

## Media in France and the Politics of Integration

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*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the national motto of France, has also been the social bottom-line in the collective white French consciousness. And the country's colour changed following large scale migration – in the 1920s and 1930s, France had the largest percentage of migrants even ahead of the United States of America - the national motto remained closeted in its white past and defined its approach towards the ethnic and religious minorities in the country. This paper does not intend to look at population migration in France in its entirety, but aims to do a “perception analysis” of the French media's approach towards the country's ethnic and religious minorities. It argues that the media in France remains oblivious to the social conditions of the country's minorities and these recent efforts to change that remains rather cosmetic. A failure to achieve colonial distancing by France – given the possession of ‘overseas territories’ and ‘collectivities’ to the present day – is examined as a possible reason for the absence of a strong will to integrate minorities into the ‘mainstream’. The paper also argues that the French principle of *laïcité* (secularism) needs to be re-interpreted from a modern perspective, failing which the national motto of the country will only apply to the dominant white populations.

### INTRODUCTION

2006 marked, in some ways, a watershed in French media history, which a leading campaigner for minority representation in the media described as a "bombshell of news". In that year, Harry Roselmack, a black journalist, became the first ever from a minority community to present a popular TV news programme on the country's biggest television station, TF1. Harry's primetime appearance came in the immediate aftermath of the 2005 riots in the suburbs of Paris – riots for which the international media squarely blamed a racist society that has marginalized the children and grandchildren of North African immigrants. Despite the much vaunted national ethos of ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’, France has faced the kind of ghettoisation not seen elsewhere. The country's original immigrants, most often settled in suburbs just outside Paris, such as Savigny-sur-Orge and Raincy, forming large

African and Arab communities where unemployment is higher than the national average and residents complain of racism and discrimination.

France has an estimated three to five million black population, the largest coloured minority in Europe. But no one can provide an exact numerical count. This is because France has always tried to portray a face of equal tolerance towards ethnic and religious minorities and it has done so by putting in place a colour blind policy. This policy is based on a model of integration that does not recognise that such minorities exist. Census in France by race is illegal. France's "egalitarian philosophy" written into the constitution rejects any official statistical classification of people into ethnic or racial groups. Discrimination against minorities is particularly awkward in France because its model of integration does not recognise that such minorities exist.

The 2005 riots in France were seen by people like Manuel Valls, Mayor of Evry and a Socialist Member of Parliament, as "consequences of 30 years of ethnic and social segregation" resulting in what he calls "territorial apartheid", combined with the "bankruptcy of the model of integration: in France, our social elevator is blocked."<sup>1</sup> The media is an integral part of the dynamics of this society.

The riots forced President Jacques Chirac to urge the media to hire more ethnic minority journalists after the riots by Arab youths. For the first time, a debate started in the French media, looking for reasons behind the riots. Harry Roselmack's recruitment resulted from the churning that started with the riots. During the first few days of the 2005 riots, the media had even failed to get past the information barrier. Years of turning a blind eye to the existence of the minorities meant that no mainstream media outlet in the country had any primary source of information within the aggrieved rioters or any reporter who had covered their issues in the past.

An observation in this context by social scientist Ezra Suleiman, Director of the European Studies program at Princeton University, was quite apt:

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<sup>1</sup> "An Underclass Rebellion-France's Riots", *The Economist*, November 12, 2005, USA

In the absence of hard data about why these riots broke out at this moment and in a particular place, whether they were organized or spontaneous, why they took the form they took, what the desires or demands of the rioters are, and even the basic organization of the communities, it becomes even difficult to devise policies for resolving the 'conditions'. The police become the only group with (obviously partial) information. And they certainly can't substitute for social scientists.<sup>2</sup>

French President Nicolas Sarkozy's new Commissioner of Diversity, Yazid Sabeg, warns that his country stood close to a "societal civil war that could tomorrow become a war between communities." He told this writer that France risked becoming an apartheid state unless it promoted diversity in all public spheres and insisted that "this period ahead of us is our last chance."<sup>3</sup>

It seems clear that Islamophobia drives the media to a very hardline position, that's clearly visible in the recent Burqa ban controversy and the earlier controversy with the issue of the Islamic headscarf in the late 1980s.

My research has been primarily based on extensive interviews conducted with nearly 100 media professionals, civil servants, academics, politicians, activists and intellectuals in Paris in July-August 2009, besides the many e-mail interviews done before. My discussions with Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, Professeur émérite à l'université Paris Diderot and Professor Geraldine Mulhman at Université Pantheon-Assas Paris, my brainstorming sessions with Martina Zimmerman from Radios Allemandes-ARD (without whom this paper would have never got the initial impetus), in-depth sessions with author Pierre Fréha, Algerian journalist Nadia Bey, Wallace Kotra from France O, France's Commissioner of Diversity Yazid Sabeg, the sociologist couple, residents of France - Priti Sanyal and Bikas Sanyal, and Rejane Ereau from *Respect* magazine along with several other individuals I interviewed has helped shape this perceptive analysis of a étranger (foreigner).

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<sup>2</sup> Suleiman, Ezra. 2005. *France: One and Divisible*. Nov 18. <http://riotsfrance.ssrc.org>

<sup>3</sup> Yazid Sabeg, interview with author in Paris (August, 2009)

## MIGRATION IN FRANCE AND THE POLITICS OF INTEGRATION

Migration into France started since the late nineteenth century after a fall in the birth rate had resulted in a labour shortage in the country. It was unique by Western European standards and France was forced to sign labour recruitment agreements with Italy (1904, 1906, 1919), Belgium (1906), Poland (1906) and Czechoslovakia (1920)<sup>4</sup>. By 1851, the first year, when official records of this nature were kept, there were 380,000 *étrangers* in France which accounted for one percent of its total population. Thirty years later, in 1881, that number had nearly tripled to 1 million or 3 percent of the total population, and by 1931 it had increased to 2.7 million or 6.4 percent of a total population of 42 million<sup>5</sup>. The flow of immigrants increased by leaps and bounds, so much so that in the 1920s and the 1930s, the immigrants in France were a higher proportion of the population in percentage terms than in the USA, the main destination for European immigrants since the middle of the nineteenth century. By numerical count, is stood second only after the USA<sup>6</sup>.

