Renée DiResta: Ultimately, propagandas have to reach an audience. That's one of the things that we look for is when you have to reach mass numbers of people, what do you do to do it, and what makes that action visible?

Tristan Harris: You're listening to part two of our interview with Renée DiResta, disinformation expert and coauthor of the Senate Intelligence Committee's Russia Investigation and a Mozilla fellow. If you haven't heard part one of our interview, we highly recommend you go back and listen now.

Aza Raskin: It’s an essential guide to how disinformation spreads online, and why all of us, from the platforms, to the users, to law enforcement have been caught flat footed by this rapidly evolving threat.

Tristan Harris: But we can catch up if we take the time to look at the technology that's driving this harmful virality and take steps to stop it.

Aza Raskin: We'll consider a few of those solutions. In part two of our interview with Renée DiResta.

Tristan Harris: I'm Tristan Harris.

Aza Raskin: I'm Aza Raskin. This is Your Undivided Attention.

Renée DiResta: If you follow an anti-vax page or join an anti-vax group-

Tristan Harris: Just one of them.

Renée DiResta: Yeah, just one. Facebook would start to show you other ones because the algorithm doesn't understand. It's amoral. It does not understand what it is showing you. It just knows that mathematically speaking, if you like this, you are statistically likely to like this other thing as well.

Tristan Harris: The word like there is so deceiving. It means you hit a button in a moment of choice.

Renée DiResta: Right. In the literal.

Tristan Harris: But like, not in the sense of, my whole nervous system is telling me

Renée DiResta: Right. No, the capital L, like

Tristan Harris: ... sort of this deep human lifelong desire sort of version of like, yes.

Renée DiResta: Like trademark. But what we would see was accounts that had engaged with this content would not only see more of that content, because that's a content-based filtering model, right? But then there's the collaborative filtering which says that, "Here's what people who are similar to you enjoy, or engage, with or like, capital L trademark."
Aza Raskin: Or, are most susceptible to.

Renée DiResta: That's where you start to see anti-vaxers getting referred into chemtrails groups getting referred. That was how I found the Flat Earthers actually for the first time, was looking at some of that stuff. Then, you get at the political conspiratorial communities, like Pizzagate was something that was popping up a lot then, too.

Tristan Harris: This is in the Facebook group recommendation system. What I found…

Renée DiResta: Yes. It's in the Facebook recommendation.

Tristan Harris: ... fascinating about your work, Renée, is you've shown how this same pattern of the conspiracy correlation reinforcement is happening on Amazon. It's happening on Instagram, happening on Twitter recommended users with ISIS users.

Renée DiResta: Yeah. That's because it's just recommendation engines are broken across the Internet because recommendation engines are largely the same across the Internet. There's probably various weightings and various nuance and various ways in which like each of the platforms has different visibility into who you are based on what kind of information they have about you.

Renée DiResta: You'll notice on Amazon they have this multi-tiered recommendation engine. People who searched for this also looked at, people who looked at this also looked at, people who looked at this also bought. There's the conversion kind of coming into play. If you look at a topic, they will send you an email with other topics if you don't convert and buy something on the site. They're always driving to their goal. They're showing you all manner of things that you are statistically likely to be interested in from their statistical model of human behavior and of user behavior on the site.

Tristan Harris: Ultimately, what flows into their business models, so Amazon's, these are the things that people tend to buy. They're just going to keep doing whatever works to getting you to buy it. In Facebook's case, these are groups that if I got you to join them, but we can predict that you're likely to use it a lot more than if you don't join this group. I mean this was actually how the people you may know suggested friends feature came up like when you first joined Facebook they said, "Oh, you're not using it enough. How do we like lock you into using this thing?" Let's start recommending as many people.

Tristan Harris: Specifically, we'll recommend another user who also doesn't use it very much and we'll put you into a double bind so now you'll both have increasing reasons to use it and you're sort of filling up the fuel tanks across all of Facebook at once.

Renée DiResta: Yeah. I think recommendation engines; they've been sort of one of the areas that I think we have the greatest amount of leverage over as far as that is
something that you don’t need regulation to make that happen. You need a platform to decide that it’s going to go and do it.

