate!
Ask your target audience to donate money for a shared cause. Recommend trusted organisations.

Volunteer!
Ask your target audience to take action as volunteers in trusted organisations that work on the issues they most care about. Provide them with information on how to do this.

Participate!
Organise a demonstration, talk or other kind of public event, where you call for your audience to join in.

Talk to us!
Providing a phone number or website that encourages people to call or visit to obtain help is an effective way of connecting with your target audience.

> Tip
>
> **One-to-one digital intervention** is an advanced method of talking with your audience directly and on an individual level; it resembles offline work carried out by social workers. The RAN 1-2-1 paper explains how to do this.

Plus Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E): Is your campaign effective?

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Why is M&E so important?

Including M&E from the start will be of benefit in a number of ways. It will allow you to adjust and improve your campaign, based on the feedback and data you collect. Moreover, you will be able to demonstrate the reach, performance and impact of your campaign to third parties. This may be key when you apply for funding or seek to convince stakeholders to scale up your campaign.

Check: What do you need to know?

Which indicators of success can you measure? What is the best way to monitor these indicators, so you can adjust the campaign if necessary? (see GOAL for further questions on this matter).

Once your campaign is complete, collect specific 'lessons learned' from your data and experience that could improve the effectiveness of your next campaign and can be shared with others. Use this to promote your campaign and your campaigning skills. A learning environment is well worth investing in (it is also useful for external funding).

> Tip
>
> The RAN paper on M&E contains a practical and user-friendly checklist; this and more information on relevant handbooks is available online.

Annex 1: Explanations

What is propaganda?

Propaganda is the structured attempt to manipulate the cognitive and emotional perceptions of a specific target audience (Ritzmann, 2017). Used as a tool of extremist organisations, it promotes a set of narratives and values, an ideology, that offers a binary perspective of victimhood (us, the in-group) and aggressors (them, the out-group). Extremist propaganda has clear-cut messages that promise clarity, relevance, adventure, meaning and other emotional and social benefits, such as belonging to a new family, brotherhood or sisterhood.

In the form of recruitment messaging, extremist propaganda often follows the same pattern: diagnosis (what is wrong), prognosis (what needs to be done), and rationale (who should do what and why).

While propaganda has been part of every political or religious conflict in recent human history, its effectiveness is still being debated. Its impact largely depends on conditions it tries to influence but cannot create: escalating violent political conflicts, societal polarisation, and even more relevant, cognitive openings within the targeted audience. Generally, for propaganda to increase its chances of success, it needs to be close to already existing (perceived) truths of the targeted audience, for example it may connect to shared conspiracy theories.

Four ways to counter propaganda and promote alternative narratives

1) **Prepare**. Foster critical media literacy, particularly by educating youth in schools on how to evaluate and qualify information sources. This is part of 'democracy training', with the concept of critical thinking as applied in daily life.

2) **Disrupt**. Extremist propaganda can be removed from online media, for example by using 'hashing' technology, which can automatically detect and delete content that has been red-flagged before. To protect free speech, the application of algorithms needs to be transparent and limited to the worst of the worst, focusing on clearly illegal content.

3) **Empower**. Alternative narratives aiming to promote positive messages, universal values, role models or other kinds of information relevant to a specific part of the population are meant to strengthen the resilience of individuals or communities against extremist propaganda.

4) **Challenge**. Counter narratives, which aim at exposing lies and flaws of extremist organisations, need to be directed at a well-researched and narrowly targeted audience that is already engaged with extremist content.

Annex 2: Recent Research

Table A2.1 presents relevant studies from the fields of political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology and neuroscience.