But since the mid 1950s, the migration pattern into France changed. Until then , most migrants into France were white-skinned Europeans<sup>7</sup>. It is then that the French realised that their colonies nearer home had a workforce that was more potent and less expensive. Thus started an inflow of migrants from what is called the Maghreb (North-West Africa: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), certain countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Senegal), and the DOM-TOM (Départements d'outre-mer and Territoires d'outre-mer) like Guadeloupe, Martinique and French Guyana (in the Caribbean) and Reunion Island (in the Indian Ocean).

In France, there are two main groups of black populations: black-Afro-Caribbeans and black-Afro-Africans. The first are from France's colonies in the French Antilles and also from the African Indian Ocean island of the Reunion, while the second are from France's former

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/215768/France/40444/The-Third-Republic>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/215768/France/40444/The-Third-Republic>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.focus-migration.de/France.1231.0.html?&L=1> (Hamburg Institutue of Intenational Economics, Federal Agency for Civic Education, Netzwerk Migration in Europa)

<sup>7</sup> International Humanist and Ethical Union <http://www.iheu.org/node/377>

colonies of West and Central Africa and the African Indian Ocean island of Madagascar.<sup>8</sup> Although the first were colonies, their status did change in 1946 when they became France's overseas dependences. It was a legal or administrative act that makes France's former colonies in the Caribbean and in the African Indian Ocean also known as the 'old four' to, in principle, enjoy the same rights with their compatriots in metropolitan France<sup>9</sup>.

As for the second, their status mutated twice, first in 1946 and then in 1960, when they became independent countries with strong ties with the former colonial power<sup>10</sup>. Children of the second are the ones forming the bulk of black-Afro-Africans in metropolitan France today. Even though blacks from France's colonies of the Caribbean and the Reunion, who have a different administrative status from those in Africa following the aforementioned mutations/reasons, both communities are facing the same problems of discrimination and are also the subjects of wild fantasies from the mainstream majority White French<sup>11</sup>.

The Maghrebians became the most significant group of *immigrés* (immigrants) into France. The vast majority of these were not from Morocco or Tunisia (which were former protectorates of France and not full-fledged colonies) but from Algeria, the jewel in the crown of the French colonial empire. In 1962, upon the conclusion of the Algerian War, which many refer to as France's Vietnam, 900,000  *pied-noirs*, meaning "black foot" but used to refer to the European  *colons* in Algeria, were repatriated to France, as well as most of the 91,000 Harkis (native Algerians who fought with the French army during the war)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> French Colonies - POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF FRENCH COLONIES IN AFRICA, ASSOCIATION AND ASSIMILATION

Read more: <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/5923/Africa-French-Colonies.html#ixzz0VImTdctA>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.britannica.com>

<sup>11</sup> *Faes, Geraldine & Stephane Smith. 2006. Noir et Francais. :Edition Panama*

<sup>12</sup> *Algerian government brochure – “ The History of Algeria”*

They were expected to return home but that never happened. They joined the *travailleurs immigrés*, Algerian and Maghrebian population already living in France as migrant workers. By 1975, the Maghrebians started bringing their families to France. That culminated into a flashpoint by the early 1980s when years of neglect forced the migrant workers, primarily the Maghrebians, to take out *La Marche Pour L'égalité* on the streets of Paris in 1983<sup>13</sup>. Suddenly, the whole of France was waking up to a new reality – a reality of a multi-coloured country, not recognised for a long time. It also coincided with the rise of the extreme Right, the radical movement led by Jean-Marie Le Pen and his political party, Le Front National<sup>14</sup>. The French society was suddenly faced with the debates about immigration, integration, assimilation and the Right. The *Marche Pour L'égalité et Contre le Racisme*, a march from Marseilles to the centre of Paris in 1983 to protest against discrimination was a key moment in the *la génération Beur*, a generation of young men and women with their own specific cultural identity at once different from that of their North African parents and from that of their peers of European descent. The term *Beur* expresses a bi-cultural identity experienced as either plenitude – *both Arab and French* and belonging to both cultures – or as alienation *neither French nor Arab* and belonging fully to neither culture. *Beur* is the word “arabe” inversed (“be-ur”), a linguistic fashion in the suburbs. They started gaining national visibility<sup>15</sup>.

### A HISTORY OF HOSTILITY

But as Phillipe Bernard of *Le Monde* newspaper points out, “there is a history of hostility and resistance to immigrants in France”, and it did not start with the Maghrebians or Le Beurs. “But, obviously, the earlier immigrants from Poland, Italy, parts of Eastern Europe were not stigmatised for the colour of their skin,” Bernard, an expert on migration in France, says.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Radio Allamande, “Hintergrund Vorortkrawalle” Report by Martina Zimmerman, Nov 30, 2007

<sup>14</sup> ^ L'affaire du poignard du lieutenant Le Pen en Algérie, *Le Monde*, 17 March 2003 **(French)**

<sup>15</sup> Kessas, F. 1989. *Beur's Story*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Phillipe Bernard at the *Le Monde* headquarters in Paris (August 2009).

The European immigrants were victims of racism as the French saw their influx as responsible for lowering of employment opportunities for the sons of the soil. The fear of *l'invasion*, the invasion of France by large numbers of foreigners were seen as *briseurs de grève*, pushing down the wages of the honest and hard working *Français de souche*, threatening the social order and the purity of French womanhood.<sup>17</sup>

And then there was the 'other' fear. The fear of *l'inassimilabilité*, the concern that these immigrants would not 'assimilate' (and not integrate) successfully into French society.

