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TABLE OF CONTENTS**PAGES****The Impact Of Dysfunctional Family Communication
Patterns On Psychopathology***By Chuka Mike Ifeagwazi*

1-12

Global News Flow Controversy: Is The South Also Guilty?*By Ekeanyanwu Nnamdi Tobechukwu*

43-51

Sexism And Culture: The Nigerian News Scene*By Kate Azuka Omenugha*

52-68

**Periscoping The Nwico Debate Using
Nigerian Press Coverage Of Darfur Conflict In Sudan As A Case Study***By Nnanyelugo Okoro and Emmanuel Obeni*

69-95

The Challenges Of Media Gatekeeping In Nigeria*By Ekeli, E.O.*

96-103

**Consensus And Coalition Building In A Democratic Nigeria:
The Role Of The Legislator***By A. Otohile And Prof. S.A. Idahosa*

104-115

**Broadening Communication Theory: An Exploration
Of Duro Kheim's Intellectual Legacy***By Essienubong H. Ikpe And Nsikak S. Idiong*

116-124

Ratings Research: A Neglected Input In Nigeria's Broadcasting Industry*By D.E.J. Konkwo*

125-138

**Mass Media Inadequacies In Educating Nigerian
Women On Uterine Fibroids***By Aniefiok Udouo And Chisara C. Umezurike*

139-146

Theatre Communication In Nigeria: Challenges And Problems*By Domba Asomba*

147-162

**An Empirical Study Of The Media Dependency
Behaviour Of Nigerian Electorate In The 2007 Elections***By Barikui Nnaane*

163-175

**Africa In The Internet Age: A Textual Analysis Of Selected Sub-Saharan
Domains On The World Wide Web***By Mbuk Mboho And Nsikak Solomon Idiong*

176-187

Campus Journalism: A Panacea For The Eradication Of Crisis In Nigeria Higher Institutions <i>By Akpoveta, Emmanuel Ejomafuvwe</i>	188-199
Re - Examining Public Relations Ethics In Nigeria <i>By Church S. Akpan And Nnaane, Barikui</i>	200-209
Bridging The Gap: The Role Of Community Radio In Repositioning Children's Rights <i>By Ifeoma V. Dunu</i>	210-221
Age And Gender Differences In Self-Disclosure Among Igbo (Nigerian) University Students <i>By Chuka Mike Ifeagwazi And Ugwueze Anselm Ugwueze</i>	222-230
The Role Of The Media In Tackling Discrimination Against People Living With Hiv/Aids <i>By Church S. Akpan</i>	231-239
Urban Solid Waste Management: The Role Of Strategic Communication <i>By Akpofure Rim-Rukeh And Ogbiten B. Ogbemi</i>	240-246
The Relevance Of The New Information Technologies To The 21st Century Broadcasting In Nigeria <i>By Dike Ibemesi</i>	247-260
The Role Of Broadcasting In Addressing The Problems Of Communicable Diseases In Nigeria. <i>By Nwanwene, Thomas Aworo M.</i>	261-271
A Review Of Scholars' Literature On News, News Determinants, Qualities And Values <i>By Nsikan-abasi Sam Nkana</i>	272-286
Problems And Prospects Of Rural Development Planning In Nigeria, 1960-2006 <i>By S.O. Uhunmwuango And A. Epelle</i>	287-303
Mass Communication, Environment And Occupational Health Hazards <i>By Onyilo, Maria Agbenu</i>	304-314
The Place Of Globalisation In International Communication And International Politics <i>By Olise, Festus Prosper</i>	315-322
Avian Influenza Communication: An Impact Assessment <i>By Allen Nnanwuba Adum</i>	323-333

