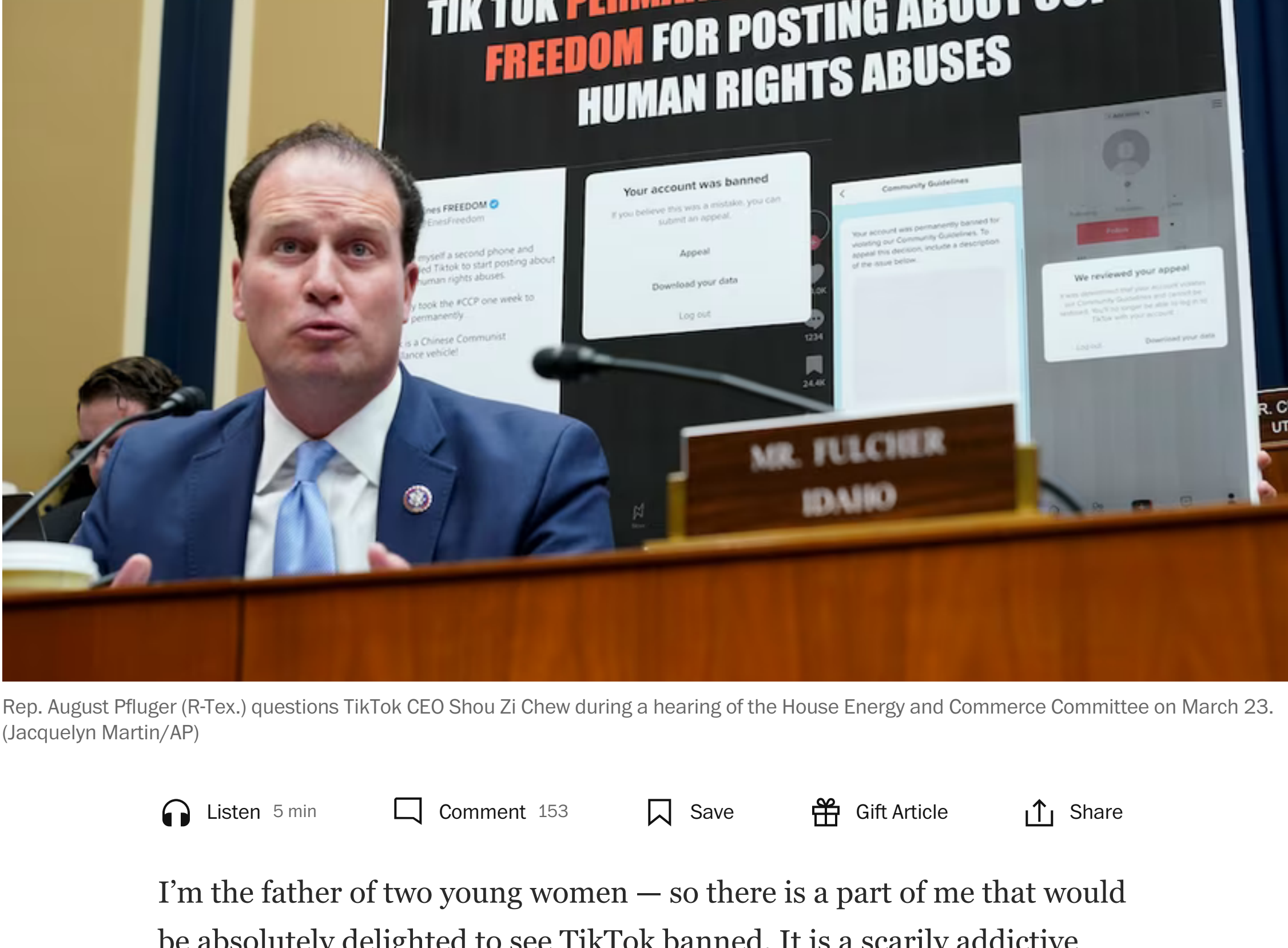


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Opinion | Why banning TikTok won't do any good

By Fareed Zakaria
Columnist | + Follow

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Rep. August Pfluger (R-Tex.) questions TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew during a hearing of the House Energy and Commerce Committee on March 23. (Jacquelyn Martin/AP)



I'm the father of two young women — so there is a part of me that would be absolutely delighted to see TikTok banned. It is a scarily addictive app with [150 million](#) U.S. users, including [two out of three teenagers](#).

But the more carefully I think about it, the more I worry. And when I look at the legislation being proposed that would enable the U.S. government to [ban](#) TikTok, I see a frightening, Orwellian law that should send chills down every American's spine.

The argument for banning TikTok is straightforward. The app is owned by a Chinese company and could be forced to obey the dictates of the Chinese government. That's an appropriate concern (even if there is [no evidence](#) that this has ever happened).

What malign behavior could TikTok engage in? First, it could collect data from its users and send that to Beijing. But if Beijing wants that information, it has many ways to get it. The most popular [apps](#) all collect some kind of personal user data — and they all share with third parties.

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There is a much better way to solve this problem — a comprehensive data privacy law that would protect all Americans' data and give people the right to stop companies from using, misusing and selling it. Unfortunately, taking on Big Tech is a much more difficult battle than bashing China.

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Most technologists I spoke to said they thought that it would be simple to block information transfers by [housing](#) all data in U.S. servers and monitoring its use — something [TikTok](#) has already committed to doing. Google and other U.S. tech platforms operate in [Europe](#) under similar data restrictions. There might even be better techniques that do not artificially divide data by geography.

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COUNTERPOINT
TikTok is dangerously addictive. We should regulate it now.

