TOP GEAR, TOP JOURNALISM: THREE LESSONS FOR POLITICAL JOURNALISTS FROM THE WORLD’S MOST POPULAR TV SHOW

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This article examines the BBC program *Top Gear*, discussing why it has become one of the world’s most-watched TV programs, and how it has very successfully captivated an audience who might otherwise not be particularly interested in cars. The analysis of the show is here framed in the form of three ‘lessons’ for journalists, suggesting that some of the entertaining (and highly engaging) ways in which *Top Gear* presents information to its viewers could be usefully applied in the coverage of politics – a domain of knowledge which, like cars, many citizens find abstract or boring.

It’s not hyperbole to suggest that when Jeremy [Clarkson] first appeared on old-style *Top Gear*, his style changed the face of modern motoring journalism. He did this by realising that people were less interested in being told about a car’s valve timing, compression ratios and tyre sizes, than they were in knowing whether a) said car would improve their general quality of life and b) if being seen driving one would make attractive people want to sleep with them. When *Top Gear* returned in 2002, the show took this philosophy, added rocket-boosters and ran with it. The rest, as they say, is history. (British Broadcasting Corporation n.d.)

When Australia’s Nine Network acquired the rights to the BBC television series *Top Gear* (taking it from SBS, for which it had been a ratings leader for several years), it marketed the show as the most-watched television program on the planet. When it made its commercial, free-to-air TV debut at 7:30pm on Tuesday 16 February 2010, it was ratings stand-out, attracting an audience of 1.68 million viewers – a 2010 high for the network (Shearer 2010) – suggesting that Nine’s outlay of a reported

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19 million dollars to help secure the rights for the show was well worth the investment (Vickery and Quade 2010). The Nine Network’s chief executive David Gyngell boasted of its success, saying (in McWhirter 2010, emphasis added) that ‘This is a world-class quality program with mass appeal, which was reflected . . . by Top Gear being No. 1 in every demographic in every market across Australia. Its continuing strength lies in that broad appeal’. That a show about cars had become such a big hit with viewers is in stark contrast to the Nine Network’s previous attempt at the genre. The Car Show, which ran on the same channel from 2003 to 2008, produced locally and hosted by Glen Ridge, followed a much more mundane, prescribed path to automotive knowledge, and was to be found in a backwater Saturday afternoon timeslot, used mainly as filler material rather than prime-time blockbuster. Even The Car Show’s production company, qmediagroup (n.d.), boasts that it had averaged just 400 000 viewers per week in its time.

Top Gear, hosted by Jeremy Clarkson, Richard Hammond and James May, has origins stretching back some 30 years, to what is now colloquially known as ‘Old-Style’ Top Gear. This old format underwent a significant re-birth in 2002, taking a creative (and somewhat risky) turn by moving away from a straightforward car reviews show, and turning into a unique entertainment show which centres around car culture. Now watched by an estimated worldwide audience of some 350 million people, this ‘entertainment juggernaut’, argues Graeme Blundell (2010), ‘has evolved into one of the cleverest formats on the track: a combination of travel show, car program and science demonstration, wrapped in some terrific comedy’. Although covering very similar subject matter to The Car Show and other conventional car shows like it, Top Gear’s immense success, evidenced by its official role as heavy-hitter in the battle for commercial television ratings supremacy in Australia, suggests that it presents information about the topic in ways that are more interesting, more engaging and more entertaining for a wider audience than more orthodox formats. Its attention to ‘aesthetics and entertainment’ (Fox 2010) means it can cover the very same subject matter in a way which is much more conducive to audience engagement; elements which, in this paper, I seek to
analyse and, crucially, suggest might be instructive for surmounting political journalists’ all-too-common shortcoming in relation to audience engagement.