Renée DiResta: YouTube has made some efforts, particularly the start of this year. Facebook has also made some efforts at the start of this year, anti-vax content taken out. A lot of the pseudoscience conspiracies taken out. It’s interesting because this is where we get at the nuance around conversations about expression versus amplification. You can still run your page and run your content on Facebook. You can still put your video up on YouTube, but you’re not going to get the free amplification and lift of it being recommended to other people. You can build your audience. You can send them there, but the platform’s not going to do the heavy lifting for you.

Renée DiResta: That, I think, is a pretty marked change that we’ve only started to see them really work on. I used to call it do not recommend, but I mean we don’t have a good name for that one yet. But it’s the how do we recalibrate as we talk about things like the first amendment? You have a right to expression. You have never had a right to amplification. This is a nuanced and interesting topic of conversation that I think we’re starting to have conversations about what that looks like.

Aza Raskin: When I think about recommendation systems, I also think of that about them as a kind of auto-complete for the human mind or an auto-complete for society or an auto-complete for-

Tristan Harris: Auto complete for consequence.

Aza Raskin: They start making realities happen. They’re folding realities.

Renée DiResta: Do you guys run marketing campaigns ever? I’ve done two startups and had marketing responsibilities for both in the very early stages before we hired somebody better than me. I would go into HubSpot and I would try to think of like what’s my drip campaign email look like? It has these like remarkably sophisticated because they’re built from an aggregate of like all of the millions of people who have written emails in HubSpot. They have these incredible aggregated analytics.

Renée DiResta: It’ll actually tell you like your email is 13% too long or it’ll like highlight words and you can go through basically this marketing message crafter AI that tells you that this is what statistically works for people. It’s interesting because then people do kind of get wise to these sort of manipulative ... The worst emails are the ones where it says like, "Hey." You think you know the guy or-

Tristan Harris: Or Re: to make you think that’s responded to.

Renée DiResta: Yeah. I always say that if you want to see where disinformation is going, just look at where the way marketers are because it’s incentives, because the difference between people who are doing it for political motivation, the economic motivation really pushes people to get to the, to the forefront a lot
faster. It’s a very powerful motivator. It’s where I think we actually can learn a lot from our old efforts and anti-spam and things like that.

Renée DiResta: Nobody ever feel sorry for the spammer whose email doesn’t make it to the top of your inbox. Nobody’s ever like, “Oh, man, we’re really censoring that guy who wants to sell me Viagra.” It’s a fundamentally different way of thinking about what has the right to appear in our field of vision online and how we should think about what platforms serve us.

Renée DiResta: If platforms didn’t have some protections where they say, “This is a low quality domain,” our inboxes would be flooded with crap all the time. That is not a sensational thing to say. But when you port that over to algorithmically disseminated content, particularly especially on YouTube, if you’ve seen the videos that are just generated by AI, it’s weird to think that we would treat our inbox experience different than our social experience. That’s because I think there’s still some sort of residual belief we have that what we engage with in the social space is real people, and that’s just not the case.

Renée DiResta: I think a lot of it is how can we shine a light on this? How can we shine a light on tactics, make people realize there is a downside to that? So this is what I would say, which is go on Twitter. Click into one of President Trump’s tweets, and look at how many people are screaming that the other person is a bot. It’s really a very, very high percentage of people and those of us who study bots knew that that was going to come because as people became more aware that bots were a thing-

Tristan Harris: Then, you distrust everything.

Renée DiResta: Then, you distrust everything.

Tristan Harris: And that’s the problem

Renée DiResta: That’s why somebody so much of the stuff, there’s no downside because if you can convince people that everyone around them is a Russian spy or a troll or a bot-

Aza Raskin: Then, you win.

Renée DiResta: Right. Either you win by-

Tristan Harris: Trust is the last currency for which we…

Renée DiResta: … secret or you win because you have made people so deeply suspicious and unable to recognize that sometimes they are just people who hold different opinions.

Aza Raskin: This is the point about deep fakes that we don’t even need to have deep fakes flooding the market because it’s the thought of it and be able to point at it and say, "Oh, that was deep fake."
Impugning the integrity of the person or the speaker or the voice. That’s where we try to find what are the ways in which you can educate people that this sort of thing is happening. This is where I always say like...

But in a way that, doesn't cause them to be paranoid about everything.

Right.

