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## Accessing the city through new forms of sociability – examples of use of digital social networks in Brazil

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**Abstract** This article presents examples of new forms of sociability in the city and in the urban public spaces by the use of digital social networks. The article provides an introduction to the use of the Internet as a space that fosters the development of a new sociability based on a massive collaborative culture. Then it presents recent Brazilian examples. In this context, the social networks are seen as a privileged space to share opinions and locate calls to actions that reconfigure urban space – its use and sometimes the space itself. The examples are related to social groups action on the Brazilian cities that have been originated and supported by the platforms used for iteration via social networks. These examples can bring benefits to the reflection on the formation of what might be called “the city as a social network” in part because of the current use and ubiquity of communication technologies in the city.

### INTRODUCTION

Internet – the largest public space that mankind has ever known (Rodotà, 2011) – is now presented as an environment of social phenomena development. Although it is subject to regulation and possible violations, it would allow men and women declare their rights, seek social recognition and develop a sense of politics, according to the author.

The networked interaction promoted by digital technologies facilitates the action of the citizen as a consumer and producer of landscape and territory and allows they make decisions often on the basis of data obtained in real time. Groups and online communities also arise as actors of social movements that bring together citizens and civil society organizations concerned to propose and participate in projects to improve the city.

According to Massimo Di Felice (2007) when the communication process becomes a stream, emitter, receiver and media mix, territory and public sphere change as well as meanings and social practices. In the first decade of this century, collective actions mediated by social media foment anti-globalization movements in favor of social justice in various parts of the world, as Occupy movements and political insurrection, as the Arab Spring, to remember some of the iconic. These movements have used digital communication networks and social media to give visibility to their ideas and to spread feelings of frustration and anger with the inability of citizens to participate at the spheres of debate and political decision. Other movements are directed to the improvement of urban space – public or not.

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On many occasions, technical and communicational skills were used to support political causes, such as in the collaborative development of open source platforms like Ushahidi. Collaboration network were also at the service of mitigation and crisis and disaster management that occurred in Haiti in 2010 or in 2011 in Fukushima, Virginia and Rio de Janeiro.

These facts indicate the existence of a turning point in contemporary social development. Perhaps it is possible to assume, as Mitcham (1995) said, that we are living a time of virtual re-contextualization where technology will lose the autonomy obtained in the modernity.

This paper presents questions that have been discussed in two research projects under way in the Federal University of Bahia – UFBA: the project “From consumer to producer of information: the citizen in the context of digital culture”,<sup>1</sup> developed as a PhD thesis in Culture and Society at Poscultura Program and the project “Digital Social Networks and its Impact on Urban Space in Brazil”, developed as a PhD thesis in Architecture and Urbanism at PPGAU.

The mentioned projects have in common a concern for citizen action aimed at changing the urban environment, either individually or in community as a member of civil society organization, using digital social networks.

As stated by Friedland, Hove and Rojas (2006), the transformation of the traditional institutions of civil society and institutions (school, community associations and indeed the family) into networked environments has created a lifeworld in which the media becomes a major source of socialization. On the other hand, the reducing cost of being a speaker invites one to take place in public conversation. Working alone and cooperatively with others he/she can ultimately participate in public arenas (Benkler, 2006) and take part in a comprehensive and cumulative cultural process of formation of preferences and beliefs (Maia, 2008).

Moreover mostly of communicative interaction modalities today observed on the Internet seems to indicate shifts on the networked structure of communication. Verified practices of sharing images via mobile phones integrated with social interactions in Japanese everyday life suggested the emergence of a form of visual sharing centered on personal, intimate and pervasive nature of social connections via handheld devices (Ito, 2005). This fact points to changes in shared perceptions of context with supposed impacts in approaches on the convergence of views.

Based on the this visions, we believe that we are living in a time of technological and cultural changes that enables the emergence of new forms of sociability with impact on the perception and use of urban spaces and can influence the planning and management of spaces into the city.

We will introduce the idea of the Internet as a space that can facilitate the establishment of a new sociability through the development of a massive collaborative culture prior to giving examples of this type of action arising from or supported by digital social networks in Brazil. These examples will bring benefits to the reflection on the formation of what Maistrello (2007) has called “the city as a social network,” in part because of the current use and ubiquity of communication technologies in the city.

