

Online ISSN

3007-3197

Print ISSN

3007-3189

<http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

Media Law and Ethical Communication in Journalism Education: Preparing Students for Defamation, Contempt, and Privacy Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the significance of media law and ethical communication in journalism education, with a focus on preparing students to navigate legal challenges related to defamation, contempt of court, and privacy rights. In an era of rapid digital dissemination and citizen journalism, journalism students must be equipped with both legal awareness and ethical reasoning to ensure responsible reporting. The paper examines how deficiencies in media law education can lead to professional risks, including legal liability and ethical breaches. It further highlights the importance of integrating practical legal training within journalism curricula, enabling students to critically evaluate the boundaries of free expression while respecting individual dignity and institutional authority. Emphasis is placed on developing competencies that align journalistic practice with constitutional protections, statutory frameworks, and professional codes of ethics. The study argues that effective journalism education must bridge theoretical knowledge with applied legal understanding to produce responsible media professionals capable of handling complex communicative environments. Strengthening this integration fosters accountability, reduces legal conflicts, and enhances public trust in the media.

Keywords— Media Law, Journalism Education, Defamation, Contempt of Court, Privacy Rights

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The field of journalism has undergone a profound transformation due to the rapid expansion of digital media platforms, social networking sites, and real-time news dissemination. Traditional boundaries of journalism have become increasingly blurred as individuals, bloggers, and citizen journalists actively participate in news creation and distribution. In this evolving media landscape, issues such as defamation, contempt of court, and invasion of privacy have become more frequent and complex. Journalism education, therefore, faces the critical challenge of preparing students not only to report accurately and ethically but also to understand the legal consequences of their communication practices. The increasing number of media-related lawsuits and regulatory actions highlights the urgent need for structured media law education integrated within journalism curricula (Asghar et al., 2026).

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses the intersection of law, ethics, and journalism education in a time when misinformation and legal disputes in media reporting are increasing globally. Journalism students often enter professional practice with strong reporting skills but insufficient understanding of legal frameworks governing media conduct. This gap can lead to serious consequences, including defamation claims, contempt proceedings, and violations of privacy rights. By emphasizing legal literacy and ethical communication, this study contributes to strengthening responsible journalism. It also supports the development of curricula that prepare future journalists to balance freedom of expression with legal accountability, thereby enhancing both professional competence and public trust in media institutions (Asghar & Sabir, 2026).

1.3 Concept of Media Law

Media law refers to the body of legal principles, statutes, and judicial interpretations that regulate the production, dissemination, and content of media communications. It encompasses a wide range of issues, including freedom of speech and expression, defamation, contempt of court, privacy rights, intellectual property, and regulation of broadcasting and digital platforms. Media law serves as a framework that balances the constitutional right to free expression with the need to protect individual reputation, maintain judicial authority, and safeguard personal privacy. In the context of journalism, media law provides essential boundaries within which journalists must operate. Understanding these legal principles is crucial for avoiding unlawful publication and ensuring responsible reporting in both traditional and digital media environments (Khaled et al., 2025).

1.4 Journalism Education and Ethical Communication

Journalism education plays a vital role in shaping the professional identity and ethical orientation of future media practitioners. Ethical communication in journalism involves accuracy, fairness, objectivity, accountability, and respect for human dignity. It requires journalists to make informed decisions about what to report, how to report it, and the potential impact of their reporting on individuals and society (Shami et al., 2025a). Within academic settings, journalism students are trained in reporting techniques,

media writing, and communication theory; however, ethical and legal training is often underemphasized. Integrating ethical communication with media law education ensures that students develop a holistic understanding of their professional responsibilities, enabling them to navigate complex moral and legal dilemmas in real-world journalism practice (Asghar, Shami, & Kiran, 2025).