Italian and Polish immigrants, for example, were attacked for their religious devotion by a French working class that was no longer regularly attending Church (mass, confession etc.) and given the derogatory term *Christos* (mainly the Italians) or *calotins* (mainly the Polish). Their religion – Catholicism, not Islam or Judaism - hampered immigrants' integration into French society.<sup>18</sup>

This violent xenophobia had resulted in anti-Italian riots in Marseilles in 1881, in the town of Aigues-Mortes in southern France in 1893 and in Lyon in 1894. But a hundred years later, anti-Maghrebian racism came to account for nearly 80 per cent of the recorded acts of violence throughout the 1980-90s. In 1983, in the *banlieues* (suburbs) of Lyon started a phenomenon known as the *rodeos* – the intentional crashing and burning of cars. On the night of July 13-14 in 2009, nearly 500 cars were burnt down, primarily in France's run-down suburban ghettos, as the country celebrated its Bastille Day. This has become a scourge, as hundreds of disaffected young men use *rodeos* to express their anger at French unemployment rates and a failed integration policy for ethnic minorities. In October and November 2005, it became a form of protest when youths burned some 9,000 vehicles after riots erupted in more than 300 locations throughout France following the deaths of two teenagers from immigrant families in a Paris suburb. The Bastille Day riots followed three nights of anarchy on the streets of Firminy near Lyon, as youths protested amid reports of a 21-year-old Algerian man dying in police custody on Wednesday July 8.

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard, Philippe. 1993. *L'Immigration*. Paris: Le Monde-Éditions. Pg 21.

<sup>18</sup> McNeill, Tony. 1998. *Immigration in France*. The University of Sunderland.

The contemporary problems of the Blacks and the Beurs did not include one major problem faced by the 'first' immigrants from Europe: they came (and still come) from former French colonies. The Maghrebians thus speak the same language. A prominent German radio journalist, Martina Zimmerman, puts it aptly:

Most of the immigrant children come from francophone countries, and they also learn to speak French in school. You cannot compare them to immigrants to Germany, where there are maternal language classes. So the argument in most parts of the world that immigrants lack of command over the spoken and written language of the host country does not hold true in France.<sup>19</sup>

It is easier to find an answer to France's ethnographic dilemma by delving into its recent history. As late as 1825, slave chains and manacles could be openly purchased in Nantes. Says historian Paul Johnson:

But France, it is with deepest regret I mention it, has countenanced and encouraged the slave trade, almost beyond estimation or belief. France is engrossing nearly the whole of the slave trade. [In one year till September 1819] 60,000 Africans have been forced from their country, principally under the colours of France... They were taken mostly to Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Cuba.<sup>20</sup>

France obtained the monopoly of *oriento* (that is, the monopoly of the supply of slaves) in 1701<sup>21</sup>. The economy of France was dependent upon revenues from the colonies, where slavery existed on plantations and thrived due to the lucrative trade triangle. The French turned four times more Africans into slaves than the Americans did in the history of the Atlantic slave trade; they used them far more cruelly, and French slavers not only got a head-start on Americans, they continued the slave trade legally until 1830, long after the rest of Europe had given it up. And they kept it alive, albeit clandestinely, until after the U.S. Civil War. France officially abolished slavery in its colonies only 14 years before Lincoln's

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Martina Zimmerman in Paris (August 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, Paul. 1992. *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830*. Harper Perennial. Pg. 330

<sup>21</sup> Elikia M'bokolo, April 2, 1998, The impact of the slave trade on Africa, *Le Monde diplomatique*



Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863, and that under pressure from slave uprisings<sup>22</sup>.

In fact, when the Convention in Paris in 1794 declared the universal emancipation of slaves, it did not actually outlaw the slave trade. The colonies required slaves, and under Napoleon, slavery was reintroduced<sup>23</sup>. Bordeaux, which today produces some of the best wines in the world, was known as the “harbour of ebony” where *Traite des Noirs* was one of the biggest in France alongside Nantes. Professor Sonia-Dayan Herzbrun reminded me that “even the great French author Voltaire was involved in *le commerce du bois d’ebene*.”<sup>24</sup>

Today, the real problem with the minority populations in France lies not only in their slave ancestry but also in the country’s failure to promote the socio-economic integration of the migrants who came after decolonisation. For these second or third generation migrants, it is tough to accept their deliberate exclusion from the society, a phenomenon Yazid Sabeg calls the “double vision” of the French people. “It is not easy for the French people to accept people of other ethnic identities as their own. The conception of identity here is purely white, it is inscribed in the French mindset,” says the Algerian-born Sabeg, France’s Commissioner of Diversity since December 2008.<sup>25</sup> Sabeg has been tasked by President Sarkozy to draft an action plan to promote diversity at elite schools, business establishments and in the media.

#### ‘FRENCH’ MEDIA, MIGRANTS AND MINORITIES

Sabeg’s observations about the white French identity are clearly reflected in the French mainstream media. A particular report on 29 August 2009 by Agence France-Presse (AFP), the oldest news agency in the world, on the Yemenia jet that crashed off the Comoros islands on

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<sup>22</sup> *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Houghton Mifflin Books. 1998.