## **INTERNET AS A SPACE FOR A NEW SOCIABILITY**

The emergence of the so-called Web 2.0 in the first decade of this century enabled a significant improvement and increased interaction by facilitating the production of content for anyone interested. In this way, the Internet allowed the consolidation of practices of content sharing – political, cultural, entertainment and marketing for products and services – through the exchange of data and information and expanded the reach of campaigns broadening audience of events sponsored either by

<sup>1</sup> Currently the empirical research project is being developed at the University of Basilicata (Italy).

commercial establishments and government. In the same sense, it helped to promote discussion and debate on issues of public interest, mobilization for participation in protests and manifestations. By using the Internet, groups and communities interested in diverse subjects have proliferated.

In its origin, the Internet was based on criteria of academic excellence, in peer review, in transparency of procedures and the sharing of results - indispensable requirements to enrich and improve research (Monaci, 2008). The hacker culture, with a passion for discovery and its ideal for sharing and free access to knowledge, was one of the driving factors of the Internet. The freedom to create became a fertile ground for development of research projects, experimentation and technological solution, regardless of the logic and its ties with institutional research and mainstream (Monaci, 2008). Freedom to create along with the spirit of sharing and collaboration fostered a synergy of factors critical to the development and diffusion of this technological innovation (Monaci, 2008).

In a second phase, in 1996, after the collapse of NASDAQ, the Internet will be characterized by the progressive privatization of content and networking experience, on one hand, and the emergence of a sustained trend in personal creativity – millions of Internet users start experiencing, collaborating and developing social relationships and practices of design and construction of knowledge in an independent and self-taught way (Monaci, 2008).

The relative ease of deployment and use of content management systems in publishing platforms and collaboration supported by blogs and wikis were largely responsible by the proliferation of information on the world web (Fumero, 2007). Giving voice and time to (often) amateur, folk taxonomies are used to label shared resources on the Web, including texts, images, addresses, profiles. In terms of geographical space, geotagging is used to provide location information, allowing its recovery through maps (Goodchild, 2007).

On the other hand different tags placed by different users at the same features create an alive content network and multiply mental pathways, establishing new connections, putting in contact ideas, ideals, people, communities, in a not predictable way (Maistrello, 2007). In addition, the user now has the ability to upload and disseminate geographic information data.

While the technological innovations allow to operate the public sphere at the local level through social practices widely shared, linked to multiple contexts and different scales of social action, we can not forget the power of big media conglomerates. The media conglomerates and Internet companies (Google, Yahoo, Microsoft and Apple) are looking for economies of synergy between the various platforms and products (Castells, Arsenault, 2008). So the space of communication increasingly becomes consolidated within a telecommunication network, including Internet and mass media.

As they recognize their market potential, global business networks are bringing these new networks of communication under their corporate control. Nonetheless, to be able to tap into this reservoir of active customers, they must respect the specific cultures of this new media. They should not excessively curtail free speech in social spaces (Castells, Arsenault, 2008).

The studies developed by Castells and Arsenault (2008) demonstrate the imbrication of *mass media* and Internet enterprises with media products being produced and consumed through social networks and of distinct contents generated by users. However, individuals, groups and civil society organizations express the capability for usage of such medias in favor of formation of a collective interpretation about common issues and interests. That is the case of environmentalist movement: the network established among scientific community, environment activists and celebrities took the global warming issue for media and broadly communicated the world using multimedia networks (Castells, 2009). Also according to Castells (2009), in the movement against corporations globalization – a movement extremely decentralized and diverse – the digital networks formed a decisive organizational tool. The author mentions at least one network – *Stop Climate Chaos* – as example of participant for which Internet is fundamental for implementation of media strategy such as for organization

of the movement (Castells, 2009).

In this context, a new form of communication through mass self-communication networks arises, a process that takes place in horizontal communication networks of the global web, which includes a multimodal interactive exchange of messages and documents from many-to-many in a given time (Castells, Arsenault, 2008).