1.5 Legal Risks in Media Practice

Modern media practice involves significant legal risks, particularly in relation to defamation, contempt of court, and violations of privacy. Defamation occurs when false statements harm an individual's reputation, leading to civil or criminal liability. Contempt of court arises when published content interferes with judicial proceedings or undermines the authority of the judiciary (Sadozai et al., 2025). Privacy violations, especially in the digital age, occur when personal information is disclosed without consent or lawful justification. With the rise of instant publishing through online platforms, the risk of legal breaches has increased substantially, often due to insufficient fact-checking or ethical oversight. Journalism professionals and students must therefore be trained to recognize these risks and adopt preventive measures, including verification of sources, adherence to editorial guidelines, and compliance with legal standards (Haider et al., 2025).

1.6 Research Objectives

- i. To examine the role of media law education in shaping responsible journalism practices.
- ii. To analyze the importance of ethical communication in journalism education.
- iii. To identify key legal challenges faced by journalists, including defamation, contempt, and privacy issues.
- iv. To assess the gaps in current journalism curricula regarding legal and ethical training.
- v. To propose effective strategies for integrating media law and ethics into journalism education programs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Development of Media Law

The historical development of media law is closely linked to the evolution of freedom of expression and the regulation of communication channels across different political and legal systems. In early societies, communication was largely controlled by ruling authorities, and censorship was a dominant feature of information dissemination. With the emergence of the printing press, concerns about uncontrolled publication led to the introduction of formal restrictions on printed materials, particularly in Europe (Shami et al., 2025b). Over time, democratic movements challenged these restrictions, emphasizing the importance of free speech as a fundamental right. The development of constitutional governance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marked a turning point, as many states began to recognize freedom of expression as a legal right, while simultaneously introducing limitations to prevent abuse. In the modern era, the rise of electronic media and digital platforms has significantly expanded the scope of media law, requiring continuous adaptation of legal frameworks to address new forms of communication, including online journalism, social media reporting, and digital content

creation (Ahmad et al., 2025).

2.2 Freedom of Press and Legal Restrictions

Freedom of the press is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic societies, enabling transparency, accountability, and informed public debate. However, this freedom is not absolute and is subject to legal restrictions intended to balance individual rights and societal interests. Media law typically imposes limitations related to national security, public order, defamation, contempt of court, and privacy protection. These restrictions are designed to prevent misuse of freedom of expression that could harm individuals or disrupt institutional integrity. In journalism education, understanding the tension between press freedom and legal boundaries is essential for developing responsible media practitioners. Scholars have emphasized that while unrestricted media can promote democratic values, it can also lead to misinformation and harm if not guided by ethical and legal standards. Therefore, the legal framework governing press freedom serves as both a protective and regulatory mechanism (Asghar, Shami, & Ashraf, 2025).

2.3 Defamation Laws and Media Responsibility

Defamation law plays a crucial role in regulating journalistic content and ensuring the protection of individual reputation. It generally involves the publication of false statements that harm a person's character or standing in society. Media professionals are particularly vulnerable to defamation claims due to the public nature of their work and the speed at which information is disseminated. Legal systems typically distinguish between libel (written defamation) and slander (spoken defamation), with varying degrees of liability and penalties (Altaf, 2023). In the context of journalism, responsibility lies in ensuring accuracy, verifying sources, and avoiding sensationalism. Ethical journalism requires careful balancing of public interest reporting with respect for individual dignity. Studies in media law education highlight that many defamation cases arise due to inadequate fact-checking and failure to adhere to editorial standards. Consequently, journalism curricula increasingly emphasize legal awareness to reduce professional risks and promote accountability in reporting practices (Kanwel, Khan, et al., 2024b).

2.4 Contempt of Court and Journalism

Contempt of court is a significant legal limitation on media reporting, designed to protect the authority, dignity, and impartiality of the judicial system. It generally refers to actions or publications that interfere with judicial proceedings or undermine public confidence in the judiciary. Journalists must exercise caution when reporting on ongoing court cases to avoid prejudicing legal outcomes or influencing public perception inappropriately (Kanwel, Asghar, et al., 2024). Sub judice rules are often applied to restrict commentary on active cases, ensuring fair trial rights for all parties involved. The literature indicates that conflicts between media freedom and judicial integrity frequently arise in high-profile cases where public interest and media attention are intense. Journalism education must therefore include training on court reporting guidelines, legal terminology, and the ethical responsibility of avoiding prejudicial content. Understanding contempt laws helps journalists maintain a balance between informing the public and respecting judicial processes (Kanwel, Khan, et al., 2024a).