The one thing I want to add here is when you get people into a paranoid mode, once you are convinced that you're part of this paranoid game ... My friends did this thing once for my birthday where they told me to go to this place in the dock in New York and then someone came up. Photographer was taking Polaroid photos of something. Suddenly, she came up to me and she took these Polaroids of me. Then, I realized she part of this script that my friends had coordinated. I was part of this game that I didn't realize and they told me to go to this other place. Suddenly, when I was looking around, I was paranoid of everyone. I thought everyone could be in on this thing that I didn't know was happening to me.

I say that because the thing that's challenging about getting people to be skeptical or paranoid is it makes people ... It flips your whole nervous system into a very different relationship with reality. It's not just like it's slightly different. It actually flips it in this very different way. How do we-

Yeah. Constantly on edge.

Right. How do we come up with a kind of calm cynicism or calm epistemic vigilance is what one of the terms is for it where you are vigilant about the things that are coming your way without going to the sort of extreme: It's all fake news. It's all just, well, what is truth anyway, which is a totally unsophisticated way to deal with a kind of vigilant way of looking at reality.

Yeah. I don't have a good answer to that question. I've been to Estonia, and I've been to Stockholm. I was fortunate to be able to have those experiences last year where I met with people who actually work on devising the sort of like citizen curriculum. They begin to have these conversations like very early because propaganda has been so much an integral part of countries that were sort of bordering Russia, and they feel that they’ve experienced this kind of propaganda, the sorts of interference for actually quite some time.

They have these sort of handbooks, and they're actually relatively ... They're not sensational at all. As very matter of fact, this is how it looks. This is what it does. Does this trigger? Does this somehow trip your emotional like does this get your hackles up? Think about why. Think before you share. It's not the-

Back to your emotional ergonomics.

There's high degree of trust in the government still there. When the government puts out these things, people aren't like, "Oh, the government is
Tristan Harris: "That's where that foundation of trust in something has to come from. Once you realize that, again, we're polarized right now as a country, we don't trust our institutions, but ask how much of that distrusted institutions was there an attempt to make me have so that now there's no place from which we can say groundedly, "Let's look into this," because back in the 1940s, we've talked about this, the Committee for National Morale and the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. These are two nonprofit organizations that were meant to try and protect the US democratic psyche from foreign fascist propaganda saying, "This is what it looks like," just like you're talking about with Estonia against Russian propaganda.

Tristan Harris: "We used to have programs like that, recognizing that the human mind and the democratic psyche is vulnerable. But I think it does come from the sort of sophistication about human nature in a different view of the mind, not as being this authoritative point of all of beliefs and choice, but as something that's much more vulnerable that needs protecting.

Aza Raskin: "Hey, listeners, we're going into the 2020 elections without having solved a lot of the problems Renée has told us about. Now, there even some new ones. Tristan and I talked about what we could do about it.

Tristan Harris: "What should we do for election 2020? What are the solutions? Facebook, and YouTube and Twitter are the only companies with the living breathing access to the crime scenes to know what is going on there. They own the satellite network. This isn't a solution. It puts us in a very tough spot. I think one thing we absolutely need is fast lanes for researchers.

Tristan Harris: "Fast lanes for researchers just means there's a lot of people who are reporting things to tip lines. But when you have special people like Renée or Guillaume who we interviewed last time from YouTube who really, really know and spot these things early, making sure that they have immediate fast reporting directly to the product teams at these companies.

Tristan Harris: "That's sometimes an issue is that they'll send stuff and the relationships have to get developed so that that stuff is treated as high priority when it comes in. As we found out that Facebook during the India election, they had a tip line, but the tip line only operated in 10 of the 22 different languages in India. There are ways that you can scale up more faster response times for tips and claims. But even there, you're going to be resource strapped, and some companies are going to have more resources than others.

Aza Raskin: "How do we tie the responsibility back to the companies? Let's say we get through the 2020 election and we look back because we get Freedom of Information Acts the fast lanes aren't fast enough, but we now have the data and we see that Facebook had some large percentage of the direct political ads were in fact just false."
Tristan Harris: The first target I would imagine to lock down would be the Facebook advertising system, which is currently still based on custom audiences, lookalike models so I can pump in a list of, "Hey, here, I've got these 20 user IDs who I know our moms who believe in conspiracy theories. Hey, and I'm Russia. Hey, Facebook, I'm going to order up 10,000 other users who look like these 10 users that I just handed you."