Localizing Broadcasting Strategy: Sure Way To Managing Communicable Diseases In Rural Areas <i>By Wogu, Joseph Oluchukwu</i>	334-340
An Evaluation Of Communication Training In Nigerian Universities And Polytechnics <i>By Ita B. Ekanem</i>	341-350
Nigeria And Media Globalisation: Evolving A Viable Development Communication Policy For The 21st Century <i>By Chudi Okwechime</i>	351-367
Effectiveness Of Frequency Sampling Technique For Identification Of Academic Skills Disordered Children <i>By Chinedu Ugwu</i>	368-378
Narrowing The Information Gap: A Critical Assessment Of The News Agency Of Nigeria (nan) In The 21st Century. <i>By Ndubuisi Chika Nnaji</i>	379-396
Adolescents' Exposure To Sexually Explicit Online Material And Its Realism <i>By Patrick I. Akpoghiran</i>	397-404
Some Suggested Inclusions Into The Curricula Of Mass Communication Programmes Of Tertiary Institutions In Nigeria <i>By Dan .i. Mezieobi</i>	405-414
Youths, Hiv/Aids And Millennium Development Goals: The Imperatives For Nigerian Youths <i>By Adeoye, Jacob .A. And Kalejaiye, Olugbenga J.</i>	415-422
Book Publishing And Its Challenges: The Nigeria Experience <i>By Kalejaiye, Olugbenga John And Akangbe, Clement Adeniyi</i>	423-433
Editorial Policies And Journalism Practice In Nigeria <i>By Nkereuwem Udoakah And Ani, Felix Nnadi</i>	434-452
Communicating Poverty Alleviation In An Era Of Disillusionment: Applying The Right Techniques And Strategies. <i>By Nsude, Ifeyinwa</i>	453-464
Identity Politics And Newspaper Representation Of Group Interests In Nigerian Democracy <i>By Galadima Danladi John</i>	465-499

BOOK PUBLISHING AND ITS CHALLENGES: THE NIGERIA EXPERIENCE

By

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AND
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INTRODUCTION

Publishing is a mass communication medium which is a principal factor in the educational process of any nation. Indeed, the development of any society is organically linked with the virility of its publishing industry. Nigeria is not an exception in this regard.

Publishing in Nigeria could be said to be about 161 years old as of today (2007). This is because the first printing press was established in the country in 1846. According to Omu (1978:7) the first printing press in Nigeria was installed by the Presbyterian Mission in Calabar. It follows, therefore, that publishing might have commenced in that year. The press was devoted to the publication of religious materials. So, publishing in Nigeria could be said to have started with the religious press. From religious publishing the country or better still, the area now known as Nigeria delved into newspaper publishing with the establishment of *Iwe Irohin* in 1859. In the words of Omu (1978:7),

"Eight years later (that is, eight years after the Calabar press was established), the Rev. Henry Townsend fitted up a printing press and inaugurated a printing school in the mission compound at Abeokuta. In 1859, he founded the Iwe Irohin (Iwe Irohin fun awon ara Egba ati Yoruba) which appeared as a Yoruba fortnightly but became bilingual when an English

language supplement was added from 8 March 1860."

Since the publishing of newspapers, other forms of publishing such as trade publishing, children publishing, mass distribution publishing, scholarly publishing, and textbook publishing have been inaugurated in the country. This study focused on book publishing in the country.

Although, publishing generally is over a hundred years old in Nigeria, the same cannot be said of book publishing. Book publishing from available records is less than 50 years old. According to Adesanoye

(2005:117), Late Bishop T.T. Solaru (the first Oxford University Press representative in Nigeria) claimed that book publishing in Nigeria could be said to have really started with the publication, in 1963, of *Ijala*, a collection of stories and songs by hunters and about life in the countryside by the Oxford University Press. It was said to have been printed in Nigeria to save cost.

However, it should be pointed out that long before 1963, many foreign publishers, such as, Oxford University Press, Macmillan Publishers, Evans Brothers, and Longman have been operating in the country. For instance, in 1948, Oxford University Press appointed Mr (later Bishop) T.T. Solaru as its first West African representative and opened shop in Nigeria almost immediately.

Book publishing has come a long way in Nigeria from the days of *Ijala*. The industry has since “grown” to become bigger and more complex both in size and structure. However, more than ever before, it has more formidable and life threatening challenges to cope with.

Objective and method of the Study

The study examined the challenges facing the Nigerian book publishing industry from the perspectives of the players in the book industry namely: the government, printers, authors, the booksellers, the readers who are the consumers, and the publishers themselves. The historical method was adopted.

It was found that the industry, to all intent and purposes, is at a cross road. If something urgent and drastic is not done, the industry may go the way of the textile industry that was booming in the 70s and early 80s but today the textile industry is practically dead. Therefore, it made a number of recommendations for the revival and sustainable development of the book publishing industry.

