INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL TOPIC FORUM

NEW FRONTIERS IN NETWORK THEORY DEVELOPMENT

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This special topic forum, commissioned to stimulate theory development on building effective networks, contains eleven papers spanning the micro, meso, macro, and meta levels of analysis. Each paper breaks new ground; collectively, they suggest that we are at a crossroads in network research. Important opportunities remain, however, for further work in network theory development, and we highlight major gaps relating to network theory’s scope and mission, accessibility, integration with other perspectives, and attention to process and internationalization issues.

Of all the phenomena that have gripped the business world in recent years, few match the impact of networks. Quite literally, networks are reshaping the global business architecture. In the ongoing evolution of the dominant organizational paradigm and mode of competition along the continuum of single, autonomous firms to dyadic alliances to networks to virtual companies, the current period is marked by a growing prevalence of the network form of organization. The ubiquity of networks, and networking, at the industry, firm, group, and individual levels has attracted significant research attention.

Being social animals, humans network. This is hardly novel. What is, however, a distinguishing feature of the early twenty-first century is the pervasiveness of many types of social, digital/electronic, and organizational networks, liberated from geographic constraints by quantum leaps in communications, computing, and transportation technologies; unbound from traditional organizational structures by ongoing experimentation in “management technology”; and necessitated by mounting pressures of global competition. Thus, the topic of networks has considerable theoretical and practical import. And the Academy of Management Review remains the foremost theory journal in management and related areas. Together, this potent combination of topic and outlet generated a gratifying seventy-nine submissions for the Special Topic Forum on Building Effective Networks. Eleven of these papers appear in this special issue.

Network scholarship has a varied and impressive lineage, including the sociometry of small groups (Moreno, 1934), the psychology of sentiments (Heider, 1946), cultural anthropology (Nadel, 1957), and graph theoretic mathematics (Harary, 1959). Building on this interdisciplinary foundation, researchers have made significant theoretical and empirical contributions (e.g., Brass, 1984; Burt, 1992, 2000; Granovetter, 1973, 1985; Gulati & Gargiulo, 1999; Hite & Hesterly, 2001; Krackhardt, 1990; Madhavan, Koka, & Prescott, 1998; Podolny, 2001; Powell, 1990; Rodan & Galunic, 2004; Uzzi, 1996), as well as methodological breakthroughs (Carrington, Scott, & Wasserman, 2004; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Based on the work published in this volume and as-yet-untapped research opportunities, we believe that network theory development is at the cusp of an exciting new phase of advances. We begin by discussing several traditional and emerging critiques of the current body of network research, with a focus on underexplored
issues and fundamental challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. We then present a summary of the papers contained in this special issue and conclude with a framework for organizing future research on networks.

TRADITIONAL AND EMERGING CRITIQUES OF NETWORK RESEARCH

Knowledge in the social and behavioral sciences can be advanced by focusing on attributes of individual actors (persons, groups, organizations, and so on); on causal forces stemming from the cognitive maps, values, ideas, and ideals held by actors; or on the many relations that might exist among actors. Each perspective offers powerful advantages and disadvantages. The first two perspectives have been criticized, for example, for their atomistic reductionism and determinism, respectively, whereas drawbacks traditionally assigned to the third perspective—the network approach—include its lack of coherence and underachievement. As Knoke notes, “Presently, diverse network approaches represent loosely connected sets of concepts, principles, and analysis methods rather than a rigorously deductive system” (2001: 63). Salancik, likewise, argues that “much of [organizational theory’s] promise has yet to be realized, in that social network analysis has been used mainly as a tool for analyzing data about organizations rather than for understanding organizations per se” (1995: 345). He goes further, noting the need to understand why certain interactions (the focus of network research) exist and why others do not. Thus, he asks:

Why does a structural hole exist? Why was it not filled before? A network theory that accounts for the appearance and disappearance of structural holes—rather than how they can be used to advantage—and the consequent changes in interactions over time may provide us with a better understanding of how collective action is organized (1995: 349).