Table A2.1 Relevant studies and key findings

	Research title	Key findings for effective alternative narratives and counter-narratives
1	Hornik, R., Jacobsohn, L., Orwin, R., Piesse, A., & Kalton, G. (2008). Effects of the national youth anti-drug media campaign on youths. *American Journal of Public Health*, *98*(12), 2229-2236.	**Do no harm; don't spread propaganda** This study indicates that making people, and youth in particular, aware of something that authorities consider inappropriate or harmful may generate (more) interest in the issue instead of dissuading them. Link: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2636541/
2	Cook, J., & Lewandowsky, S. (2011). *The Debunking Handbook*. St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland	**Backfire effect** Confrontational approaches (fact-based or emotional) will most likely strengthen the convictions of those you try to 'reason with'. This is especially the case when the target audience feels that their core values or identity are under attack from your campaign. **Quantity of messages** A regular stream of messages has a higher likelihood of being effective. This research indicates that receiving about 30 % of alternative/counter messages of one´s information stream is necessary to (help) change someone´s mind. Link: https://www.skepticalscience.com/docs/Debunking_Handbook.pdf
3	Chan, M. P. S., Jones, C. R., Hall Jamieson, K., & Albarracín, D. (2017). Debunking: a meta-analysis of the psychological efficacy of messages countering misinformation. *Psychological science, 28*(11), 1531-1546.	**Do no harm; don't spread propaganda** Misinformation/propaganda should not be repeated unless incorporated as part of a comprehensive pedagogical concept. **How to create narratives** It is beneficial to have the targeted audience involved in generating alternative or counter-arguments. **Introduce new information and mental model** People are less likely to accept the debunking of old/false beliefs when they are merely labelled as wrong; instead,

	Research title	Key findings for effective alternative narratives and counter-narratives
		they should be countered with new evidence. The new messages should also offer a new model for understanding the information. Elaboration and discourse increase the likelihood of replacing the old/false model with a new one. Link: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/09567976 17714579
4	Kaplan, J. T., Gimbel, S. I., & Harris, S. (2016). Neural correlates of maintaining one's political beliefs in the face of counterevidence. *Scientific reports*, *6*, 39589.	**Beliefs and identity** 'People are hard headed about their political beliefs, even when provided with contradictory evidence. Political beliefs are like religious beliefs in the respect that both are part of who you are and important for the social circle to which you belong. The study found that people who were most resistant to changing their beliefs had more activity in the amygdala (a pair of almond-shaped areas near the center of the brain) and the insular cortex, compared with people who were more willing to change their minds. The activity in these areas, which are important for emotion and decision making, may relate to how we feel when we encounter evidence against our beliefs. The amygdala in particular is known to be especially involved in perceiving threat and anxiety. That is consistent with the idea that <u>when we feel threatened, anxious or emotional, then we are less likely to change our minds</u>.' Link: https://www.nature.com/articles/srep39589
5	Feinberg, M., & Willer, R. (2015). From gulf to bridge: When do moral arguments facilitate political influence?. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 41*(12), 1665-1681.	**Moral reframing** Many conflicts are based chiefly on differing moral preferences, and not so much on detailed political or religious issues. If that is the case, <u>consider reframing your message so it can connect to the moral foundations of the targeted audience</u>. For example, highlight shared morals or values like justice, equality and tradition, and base your argument on those as a bridge that might connect opposing camps.

	Research title	Key findings for effective alternative narratives and counter-narratives
		Link: 'From Gulf to Bridge: When Do Moral Arguments Facilitate Political Influence?'
6	Atran, S., Gómez, Á., López-Rodríguez, L., Sheikh, H., Ginges, J., Wilson, L., Waziri, H., Vázquez, & A. Davis, R. (2017). The devoted actor's will to fight and the spiritual dimension of human conflict. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1(9), 673.	**Identity and values** The study finds 'an apparent preference for value over kin by devoted actors (which) provides empirical support for the idea that humans may form their strongest (and potentially most expansive) political and religious ties by subordinating devotion to kin to a more abstract ideal.' <u>The more radicalised the audience is</u>, the more their individual identity, morals and sacred values are 'fused' (identical) with that of the extremist ideology or group, and <u>the less likely it is that confrontational approaches will work.</u> Link: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-017-0193-3
7	Green, Melanie C. & Fitzgerald, K. (2017). Transportation Theory Applied to Health and Risk Messaging. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication	**Narrative persuasion and transport** 'Transport refers to the feeling of being so absorbed in a story that connection to the real world is lost for some time; it includes cognitive engagement, emotional experience, and the presence of mental imagery. This experience is a key mechanism underlying narrative influence on recipients' attitudes and beliefs, particularly in combination with enjoyment and character identification.' Especially with <u>individuals who have a 'fused' identity</u>, an indirect approach, for example using surreal contexts like science fiction, adventure and mystery, might not feel like an attack on their identity, and could therefore render them more open-minded to new input. Link: 'Transportation Theory Applied to Health and Risk Messaging'