In the contemporary context, one of the goals of the study of social networks is to analyze relationships between social entities and the implications of these patterns and relationships to the social life (Wasserman, Faust, 1994). Stotz (2009) states that a social network is configured through collective action resulting from a broader social process. Moreover, Marteleto (2009) reveals that social networks are shaped in everyday relationships, desires, interests and expressions of collective subjects. Social networks are open structures and tend to expand, from sharing codes, values or goals (Lara, Lima, 2009), through its members, generating new relationships.

It can be noticed the influence of these networks on the contact (and re-contact) of citizens with urban spaces and public or private environments, by analyzing the ways and means as the citizen uses and appropriates (or “re-appropriates”) of public space and the intra-urban space. It can be seen that the Digital Social Network (DSN) may play a cooperative and aggregator role, contributing this way to developing strategies to establish contact with the urban spaces and equipments (spaces suitable, minimally qualified: squares, promenades, parks, cultural centers, stations, transportation) which are often unknown or ignored.

Through the DSN is also possible to diversify the use of streets and means of transportation, modifying traffic flows through the spaces of the city, because networks are transforming each individual or group into multiplying agents of information and knowledge about urban spaces (often in real time), influencing their perception, occupation and use. Thus, it is possible to expand and transform the culture, uses and forms of appropriations of the urban spaces starting from information disclosure and experience externalized via DSN. The information disseminated by the network shows a new way to incorporate urban spaces into digital space.

The support to different media and representations such as images, sounds and videos improves and changes the perception about the urban space. Furthermore, the ubiquity opened another set of interactions between the citizen and space. The place where the citizen is located now contextualizes searches, this can attribute new meanings to the physical space. This aspect may change deeply the way people “read” the cities and connect with new networks.

### **CITY AS A SOCIAL NETWORK – BRAZILIAN EXAMPLES**

The survey conducted by CGI.br, the Internet Management Committee in Brazil, named *Survey on the use of information and communication technologies in Brazil: ICT Households and Enterprises* shows that, in 2011, 69% of the total of Internet users in the country were participating in online social networks as ORKUT, Facebook and LinkedIn (CGI.br, 2012). This type of use predominated in the age group of 16 to 24 years for such period and does not differ very much with respect to income range.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of communication through the Internet in Brazil. The highlight is the growth of uses such as Skype, Twitter and media downloading.

**Figure 1** Activities on the internet – percentage of number of users in Brazil, 2011. Available at <http://www.cetic.br/usuarios/tic/2011-total-brasil/analises.htm>

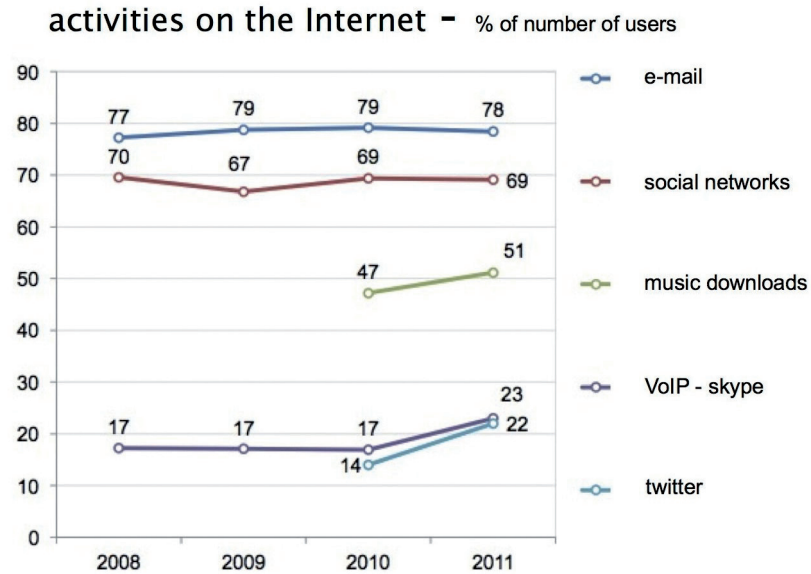
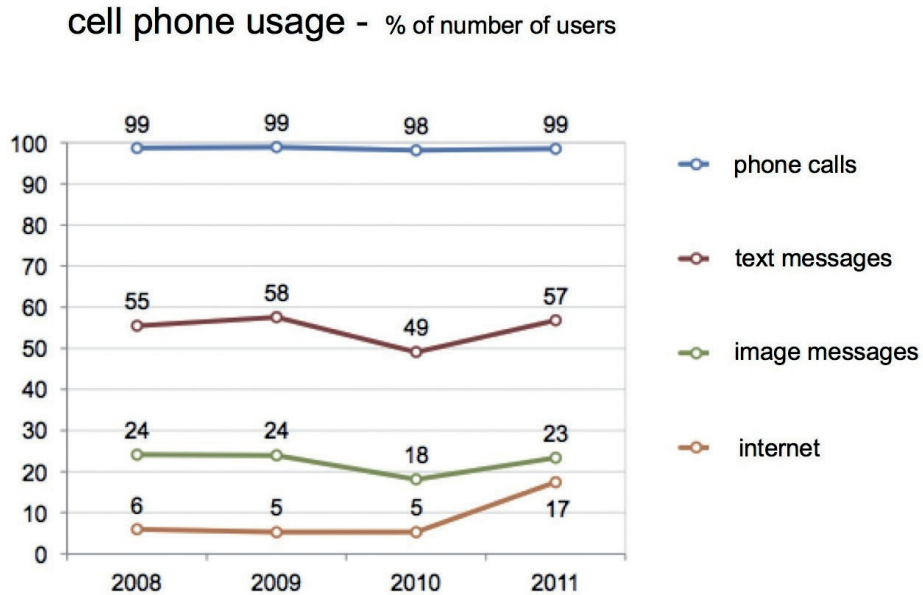