It is important to note that the intention here is not to disparage traditional political journalism, or those who practice it – by which I mean those who wish to emulate the profession’s idealised, ‘high modern’ form (see Hallin 1994, 170), covering politics in its most liberal definition – because there is nothing wrong with it per se. Journalism is an indispensable profession within our society (see Cunningham 2003, 31; Fiske 1987, 281), and members of the public should be connecting and engaging with the news on a regular basis in order to help them ‘make sense of the world and to fulfil their role as citizens’ (Dahlgren 1995, 53). The problem is, however, that it does not pay enough attention to the public it serves; that it too often fails in communicating highly valuable information to the public in a way which will captivate and appeal to a large audience. Because of journalism’s core belief in rational, objective, authoritative discourses, it often seems ‘distant’ and ‘disconnected from popular experience’ for many viewers (Morley 1999, 142). Hence Katz (1992) argues that in political journalism (what he calls the ‘old news’):

The voice is grave, resonant with the burden of transmitting serious matters – White House communications strategies, leaks from State Department sources, leading economic indicators. The stories are remote (from Yugoslavia, Nairobi, Beijing) or from institutions that feel as remote (Congress, Wall Street, the Supreme Court). The reporters of the Old News cluster there, talking to one another, mired in an agenda that seems increasingly obtuse and irrelevant.

The three very simple, interrelated lessons presented in this paper are therefore a provocation for us all – journalists, academics, citizens – to consider new ways of making ‘the significant interesting and relevant’ (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001, 3), not ad hominem barbs of arbitrary criticism. If we
examine some of the ways that *Top Gear* has managed to popularise cars and car culture (and, in doing so, breathe new life into a rather stale genre), we might learn some valuable lessons that journalists could apply in their attempt at publicising and popularising politics (see Turner 2005; Baym 2010). *Top Gear’s* fresh approach to a once-boring, abstracted topic (and the way it has appealed to the previously disinterested or uninitiated, especially women) may provide some inspiration for political journalists to think without prejudice about their profession’s full range of possibilities, and avoid ‘judging all media forms and formats by reference to historical conventions’ (Lumby 2002, 239). These lessons do not arise exclusively out of *Top Gear*, however this show is an excellent example through which to understand and explore the fundamental principles of entertainment, and their potential application in new contexts. Unlike much work in journalism, entertainment has goals that are not abstract or long-term; its primary function is to captivate a wide cross-section of the community, and immediate audience impact is a key index of its success.

**Lesson 1: Relate to the Audience**

In one episode of *Top Gear* (season 10, episode 9), the hosts find themselves standing beside a private racetrack in Spain, ogling a 1972 Lotus Formula One car as it speeds past them. James May, the affable ‘nerd’ of the group (with the affectionate nickname ‘Captain Slow’) points out: ‘One of the interesting things about that car, is it had torsion beam suspension, which was very forgiving in slow corners, which made the tyres last longer.’ After shooting him a look of astonishment Richard Hammond tells him: ‘You managed to find something very boring about something incredibly exciting’ (series 10, episode 10). And, in making this statement, Hammond manages to capture an enormous slice of this television show’s educational significance in one single sentence. That is, the way it communicates complex information by translating technical detail into understandable terms. Because cars are, by their very nature, products of engineering and design, the use of language in
describing them can too easily fall into an overtly technical discourse. In this respect, politics and cars are very much alike in many ways, given that institutional politics is – as noted earlier in this paper – often seen to be abstract, too complex, and therefore divorced from the everyday lives of most people. Journalists often seemingly fail to consider that someone may not know the differences between a neoconservative and a socialist, or indeed the rules and conventions that govern parliament. Therefore those who are not equipped with this sophisticated level of knowledge cannot access the world presented to them by political reporters.

While writing a review of the then-new Audi R8 supercar for *Evo* magazine in 2007, Richard Meaden expressed the car’s handing in this way:

> With a 44:56 weight distribution front to rear, the R8 has just the right degree of polar inertia to feel alert without feeling nervous or twitchy. Naturally, Audi has equipped the R8 with all-wheel drive, but it’s not something you’re conscious of, and it certainly doesn’t intrude on the driving experience, even through the tighter, twistier corners that we discover next. As confidence builds with each run past Andy Morgan’s Nikon, it feels more and more natural to play with the R8’s cornering balance, initially once we’re into the heart of the corner, eventually finding sufficient trust in the R8 to pitch it in and provoke the tail into oversteer. (Meaden 2007)

While eloquent in its expression, the language Meaden employs in this review is typical of the way that cars are described by motoring journalists: in mostly abstract, technical terms that a wider audience would struggle to understand (hence most car magazines and TV shows tend to appeal to quite small niche audiences). In many ways it also sounds like the presentation of political news by most journalists, which seems so foreign to many viewers that it ‘might almost be beamed in from
another planet’ (Lewis 1991, 152). In the course of reviewing the very same car for Top Gear, however, Jeremy Clarkson pitched his explanation in a very different way:

> It’s not the speed, though, that impresses you most of all – it’s the way this things feels through the corners. Driving most supercars, it’s [sic] like trying to manhandle a cow up a back staircase. This is like smearing honey into Keira Knightley. (season 10, episode 2)

What makes Clarkson’s colourful explanation significant here is that, while he could very well have explained the car’s handing by using the phrase ‘polar inertia’ (or something equally as obscure), he refrains from doing so, instead opting to use a metaphor which even a complete newcomer to cars (someone who may not even know what oversteer is) would easily understand. This account of how an Audi R8 feels to drive, and also how it deviates from the experience of driving of most expensive, powerful coupes is digestible to a ‘lay’ audience and would resonate much more deeply with them. The journalist, then, does not assume that the audience knows as much about cars as he does – instead opting to deliver a simple message which would be far more illuminating about the driving experience here than a dry, technical description of how Audi has crafted this driving experience through the use of sophisticated suspension technology and advanced construction materials. Indeed, Clarkson does exactly this while talking about the advanced technology found in the Nissan GT-R:

> The axels are assembled on hydraulic rigs that replicate the weight of the car, so the geometry is bang-on before the suspension is bolted to the body. It uses its yaw-sensor and G-sensor to measure actual yaw rate and can then adjust the electronic shock absorbers and the four-wheel-drive system every hundredth of a second to bring the car into line with a pre-ordained target.
But he then realises that this means very little in the ‘real’ world (or to him, for that matter), and so adds this flourish:

I don’t understand any of that, but I do understand this: the GT-R can corner so fast and so violently that each wheel has a special knurling on the rim to stop the tyres coming off.

(series 11, episode 5)

By focusing on something that is easy to understand (yet speaks volumes about the end result of so much sophisticated technology), the host here uses a vernacular that people can easily relate to. He makes himself understood to the audience, thereby ensuring that the information does not sail over their heads and thereby disengage from the content. This is not about ‘dumbing-down’ as such, but finding, exploring and exploiting a mutually-shared set of communicative tools.

We can see this at play also in James May’s description of the immensely powerful, yet supremely luxurious BMW 760Li, saying ‘This is a bizarre kind of fast. It’s quiet, relaxed and smooth. It’s like swimming over a waterfall of double cream’ (season 14, episode 3). Likewise in Richard Hammond’s description of the limited-edition Valentino Balboni version of the Lamborghini Gallardo, as he draws an analogy between the raw, stripped-down car, and a similarly rough style of music:

Because this [car] is a tribute to their looniest test-driver, Lambo have ditched the usual four-wheel-drive for a Gallardo, and gone back to the old hairy-chested rear-wheel-drive. That makes it 120 Kilograms lighter. Ordinary steel brakes instead of carbon-ceramic fancy ones... it’s Lamborghini’s punk album. (season 14, episode 3)

Or Clarkson again, on what he calls the ‘pointless’ Audi Q7 V12:
It’s a six litre, twin turbocharged, V12 diesel. Now, I’m sorry, but the whole point of buying a diesel engine car is to save money. So, having a twin turbo, V12 diesel is like turning your central heating off at home and then keeping warm by burning Rembrandts. (season 14, episode 4)

By speaking the same language (metaphorically-speaking) as viewers, the hosts then present themselves – unlike many political journalists – as a likeable peer, not an all-knowing superior. As Justin Lewis (1991, 141-142) has argued, the ‘world of television news is much more remote in all senses.... the world of “them” not “us”’. This then helps to set up the belief that politics is a domain for ‘other’ people, and that engaging and participating in this domain is beyond their reach, or is a waste of time and effort:

The news can... be both patronising and alienating at times, ironically reducing politics to a spectacle much more than do many of the entertainment shows that provoke much more condemnation for textualizing politics. The power dynamics of news become all the more troubling when so many of its experts... are middle-aged, middle-class white males... [this] creates the semblance of an insider’s club that includes politicians, pundits, and newscasters. No wonder, then, that so many feel disaffected by politics, since its presentation in the news quite often places much of the population on the outside of politics. (Gray 2008, 147-148)

