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PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM

Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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JANE B. SINGER, ALFRED HERMIDA,
DAVID DOMINGO, ARI HEINONEN,
STEVE PAULUSSEN, THORSTEN QUANDT,
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WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2011

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Participatory journalism: guarding open gates at online newspapers / Jane B. Singer ... [et al.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4443-3226-1 (hardback) — ISBN 978-1-4443-3227-8 (paperback)

1. Electronic newspapers. 2. Online journalism. 3. Citizen journalism. I. Singer, Jane B., 1955– II. Title.

PN4833.P37 2011

070.4–dc22

2011001829

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is published in the following electronic formats: ePDFs 9781444340716; Wiley Online Library 9781444340747; ePub 9781444340723

Notes on Authors

David Domingo is a senior lecturer in online journalism at the Department of Communication Studies of Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona, Spain. Domingo, who has a PhD in Journalism from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, was a doctoral fellow at the University of Tampere (2004) and visiting assistant professor at the University of Iowa (2007–2008). His research interests include online journalists' professional ideology and work routines, as well as the dynamics of innovations such as participatory journalism and convergence. He is co-editor, with Chris Paterson, of *Making Online News: The Ethnography of New Media Production* (Peter Lang, 2008).

Ari Heinonen, PhD, is journalism teacher and researcher in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Tampere, Finland. A former newspaper journalist, he has focused his academic research on explorations of the changing nature of professionalism in journalism, concepts of journalism in the new media era and journalistic ethics. He has directed and participated in a number of national and international research and development projects in these areas.

Alfred Hermida is a digital media scholar, journalism educator and online news pioneer. Since 2006, he has been an assistant professor at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Hermida was a Knight–Wallace Fellow at the University of Michigan in 2005 and an IBM CAS Canada Research Faculty Fellow in 2010. An award-winning journalist who served for four years as a Middle East correspondent, Hermida is a 16-year-veteran of the BBC and was a founding news editor of the BBC News website in 1997. He has also written for *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Times of London*, the *Guardian* and NPR.

Steve Paulussen, PhD, is a part-time lecturer in journalism studies at both the University of Antwerp and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, as well as a senior researcher at the IBBT research group for Media & ICT (MICT) at Ghent University, Belgium. In recent years, he has participated in a number of projects on different aspects of today's digital media culture. His main research interests lie in the field of journalism studies, where he has published on developments in online journalism, newsroom convergence and the sociological profile of professional journalists. Between 2006 and 2010, he also was involved in a multi-disciplinary strategic research project on digital news trends in Flanders, Belgium (FLEET).

Thorsten Quandt, Dr. phil. habil. is a professor in Communication Studies / Interactive Media and Online Communication at the University of Hohenheim, Germany. He has served as chair of the Journalism Studies Division in the German Communication Association (DGPuK) and as an officer in the Journalism Studies Division in the International Communication Association (ICA). His widely published research includes studies on online journalism, media evolution, network communication and computer games.

Zvi Reich, PhD, is a former journalist and a researcher in journalism studies at the Department of Communication, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. His book, *Sourcing the News*, was published by Hampton Press in 2009. Reich's research interests focus on online news, sociology of news, the relations between reporters and sources, authorship in journalism and the use of communication technologies in journalism. Two of his papers have won the top three papers prize of the Journalism Studies Division at ICA. Other research has appeared in *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* and *Journalism*. He is a member of the editorial board of *Journalism Practice*.

Jane B. Singer is an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa, USA, and a visiting professor in the School of Journalism, Media and Communication at the University of Central Lancashire, UK. From 2007 to 2010, she was the Johnston Press Chair in Digital Journalism at Central Lancashire. Her research explores digital journalism, including changing roles, perceptions, norms and practices. Before earning a PhD in Journalism from the University of Missouri, Singer was the first news manager of Prodigy Interactive Services. She also has worked as a newspaper reporter and editor.

Marina Vujnovic, PhD, is an assistant professor at Monmouth University, USA. Her primary fields of research are participatory journalism and new media studies, media history and gender, critical political economy, and cultural studies. Additional research interests include international communication and the global flow of information, as well as ethnicity and the media. She is the author of *Forging the Bubikopf Nation: Journalism, Gender and Modernity in Interwar Yugoslavia* (Peter Lang, 2009).