Conceptual review

Incidentally, our focus in the study is book publishing which of course is the most important of all the publications we have. So our conceptual review will begin with the term, book. According to the Funk and Wagnall's *Standard College Dictionary*, “book is a bound set of printed sheets of paper usually between covers forming a volume of some bulk”.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, defined book as “a written or printed message of considerable length, meant for public circulation and recorded on materials that are light yet durable to afford comparatively easy portability.” This definition is amplified in a simple way by the American edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which described book as “an assembly of a number of leaves held together... and protected in front and back with a cover of more or less durable material.”

Publishing, on the other hand, is from the root word publish. Publish is from the

latin word *publicare* which means to make public. The word, publish, therefore, means to bring to public attention; to announce (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English language cited in Carter & Patis, 2001: xi).

The Encyclopedia Britannica (cited in Carter & Patis, 2001: xi) defined publishing as “the activity that involves selection, preparation, and marketing of printed matter. It has grown from small and ancient beginnings into a vast and complex industry...” Similarly, Grannis (1967:1) sees publishing as,

to make public - to send forth among the people - the words and pictures that creative minds have produced, that editors have worked over, that printers have produced. It is a whole intellectual and business procedure of selecting and arranging to make a book and promoting its ultimate use.

This definition, it has been argued, manifests in clear terms the importance and multiplicity of operations involved in publishing. It is a profession of multiple experts involving authors, editors, graphic artists, typesetters, illustrators, printers, marketers, distributors, and many more. Publishing is, therefore, a team work.

In the same vein, Bigley (1966:2) argued that book publishing is the chain of activities which take place between an idea in the mind of an author and a book on the shelf at home or in the library. Invariably, what Bigley is saying here is that publishing is a composite of diverse but mutually related activities, none of which can exist independent of others.

Theoretical framework for the study

The study was anchored on the functionalist (functionalism) theory. The theory according to Merton (1957 cited in McQuail, 2000:78) tends to explain social practices, and institutions in terms of the needs of the society and of individuals. The society's needs include the need for education, continuity, order, integration, motivation, guidance, socialization, adaptation etc.

According to McQuail (2000: 81), the functionalist theory sees the mass media as essential to the society for integration and co-operation, order, control and stability, and continuity of culture and values. The importance of book in the society's socio-economic, political cum technological development has already been discussed earlier in the paper.

The functionalist theory sees the society as an ongoing system of interrelated subsystems, of which the mass media, book inclusive, are one. Each subsystem is required to make essential contribution to the continuity and orderly working of the society. The book is essential for the society's continuous existence, growth, and

development. There could be no book without the publishing industry.

Book publishing and the Society

Book is very significant to human development. As a matter of fact, the development of any society cannot be separated from the book publishing industry. In other words, "there is such a direct and obvious link between a virile publishing industry and a purposeful national development" (Adesanoye 1995:1). Book is therefore a veritable *sine qua non* for both individual and national development.

According to Smith Jr (1989: 3) book publishing is the key to true educational, social and economic development and hence to true nationhood. Without book, it is doubtful if any meaningful development can take place in any nation, Nigeria inclusive. This is because education is the basic investment for economic development and books are the basic tools of education (Smith (Jr) 1989: 3).

Corroborating, Dr. Alex Ekwueme, the former Vice-President of Nigeria, in his opening address at the First Nigerian National Congress on Books held in Lagos between 21st and 25th March, 1983, declared:

... education is the backbone of national development and the book is the principal element in the educational process, the book deserves a place of honour in our

national priorities. The book is a passport to the world, an indispensable vehicle of science, a storehouse and conveyor of culture and information for development (Ekwueme 1984:33-34).

What more can we say? In clear terms, publishing plays a great role in the development of any nation and book promotes education, eradicates illiteracy, brightens the citizenry mentally, physically and spiritually. It informs, enlightens, entertains, aids good governance and as such paves way for a stable and peaceful society.

The modest progress made in development in Nigeria today can be attributed to publishing. The profile of the art of publishing is rising day by day in the country with the enduring sophistication of technological advancement. From the era of monotype machine of manual typewriter, then electric, from IBM electric to compugraphic machine, now comes the age of computer with assorted makes of various strength and abilities: IBM compatible, Apple Mackintosh, etc. with enabling packages and valuable printers, the profile of publishing has blossomed into a full profession.