Online ISSN

3007-3197

Print ISSN

3007-3189

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2.5 Privacy Rights and Media Ethics

Privacy rights have become increasingly significant in media law due to the expansion of digital communication and the widespread collection and dissemination of personal data. Media ethics emphasizes respect for individual privacy, particularly when reporting on sensitive personal matters such as health, family life, or private communications. Legal protections for privacy vary across jurisdictions, but generally aim to prevent unauthorized intrusion and misuse of personal information (Kanwel, Khan, et al., 2024c). The rise of social media and digital journalism has intensified concerns about privacy violations, as information can be shared instantly and globally. Ethical journalism requires careful consideration of whether the public interest justifies disclosure of private information. Scholars argue that responsible reporting must avoid unnecessary harm while maintaining transparency in matters of legitimate public concern. Journalism education must therefore incorporate privacy law and ethical guidelines to prepare students for the complexities of modern information environments (Ch et al., 2024).

2.6 Comparative International Media Regulations

Comparative analysis of international media regulations reveals significant differences in how countries balance freedom of expression with legal constraints. In some jurisdictions, such as liberal democracies, strong constitutional protections for press freedom exist alongside robust legal remedies for defamation and privacy violations. In contrast, other systems impose stricter controls on media content, particularly in relation to political reporting and national security. The United Kingdom, for example, follows a structured defamation framework with strong emphasis on reputation protection, while the United States provides broader protection for speech under constitutional principles (Nisar et al., 2023). In many developing countries, media regulation is still evolving, often influenced by political, cultural, and institutional factors. International human rights frameworks advocate for a balanced approach that protects both freedom of expression and individual rights. For journalism education, comparative understanding of these systems is essential, as it enables students to appreciate global media practices and adapt to diverse regulatory environments in professional careers (Afzal et al., 2023).

2.7 Research Gap

Existing literature extensively discusses media law, journalism ethics, and freedom of expression independently; however, there is limited integrated research focusing specifically on how journalism education prepares students to handle defamation, contempt of court, and privacy challenges simultaneously. Most studies emphasize theoretical aspects of media law without adequately addressing practical training in educational settings. There is also insufficient attention to curriculum development that bridges legal knowledge with ethical communication skills in journalism programs. This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive educational framework that equips journalism students with both legal literacy and applied ethical reasoning for professional practice.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Online ISSN

3007-3197

Print ISSN

3007-3189

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This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a doctrinal approach to examine the relationship between media law and ethical communication in journalism education. The research is primarily analytical and interpretive in nature, focusing on the critical examination of legal principles, academic literature, policy documents, and relevant case law related to defamation, contempt of court, and privacy rights. The design is structured to explore how journalism education integrates legal and ethical dimensions into its curriculum and how effectively it prepares students for professional challenges in media practice. By employing a doctrinal framework, the study systematically evaluates existing legal norms and educational discourse to develop a coherent understanding of media regulation in the context of journalism training.

3.2 Qualitative and Doctrinal Research

The study is based on qualitative research methodology, which emphasizes the interpretation of textual data rather than numerical analysis. Within this qualitative framework, a doctrinal legal research approach is employed, focusing on the systematic analysis of legal texts, statutes, judicial decisions, and scholarly writings. This approach enables a detailed examination of how media law principles are constructed, interpreted, and applied in relation to journalism practice. It also facilitates an in-depth understanding of ethical communication standards within journalism education. The doctrinal method is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for the critical evaluation of legal frameworks governing defamation, contempt of court, and privacy, while also assessing their relevance to educational practices in journalism institutions.