	Research title	Key findings for effective alternative narratives and counter-narratives
8	The Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP). (2015). Theories of Change, Policy Brief.	**Theory of change** 'Too often well-meaning efforts result in unintended and counterproductive impacts. The gap between intent and impact is a challenge facing all organizations who make assumptions about how they can intervene. A theory of change is about how some driving or mitigating factor identified in a CONFLICT ASSESSMENT can be changed with some INTERVENTION PLAN to achieve an IMPACT that prevents violence or builds peace.' Link: http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/FINAL-Theories-of-Change-in-PB.pdf
	Beutel, A., Weine, S., Saeed, A., Mihajlovic, A., Stone, A., Beahrs, J., & Shanfield, S. (2016). Guiding Principles for Countering and Displacing Extremist Narratives. *Journal of Terrorism Research, 7*(3)	**Delivering new narratives:** **'Know the intended audiences** Choose a specific group or groups of persons you want to reach, and learn all you can about them. **Define the desired outcomes** Clarify what kind of changes and impact you want to make. This could include changing knowledge, attitudes and/or behaviours. **Choose the medium(s) of communication** Select the most appropriate medium for reaching your intended audience. **Choose credible messengers** Narratives should be transmitted by trusted and legitimate sources. **Do no harm** Narratives that have the potential to make a positive difference can also be harmful to your campaign. For example, humour and ridicule in anti-extremism messaging may be a double-edged sword. **Evaluate the process and impact**

	Research title	Key findings for effective alternative narratives and counter-narratives
		Given the lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of counter-narratives, it is vitally important to apply programme evaluation methods that evaluate both what impact a message has, and how and why it is having that kind of impact. ' Link: 'Guiding Principles for Countering and Displacing Extremist Narratives'
9	European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs. (2017). Countering Terrorist Narratives. PE 596.829.	**Target audience, disruption and quantity of alternative narratives and counter-narratives** 'Disruption of violent extremist material needs to be applied comprehensively and across multiple platforms, in order to avoid displacing terrorist messaging activity between channels. The vacuum created by disruption needs to be filled with a series of messages designed to leverage a range of motivational drivers, in order to resonate with a target audience subject to varying motivations and in order to have a reinforcing cumulative effect on that audience. A <u>clear identification of the target audience</u> is vital to effective strategic communications, taking into account a spectrum of potential consumers of the message (intended, unintended, supporters, adversaries and neutrals). A <u>nuanced behavioural and attitudinal understanding of that audience</u> is needed to persuasively shape attitudes and behaviours.' Link: 'Countering Terrorist Narratives'

	Research title	Key findings for effective alternative narratives and counter-narratives
10	Rieger, D., Frischlich, L., & Bente, G. (2017). Propaganda in an insecure, unstructured world: How psychological uncertainty and authoritarian attitudes shape the evaluation of right-wing extremist internet propaganda. *Journal for Deradicalization*, (10), 203-229.	**Uncertainty and authoritarian attitudes** 'The positive relation between authoritarianism and the attraction towards extremist ideologies such as transported within propaganda videos was fueled by psychological uncertainty. While under conditions of low uncertainty, authoritarianism even increased the rejection of extremist groups, potentially due to their challenge of the current social order; under conditions of higher uncertainty, the advantages of the clear worldview transmitted by extremist propaganda seemed to outweigh these disadvantages for individuals with authoritarian attitudes. In addition, uncertainty increased the identification with the national group addressed by the extremist propagator, irrespective of the authoritarian attitudes of the recipient. <u>Attempts to challenge extremist ideologies online, for instance via so-called counter-narratives should therefore address uncertainties and the transmission of authoritarian attitudes.</u> Particularly authoritarian sources transmitting peaceful values can foster peaceful instead of hostile inter-group attitudes under conditions of existential threats.' Link: http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/88

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