The profession of publishing is procedural with various operations which require ordering of responsibilities in many ways. These responsibilities are carried out by various categories of skilled and unskilled personnel. These operations range

Nigeria; the same is obtainable in other parts of the world even in the developed countries.

Curtis (1977), for instance, noted that though book sales have grown over the years, the total annual volume remains low in the comparative scale of American industries. According to him, the book sales volume in America is so low and quite insignificant that it only ranked with the likes of pet foods and processed peanut products. Furthermore, he submitted that in any good month of the recent past, the billings of Exxon or General Motors alone have equaled the annual billings of the entire American book industry. If this revelation about the American book industry is said to be disturbing, then, that of Africa, and Nigeria in particular, would be startling. In Canada, among the book publishers, the largest companies were the most profitable. Indeed, with the exception of the small, French-language publishers (revenues less than \$1 million), only the largest book publishers had positive earnings on average.

Another problem that arises is that due to lack of required capital, and low returns on investment, coupled with unstable and unfriendly government policies, publishers find it difficult to formulate a stable management policy to publishing programmes. New projects have to be initiated to meet the new challenges posed by ever-changing policies.

(ii). *Inadequate manpower and manpower development programme:* The book

publishing industry in Nigeria lacks adequate manpower for effective development. Since its inception, there have been no well thought out, manpower training and development programme for the book publishing industry in the country. As at the time of the study, only Lagos State University has a degree programme in book publishing in Nigeria. Only very few institutions offer any one or two courses in book publishing at any level. This does not enhance training and retraining of personnel.

(iii). *Negative Attitude of Investors and Banks:* Due to the fact that publishing is a capital intensive venture and yields so little, only very few individuals are interested in investing in it. Financial institutions like banks are usually reluctant to invest or give loan to publishers for fear of losing such money. This negative attitude of investors and banks make it more difficult for publishers to raise enough capital for their operations.

(iv). *Authorship:* Authors too constitute challenge to the publisher in a number of ways. Most importantly, most authors carry false impression of the publishers. To many of them publishers make a lot of money but give so little as royalty. As a result, when called upon to write, they make unrealistic demands. At times, some viable projects are abandoned for lack of co-operation. In addition, many authors find it difficult meeting deadline while some even double deal. The quality of manuscripts coming from many authors today is suspect.

(v). *Piracy*: This is a devastating problem confronting the publishing industry.

Almost all the publishers in this country have had one or more of their best sellers pirated at one time or the other. This problem is multidimensional. Stories of booksellers colluding with pirates abound. Also, there are several allegations of booksellers pirating best selling titles at ridiculous prices. The implication of this for the publisher is that his stock lay stacked in the warehouse while unscrupulous pirates enjoy large patronage from consumers.

3. Authors

Nigerian authors and authors in Nigeria are also faced with serious challenges. For one, the environment, it may be argued is not conducive to book authoring. There no incentives for authors to write. Those that write hardly can afford to get it published while those that published can hardly find market for their publications. Even when there is market, the return, most times, is not encouraging.

4. Booksellers

While it is true that the booksellers like their other counterparts in the publishing industry also face some challenges, activities of many of them constitute major challenge to the book publishing industry.

(i). *Commitment*: Experience has shown that most booksellers are not committed to the business. Bookselling is regarded as seasonal business to many booksellers and

so profit made is not ploughed back into the business. Only a few of them stock books throughout the year.

(ii). *Capital*: Not many booksellers are financially buoyant to invest heavily in the book business. Due to complaint of lack of fund, publishers do supply books to booksellers on sale-or-return basis, apart from the discount granted on books. The usual story is that books are sold and payment is not made to publishers until sales representatives use force of all sorts to collect the company's money. Besides, many booksellers do mark up the prices of books in spite of discount and sale-or-return given to them, thereby making books unaffordable to consumers.

(iii). *Low educational background*: Majority of booksellers are semi-illiterates. Many cannot read fliers on books, as such, they have little knowledge of the trade and its ethics. If titles are not on adoption list, booksellers are reluctant to stock. This implies that trade books shall continually lack patronage.