3.3 Data Collection Sources

The data for this research is collected exclusively from secondary sources. These include academic journals, books on media law and journalism ethics, legal commentaries, constitutional provisions, statutory laws, judicial decisions, policy documents, and reports issued by media regulatory bodies. In addition, credible online databases, scholarly publications, and institutional reports on journalism education are utilized to support the analysis. Secondary sources provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the theoretical and legal dimensions of media law and its application in journalism education. This reliance on documented and published material ensures that the study remains within a structured legal and academic framework without involving any primary data collection methods.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from secondary sources is analyzed using qualitative content analysis and doctrinal legal interpretation. Content analysis is employed to identify recurring themes, concepts, and patterns related to media law and ethical communication in journalism education. Doctrinal analysis is used to interpret legal principles, statutory provisions, and judicial precedents relevant to defamation, contempt, and privacy issues. The combination of these techniques allows for a systematic evaluation of how legal frameworks interact with journalistic practices and educational structures. The analysis also focuses on identifying gaps, inconsistencies, and evolving trends in media regulation and journalism training. This interpretive approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of both theoretical and practical dimensions of the subject.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Although the study does not involve primary data collection or human participants, ethical considerations remain essential due to its reliance on secondary sources. Proper academic integrity is maintained by ensuring accurate citation, acknowledgment of original authors, and avoidance of plagiarism. All interpretations of legal and scholarly materials are conducted objectively without distortion of meaning. The study also adheres to ethical standards in legal research by respecting intellectual property rights and ensuring transparency in the use of sources. Additionally, care is taken to present balanced and unbiased analysis, particularly when discussing sensitive issues such as defamation, contempt of court, and privacy rights in media practice.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Awareness of Media Laws among Journalism Students

The analysis of secondary literature reveals that awareness of media laws among journalism students remains uneven and often insufficient in many academic contexts. While most journalism programs include introductory courses on media ethics or communication law, the depth of legal understanding tends to be limited to theoretical exposure rather than practical application. Students generally demonstrate awareness of basic concepts such as freedom of expression and responsible reporting; however, their understanding of complex legal issues such as defamation liability, contempt of court restrictions, and privacy protections is often superficial. This gap in legal literacy creates challenges when students transition into professional media environments where legal accountability is strict and immediate. The discussion highlights that inadequate integration of doctrinal legal training within journalism education contributes significantly to this deficiency, thereby increasing the risk of unintentional legal violations in professional practice.

4.2 Ethical Challenges in Modern Journalism

Modern journalism operates in a highly competitive and fast-paced digital environment where ethical challenges are increasingly complex. The literature indicates that the pressure to publish breaking news, attract audience engagement, and maintain visibility on digital platforms often compromises ethical standards. Issues such as sensationalism, misinformation, biased reporting, and lack of source verification are frequently identified as major ethical concerns. Journalism students and professionals alike face dilemmas when balancing truth-telling with audience demand and editorial pressures. Ethical communication requires adherence to principles such as accuracy, fairness, accountability, and respect for human dignity, yet these principles are often tested in real-world media practice. The findings suggest that ethical decision-making in journalism is not merely a theoretical exercise but a practical necessity that must be reinforced through continuous training and institutional support.

4.3 Defamation and Privacy Concerns in Media Practice

Defamation and privacy violations emerge as two of the most significant legal risks in journalism practice. The literature demonstrates that defamation cases often arise due to inadequate fact-checking, reliance on unverified sources, and the publication of allegations without proper legal safeguards. Journalists may unintentionally harm reputations when reporting sensitive issues involving individuals, organizations, or

Online ISSN

3007-3197

Print ISSN

3007-3189

<http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

public figures. Similarly, privacy concerns have intensified in the digital age, where personal data and private information can be easily accessed, shared, and amplified through online platforms. The boundary between public interest and invasion of privacy is often blurred, creating ethical and legal dilemmas for media practitioners. The discussion highlights that journalism education must emphasize careful evaluation of information before publication and promote awareness of legal consequences associated with reputational harm and privacy breaches.

4.4 Digital Media and Contempt Issues

The rise of digital and social media platforms has significantly increased the risk of contempt of court violations in journalistic practice. The literature indicates that real-time reporting, live commentary, and user-generated content often lead to premature or inappropriate discussions of ongoing legal proceedings. Such content may unintentionally influence public opinion or judicial processes, thereby undermining the principle of fair trial. Unlike traditional media, digital platforms allow rapid dissemination without editorial oversight, making regulation and control more difficult. Journalism students and practitioners must therefore be trained to understand sub judice principles and the legal boundaries of reporting on court matters. The findings suggest that contempt issues are becoming more prevalent in the digital era, requiring stronger integration of legal education and ethical guidelines in journalism curricula to prevent judicial interference and maintain institutional integrity.