Although the hosts of Top Gear are, in fact, middle-aged white males, they self-identify as mere ‘ordinary’ people with whom the audience can affectively relate – Wickham (2007, 162) notes, for instance, that Clarkson is highly popular because his fans “see something of themselves in him” – which is far more welcoming than the stuffy, high-falutin, self-important posture which so many journalists (and indeed, politicians too) often adopt, to the possible detriment of public knowledge.
LESSON 2: BE UNCONVENTIONAL

Too often, quality journalism is defined by its adherence to normative standards; the accuracy of its attempt to emulate the ideal (indeed, to conform to the very strict rules of the genre). However, what *Top Gear* has shown is that through trying something new we can connect with audiences in much deeper ways. One of these ways is though its extensive use of highly unconventional car reviews. Whereas other programs, like *The Car Show*, *Behind the Wheel*, *Torque*, or even DW’s *Drive It!* tend(ed) to focus on the more mundane aspects of a car – such as braking distances, included equipment, or fuel economy – *Top Gear* has continually sought to find new and interesting ways to pass critical judgement on an automobile. When Jeremy Clarkson races an Audi RS4 up a mountain against a pair of speed climbers (series 7, episode 2), for example, or when Hammond (driving its sister, the RS6) races a pair of alpine skiers from one village to another in the French alps, the intention is not so much to focus on the race, but to add an element of excitement and interest to the review. To give us, as possibly disinterested viewers, something else to get excited about.

One stand-out example of this creativity was, when faced with the prospect of reviewing a cheap, ‘boring’ hatchback more suited to a multi-storey carpark than a racetrack, Richard Hammond and James May decided to try something very different: they had a game of football (soccer). With one team of professional drivers in Toyota Aygos (representing the Czech Republic, where they are constructed) and another team in Volkswagen Foxs (from Brazil), the aim of the game was to punt a giant inflatable football around a bitumen ‘pitch’ with goals at each end. The amazing, well-coordinated driving skills on display, and the excitement of not knowing which team was going to win, added immeasurable pleasure to the inevitable decision as to which is the better car to buy. Although nearly destroying a small fleet of the cars in the process (thanks to some very heavy fouls), the outcome of this segment allowed the hosts to arrive at some sort of conclusion as to which car was more sturdy, agile, had the most nimble handling, and greatest degree of manoeuvrability in a
crowded area – all the things that a potential owner of one of these cars would like to find out about, but wrapped up in a much more absorbing package. Hammond even suggests: ‘My one worry about this whole thing is that after seeing this, people aren’t going to be bothered about watching the real World Cup’ (season 8, episode 5).

In a similar vein, Top Gear has made things interesting for viewers by regularly courting controversy, and by not clinging to traditional standards of objectivity. An ongoing feature of the show is actually its hosts’ continual, vehement disagreement on certain things, which often never get resolved. They constantly bicker and argue (playfully) about where to place certain cars on the ‘cool wall’, or, which car in a group comparison test is the best. Typically, each will pick their personal ‘favourite’ (within the limits that have been set, for the purpose outlined) and continually make the case that theirs is the best choice. We can see this in the debate that rages between the three hosts about which is the better car, out of a Porsche 911, an Aston Martin V8 Vantage and a BMW M6:

**May:** If I was walking towards the dealerships with my own money, at the last minute I’d think “ahh”, and I’d veer off and buy the 911.

**Hammond:** Hey! It’s two against one. Let’s imagine this is a democracy. It’s a more clever choice, it’s finally a beautiful-looking car...

**Clarkson:** It’s won: it’s the sports coupe. I’m not going to deny that. I mean, you’re wrong. For god’s sake, if you’re watching this, don’t buy one, but it’s won!