Clearly, there are underexplored issues in network theory development. We next outline several additional “emerging” critiques, each of which directs attention to particular underexplored issues.

Scope and Mission

What is, and should be, the scope and mission of network theory? In Bacharach’s words, “A theory is a statement of relations among concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints” (1989: 496). What are the ontologically primitive elements that constitute network theory’s basic concepts? What are the relations among these concepts, and under what boundary assumptions about values, time, and space? Does network theory satisfy the evaluative criteria of falsifiability (Popper, 1959) and utility (Bierstedt, 1959)? What is the logical adequacy, empirical adequacy, and predictive adequacy (Bacharach, 1989) of extant network theory?

The fundamental concepts in network analysis are actor, relational tie, dyad, triad, subgroup, group, relation, and network (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). These concepts certainly are not treated equally, however. As Wellman (1988) observes, network theory shifts the focus from atomistic explanations of phenomena (attributes of independent cases) to relationships among systems of dependent actors. Viewed in this way, behavior is interpreted “in terms of structural constraints on activity, rather than in terms of inner forces within units” (Wellman, 1988: 20), a point echoed by Burt: “People and organizations are not the source of action so much as they are the vehicles for structurally induced action” (1992: 5).

Although useful at one level, such a shift in focus risks understating the role of the very actors composing the network. Consider carbon atoms, which may be structured in different ways. One arrangement yields graphite, the soft, greasy, black substance used in pencils. Another yields diamonds, the hardest known substance found in nature. And an even harder substance (called buckeyballs, or C60) can be manufactured. These structural differences are certainly worthy of attention. Yet while the bonds between the atoms are important, so are the atoms themselves . . . are they of carbon or hydrogen or nitrogen? The actors, and the interdependencies among them, are both crucial in determining the overall structure of the entity.

Player-structure duality is but one of the paradoxes inherent in network theory. There are others. Networks are structures and networks are flows. Networks can be conceptualized as impersonal, institutional arrangements (Furubotn & Pejovich, 1972), and they can be viewed normatively (Burt, 1982). Hite and Hesterly (2001) contrasted path-dependent evolution versus intentional management in networks, and the
identity-based versus calculative nature of networks. Granovetter (1985) grappled with under-socialized versus oversocialized accounts of the embeddedness of economic action in structures of social relations, and with Hobbesian versus generalized morality. These alternative world views are often treated in passing, if at all. Systematic recognition of these choices (cf. Gnyawali & Madhavan, 2001) will help delineate the scope and mission of network theory in the coming years.

**Greater Accessibility**

Another critique of current network research deals with its accessibility. As noted, network theory shifts the focus from individuals and their attributes to pairs of individuals and their relational ties. The mathematical and methodological groundings of network theory can be quite technical (including early sociometry, graph theory, and statistics). Formal mathematical treatment of relational data can be a formidable experience to those outside the field, leading to charges of an overly abstract domain of study accessible only to a narrow audience. Perceived or real, such charges unfortunately limit network theory’s full potential from being realized by a wider pool of scholars and practitioners.

Game theory’s history may be instructive. Invented by John von Neumann and Oskar Morganstern in the 1940s, game theory was long prophesied to revolutionize economics and management. Yet it remained an intellectual backwater, avoided as too arcane even by economists, because it required too many simplifying assumptions to be of much practical use. By the early 1980s, particularly with the work of John Nash, John Harsanyi, and Reinhard Selten, the revolution actually began. This trio, winners of the 1994 Nobel Prize in Economics, worked out the limitations and made game theory applicable to real-life situations, such as designing bidding for offshore oil leases, auctioning Treasury bills, forming trade negotiations, and making pricing and capacity investment decisions.

There may be an important lesson here for network theorists. Unlocking the full power and usefulness of network theory may require researchers to revisit network theory’s assumptions, to reexamine construct definitions and variable operationalizations of core network concepts, and to tighten links between rigorous work and real-world industries, companies, and managerial situations.