<sup>23</sup> **Cherfils, Christian (1914). *Bonaparte et l’Islam d’après les documents français & arabes*. Pedone.**

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Professor **Sonia Dayan**-Herzbrun at Universite Paris Diderot. (August 2009)

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Sabeg (August 2009)

30 June killing 152 people, marked a significant deviation in the French media's coverage of the air-crash. It said: "The causes of the

crash of the plane, which was carrying mainly passengers of Comoran origin living in France, remain unknown."<sup>26</sup>

Following the AFP report, the initial coverage in the French media described the passengers as Comorans. It attracted widespread protests from anti-racism groups in France, who saw media's attempt to portray legitimate French nationals as just Comorans a 'legacy of the white mindset in the newsrooms.' Walles Kotra, Managing Editor of France Ô, whose family migrated from New Caledonia in the Pacific Ocean, insists: "Till now, the media in France has been internally racist. The white newsrooms have practised implicit racism over the years. They have closed their eyes to the minorities and that is not going to change in a hurry."<sup>27</sup>

According to a survey in 2004 by the Institut Montaigne, a think-tank, the unemployment rate of "visible minorities" is nearly three times the national average. Young women seem able to get and hold down jobs; but many job applications from young men end up unread in the bin.

Over the years, the French media has turned a blind eye to the ever-increasing presence of migrants in France. In fact, the riots of 2005 in the *banlieues* of Paris were an eye-opener to the print, audio-visual and cyber media in the country. As the riots started, the media descended on the Paris suburbs but their geographical, historical and sociological knowledge of the area was so little that most media houses did not even get a single voice from the Black community on the first or second day. For days the rioters were simply referred to as "youths from the suburbs". It was the outcome of a blatant failure of successive governments to address the problems of low-income, migrant-prone suburbs dominated by public housing estates, some of them little more than ghettos where crime and gangs were rampant.

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<sup>26</sup> France 24. 'Search teams locate second black box'. 29 August 2009. Full text available at <http://www.france24.com/20090829-second-black-box-found-yemenia-flight-comoros-crash-airbus> last accessed 1 October 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Wallace Kotra, Managing Editor, France Ô. He is the first and only black editor of a television channel in France.

Sabeg compares the media in France with its political establishment. France's political establishment remains overwhelmingly white despite the appointment of two women of North African (Maghrebian) descent and a Black human rights minister in Sarkozy's right-wing government. There is only one black Member of Parliament from mainland France. Sabeg sums up the situation aptly:

The integration of immigrants is one of the top challenges facing the French society. Today we are creating a rift that is leading straight to apartheid. And the media is a partner in crime with the French society. The media reflects the society. They play a large role in influencing the society; they can play an equally pivotal role to introduce the question of plurality of opinions in the society and their own system. But the problem is that all newsrooms in France are of the same origin. There is no diversity in newspaper by-lines or on the television screens.<sup>28</sup>

Professor of Political Science at Universite Pantheon-Assas Paris, Geraldine Mulhman, who also moderates her own talk show in a leading television network, agrees with Sabeg's assessment:

The system will not lead students from minority communities to study journalism in top universities. The legacy of discrimination has ensured that the minorities today cannot even think that white-collar jobs are for them. And the white majority will just deny that any discrimination happens in France, citing the principle of 'laïcité'<sup>29</sup> and the tough law that exists against racism.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Sabeg (August 2009)

<sup>29</sup> In its strict and official acceptance, it is the principle of separation of church (or religion) and state. Etymologically, *laïcité* comes from the Greek *λαϊκός* (*laïkós* "of the people", "layman"). **In French, laïcité (pronounced [la.i.si□te]) is a French concept of a secular society connoting the absence of religious involvement in government affairs as well as absence of government involvement in religious affairs.** During the twentieth century, it evolved to mean equal treatment of all religions, although a more restrictive interpretation of the term has developed since 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Professor Geraldine Mulhman in Paris (July 2009)

In the late 1990s, when Naomi Campbell was put on the cover of the French edition of *Cosmopolitan*, the leading lifestyle magazine for women, initially it was seen as a bold move. But then the magazine claimed that sales had gone down by 20 per cent. Says Isabelle Sassari, Photo Editor of *Le Figaro* :

After that no black model was ever put on the cover of *Cosmo* till very recently. Earlier there were famous editors like Axel Ganz in our country who were very racist. They would never put a black on the cover. But even today, in the media, the representation of the people of diversity is very poor.<sup>31</sup>

Analysing her own newspaper *Le Figaro*, Stassart concludes that the “issues of the minority community are hardly discussed, except when controversies happen.”<sup>32</sup>

One such controversy arose following the Islamophobic discourse that has been generated in the country which has complicated the process of integration of the minority communities, a majority of whom are Muslims, into the French society after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA. President Sarkozy’s statement at a special session of the national parliament in Versailles on 22 June 2009 sparked off this debate over the *burqa*:

We cannot accept to have in our country women who are prisoners behind netting, cut off from all social life, deprived of identity. That is not the idea that the French republic has of women’s dignity. The burqa is not a sign of religion; it is a sign of subservience. It will not be welcome on the territory of the French republic.”<sup>33</sup>

Surprisingly, there are only about 500 women who wear the veil on the streets of France. French author Pierre Fréha finds the ban on the *burqa* “preposterous”. But in France, campaigns to stop the State cracking down on the wearing of the headscarf are often run by young Muslim women confident of their right to fulfil their potential and their right to express their religion. Journalist Rachida Ziouche, daughter of an Algerian *imam* who has been living in exile in France since fleeing her homeland, told the BBC that “France wants its people to live together, celebrating their diversity, but it also has a secular tradition to protect

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Isabelle Stassart, Photo Editor, *Le Figaro*, in Paris (July 2009)

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>33</sup> Burkas 'not welcome' in France: Sarkozy

AFP News report, 22 June 2009.

- one which seeks to keep religion from the public sphere... Where I live, in a small town in France, girls and young women are intimidated by Muslim men who oblige them to wear the scarf. These Muslim women are often isolated, and need some protection. The law to outlaw the veil goes some way towards addressing this need.”<sup>34</sup>

But Pierre Fréha believe that the *burqa* ban is an attempt to “make the French society look like an aquarium full of good-looking fishes - the *burqa* debate has seen unbalanced views being propagated through the media.”<sup>35</sup>

But at least there was a debate generated in the media, and this in itself points to changing times. Stephanie le Bars, who has reported on religion for *Le Monde* for several years now, feels that this time the media was very moderate in its approach compared to its approach in the autumn of 1989 after the issue of the Islamic headscarf blew up into a national controversy when the headmaster of the Lycee Gabriel Havez in Creil, a suburb of Paris, announced his decision to exclude four students from his school for wearing a headscarf.