The authors have elected to donate all their proceeds from the sale of this book to Reporters Without Borders / Reporters Sans Frontières (http://www.rsf.org, http://en.rsf.org), a non-profit organization committed to press freedom around the world.

Acknowledgements

This book became a reality because dozens of journalists and news executives with precious little time to spare agreed to open their newsrooms to us and to carve out space to talk with us honestly, thoughtfully and at length. We are deeply grateful to them for their willingness to share their ideas and insights, as well as their reasons for both hope and concern as they contemplate an increasingly participatory future.

We also owe a large debt of gratitude to the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation in Finland for supporting the extensive fieldwork involved in this research. Without the foundation's generous support through multiple phases of the project, from its planning through its execution, this multi-national, multi-authored endeavor would have been impossible to coordinate or to carry out. The rest of the authors also send a big "kiitos paljon!" to co-author Ari Heinonen and the Tampere Journalism Research and Development Centre for negotiating this foundation support, as well as overseeing the conversion of that commitment into much-appreciated dollars, euros, pounds and shekels.

Our editors at Wiley-Blackwell, particularly Elizabeth Swayze, Margot Morse and Elina Helenius, have been unflaggingly enthusiastic and remarkably patient throughout our lengthy, long-distance laboring to turn a mountain of interview data into a manageable manuscript. They have been hugely helpful right from the start, not least in soliciting reviewers whose feedback has significantly strengthened the work you are about to read. These reviewers are outstanding thinkers and scholars in this field, and they and their colleagues – including those who have provided feedback at the academic conference venues in

which some of our preliminary findings were initially presented – have been a resource and an inspiration for us.

Each of the authors also wishes to thank our respective academic institutions, which provided the time, space and resources that enabled us individually and collectively to do our thinking, researching, analyzing, writing and editing.

Several of us also would like to individually thank the following people for their invaluable aid:

David Domingo wishes to thank Erin Tiesman, for her assistance in transcribing the US interviews, and Sergio Martínez Mahugo, who conducted and transcribed the interviews with Spanish journalists.

Ari Heinonen wishes to thank Pauliina Lehtonen and Riina Hautala, both of the University of Tampere, for their assistance in this research.

Alfred Hermida wishes to thank Leslie Young, who conducted and transcribed the interviews with Canadian journalists, as well as Alison Loat of Samara for providing a space to think and write.

Thorsten Quandt wishes to thank Ansgar Koch, Laura Leithold, Agatha Pohl and Fabian Schwinger for their assistance in this research.

Zvi Reich wishes to thank Tal Waxman-Kushnir from Ben Gurion University for her thoughtful contribution in conducting the interviews and analyzing the data, as well as Dror Walter from the Hebrew University and Oded Jackman from Ben Gurion University for their assistance.

These authors, along with co-authors Steve Paulussen and Marina Vujnovic, also are grateful to Jane Singer for her precise and patient work in crafting a final manuscript that succeeds in giving one voice to this collective research project.

Jane Singer wishes to thank Jean-Yves Chainon, then of the World Editors Forum in Paris, for arranging, leading and transcribing the French interviews.

Finally, we must thank you, our readers and the readers of these and other online newspapers, for all that you bring to “participatory journalism.” The future of this collective enterprise rests on you and your contributions, and we believe you will enrich it beyond measure.

Authors' Note

This book is the result of a research project carried out by eight researchers in eight languages and in ten different countries, over a period of several months in late 2007 and early 2008. Among us, we talked one-on-one with nearly 70 journalists, at more than two dozen leading national newspapers, about user contributions to the newspaper-affiliated website. The appendix, beginning on page 192, provides more details about what we did and how we did it.

Each chapter contains information gathered by all of us, asking similar questions of our interviewees and steering our newsroom conversations in the direction we collectively decided would be most interesting and illuminating.

To turn this mountain of quotes into a book, each of us took the lead in crafting one thematic chapter that explores a particular aspect of our topic in detail. Jane Singer, with the assistance of Alfred Hermida, then worked to integrate each of these chapters into what we hope is a cohesive whole that is easy and enjoyable to read as a unified package. We did not want our own individual voices to drown out the voices of the journalists whom you will "hear" throughout the pages that follow.

However, we have included the names of each lead author in the Table of Contents and at the start of each chapter to highlight the individual effort and perspective that went into each section of the book.