**Greater Integration with Other Perspectives**

“We are what we eat,” goes the saying. Similarly, network research owes much to its founding disciplines. The current world view (Kuhn, 1970), research foci, and methodological leanings of network theory can be traced to the theory’s roots in sociology, psychology, anthropology, and mathematics (see Wasserman & Faust, 1994: 10–17, for an overview)—in particular, sociologists’ dominance of network research since the 1970s.

Integration of network theory with other prominent perspectives in management research, such as institutional theory, organizational ecology, resource dependence, and transaction cost economics, may be fruitful. (Dovev Lavie’s paper in this issue represents an excellent start in this direction.) More expansively, emerging work in virtual communities (Castells, 2001), technology convergence (Baker & Green, 2004), and military science (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001) holds significant promise to enrich and energize theory development in network analysis in the coming years.

**Greater Focus on Process Issues**

Many social science studies are alleged, often correctly, to represent cross-sectional snapshots rather than to capture processes that deal with important changes over time. Network studies are not an exception to this general rule. A focus on processes injects time as a variable and allows for the study of dynamic changes of the phenomena in question. Different conceptualizations of processes include life cycle, teleological, and evolutionary (de Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004). “Life-cycle” conceptualizations seek to find and assess linear, irreversible, and predictable progressions of events or states over time. “Teleological” conceptualizations emphasize purposeful cooperation by entities toward desired end states. “Evolutionary” conceptualizations study change and development in terms of recurrent, cumulative, and problematic sequences of variation, selection, and retention.

For example, Burt (1992) recognizes the importance of the time variable, but he is unable to
address issues of causality. After gathering empirical evidence of the association between the holes in a manager’s network and the timing of his or her promotions relative to similar managers, Burt concludes that managers rich in structural holes get promoted faster and at a younger age. However, he concedes that “early, fast promotion might be the cause, not the result, of a manager’s network” (1992: 173) and suggests that causal order is a serious question for future research. To be sure, Burkhardt and Brass (1990) have conducted longitudinal network research, Doreian and Stokman (1997) have studied social network evolution, Burt (2000) has examined how ties decay over time, Hite and Hesterly (2001) have studied the evolution of interfirm networks, and Monge and Contractor (2003) have called for evolutionary theory to be used to describe the creation, maintenance, and dissolution of networks of actors. However, these are among the exceptions, and concerted attention to process issues is needed. (Two papers in this issue—by Kim, Oh, and Swaminathan on network inertia and by Koka, Madhavan, and Prescott on environmental effects—explicitly consider network process issues.)

**Internationalizing Network Theory**

Differences in national cultures, attitude toward cooperation, and willingness to trust “outsiders” influence the continuation or dissolution of partnerships (Park & Ungson, 1997). In countries such as Japan and South Korea, intrafirm and interfirm networks are an integral part of the overall structure of the economy (Gerlach, 1992), and the complex interaction of country-specific legal regulations, economic policies, and existing interfirm partnerships has different effects on the formation of interfirm networks (Sakakibara & Dodgson, 2003). Further, many of the ideas central to network theory, including status, prestige, influence, cohesion, hierarchy, legitimacy, power, trust, and social capital, are deeply rooted in a country’s host culture.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid, however, to the crucial cross-national, cross-cultural aspects of networks. As Boyacigiller and Adler (1991) conclude, organization science in the United States is a “parochial dinosaur,” where empirical research tends to focus on North American organizations (mostly U.S. ones), limiting the generalizability of current theories to firms not in North America and to firms embedded in cultures not derived from an Anglo-Saxon heritage. In a world economy where international networks are thriving, network theory must accept and more fully embrace the phenomenon of globalization. (John Hagedoorn’s paper on cross-level embeddedness in this issue is a welcome effort in this direction.)

**PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL TOPIC FORUM**

We now briefly discuss the eleven papers contained in this special issue. Each extends current thinking on networks in important ways, and a summary of them is provided in Table 1. We were delighted that these papers cut across all professional divisions and interest groups of the Academy of Management and span multiple levels of analysis, often within the same article.