Tristan Harris: Lookalike models can be really useful because I can say, "Here's 10 people who like Nike shoes and I know they like Nike shoes and I'm Adidas." I want to say, "Hey, Facebook, give me 10,000 users like these because I know they like shoes." But can also be really bad tools. Again, I think until we have a ridiculously rigorous trust layer that we say, "Well, who do we trust to use a tool like lookalikes?" What is a trustworthy actor to be able to say, "Let me target people who look like these other people?" Who can guarantee that they are a good faith user of a system like that? Until that can be guaranteed, shut it off.

Aza Raskin: If I was an engineer or designer sitting within Facebook or Twitter, what could I be doing to even have a small positive impact here?

Tristan Harris: The first thing is I would just ask these questions on the inside. What do people say when you say, "Do we have a way of protecting this from happening?" Here's the structure of it, just everything we've laid out. The answer is going to be no, but are people even allowed to have that conversation? But we need to recommend that they do because I think everyone in the company needs to understand what are you going to be complicit in.

Aza Raskin: All right, back to Renée's interview.

Renée DiResta: One of the interesting things that I've confronted recently is ways in which things that privacy activist want, I do not want as a disinformation researcher, ways in which there are certain channels that you can push people into that make it next to impossible to see what propaganda is spreading where and how. It's how is disinformation going to evolve and what do you do to detect it? That is something where as we push people into encrypted channels and things, the AI is not going to be able to do very much. You can have the best moderation AI tool in the world. If it can't see what people are sharing, it can't do anything.

Tristan Harris: This is important because Facebook is just moving all of their conversation. They've announced a whole directional shift to move from a public platform where there is the opportunity to do research to move the entire thing into these private encrypted channels where they...

Aza Raskin: It's a very clever move because I can feel it inside of me. I'm like, "Oh, the part of me that's like privacy matters. I don't want my data leaking out. It should just be for me," I'm like, "Oh yay. That's a great move." Then, the cynic in me is like, "Wait, isn't this just because Facebook's getting hammered for all this stuff that people see that's wrong. If they move it to encrypted channels, then nobody can see what's wrong. Then, there's no accountability."
Renée DiResta: But the question becomes more do people maintain a presence on overt platforms like Facebook where there’s more discoverability? Does everybody fracture back into small friend-based groups? I spend more time on WhatsApp now than I ever have before. Funny enough, talking about Twitter, it’s really weird. People push tweets from Twitter into WhatsApp because they want to have the conversation privately because they don’t like the mob on Twitter. It’s a way to have a conversation with like a trusted smaller group of people about something maybe that’s controversial that you don’t want to say to inadvertently attract the Twitter trolls.

Renée DiResta: I once heard Chris Pool describe it as it’s not who you share with. It’s who you share as, so the idea that we don’t have the same identity in all places. If you are somewhat public on Twitter, you would welcome the opportunity to have these conversations in encrypted channels where you don’t have to face the same risk of being exposed in some way.

Aza Raskin: What should I know about my own psychology as a denizen of the Internet to give me antibodies against this kind of disinformation?

Renée DiResta: I think the acknowledgement internalization that you are vulnerable to it is a good start. I think that there’s a lot of defensiveness. I think I get two or three tweets a day from somebody telling me, ”Well, maybe you’re an idiot and you’d fall for it, but I never would.” I always get a kick out of those people.

Tristan Harris: Imagine if we say the PhDs are the easiest to manipulate.

Renée DiResta: Yeah. I was looking at a page yesterday that I’m pretty sure is not authentic, but you’re just constantly second guessing what you’re seeing and trying to come up with some probabilistic waiting of when do I potentially embarrass myself by giving this off to somebody else and saying, ”What do you think? You look at it now.” It becomes a really interesting question because if it’s done well, it triggers some little sense of the uncanny valley almost. This isn’t quite normal. This isn’t quite right, but you can’t quite put your finger on why.

Renée DiResta: I find when I get into those situations, I just try to actually just step away and go look at something else for a while before going back to it and starting again. When somebody’s serving an ad at you, you should be ultra-suspicious of why you are getting that ad. That’s a thing where there’s an innate distrust for product ads on the internet or, oh, they’re just trying to get my money. But I don’t think we have that same innate distrust of political ads. That’s because they don’t look like ads a lot of the time.