4.5 Institutional Role in Ethical Journalism Training

Educational institutions play a critical role in shaping ethically responsible journalists by integrating media law and ethical communication into journalism curricula. The literature emphasizes that institutions that provide practical legal training, case-based learning, and exposure to real-world media scenarios are more effective in preparing students for professional challenges. However, many journalism programs still rely heavily on theoretical instruction without sufficient emphasis on applied legal knowledge. Institutional support, including collaboration with legal professionals, media organizations, and regulatory bodies, can significantly enhance students' understanding of defamation, contempt, and privacy issues. Furthermore, faculty development and curriculum modernization are essential to ensure that teaching methods remain aligned with evolving media environments. The discussion highlights that institutional commitment is central to producing legally aware and ethically responsible media professionals.

4.6 Comparative Discussion with International Practices

A comparative analysis of international journalism education practices reveals notable differences in how media law and ethics are integrated into academic training. In several developed jurisdictions, journalism education includes strong interdisciplinary components that combine legal studies, ethical reasoning, and practical media training. Students are often exposed to case law analysis, courtroom reporting guidelines, and privacy regulations as part of their core curriculum. In contrast, many developing contexts face challenges such as limited resources, outdated curricula, and insufficient emphasis on legal training. The discussion indicates that countries with well-structured media law education systems produce journalists who are better equipped to navigate

legal risks and ethical dilemmas. International practices also demonstrate the importance of continuous professional development, where journalists receive ongoing training even after entering the profession. This comparative perspective underscores the need for reform in journalism education systems to align with global standards of media accountability and ethical communication.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

The study of media law and ethical communication in journalism education highlights the growing importance of preparing students to effectively navigate complex legal and ethical challenges in modern media environments. The findings indicate that journalism education often provides foundational knowledge of media principles; however, there remains a significant gap in practical legal preparedness, particularly in relation to defamation, contempt of court, and privacy issues. The rapid expansion of digital media has further intensified these challenges, as information now spreads instantly and widely with minimal editorial control. As a result, journalism students are increasingly exposed to situations where legal awareness and ethical judgment are essential for responsible reporting. The analysis also reveals that while theoretical instruction on media law exists in many curricula, it is often insufficiently connected to real-world application, leaving graduates underprepared for the legal risks they encounter in professional practice.

5.2 Importance of Ethical Communication in Journalism

Ethical communication emerges as a central pillar of responsible journalism and a necessary complement to legal knowledge. The study underscores that ethical journalism is not only about compliance with laws but also about maintaining integrity, fairness, and respect for individuals and institutions. In the context of defamation, ethical communication requires journalists to verify information thoroughly before publication and avoid unsubstantiated claims that could harm reputations. Regarding contempt of court, ethical communication demands sensitivity toward ongoing judicial proceedings and respect for the authority and impartiality of the justice system. In matters of privacy, journalists must carefully balance the public's right to know with an individual's right to dignity and confidentiality. The findings suggest that ethical communication serves as a preventive mechanism against legal violations, reinforcing professional accountability and enhancing public trust in media institutions. Therefore, embedding ethical reasoning within journalism education is essential for cultivating responsible media professionals capable of making sound judgments in complex situations.