“This time the media has been very cautious. Though the press has been supporting the anti-*burqa* move, this time they are talking about resolving the issue through mediation and dialogue rather than directly condemning the *burqa*, as they did during the headscarf debate.”<sup>36</sup>

The media had also reacted in an utterly biased manner, taking Islamophobia to new heights, after former President Jacques Chirac’s landmark speech on secularism, in which he had called for a ban on all "conspicuous" religious signs in schools. The mainstream media had backed the move, argued it was meant to curb the influence of Islamist fundamentalists and to block what the government perceives as their attempt to undermine the country's secular system through the provocative use of religious symbols in the sanctuaries of the republic - the schools.

Only one or two newspapers had opposed the move. The French daily *Le Monde* had warned that such a move could backfire because it will render secularism "cold, closed and defensive," and exclude a large segment of the citizens that the State needs to integrate.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> **Viewpoints: Europe and the headscarf.** <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3459963.stm>

<sup>35</sup> *Interview with Pierre Fréha in Paris (July 2009)*

<sup>36</sup> *Interview with Stephanie le Bars in Paris (July 2009).*

<sup>37</sup> *(Le Monde archives, December 15, 2003)*

## MEDIA, MULTICULTURALISM AND COSMETIC CHANGES

When former French President Jacques Chirac spoke to the nation after three weeks of rioting in 2005, he said the media must better reflect contemporary France. Chirac had argued then that it was vital that television and newspapers should be representative of the population as a whole. This came after widespread criticism of the French media, especially the visual media, not only for their failure to present an ethnically diverse picture of French society during the riots but even for their lack of coverage of the country's worst civil unrest in decades.

One of France's leading TV news executives even admitted censoring his coverage of the riots in the country but sugar-coated his defence with a politically correct message. Jean-Claude Dassier, the director general of the rolling news service LCI, said that his decision was "motivated by a desire to avoid encouraging the resurgence of extreme rightwing views in France."<sup>38</sup> Dassier had argued: "Politics in France is heading to the right and I don't want rightwing politicians back in second or even first place because we showed burning cars on television."<sup>39</sup>

However, the criticism and the simultaneous political pressure resulted in the recruitment of Harry Roselmack in TF1 as the first black prime time presenter in the history of French television. The TF1 evening news, with an audience of more than 5 million, is one of the most watched news programmes in Europe. In a country which has a low readership of national newspapers, the TF1 news often is considered the main window on national and international events, especially in "*La France profonde*" (provincial France).

The recruitment was received with great enthusiasm with the then Minister for Equality of Opportunity Azouz Begag, calling it a "great step forward" because television was the "mirror in which society looks at itself".<sup>40</sup> Roselmack's photograph was splashed across the front pages of most newspapers the next day.

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<sup>38</sup> *Guardian, UK (Nov 10, 2005)* - <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/nov/10/france.tvnews>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Le Monde (March 6, 2006)*

Despite the euphoria it generated, many saw it as France's acceptance of the fact that they are fighting a battle against racism that they lost in their backyard, slowly burying even the symbolic value of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*.

Roselmack, whose parents migrated from Martinique, in the French Caribbean, was not convinced though that his appointment had changed French media's discriminatory outlook towards its minorities:

This is certainly no sign that we have arrived at a normalized situation. That will be the case the day people no longer make such a fuss when a black, North African or Asian colleague is hired.<sup>41</sup>

Roselmack's recruitment came as part of the government's "positive discrimination" programme - a programme which was given prominence during his election campaign by President Nicolas Sarkozy, the same man who as the interior minister in Chirac's government called the 2005 rioters "*racaille*" (scum) and promised to clean popular areas from "delinquency" with a "Karcher" (high pressure cleaner).<sup>42</sup> Sarkozy's vocabulary received high praise from the Right and the extreme Right, but was seen by the minorities, especially the youth in the suburbs, as a blanket slur.

Footballer Lilian Thuram says Sarkozy's comments hurt, forcing him to rethink whether change is at all possible in France. He says:

Do you think that it's right, to speak like that? I took it personally. His words hurt. Perhaps Sarkozy doesn't know what he is talking about. I grew up in an estate, too, but I am not scum. People used to say the same thing to me. What I wanted was to find work. Violence never happens for no reason. You have to understand where the

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<sup>41</sup> *The New York Times* (14 August 2006) -

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/14/arts/television/14anch.html? r=1>

<sup>42</sup>**French Sociology Under Fire: A preliminary diagnosis of the November 2005 "urban riots", by**  
By Franck Poupeau, **Jun 11, 2006**

malaise comes from. Before talking about law and order, you have to talk about social justice.<sup>43</sup>

Nadia Bey, senior journalist with Radio Orient, who is an Algerian working in Paris, thinks that Sarkozy used “positive discrimination” to his own advantage:

At that time, we were sick and tired of being described as immigrants, delinquents, thieves, Islamic radicals. They still see us mostly as gang rapists, hash dealers or religious zealots but then Sarkozy launched a loud, cosmetic effort to change the image. He did so through the media and his own cabinet. He made positive discrimination sound like his own trumpet.<sup>44</sup>

Though the phrase entered France’s political vocabulary 20 years ago, “positive discrimination” has gained wide currency only in the past few years, mainly due to Sarkozy. But for all the debate since the violent riots in 2005, it has hardly led to any substantial change on ground.