The second fear about TikTok is that it would transmit anti-American information through its platform, becoming a subtle vehicle for Chinese propaganda. So how would we feel if we learned that a Chinese media company had started a cable news channel that broadcasts sometimes anti-American messages? That is already legal. The United States hasn't banned China's CCTV or, for that matter, Qatar's Al Jazeera — both government-owned media platforms. If we ban TikTok, will we also ban Chinese media companies from distributing pamphlets or books in the United States? Will we ban all Chinese video game companies, which are giants in the industry? The premise of an open society is that people should be free to consume what information they want — and that we are stronger for it.

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A bipartisan group of senators has put forward [legislation](#) that would make it easy to ban any company “in which any foreign adversary (such as China) has any interest” — which would cover almost any company that has any operations in China (or several other countries). This law would give virtually unlimited powers to the U.S. administration to prevent or punish any company that has tech or information products or services that — in the administration's view — pose an “undue or unacceptable risk to U.S. national security or the safety of U.S. persons.”

“If men were angels,” James Madison [wrote](#) in the Federalist papers, “no government would be necessary.” It does not take a particularly skeptical view of government to be terrified by the idea of giving it that much power. Imagine Donald Trump as president with these tools at his disposal.

We are living in times when state governments are [banning](#) books by the hundreds, when speech is considered a weapon and when politicians openly talk about shutting down dangerous ideas. Incidentally, as Fox News anchor Laura Ingraham [fulminates](#) against TikTok, she might want to keep in mind that Fox's former parent company, News Corp., was [granted](#) a waiver from existing restrictions on foreign ownership of media platforms.

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News Corp founder Rupert Murdoch, by the way, argued that such a waiver was [unnecessary](#), presumably because he believed Americans should get free flows of information, no matter their country of origin.

I support many of the Biden administration's efforts to compete with China — by investing and building at home, by shoring up alliances, by restricting China's access to the highest-level technologies and by building up our military deterrent. But the key to the United States' success and dynamism, decade after decade, has been its openness, innovation and belief in the vigorous contest of ideas, products and services. That's why our technology tends to be better than that coming out of closed societies. We should not lose that confidence in a panic over one Chinese app.

For years, we believed mistakenly that as China opened up economically it would become more like us. But look at where we are today. We've embarked on central economic planning with massive subsidies to industry, and now we're proposing draconian restrictions on the free flow of information. It seems like we are slowly becoming more like them.

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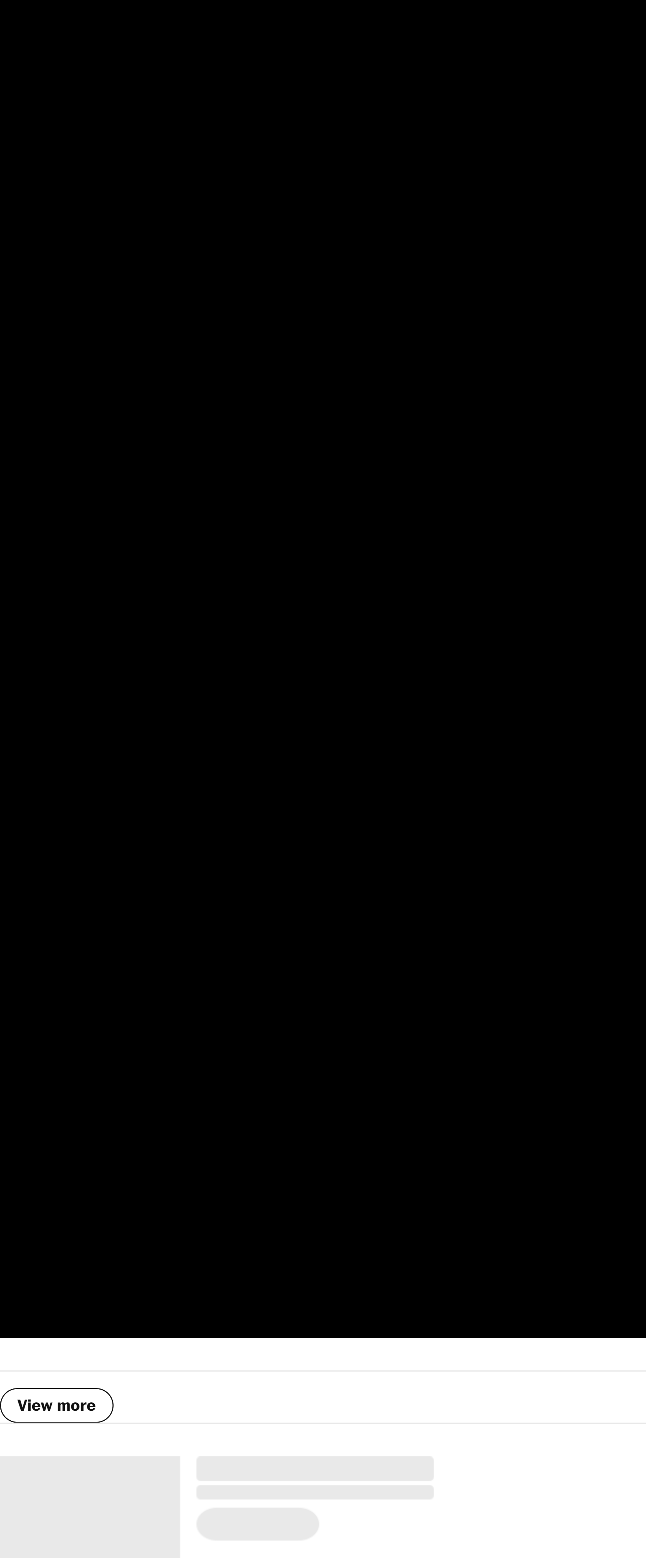
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