Groups (or teams) are increasingly used in the workplace, and the notion of social capital has received considerable research attention. Yet, as Oh, Labianca, and Chung note, the two concepts (groups and social capital) have rarely been paired together, with the result that a simultaneous, multilevel understanding of intragroup and intergroup relationships, and therefore of group effectiveness, has remained beyond reach. A group comprises individuals and subgroups, and, in turn, is itself embedded within a larger formal and informal organizational social structure. The concept of group social capital permits a novel, useful way of examining group effectiveness as shaped by social relationships within and outside groups.

Continuing the theme that teams are increasingly used in the workplace, concomitantly with growing diversity of the workforce, Joshi extends past research on personal networks to the team level. Diversity in a team represents access to a diverse array of external networks, which are sources of diverse perspectives, knowledge, and information that can enhance a team’s social and knowledge-based capital and improve team performance. The interplay among external networking, team diversity, and team functioning is highlighted in this insightful paper, where Joshi employs the theoretical perspectives of social identity theory and embedded intergroup relations theory.

In social and psychological situations, asymmetries abound. A common example is that trust
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<th>Core Research Questions</th>
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<td>Oh, Labianca, &amp; Chung</td>
<td>A multilevel model of group social capital</td>
<td>Intragroup, intergroup</td>
<td>How can the concept of social capital be fruitfully extended to groups, and how does group social capital help determine a group’s effectiveness?</td>
<td>To introduce the concept of group social capital and to propose a model that links a group’s social capital resources, the group’s social capital conduits, and the group’s effectiveness</td>
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<td>Joshi</td>
<td>The influence of organizational demography on the external networking behavior of teams</td>
<td>Workgroups (teams), organizations</td>
<td>How do team demography and the demography of the larger organization of which the team is a part shape the nature and extent of external team networks?</td>
<td>To study the external networking behavior of teams in relation to team diversity—i.e., to understand the processes by which team diversity can influence team functioning</td>
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<td>Labianca &amp; Brass</td>
<td>Exploring the social ledger: negative relationships and negative asymmetry in social networks in organizations</td>
<td>Social networks in organizations</td>
<td>What factors lead to negative relationships in social networks, and what social liabilities result from negative relationships?</td>
<td>To understand the underexplored and important, perhaps even dominant, role that negative relationships play in social networks of work organizations</td>
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<td>Nebus</td>
<td>Building collegial information networks: a theory of advice network generation</td>
<td>Ego-centered network comprising the ego, social alters, and expert alters</td>
<td>When needing knowledge, whom do people contact in forming their advice network?</td>
<td>To develop a theory of network generation for a class of networks in which an actor selects alters who are instrumental in achieving a desired outcome</td>
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<td>Lavie</td>
<td>The competitive advantage of interconnected firms: an extension of the RBV</td>
<td>Dyads, triads, ego networks</td>
<td>Why doesn’t the RBV, an influential perspective in the strategic management literature, consider multiparty resource contributions and rent distribution?</td>
<td>To extend the RBV from the single firm to networks</td>
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<td>Dhanaraj &amp; Parkhe</td>
<td>Orchestrating innovation networks</td>
<td>Firms, network</td>
<td>How do innovation networks work, given that they often consist of autonomous firms, joined together as loosely coupled systems, and there are no hierarchical controls?</td>
<td>To introduce the concept of orchestration in certain types of networks, and to develop a framework for network orchestration by hub firms</td>
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<td>Hagedoorn</td>
<td>Understanding the cross-level embeddedness of interfirm partnership formation</td>
<td>International, industry, network, dyadic</td>
<td>What are the multiple levels of analysis at which structural and relational embeddedness of interfirm collaboration should be studied, and what interactions occur among these levels?</td>
<td>To recognize that a focal firm’s future interfirm collaboration decisions are impacted by its embeddedness within a nest of dyadic alliances, within inter-organizational networks, and within broader meso (industry or sector) and macro (international) environments; further, to highlight the complex interaction effects among these multiple levels</td>
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is difficult and slow to build yet easy to destroy. The concept of negative asymmetry, highlighted in Labianca and Brass’s paper, posits that, in certain circumstances, negative relationships may have greater explanatory power than positive relationships. The positive aspects of network relationships (e.g., social capital, job satisfaction, promotion) have properly received significant research attention, yet the negative aspects, which arguably have an even larger impact on socioemotional and task outcomes in organizations, remain relatively neglected, and the authors take a major stride in addressing this gap.