Tristan Harris: Well, if they’re not even ads they’re just content or pages.

Renée DiResta: Right. It’s just content or pages.

Tristan Harris: But people often-

Renée DiResta: ... issues not candidates basically.
Tristan Harris: This has also come up a lot because people think, "Oh those ads. I would just not look at the ads or I don't even look at the ads." But you should talk about how most of this especially the information warfare happening from all these different countries now who have entered the game, it's not even happening from ads per se anymore.

Renée DiResta: No. It's not happening from ads anymore. Either they have built up pages and then once you built up pages with the right content, you'll get the lift of organic shares or you can just go into a group where people have already declared what they are and you can share your article into the group.

Tristan Harris: You infiltrate using these techniques that we've…

Renée DiResta: Yeah. There are a lot of fake personas. There's been a lot of speculation about the yellow vests movement and to what extent. As those protests were coordinated and Facebook groups were outside agitators coming into to either amp up the more violent elements that people who are more likely to set things on fire versus just the people who march whether there were foreign infiltrators. This is, of course, a ripe environment. You've got really heated, passionate people who are going to march in the streets. Can you push them to do things that are...

Tristan Harris: Tap into grievances and just make them more violent. There's actually in this list, we've got this list of techniques here, forum sliding, consensus cracking. One of them here is called anger trolling. Is there a way to peel off the most anger-driven forum posters? The most inclined to violence, identify who they are and then go directly after them. This is one of the techniques that I see you talking about. I always think of, not to put this on Russia, but if you think of Putin is that kid on the playground when two kids look like they're about to start getting into a fight and the other kid goes, "Yeah. Fight, fight, fight, fight."

Tristan Harris: That changes the way you see the situation because that kid's really annoying. He's kind of a brat, and he's making everybody else fight and whenever he sees people just barely start to get into this battle. I'm trying to make it more extreme. I find that image helpful because what I think we have to realize is that the antidote to this would be a supernatural ability to find common ground or to be calm and to not fall into emotions, to have more recognition of ways in which the system might be rewarding us for being outraged, rewarding us for being polarized, rewarding us for getting into fights as opposed to who can be the most calm, nuanced thinker and speaker. Who can speak the least, speak the least, but say the most?

Aza Raskin: This is actually a question I really want to ask you, Renée. You can think of the whole virality machine, the attention, extractive attention economy tilting, everything towards a structure where the least nuanced, most outrageous, most polarized thing wins. Knowing what you do about both disinformation and human psyche and how information travels, how should we start to think about redesigning sort of the infrastructure, the shape of our social graphs, like at a structural level to make them more impervious to disinformation?
Renée DiResta: I think some of that is the signal that you can get about the content, the dissemination pattern, the content for authenticity, but then also Zuck put up that graph, I think, where he says that distribution trends, the closer you get to that inappropriateness line where they would moderate it away. I think that they're trying to think about what that looks like and how their incentive structures drive that.

Tristan Harris: Incentive Gradients, I think they call it.

Renée DiResta: Yeah. I think there's the react-g. If everybody's anger reacting, what do you do with that? Is there a way that ... I'm actually really curious. I'd love to hear them talk about how their react-g figure into their ranking algorithm.

Aza Raskin: I mean, I'm thinking about WhatsApp deciding to limit the number of people you can be shared to, which changes the structure of the problem. It's not hiring some 10,000 people to try to hold the boulders back. It's saying, "We're going to change the landscape that human beings are communicating on to let the more nuanced thing have a greater chance."

Tristan Harris: Yeah. What are the kinds of-

Renée DiResta: Yeah. It can be like friction around dissemination and virality. Have you read the article or are you clicking share before even actually clicking into the article? Do you even know what it says?

Tristan Harris: I talked to someone at Facebook who said the number one thing that he thinks would stop a lot of these problems is why in the world did we invent instant impulsive sharing? I mean there's a story even about Steve Jobs when the first podcast app was created. Someone had suggested, "Oh, we should make it so you can instantly share podcasts in a feed and everybody else can see the podcast that you're doing." He said, "No." He said, "If it's that important, someone will make a conscious choice to like copy the URL and open up a message and send it to one specific person or two specific people because it's worth their attention."

Renée DiResta: Yeah. I agree with that.