(season 7, episode 1)

This playful conflict between the hosts, suggests then that there aren’t always clear answers; that there is a place for personal opinion and disagreement, and this approach might itself help to provoke discussion among its audience, thus facilitating the operation of the (or a) public sphere (see Fiske 1989, 193).
Top Gear then has clearly resisted the prescribed, well-trodden path, which, although the easiest, most comfortable, most reassuring way to go, is also the most predictable. So, in the same vein it is worth considering what journalists could likewise gain from such a dedication to further diversifying its range of practices and types of output. If we cease to rely on the notion that there is one, single, idealised method for imparting political information to the public, then we may reinvigorate the interests of those who have disengaged. Perhaps the benefits of diversity resulting from innovative, unconventional approaches to news may even stretch beyond audience engagement, and contribute to a better, more critical interrogation of politics. An increasingly heterogeneous realm of journalism will help to expose and impede the often disingenuous media ‘spin’ on which political actors have come to increasingly rely upon for impact on the citizenry (c.f. McNair 2006, 64). That, put simply, ‘the more varied and diverse journalisms we have, the better off we will be in deconstructing the behaviour of political actors’ (Harrington 2009).

Lesson 3: Make it fun

If there is one single thing that has defined the new iteration of Top Gear, then it is its desire to make the show fun, humorous and spectacular at every opportunity. Hence it is the final lesson that I wish to present in this paper. Just as MythBusters has shown in regards to scientific inquiry, Top Gear proves that lacklustre subjects can actually resonate far better with the viewing public when they are approached in more fun and often spectacular ways – and often for no other reason than to have a fun outcome. In Ending the Affair, Graeme Turner looks to the flagship ABC current affairs program This Day Tonight (1967-1978) as something of ‘Gold Standard’ for the reporting of politics and current affairs in Australia’s television history. This show, Turner argues, was significant because it had an open desire to produce entertaining television, but not at the expense of trivialising the
issues that it covered (Turner 2005, 28-48). Although this show was very much focussed on the current political agenda of the time, it also wasn’t afraid to break from (what we now see as) convention and spend some time on jokes. And, as clearly shown in some of the examples outlined thus far in this paper, Top Gear is very much in keeping with this model.

Characteristically, in season 9, episode 4, May and Hammond decided to take a Reliant Robin – what they describe as a ‘complete joke’ of a three wheeled car – and turn it into a space shuttle. With just weeks to design, assemble and launch a giant rocket – with the assistance of a team of amateur enthusiasts – in order to attach it to a 30 year-old car, the result was, put simply, an explosive disaster (because the Robin failed to detach from the main rocket at the peak of its trajectory). The mission was, however, highly successful, in that it made for around a quarter-hour of gripping television, and very little of it necessarily related to cars. Some years earlier, when trying to ascertain how ‘tough’ an unmodified, 13-year-old Toyota Hilux is, the team did everything in their power to kill it. This meant driving it down public stairways, crashing it into trees, drowning it in the ocean, hitting it with a wrecking ball, setting it on fire and sitting in on top of a building during a controlled implosion (series 3, episodes 5 & 6). None of these were successful, and the mangled, but apparently still functional wreck now sits proudly on a pedestal in the studio. Again, all of this occurred for no other reason than to have some fun, and, in doing so, fascinate the audience.

When trying to satisfy a critical viewer’s demands (a ‘Mr Needham’) that the team do a ‘proper’, normal review of a ‘normal’ car (the new Ford Fiesta), most of the bases were covered: price, practicality, fuel economy, ease of parking and so on. Thrown into the mix for good measure by Clarkson, however, was the question ‘What if I go to a shopping centre and get chased by baddies in a Corvette?’, which was answered by actually taking the hatchback into a shopping centre and having it chased by a black Corvette. This was followed-up with another question: ‘What if I’m asked to take part in a beach assault with the Royal Marines?’ The answer to this question was also tested
out with the Fiesta driving off a landing craft during a small scale re-enactment of the D-Day landing. During the course of the review, the audience discovered that it is possible to drive this car through the shallows of a beach, and that its cup holders are a perfect size to fit a military-issue smoke grenade. The entire test finished with Clarkson yelling over the noise of marines firing their rifles and helicopters swirling overhead: ‘So, there you are Mr Needham. The most thorough test of a car ever undertaken on British Television. The Fiesta has come through with flying colours! Drive safely!’ (series 12, episode 6).