5. Consumer

Publishing cannot be a business venture if books are not demanded for. Whatever problems are encountered by consumers affect the publishing business. The following are some of the problems confronting the consumer.

(i). *Poor Reading Habit*: This is the greatest problem of the Nigerian book consumers. The market for book publishing in Nigeria is

from conception of ideas to manuscript acquisition, manuscript assessment, editing, designing, printing, warehousing, distribution, publicity and promotion, marketing, administration and accounting. These operations are assigned to the following arms of the company: publishing (editorial and production), warehousing, publicity and marketing, administration and accounts departments. All these departments work hand-in-hand and function as team, as none exists in isolation.

Challenges facing book publishing in Nigeria

The book publishing industry in Nigeria today is fighting the battle of its life. The industry is beset with many life threatening challenges. This is the focus of this subsection. The examination focused on five major actors in the publishing industry and the challenges they face. These include the government, authors, publishers, booksellers, and consumers. Adesanoye (2005: 115 - 141) highlighted six broad challenges. These are the economy, government printing problems, marketing, degraded infrastructure, and book culture. We shall begin our examination with the government.

1. Government : The government may be described as the greatest challenge facing the book publishing industry in Nigeria today.

(i). **Fiscal Policies of the Government:** To say that the policies of government are unpredictable is an understatement. According to Adesanoye (1995:56) these

policies change as unpredictably as women's fashion in clothes, although, of course, more devastating negative in terms of the publishing efforts. Without doubt, frequent revision of policies by the successive governments affects the publishing business adversely. For instance, from 6-5-4 educational system, the government changed to 6-3-3-4 and before this could mature, there seem to be a shift to Basic 1-9 comprising the primary and lower secondary levels, the educational policy is changing frequently. All these systems demand changes in available text books that are tailored to meet their specific needs.

(ii). **Government economic policies:** Successive government economic policies from the days of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) have never been favourable to the real sector of the economy. SAP with all its inbuilt instruments like SFEM (Second-Tier Foreign Exchange Market) and the abolition of import licence scheme were not publishers-friendly. To compound the publishers' woe, the Value Added Tax (VAT) was introduced in 1996. This only serves to worsen the problem of equipment acquisition. High tariff charged on imported printing materials such as ink, plate, film, paper, board, etc also constitute a major challenge to book publishing in the country. These unfavourable fiscal and economic policies lead to high prices of books and its attendant negative consequences on the industry.

(ii). **Degraded infrastructure:** The country's infrastructure, to say the least, is in

a terrible state of disrepair and degradation. Power (electricity) which is the back bone of industry is perpetually erratic. Water has since become a luxury. The roads are bad while the railways according to Sonowo (2007: 13) are in a sorry state. In Nigeria of today, every industrial concern has its own electricity board, water works, police force, etc. All these do not augur well not only for the publishing industry but the economy as a whole. This much was confirmed by the president, Umaru Yar' Adua in the address he sent to the opening ceremony of the 21st Lagos International Trade Fair on 2nd November 2007. According to the president, the lack of adequate infrastructure has acted as a break on economic initiatives and limited the capacity of entrepreneurial activities to stimulate qualitative growth (Sonowo, 2007:13). Not surprisingly, the World Economic Forum, in its 2007 annual Global Competitive Report ranks Nigeria No. 95 on the list of 131 countries in terms of the ease or otherwise of doing business. Availability of relevant infrastructure was a key parameter in the ranking.

Lack of functional paper mills in the country constitutes another critical dimension to the compounded problem of publishing in Nigeria. In spite of the heavy investment on Oku-Iboku and Iwopin Paper Mills, the two companies have unfortunately not remain practically moribund and therefore unable to meet the country's paper need. In addition, other publishing consumables are hardly produced in the country. The result is that

they have to be imported at prohibitive cost.

(iii). *Political Instability*: Frequent changes in government have not an asset to publishing at all. There are so many changes in government and government officials that publishers find it difficult to receive supply order from government. Between 1999 and 2007, the country has had about seven ministers of education. Each minister usually came up with his own agenda. There is, therefore, need for caution in honouring government supply order, in order to avoid a great risk. The moment there is a change of government or official, there is a change of ideas and ideals. In addition, problems such as fuel scarcity, religious turbulence, communal strike, industrial actions, tribal conflicts, incessant power failure, etc. do affect publishing programmes and planning.