Figure 2 shows the use of mobile phones in Brazil, the highlight is the growth of Internet access using mobile devices, which tripled from 2010 to 2011 (orange line).

**Figure 2** Cell phone usage – activities on the internet – percentage of number of users in Brazil, 2011. Available at <http://www.cetic.br/usuarios/tic/2011-total-brasil/analises.htm>



In Brazil there are several web based initiatives that aim improving citizenship and the right to the city through subjects related to urban space in a widespread way, or that promote, argue and perform actions over specific points, just like mobility, public cleanliness and communitarian landscaping. In

this context, it is possible categorizing Brazilian initiatives with specific purpose for develop social networks for discussions and actions about urban spaces or the right to them. The next two examples are generic platforms designed to allow public participation – the first one in Porto Alegre City; the second one can be adapted to local actions. Here, we present the result of a competition about Vila Pompéia, a neighborhood of São Paulo City, runned by the second platform. The other initiatives have specific scopes articulated from digital social networks aiming to transform the use and perception of urban space.

The Portoalegre.cc project (Figure 3) was launched in 2011 and presents a digital cartographic application open to all that subscribed the site, allowing each user to create a cause with a georeference.

**Figure 3** Cartographic interface for user interactions in PortoAlegre.cc project. Available at <http://www.portoalegre.cc/>



The concept of cause in this project encompasses: reports about positive and negative events such as thefts, problems in the streets as holes and leaks, public equipments out of operation, notification and/or organization of sportive and leisure meetings or even for recovery of non-assisted areas by public administration. With all these interactions, it was possible, in a participative and collaborative way, developing a georeferenced mural of problems found into the city of Porto Alegre. This digital platform can guide the public administration to fix the reported problems.

On the other side, citizens may interact and exchange information, allowing these to organize and be connected to events and collective activities that happens in different urban spaces. This project was partially sponsored by the city hall of Porto Alegre in a partnership with a local university and other organizations which, together, execute in parallel several workshops to promote digital tools utilization. Launched in 2009, the Democratic City project (Figure 4) was created by a Civil Society Organization with Public Interest (OSCIPI in Portuguese) that is presented as “a platform for politic participation, where citizens and entities express themselves, communicate and generate mobilization for developing a better society”. It’s possible record problems and also make proposals related to the everyday life of cities in Brazil. The participants may create a subject or choose one of the concepts as well as receive support for their proposals and problems.