Tristan Harris: I think that in a time when attention is so fragmented and it's hard to actually say that we're concentrating or spending attention on any of the right things that actually matter to navigating civilizationaly including in our personal lives. Having that level of a kind of a threshold of what is actually genuinely crossing that bar a threshold of what's worth our attention.

Aza Raskin: What are your closing thoughts? Are there reasons to be hopeful? What can we like learn about?

Renée DiResta: I think we've come a long way, like a remarkably long way even just in the framing of the problem in the last couple of years. There's a long way to go. There's going to be some really interesting tensions, I think, between the
disinformation versus privacy. I feel like I am a proponent of decentralization actually. I can't quite figure out how we get there safely and effectively, so to speak. But I do wonder a lot about this idea that we have a global public square. That's actually ludicrous. That should never have existed. The idea of that shouldn't even make sense to people.

Renée DiResta: We don't even have a national public square. There was no such thing. There's something to be said for smaller scales of communication for almost like an internet federalism, if you will, like a way in which people find communities. They join their communities. There's less of this like constant loggerheads' battle for attention. All information flows through these five channels. Controlling them is critical to controlling the conversation across the entire planet. I really do believe that decentralization would be a net force…

Aza Raskin: What I'm hearing you say there is like in the back of my head I hear the things like the human social animal was adapted to living in smaller groups and it's where we're naturally most brilliant. Our technology in many ways should fit the ergonomics of our social systems.

Renée DiResta: I think that that's true. I think I would agree with that. I'm just not sure how that happens. I've been trying to read other people, including people who I traditionally would've disagreed with. Mike Masnick has an interesting thing on protocols, not platforms, just people who are thinking about what does it look like to facilitate a system in which we aren't trying to push everybody into one central conversation. Can you possibly have a healthy conversation with all of these people gathered in one place all the time?

Renée DiResta: I would argue that probably the answer is no. I'm curious to see how the platforms resolve that tension and how we as users push them to resolve that tension, how regulators push them to resolve that tension. I think that that's going to be something that's going to come up a lot over the next two years.

Tristan Harris: Yeah. Let's add one more thing to that, which is what are the group sizes where you feel a really inclusive level of participation? If you have six people, people can really raise their hands. They know everyone else pays attention to them and everyone's getting certainly enough of an opportunity to speak. If you have 20 people in a group, suddenly you had 20 of the smartest people in the world but then they're going to be beating each other. It's just a product of a kind of physics, that kind of human social physics that some group sizes are conducive to open mindedness, civility, decency and others are not.

Tristan Harris: I hear you saying less decentralization and more breaking up the big public square into the right-sized appropriate sizes. I mean I think the way you do urban planning is you have plazas and you have warrens. You have big plazas in the center and there's certain things that happened there.

Tristan Harris: Then, you have little side areas and warrens and little benches and there's these different sized units, these different like attentional vehicles for group conversation. That's one of the things that I would love to see people get
sophisticated about are what are those different sized spaces that are best for different kinds of conversations.

Renée DiResta: Yeah. I agree.

Tristan Harris: Cool.

Aza Raskin: Thank you so very much, Renée.

Renée DiResta: Thanks for having me.

Aza Raskin: Always so much fun to talk to you.

Renée DiResta: Likewise.

Aza Raskin: I learned so much every time.

Tristan Harris: You always blow our minds. On our next show, we'll be talking to Gloria Mark, professor of Informatics at the University of California in Irvine.

Gloria Mark: We carried around stopwatches, and we timed every single activity that people did to the second, so they turn to their email. That would be start time. Click on the stop watch. Then, they turn away from email. That would be stop time. Click on the stop watch. We recorded all these things so we could be as precise as possible.

Aza Raskin: What was Gloria measuring? She's clocking our attention spans down to the second. They're eroding fast as you might've guessed. But just how fast, and what's the problem with that? Gloria will share those findings and tell us what we can do to stop the downgrading on the next episode of Your Undivided Attention.

Tristan Harris: Are you concerned about the next elections happening around the world? Do you have ideas? Do you want to chime in to this conversation? Do you want to put pressure on the technology platforms? Do you want to help them? After each episode of the podcast, we're holding real-time virtual conversations with some members from our community to really react and share solutions. You can find a link and information about the next one on our website at humanetech.com/podcast.

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