5.3 Legal and Educational Implications

The legal and educational implications of this study are significant for the development of journalism curricula and professional training frameworks. From a legal perspective, the increasing number of defamation cases, contempt proceedings, and privacy disputes involving media practitioners demonstrates the necessity of stronger legal literacy among journalists. Journalism students must be equipped with a clear understanding of statutory laws, judicial interpretations, and regulatory frameworks governing media conduct. This includes not only theoretical awareness but also practical competence in

Online ISSN

3007-3197

Print ISSN

3007-3189

<http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about>

applying legal principles to real-world reporting scenarios. From an educational standpoint, the study emphasizes the need for curriculum reform that integrates media law and ethics as core components of journalism education rather than supplementary subjects. Institutions should adopt interdisciplinary teaching approaches that combine legal studies, ethical communication, and practical journalism training. Additionally, case-based learning, exposure to legal proceedings, and collaboration with legal professionals can significantly enhance students' understanding of media-related legal risks. The findings also suggest that continuous professional development should be encouraged beyond formal education, ensuring that journalists remain updated on evolving legal standards and digital media challenges. Overall, the study concludes that strengthening the integration of media law and ethical communication in journalism education is essential for producing competent, responsible, and legally aware media professionals capable of contributing positively to democratic societies.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Inclusion of Media Law Courses in Curriculum

It is strongly recommended that media law be made a core and compulsory component of journalism education at undergraduate and postgraduate levels rather than an optional or supplementary subject. Journalism students must develop a clear and structured understanding of legal principles governing defamation, contempt of court, privacy rights, intellectual property, and freedom of expression. The inclusion of comprehensive media law courses should move beyond theoretical instruction and incorporate practical case law analysis, enabling students to understand how legal principles are applied in real-world journalism scenarios. Universities and academic institutions should update their curricula regularly to reflect emerging legal challenges in digital media environments. This will ensure that students are not only aware of legal boundaries but are also capable of applying legal reasoning when making editorial decisions in professional practice.

6.2 Ethical Journalism Workshops and Training

In addition to formal coursework, journalism programs should introduce regular workshops and training sessions focused on ethical communication in media practice. These workshops should emphasize core journalistic values such as accuracy, fairness, accountability, and respect for individual dignity. Through interactive discussions and guided exercises, students can be exposed to real-life ethical dilemmas involving defamation risks, privacy concerns, and courtroom reporting restrictions. Such training should also encourage reflective thinking, allowing students to evaluate the consequences of their reporting decisions on individuals, institutions, and society. Collaboration with experienced journalists, legal practitioners, and media ethicists can further enrich these workshops by providing practical insights into the ethical challenges faced in contemporary journalism.

6.3 Practical Media Law Simulations

It is highly recommended that journalism education incorporate practical simulations that replicate real-world legal and ethical challenges in media practice. These simulations may include mock defamation trials, courtroom reporting exercises, newsroom decision-making scenarios, and case-based problem-solving activities

Online ISSN

3007-3197

Print ISSN

3007-3189

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involving privacy violations and contempt of court issues. By engaging in such experiential learning methods, students can better understand the consequences of legal breaches and the importance of responsible reporting. Simulations help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and professional application, allowing students to develop critical thinking, legal awareness, and ethical decision-making skills in a controlled academic environment. This approach also prepares them for high-pressure situations in professional newsrooms where quick but legally sound decisions are required.

6.4 Strengthening Digital Media Ethics Policies

Given the rapid expansion of digital journalism and social media platforms, there is a pressing need to strengthen digital media ethics policies within journalism institutions and media organizations. Educational institutions should develop clear guidelines addressing issues such as online defamation, digital privacy violations, misinformation, and unauthorized content sharing. These policies should be integrated into student conduct codes and reinforced through continuous awareness programs. Additionally, journalism programs should educate students about algorithm-driven content dissemination, audience engagement pressures, and the legal implications of digital publishing. Strengthening digital ethics policies will help ensure that students and future journalists are better equipped to navigate the complexities of online media while maintaining legal compliance and ethical integrity in their reporting practices.

6.5 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research in this field should focus on exploring the effectiveness of integrated media law and ethics curricula in improving professional competency among journalism graduates. Comparative studies across different countries and educational systems would provide valuable insights into best practices for teaching media law and ethical communication. Further research should also examine the impact of digital transformation on defamation, contempt, and privacy issues, particularly in the context of social media journalism and citizen reporting. Another important area for future investigation is the role of artificial intelligence and automated news generation in shaping legal and ethical challenges in journalism. Expanding research in these areas will contribute to the development of more robust educational frameworks and legal safeguards for responsible journalism in the digital age.

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