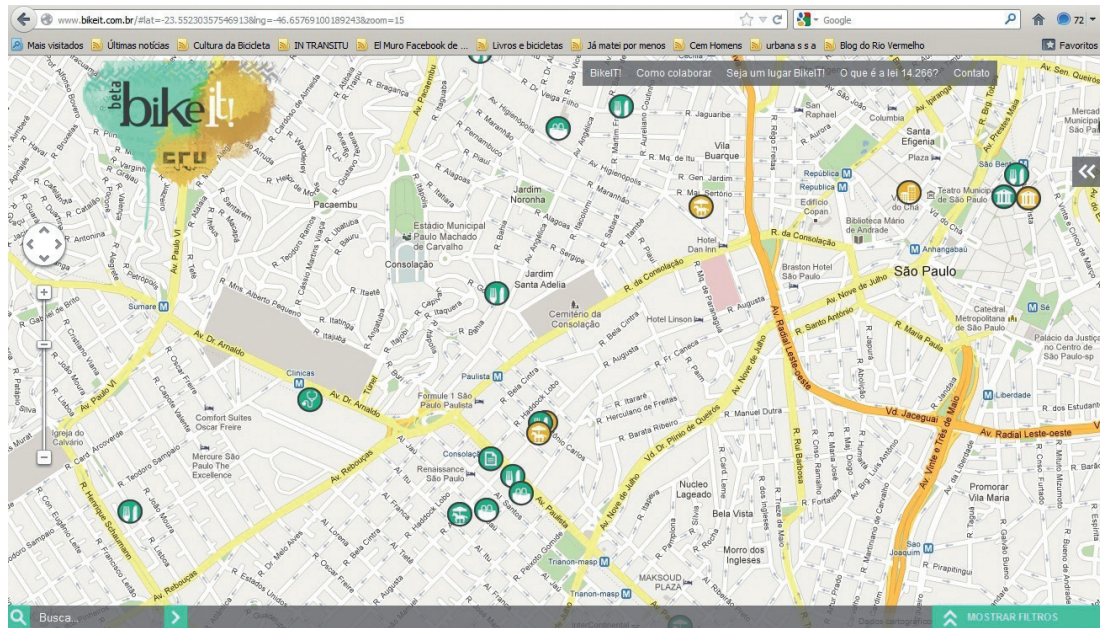
Figure 4 Interface for user interactions in Democratic City project. Available at <http://www.cidadedemocratica.org.br/>



This project aims: to promote interaction among the citizen, public managers and entities such as NGOs, social movements, enterprises, universities and the public power, in an effort to create and promote new proposal and start new dialogues with social actors, to provide support, ideas and information about these actors; to recognize collaborative communities and to build diverse networks that act in local issues and participate in the discussions. Structured as a tool for open innovation, it allows anyone to create challenges about specific aspects where groups of people work together to develop innovative solutions to the problems that affect them. The challenges are therefore a powerful means for aggregation of ideas and problems, according to the website. The contest “A Pompeia we want” provides an example of such an aggregation.





Figure 6 BikeIT project - <http://www.bikeit.com.br/>

The project certifies the indications through votes from other users to confirm the published information, granting a seal of BikeFriendly to the place. This way, the project intends to promote and legitimate the bicycle as a transportation, modifying the urban public and private space usage. This initiative may encourage other places to offer support to bicycles or simply accept them, incrementing the change in the everyday use of the city. The difference in this project resides in the way used to publish such places with such characteristics, through interactions that happen in users networks to indicate but also to endorse the indications of the *bikefriendly* places.

The Canteiros Coletivos (Collective Yards) Movement group page on Facebook (Figure 7) states that it is an open group, which brings together people who believe in participatory management of public urban areas. Through actions of cleaning, planting and artwork, the group intended to lead the local people the idea that the strength of a collective can transform and reframe degraded and forgotten spaces of a city.

The organization and convocation of volunteers happened exclusively in the digital social networks, with interactions generated from photographs, videos and textual reports. The collective has been invited to participate in diverse activities with different and relevant partnerships, as Solar Boa Vista Theater and the Permaculture Institute of Bahia. Other neighborhoods have made contact with the project and begun to recover their yards and squares.

Figure 7 Canteiros Coletivos Movement – <http://www.facebook.com/groups/coletivodecanteiro/>



The project has received a wide audience: November, 2014, the group, born in February 2012, had 2,067 members.

The Desocupa Movement (Figure 8) is another important example of usage of digital social networks about urban issues.