2. The Publisher

Like other actors in the book publishing industry, the publisher has his own fair share of challenges. Some of the major challenges are discussed below.

(i) *Finance*: The total turnover of the Nigerian publishing industry for four decades of actual publishing was less than one billion naira (Adelekan, 1995). The average net profit is low while the bank interest rate is high. If one considers the turnover rate, gestation period and level of investment, one wonders how publishing industry has been able to survive this far in the country. It is necessary to point out quickly that the poor turnover of the publishing industry is not peculiar to

limited as Nigerians are yet to cultivate the habit of reading for pleasure. Although the reading population is growing as a result of educational expansion at all levels, a lot of reading is still for examination or certificate oriented. The implication of this is that the rate of sale is low, turnover of deployable capital is poor, forcing the publishers to be conservative and cautious in the quantity of books they print. Low print runs, of course, results in higher unit cost (Nwankwo, 1992:157). *According to Unwin (1976:219-220), the monetary return is in few cases commensurate with the labour expended. It is, in fact, much more difficult to 'make good' in publishing than is commonly supposed ... it is probably true that anyone who could make money at book publishing could make more in other businesses.*

(ii). *Weak Purchasing Power:* To worsen the situation, the economic downturn has badly eroded the purchasing power of the average Nigerian consumers. About two decades ago, parents could proudly buy all the books on their wards' list but today, the financial ability is no more. The second-hand book market is everywhere and 'passing down' books to the younger ones has become the in-thing. All these affect the publishing industry negatively.

Recommendations

Since the importance of books in the

development of man and the fulfillment of his potentials cannot be denied, so also its importance in national development, therefore, it is imperative for the government, the publishers, booksellers, authors, and individuals to join hand and contribute their quota towards the upliftment of the publishing industry. Government in particular has a great role to play in the revival and sustainable development of the book publishing.

Consequently, it is recommended that:

1. The government, at all level, should get more involved in the book publishing. It should encourage other stakeholders in the industry by ensuring that a conducive environment is put in place. In addition, the government should also formulate a National Book Policy which would not only regulate the operations of every player involved but also serves as catalyst for the development of the industry.
2. The ailing paper mills should be repaired by the government so that they can operate at full capacity. This will reduce considerably the hike in the prices of paper which hitherto is imported.
3. Government should be more decisive about book piracy and pirates by allowing the full wrath of the law to descend on any culprit caught. A situation whereby law enforcement agents serve as aids to pirates will only amount to paying mere lip service to the scourge of

piracy.

4. Government should encourage the formation of book clubs in all schools in the country. Private sector participants should also get involved. This will promote reading culture among the youth.
5. More book fairs should be held regularly. This would help promote the available books and open up the potentials of the book industry to local and foreign investors.
6. Existing public libraries should be refurbished and upgraded while new ones should be built and equipped with relevant titles.
7. Publishers should promote the giving out of books as a gift for occasions like birthday, festive seasons (Christmas, New Year, Id-Fitri, El-maulid, Easter etc.). In place of plaques or in addition to plaques books should be used for awards. These will improve the reading habits of Nigerians.
8. There is a greater need for private sector participation in publishing more than ever before through provision of financial aids and grants. Government, investors, banks, private sector and rich individuals should develop positive attitude towards publishing through better funding. With the provision of

adequate capital for the operations of the publishing industry, tremendous progress will be made in the book sector.

9. The government should provide tertiary education in publishing and other related courses to give room for national development. Higher institutions should be encouraged to offer courses in book publishing and related disciplines.

Conclusion

The book is a dynamic product and a monumental property of every society. It is a veritable source of information to the teachers and students, a gold mine of knowledge for researchers and scholars, and a fountain of pleasure and leisure to general readers. Books are indices of progress, pivots of stability, catalysts for social development, as well as springboards of advancement and galvanisers to breakthrough. The onus is, therefore, on all, both the government and the private sector, to nourish the book publishing industry, the harbingers of books, especially, in this democratic dispensation so as to bring Nigeria to the haven of stability and shore of advancement.

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