There are just two TV anchors “colouring” the French airwaves at present: Harry Roselmark and Audrey Pulvar. Pulvar who comes from the French Caribbean island of Martinique, feels that cultural diversity in the newsroom French is still “wishful thinking”. In an interview to *Le Monde*, Pulvar said: “This country is moving, but the editors argue slower than the company they keep!”<sup>45</sup>

Sabeg, the Commissioner of Diversity, says that “positive discrimination is a bad word.” According to him:

It reeks of discrimination. Why not call it ‘affirmative action’ like the whole world does? The problem is that in France, there is no process of such action to integrate the

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<sup>43</sup>*Soccer Heroes Blame Social Injustice, November 10, 2005, The Times, London*

<sup>44</sup>*Interview with Nadia Bey, Senior Journalist, Radio Orient in Paris (July 2009)*

<sup>45</sup>*Le Monde (14 September 2009) – Interview with Audrey Pulvar.*



minorities even after thirty years. There are only individual acts like the recruitment of a (Harry) Roselmack.<sup>46</sup>

While analysing the role of the French media in both overlooking and the stereotyping of blacks in France in their book, *Noir et Français* (2006), authors Geraldine Faes and Stephane Smith make an interesting observation, yet again linked to the French model of abstract Republicanism, that the reason for the absence of black journalists in the editorial team of main French newspapers such as *Le Monde* or *Liberation* or in television networks like TF1 is because these newspapers and television channels are owned by people who do not accept black tenants in houses that they own. Personal prejudices affect the professional workplace.

Walles Kotra, managing editor of France Ô, recounts an incident when he went to a dinner invitation in Paris where the social and media elites of France were all present. On being asked where he worked, Kotra said he worked as a manager of a television channel. To that, the owner of a French newspaper wanted to know which African country he worked in.<sup>47</sup>

Kotra is the first black person to manage a television channel in France. The channel he runs, France Ô, is a French public television network featuring programming from the French overseas departments and collectivities in France. It is part of the France Télévisions group, and is available through cable, satellite, ADSL and the new digital terrestrial television system. It is not, however, available for free in main cities like Paris through the main cable networks that would have exposed the French population to the diversity in their multicoloured reality.

### MINORITIES, MEDIA AND COLONIAL EXIGENCIES

Throughout my research work in Paris, almost everyone I spoke to mentioned that France has taken refuge to the “principle of *laïcité*” every time doubts has been raised in the country’s ability to accept multiculturalism as a way of life in the multi-coloured France of today. The argument for a “color- and religion-blind” country under the larger banner of liberty, equality and fraternity has lost its relevance in the maze of some abstract universalism which was

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Sabeg (August 2009)

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Kotra (August 2009)

reflected in the French media's interpretation of the recent *burqa* debate. Call it the great French illusion.

The media has always sought refuge - and continues to do so - in this quintessential French logic, evocative of political conceptions of culture in everyday discourse, which are notoriously famous for excluding any possibility of mediation and reconciliation between different cultures. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* is a leading example of this discourse, in which the author emphasizes cultures are primordial and that differences between them are simply unbridgeable.<sup>48</sup>

Feriel Balcadhi, junior producer at France Ô, a Tunisian born French, puts the media's lack of understanding of the diversity issue in perspective:

What our media here does not understand is that a French young woman of North African origins may feel more at home in Paris or Marseilles than in Tunisie or Algiers. I am more comfortable here, I live like the French do, and my father back in Tunisia does not accept it.<sup>49</sup>

But she is proud of her Tunisian roots and complains that the media's ignorance and a lack of willingness to look inside the lives of the black and the Beur on a regular basis forces her, especially in a white newsroom, to overplay her North African-ness only to resist a culture of racism that excludes North Africans from French society.

Most black journalists blame it on the "white arrogance" in the newsrooms combined with the "fear of losing power" if integration happened in the true sense. To a large extent, this "fear" is perhaps rooted not only in a collective "colonial hangover" that France suffers from, but in also a present day reality that does not allow the French to come out of their past. The failure of colonial distancing in France, done quite effectively by former colonial powers like Great Britain and Portugal, leads to a fear that a new France will be less French and it arises from the fact that France still clings on to its several "Overseas Territories" or "Collectivities".

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<sup>48</sup> Huntington. 1997. *The Clash of Civilizations*.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Feriel Balcadhi, Junior Producer at France Ô in Paris (July 2009)

The French *départements d'outre-mer* and *territoires d'outre-mer* or DOM-TOM (Overseas Departments and Territories) consist broadly of French-administered territories outside the European continent. These territories have varying legal statuses and different levels of autonomy, although all (except the ones with no permanent inhabitants) have representation in the Parliament of France and the right to vote in the elections to the European Parliament. The DOM-TOM include island territories in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans, a territory on the South American coast, and several peripheral Antarctic islands as well as an extensive claim in Antarctica. 2,624,505 people were censused as living in the French DOM-TOM in January 2009.<sup>50</sup>

One of these overseas territories is New Caledonia, where the indigenous population has been fighting for the right to self-determination has witnessed several revolts and brutal French suppression since it became a full colony in 1863. A referendum was held in France in 1985 as a result of pressure from the United Nations, and 80 per cent of the French people voted for the right to self-determination for the people of New Caledonia. But repeated delaying tactics by successive French governments has ensured that the self-determination bill has still not been passed. However, these are issues that hardly merit any attention in the French media.