Figure 8 Desocupa Movement – <http://movimentodesocupa.wordpress.com>



The movement began in January, 2012, in Salvador, organized and released through the social networks. Facebook was the most relevant network in the very first moment. The movement begins to disprove and question the occupation of a public square by a private enterprise of carnival (approved by the city hall), avoiding public usage for more than six months. The participants claimed for removal of the equipments and return the public space to the people and neighborhood usage. Since then, this manifestation provoked the creation of a huge network of citizens interested in keeping discussions and manifestations against political and juridical actions in the scope of urbanism related to public spaces of Salvador. This network organized manifestations and created several events to discuss the problems of the city, titled “A cidade que queremos” (The city we want). The presence of public defenders, prosecutors, city councilmen, congressmen, representatives of Regional Council of Urbanism and Engineering and Brazilian Institute of Architects to these events demonstrates the relevance of the movement and its issues.

### **CITY AND DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORKS – SOME OBSERVATIONS**

Digital social networks are now the space where people, especially the young ones, connect and communicate. Especially in big cities, they interact with the use of mobile networks, maybe much more than on the streets, squares and malls. We believe that this is a topic that must be debated among professionals of Architecture and Urban Planning and among all those responsible to think about the city.

Planning activities still have to deal with the physical structure and infrastructure of cities. Public spaces, squares, streets, private spaces, mobility, density, segregation, land use regulations remain relevant to the management and operation of the city, but it is mandatory to add new tools that can display and manage the flows of information, connecting business, government and NGOs, and especially citizens that, from these cultural and technological possibilities can also act politically and influence the way of thinking and acting on these structures, both physical and digital.

In Brazil, the constitutional principle of citizen participation has been established since 1988. The Statute of the City, from 2011, regulates the chapter “urban policy” of the Brazilian Constitution. Its fundamental principles are the participatory planning and the social function of property.<sup>2</sup> However, the proposed means to make it happen – public hearings, publication of documents and public access – are insufficient. The studies guiding techniques and policies decisions are rarely released. When it happens, few groups are able to discuss it. Therefore, they do not guarantee the effective participation of the population, especially when more than a third of the Brazilian population live in large cities or metropolitan areas.

Consider the city as a social network with each node connected to the Internet is to design a true map of the local realities. City network would therefore be a classic example of an application based on social networks, a social network whose scope would not only find friends, post photos and videos to look for work, but to become the protagonist of the territory and represent the complexity (Mastrello, 2007).

Networked interactions here presented have been used to support movements, in socio-cultural practices designed to amend sharing and new meanings to physical, social and political contexts in favor of using the public space as a common good, in the interest, if not all, of many. The examples show some ways to engage citizens in movements aiming to improve public spaces and the quality of urban life. None of these platforms are really empowered by public administration. Participants just can propose, access informations and give opinions. They can participate in networked conver-

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/leis/leis\\_2001/110257.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/leis_2001/110257.htm)

sations but not decide. However this gives opportunity to create rules in discussion, make evaluations and express values and judgments in a kind of “subactivism”, as termed by Bakardjieva (cited by Dahlgren, 2013), to describe the form of civic participation that takes place between people in their everyday life. Therefore we can't discard the possibility it can acts as a support for the provision of alternatives and pressures that come to legitimize the political decision.

Cities have always been areas of diversity, social interaction and transaction. There is now a new role for Urbanism: to explore the possibilities that arise with new technologies. There is indeed a large number of computer applications for the search of their “equals” and to keep one in touch with his network of “friends.” On the other hand, they allow choices, mobilization and collective action, public interventions, dissemination of information as the examples presented here. If they do not guarantee or create communities of interested participants in planning with a view to the common good, at least they make possible the extension of the public space by creating living spaces contributing to the fight against segregation that shapes our cities today.

It is possible to observe that most of current online social practices are at large distance of the convergence of opinion reached throughout rational-critical debate as defined by Habermas (2003). In this case, it's more proper to affirm they reinforce the idea of public opinion as something not so clear or straightforward, as proposed by the communicative rational utopia, but opaque and full of misunderstanding as Walter Lippmann demonstrated in their classical book *Public Opinion* (Benigno, 2013). We shall be aware of some consequences, as that shared visions do not assure they are the best and most coherent choices and ideas.

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