The encyclopedias of yore may largely be replaced by web surfing on the internet today, yet the modern workplace retains its social properties. For a variety of reasons, people still seek to supplement knowledge obtained through other means with advice from a network of individuals. How does an ego proceed to construct a useful network of advice givers? Integrating a variety of human choice and decision-making perspectives, Nebus creatively develops a theoretical model that addresses this question.

Lavie’s paper notes that the resource-based view (RBV) has tended to assume that resources exclusively belong to and are proprietarily controlled by the (focal) firm. In an increasingly networked business world, featuring significant sharing and/or exchange of resources, such an assumption is tenuous. The inputs into such alliances comprise shared and nonshared resources, which together generate four types of rents: internal, appropriated relational, inbound spillover, and outbound spillover. The paper demonstrates how firm-specific, relation-specific, and partner-specific factors determine the

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**TABLE 1**

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<tr>
<td>Contractor, Wasserman, &amp; Faust</td>
<td>Testing multitheoretical, multilevel hypotheses about organizational networks: an analytic framework and empirical example</td>
<td>Actor, dyadic, triadic, global</td>
<td>How do we comprehensively frame the study of “organizing as networks,” using diverse theoretical approaches at multiple levels of analysis?</td>
<td>To propose an analytic framework that can be used to specify and statistically test multilevel, multitheoretical hypotheses about the structural tendencies of organizational networks</td>
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<td>Kim, Oh, &amp; Swaminathan</td>
<td>Framing interorganizational network change: a network inertia perspective</td>
<td>Intraorganizational networks, interorganizational dyadic ties, interorganizational network position, and interorganizational field</td>
<td>What are the constraints on network change, what are the sources of such constraints, and what implications do the constraints have for network evolution?</td>
<td>To deepen appreciation of the processes of network change; more specifically, to add to our understanding of the forces of resistance to dissolving old network ties and forming new ones</td>
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<td>Koka, Madhavan, &amp; Prescott</td>
<td>The evolution of interfirm networks: environmental effects on patterns of network change</td>
<td>Firm, network, external environment</td>
<td>How do changes in the external environment help bring about changes in interfirm networks?</td>
<td>To link changes in the attributes of external environments (uncertainty, munificence) to patterns of changes in networks (expansion, churning, strengthening, shrinking)</td>
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<td>Rangan, Samii, Van Wassenhove</td>
<td>Constructive partnerships: when alliances between private firms and public actors can enable creative strategies</td>
<td>Firms, alliances, networks, governments, multilateral organizations</td>
<td>Under what circumstances and in which economic spheres are partnerships necessary between private firms and public actors (such as governments or multilateral organizations)? Why?</td>
<td>To reach beyond networks of private actors (for-profit firms) to consider situations where partnerships among private and public actors offer the only viable solutions in certain pockets of economic activity</td>
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contribution of partner resources to the rent streams that firms extract from their alliance networks. This meshing of network theory with the RBV deepens and enriches both perspectives.

Once the picture is defined, everything else becomes the background. With its focus mainly on structures, relations, and outcomes, network theory has tended to overlook crucial process issues. One of these issues deals with the increasingly important phenomenon of innovation conducted by autonomous members of loosely coupled networks in which hierarchical authority is absent. Dhanaraj and Parkhe’s paper proposes that, in such situations, “hub firms” arise in order to “orchestrate” the processes of managing knowledge mobility, innovation appropriability, and network stability. This framework for network orchestration sheds light on how value is created and extracted in innovation networks.