More fun, of course, has been had on myriad other occasions on the show. Take, for instance, the time when each member of the team was tasked with building (by themselves) a stretch limousine version of a regular car, and then had to drive them (with very little success, to the chagrin of other drivers) through the streets of London (series 9, episode 6). Or, in order to demonstrate just how genuinely small the Peel P50 (the smallest passenger car in the world) is, the time that Clarkson drove one through the offices, hallways and lifts of the BBC, where the show’s production team is based (series 10, episode 3). Perhaps even the time when we saw that it is indeed possible to make a meat, Bovril and brick ‘smoothie’ using a blender powered by a V8 engine. All of these instances (let alone the many running jokes which relate to the true identity of their ‘tame[d] racing driver’, The Stig) show us that it may be profitable to deviate off topic from time to time for the sake of having fun. And, in doing so, provide moments of fun and pleasure in the entire experience of becoming an informed viewer.

Importantly, this final claim does not seek to reinforce or rely upon the absurd assumption that news and entertainment are separate entities. Not only are there very few if any barriers between these two domains, and regular trades between both realms in both directions (Baym 2005, 262), but news (that is, information) can itself be highly pleasurable for audiences – if only on an circadian level – even when presented in its most basic form (Fiske 1989, 174). So, I am wary of this obvious
issue, but I am not attempting to suggest that the solution to all of journalism’s ills are for it to become more entertaining. In some cases the very problems it faces are a result of its primary attention to entertainment (such as the long-term malaise that we once called current affairs television in Australia – see Turner 2005, 49-69). What I am suggesting then, is that, even if some care needs to be shown to appreciate what information is being popularised in this way (Harrington 2008), entertainment can directly help to popularise journalism, and boost audience interest. Indeed, housing of highly valuable elite knowledge within popular entertainment genres might be one of the most efficient ways to create a more knowledgeable citizenry and healthier democracy. Because journalists have a social responsibility to ‘disseminate knowledge that the people may not wish to know and may find little pleasure or relevance in knowing’ (Fiske 1989, 148), then a particularly strong ability to make abstract news events ‘matter’ (ibid, 196-197) to people in their everyday lives through the use of entertainment is a fantastic weapon in a journalist’s communicative arsenal.

**CONCLUSION**

Since the first realistic novel was published it has been the entertainment industry’s job to translate observation, truth, science, creativity, and innovation into a popular idiom; to recruit the lay public to the story of modernity. (Hartley 2008, 255)

This article has argued that *Top Gear* may (emphasis here on *may*) be instructive to political journalists; that it might offer some very useful insights into how they might more efficiently generate and transmit new knowledge. Although reporters usually cling to ‘enlightenment model of rationality’ (Dahlgren 1992, 18), the key characteristics of successful entertainment which Jeremy Clarkson and co. have unashamedly adopted, show us that ‘making often complex news topics
enjoyable and accessible’ can therefore make once-inaccessible information much more palatable (Harrington 2010, 187). In making this argument I do not intentionally gloss over this show’s many failings, but merely wish to suggest that the ‘old’ news, which, Katz (1993) argues, has ‘resisted innovative design, clung to its deadly monolithic voice, refused to broaden or alter its definitions of news’, no longer needs to hang pathologically onto its outdated tenets. Instead, political journalists need to think much more critically about how they might engage audiences in a way which might see them not only sit up and pay more attention, but also actively seek their output and engage with it more enthusiastically.

The point of this whole exercise is not to wish for journalism to imitate the Top Gear aesthetic (however beautiful its cinematography may be), but rather stems from a modest hope that more of the news we read, see or hear might be inspired by this show’s epistemological orientation. A form of political journalism thus minded might see more journalists try new things, wear jeans and t-shirts, speak to camera like they were speaking casually to a close friend, take a subjective stance against the actions of a politician, or be satisfied with an imperfect first take. That seems to me like an ethos which has the potential to reinvigorate political journalism, and perhaps see it become a genre that many more citizens willingly attend to, not a civic chore they try to avoid.

NOTES

i A good example of this was when (in 2005) Clarkson suggested that a “quintessentially German car” would have indicators that mimicked a Hitler salute, a satellite navigation system that only goes to Poland, and a fanbelt that lasts for a millennium (Hall and Meller 2005; Stephenson 2005).

ii Indeed, a large problem in this program is the often uninformed (and arguably irresponsible) views of the hosts when deviating off the topic of cars. Jeremy Clarkson, for instance, is a strong opponent to the over-regulation of roads, and road safety. He once expressed great scepticism towards climate change based on his assessment on one occasion (series 8, episode 3) that northern England was experiencing an especially cold winter.
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