A small change, however token in nature, can be discerned in the French media environment now . Until the 1990s, anybody discussing multiculturalism in France was labelled as a "*communautariste*" (ethnic separatist) or as a destroyer of the Republic. Now it debates the issues of *diversité* not infrequently. Author Pierre Fréha, who has often worked among the diversity population in other countries including India, puts it in perspective:

The concept of 'minorities' here is almost a new one. Before the 1970s and 1980s it was not even an issue, though there were minorities. But politics ignored them. The Chinese, for instance, did not even try to speak out. Also the rise of Le Pen's ideas has had a paradoxical effect. Suddenly they were being talked about. It has helped the media realize that it could not continue without comment like that. So, Le Pen helped

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<sup>50</sup> <http://french.about.com/od/vocabulary/g/domtom.htm>

make things better, what a paradox! And the 2005 riots forced our inward looking society to look out of their windows. After all, Paris was burning then.<sup>51</sup>

The beginning of “small” change in the media and its outlook in the aftermath of the 2005 riots was accelerated by the nudge from President Chirac and surveys like the one conducted by the daily newspaper *Le Parisien* in which 79 percent of the respondents agreed with Chirac's statement that “The media must better reflect the French reality of today.” In the newspaper *Le Monde*, which many believe played a leading role in advocating decolonisation, the likes of Phillipe Bernard played an important role to make the first recruitments of people from black or Beur backgrounds. Mustafa Kessous was one of the first Maghrebian journalists to be recruited at that time; in 2009, he became the first journalist from diversity to cover the Tour de France, a typically “white and populist” event. As Professor Herbrun explains: “Something is moving in France, we are in a period of flux.”<sup>52</sup>

The *Le Parisien*, which is one of the best-selling newspapers with a circulation of 500,000 daily in Paris and the suburbs, is also seen as a harbinger of this change with dedicated daily reporting on the minorities as well as on the *banlieues*. Every Wednesday, *Le Parisien* brings out a page dedicated to the minority community. The newspaper has also recruited the maximum number of journalist from the minority community since 2005.

But diversity in the media itself remains a big problem because the system will not lead minorities to study journalism in top French colleges. Patrik Lozes, who fights for “true *egalite*” in the system with his Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires (CRAN), says: “the glass ceiling in the French society prevents minority students from even aspiring to study for a white-collared job like the media.”<sup>53</sup> Journalism schools are expensive and most minority families find it beyond their means to afford them for their children.

TF1, the leading private-owned news network in France perceived to be close to President Sarkozy, started an *integration programme* for journalists in 2008. It recruited three young

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with Fréha (July 2009)

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Herbrun (July 2009)

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Patrick Lozes, CRAN (July 2009)

students from the minority community and gave them a two year training in journalism, with alternative two-weeks in journalism schools and two-weeks of practical training in TF1 spread over 24 months. Many suspect that this was done at the behest of President Sarkozy. One of the students selected in 2009 from the northern Paris suburb of Saint-Denis, home to the *Basilique Saint-Denis* (Basilica of Saint Denis) - the burial site of French monarchs – is Jean Marie Bagayoko, a French citizen of Malian descent, who had earlier dropped out of a journalism school for wants of funds before he was selected for TF1. He says:

I would have found it difficult to ever break into the big league if there was no integration programme. The media in France is run by the elite of the society. That's a vicious cycle. Here in France, to become a journalist, you have to have a background of certain elite, white schools.<sup>54</sup>

At the prestigious Ecole supérieure de journalisme (ESJ) in Lille, France, only one or two percent of the students come from a working class background; a small change that has happened in the last four years. The ESJ has launched a foundation course to help students from less financially sound backgrounds pass the entrance competition for French journalism schools. It has done this with Bondy Blog, a news website rooted in the *banlieues*, or suburbs. 20 students out of 200 applicants who represent French social diversity have been recruited, all of whom are grant holders from France's National Education, coming from the North of France, the Paris area and the South of France.

Marc Capelle, the school's managing director, emphasises that they come from a background of "social diversity".

I am not talking about cultural diversity, though the two are often connected. Because of their social background, these young people thought they could never get into journalism schools. They thought it wasn't for them, because they noticed the lack of diversity in journalism recruitment schools like ours, the ESJ. That's why we

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Jean Marie Bagayoko (July 2009)

launched the preparatory course, ‘Diversity’. The idea was to widen recruitment in journalism schools and, on another level, to widen diversity in newsrooms.<sup>55</sup>

Still, the coverage about minority issues mostly veers around the negative aspects of life in the *banlieues*, which more or less has come to represent the minority habitat. The media mostly loves to sensationalize the minority issues. According to Vicent Brossels, Asia head of *Reporters Sans Frontiers*, the coverage of people from the minorities has definitely increased but still “it mostly focuses on crime; we hardly see minority success stories or positive stories from the suburbs.”<sup>56</sup>

Rejane Ereau, bureau chief of *Respect* magazine, blames it on the lack of resources in the mainstream dailies and television channels:

They argue that they do not have the resources to go deeper into the topics. The journalists are also afraid to go into the suburbs, because the white French newsrooms are never at ease with the blacks and the beurs. In fact, in the history of the French media, the word ‘black’ only started appearing in print after the early 1990s. And then, in the middle of this decade, they started treating the suburbs as zoos, a spectacle of animals in front of cameras.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, such “deep-rooted media perceptions” lie in stereotyping the blacks and the beurs. Interestingly, William T. McLeod, editor of the *Collins Concise Dictionary*, has written that the term “stereotype” has a French root. It deals with the received common idea or convention that will “standardise image or conception of a type of a person.” The words ‘Africa’ and ‘Black’ have long been associated with barbarism and demeaning undertones that both insult and undermine black people's intelligence, their humanness and their humanity. Today, Bagayoko emphasizes that the Black community in France is “associated with sports, music, arts and sex”, but never with any intellectual white-collared jobs or positions of leadership, even in the sporting arena.

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<sup>55</sup> Marc Capelle's interview with European Journalism centre (Sep 21, 2009)

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Vicent Brossels (July 2009)

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Ereau (July 2009)

In 1998, when the French football team won the World Cup, aided by the likes of Algerian-born Zinadine Zidane, the son of a North African immigrant worker, and the Guadeloupe-born Lilian Thuram, the celebrations witnessed on the Champs-Élysées following the final victory over Brazil was hailed as a new dawn for France. The media looked at it as a manifestation of a new state of mind in the French society, labelling it as a victory for integration because the crowds, like the French football team, was made up of all sections of the French society. The newspapers interpreted it as if a nation had rediscovered its lost pride in the true values of its national motto - *liberté, égalité, fraternité* - calling it a victory for the non-aggressive and non-exclusive nationalism and the values of the “principle of laïcité.”