Hagedoorn develops a useful aggregation of multiple, fragmented bodies of literature on embeddedness, which together generate a whole that is greater than the sum of its component parts in terms of appreciating propensity for interfirm partnership formation. Put another way, country characteristics, patterns of alliances within an industry, and a particular company’s history of alliances jointly affect the company’s future partnership formation.

Arguing that the evolving, emerging network form is the organization, Contractor, Wasserman, and Faust take an unusually broad sweep of the literature surrounding social networks to show how diverse theoretical perspectives may be applied in a framework that helps us understand the emergence of networks. What is intriguing about this paper is not only its encompassing treatment and its potential to explicate apparently disconnected ideas, but also its rigorous illustration of the framework, using p∗ techniques, in the context of an important network organization, a Cooperative Research and Development Agreement (CRADA).

Economists can perhaps be forgiven for assuming that network members costlessly dissolve old, unproductive relationships and form new, potentially more lucrative ties. But management, network, strategy, and organizational scholars cannot make such assumptions. The embeddedness of interorganizational relationships (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1996) strongly impacts network membership dynamics (entry into or exit from a network), yet such process-based considerations have received scant attention in the literature. Kim, Oh, and Swaminathan, drawing on the structural inertia theory of organizational ecology, propose an integrated theoretical framework for network inertia. This framework probes the causal mechanisms of resistance to change, including internal factors (organizational characteristics), external factors (interorganizational dyadic ties, interorganizational network positions, and the external environment), and interaction effects between internal and external factors.

Network change is also the theme of Koka, Madhavan, and Prescott’s paper. Firms are embedded in networks, which, in turn, are embedded in external environments. Dynamic changes in environments can be expected to have a strong influence on network evolution, yet such linkages scarcely have been studied in the literature. This paper provides a useful framework for understanding the environmental change/network evolution relationship. The authors are careful to avoid environmental determinism by including strategic orientation as a moderator. The result is an incisive blend of theoretical analysis at the firm, network, and environmental levels.

Finally, Rangan, Samii, and Van Wassenhove cast an even wider net, beyond the important role of governments in directing business activity to partnerships among private and public players. Although such partnerships have not been studied extensively, there are classes of situations where conventional arrangements are not viable, and nontraditional partnerships pairing sets of private actors and public actors become necessary. Based on transaction cost economics and the theory of externalities, this paper provides a framework for understanding such situations and, in the process, illuminates the potential role of public actors in building effective private networks.

CONCLUSION

The papers that follow provide theoretical insight and build a more complex and yet more refined understanding of networks. The implications extend far beyond networks—to students of management, strategy, organizational behavior, human resources management, entrepre-
neurship, alliances, knowledge and learning, and international business. Indeed, network theory has the potential to inform several contemporary issues, including the internet (Castells, 2001), “sleeper cells” in terrorist groups, epidemicologic studies of the spread of AIDS, and technology’s impact on organizational structure and performance (Brews & Tucci, 2004; Rodan & Galunic, 2004).

Much remains to be learned, however. The “emerging critiques,” discussed above, may provide several trigger points for future research. More generally, we stress the need to place network research in its broader context, temporally and topically, as shown in Figure 1. Temporal contextualization uses the time dimension as an organizing principle, from birth to growth to maturity to death. In a parallel track, topical contextualization focuses on central topics of interest to managers and researchers along various phases of a network’s life cycle.

Finally, a word of thanks. We appreciate the work of Rosalie Tung and Ed Conlon, Academy of Management president and former AMR editor, respectively, in organizing this special issue on networks. Art Brief, former AMR editor, and Susan Pauli, former managing editor, provided valuable support and guidance throughout the process. We are grateful to the reviewers for their tireless efforts and their talent and expertise. Most important, we applaud the research achievements of the authors who submitted manuscripts to this special issue. Although not all papers with merit could be accepted for publication, the impressive quality and quantity of ongoing work lead us to conclude that the study of networks will remain vibrant far into the future.

REFERENCES


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