But in education, there are no black teachers in French schools apart from those in the suburbs, no black professors in the universities and the presence of black journalists in the media is till now an exception which has helped to prove the rule. Here the debate definitely veers off towards the argument that the minority communities need to create their own tool to represent diversity in the media. Ethnic media began making an appearance on the French market in the mid-1980s, when the extreme Right-wing of Le Pen was gaining momentum. But that mostly happened in the realm of radio. Unlike neighbouring Germany, France still does not have an ethnic television station or a daily newspaper for the diaspora. “We don’t have love stories, we don’t have our TV, we don’t have our media,” says Hortense Nouvion, founder and editor of *Cite Black*, a magazine that showcases the African culture of France.<sup>58</sup> Martina Zimmerman argues that this is because “minorities here watch only mainstream media”. After all, they all speak the same language.

After coming back from reporting on Tour de France, Mustafa Kessous wrote how difficult it is to be an Beur journalist in France in his own newspaper *Le Monde*. “It is very difficult for people to imagine I can actually work for *Le Monde*,” Kessous writes.<sup>59</sup>

The ethnic radio stations like Beur FM started gaining popularity during the 2005 riots. Beur FM, founded and run by Maghrebians themselves, started as a grassroots reaction to years of

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<sup>58</sup> *Interview with Nouvion (July 2009)*

<sup>59</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2009/09/23/ca-fait-bien-longtemps-que-je-ne-prononce-plus-mon-prenom-quand-je-me-presente-au-telephone\\_1244095\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2009/09/23/ca-fait-bien-longtemps-que-je-ne-prononce-plus-mon-prenom-quand-je-me-presente-au-telephone_1244095_3224.html)

marginalization, racism, and misrepresentation in French mainstream media. Its mission is rather particularistic, but one of its goals is to facilitate the integration of its listeners into French society and help them reconcile the cultural contradictions they experience in that society. But Beur FM's mission was in sharp contrast to Radio MultiKulti, which seeks to educate the German public and minorities on the benefits of a multicultural society while preserving the cultural identity of foreigners.

Clearly, with most of their programming in French, the minority radio in France has limited value in cultural retention but it serves as a morale-booster for a community long sidelined or over-looked in the social hierarchy. While the diaspora media constitute a key site for identity formation in neighbouring Germany and even Britain to a great extent despite the outreach of a multi-coloured BBC, in France it fails to make an impact in the public discourse beyond the obvious fetish of hackneyed nostalgia (which in a way acts as a catalyst for essentialising their cultures) or uniting hybridized cultural pride. But radio stations like Beur FM and Tropic FM have been successful in keeping the minority issue alive in the public discourse, igniting the aspiration levels of the community in its perennial struggle to reconcile their use of ethnicity with an old "constant" of French political philosophy and culture: French republicanism.

Rejane Ereau agrees the magazine she helped to start in 2002 to give a platform to the people of diversity in the French society, *Respect*, can never replace the mainstream in France; it can only survive simultaneously.

If it was Germany, the Turks would have produced such a magazine in Turkish, In Britain, South Asian minorities have created media outlets in their own language and have gained best-selling popularity, but in France we can only publish in French.<sup>60</sup>

This is because a majority of the minority communities come from former French colonies or present French overseas territory and the main media is their first source of information.

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Ereau (July 2009)



## CONCLUSION

France, with a larger proportion of non-European minorities than any of its neighbours, has been in denial of the increasingly multiethnic makeup of its society for decades. The disparity between the country's monochromatic image of itself and the multicoloured reality frustrates young citizens from non-European immigrant backgrounds and adds to their sense of alienation. The French society talks about equal opportunities as part of the public discourse which it has internalised to the point that it devaluates the American model of affirmative action. But the talk of equal opportunities remains confined within the discourse and the often “proud” rhetoric, and hardly gets translated into positive action in reality. But the first signs of change are also coming through the prism of the media.

As a man making the change in his journalism school, Marc Capelle feels that for long French media propagated a unilateral theory, which became manifested awkwardly during the riots of 2005 as the media fell victim to a state ideology that goes a long way to explaining not merely the origins of the riots but the absence of data that might have helped the authorities adopt policies that might have avoided the outbreaks, or even to react to them more effectively, and certainly to have a better idea of what the aftermath should call for. But France is going through a season of flux and Capelle wants the media to start reflecting the flux.

Journalists are, by definition, observers of reality in many different walks of life, so it's very awkward when people doing this job are predominantly from privileged backgrounds – middle managers, upper managers, professionals, etc. – and hence often ignorant about whole parts of French society. So, of course, young people from this diversity will bring something in their work.<sup>61</sup>

The French media, which often mirrors an aggressively exclusivist society, needs to adhere to the national motto of the country after making an addition to the maxim of liberty, equality and fraternity. It should read: *Liberté, égalité, fraternité, diversité*. Then only will the society start accepting the new way of life: that France can no longer live in its white European identity.

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<sup>63</sup> Marc Capelle's interview with European Journalism centre (Sep 21, 2009)

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*Sumon K Chakrabarti is the National Affairs Correspondent of India's largest English news network, CNN-IBN, of which he is also a founder employee. The Eurasian-Nets Fellowship of 2009 gave Chakrabarti the opportunity to travel in France and support his brief stay in the country, where he interviewed a wide cross-section of editors, journalists, media researchers, intellectuals and politicians. He was based at the Universite Paris Diderot in Paris in 2009, during which he completed this study.*

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