1

Introduction

Sharing the Road

The English words “journalism” and “journey” are cousins. Both stem from the Latin word *diurnalis*, which means “daily.” Over time, one came to mean a daily record of transactions, while the other was used to describe a day’s work or travel. Today, journalism is on a journey into uncharted territory – and the road is crowded with all manner of travellers.

Only very recently has the entrenched idea of a concrete daily record, prepared by people dedicated to its compilation, begun to lose its usefulness. A printed product may still appear just once a day, but as newspapers have moved online, they have evolved into something far more fluid and amorphous. The twenty-first-century newspaper is essentially never complete, neither finished nor finite.

Nor are journalists the only ones determining what gets recorded. A great many other people also contribute content, representing their own interests, ideas, observations and opinions. That content comes in a steadily expanding volume and variety of forms and formats – words, images and sounds, alone or in combination, turning the online newspaper into an open, ongoing social experiment.

This book is about the journey of the journalistic enterprise through an increasingly collaborative present and into a collective future that you will share, whether or not you ever

set foot in a newsroom. It explores how newspaper journalists are handling the transition to a world in which vast numbers of strangers contribute directly to something that those journalists alone once controlled. The story is still being written, and you are the ones writing it.

1.1 Participatory Journalism

Many terms have been coined to describe the contributions to online newspaper content from those whom media critic Jay Rosen (2006) describes as “the people formerly known as the audience.” Some call it “**user-generated content**.” Others prefer “**citizen journalism**.” One scholar likes the term “produsage” to highlight the blending of producing and consuming information (Bruns 2008; 2005).

Our choice, though, is “**participatory journalism**” because we feel it captures the idea of collaborative and collective – not simply parallel – action. People inside and outside the newsroom are engaged in communicating not only *to*, but also *with*, one another. In doing so, they all are participating in the ongoing processes of creating a news website and building a multifaceted community.

Others like this term, too.[1] Back in 2003, online journalist and commentator J. D. Lasica defined “participatory journalism” as a “slippery creature” but offered a range of examples, some of them associated with mainstream media offerings and others not. Among the former, which are the focus of this book, he included **comments**, discussion **forums** and user **blogs**, along with reports (including visual ones), reviews and articles supplied by readers (Lasica 2003).

Those sorts of contributions remain very much part of today’s participatory journalism, and they have been joined by newer forms of contributing, such as **reputation systems**, **micro-blogs**, **social networking sites** and

more. Indeed, new participatory formats appear all the time; by the time you read this, there will be a dozen new examples that don't even exist as we write.

Since Lasica made his list, people outside the newsroom have contributed to a steady stream of material published on media websites (and, of course, elsewhere, as well) around the world. In a fundamental way, news has become socially engaging and socially driven, as millions of people not only create news but also share it (Pew Research 2010).

Ordinary people have captured and published, in words and images, stories of global impact, including the results of terrorist attacks on the commuters of Madrid and London, the abuse of prisoners at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, the lethal chaos surrounding elections in Iran, and the devastation caused by tsunamis, floods and earthquakes. They also have provided intimate looks within the smallest of communities, sharing local and even personal information and ideas in depth and detail. They have carried on millions of topical conversations through discussion forums, comment threads and blog posts. In all of these online activities and many more, they have taken on roles and carried out functions that sound quite a bit like, well … journalism.

In the same year that Lasica offered his definition of participatory journalism, Chris Willis and Shayne Bowman connected the rise of what they referred to as both "we media" and "participatory journalism" to the changes facing traditional newsrooms. "The venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves," they wrote (Willis and Bowman 2003). The subtitle of our book, "Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers," suggests that this challenge remains a central one for journalists today.

Gatekeeping has been defined as “the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by news media” (Shoemaker *et al.* 2001: 233). But when journalism becomes “participatory,” the volume of transmitted information rapidly surges to flood levels, swamping traditional approaches to winnowing and the like. How newspaper journalists are thinking about and dealing with the change is a recurring theme in this book.

1.2 Why Look at Newspaper Websites?

Journalists produce content for all sorts of platforms and products, of course. They work for lots of different kinds of employers – including themselves – as the numbers engaged in increasingly entrepreneurial versions of the craft continue to grow (Shedden 2010). However, we have chosen to focus on journalists employed by companies that print (on sheets of paper), a traditional newspaper and maintain a website affiliated with that newspaper.

We made that choice for a number of reasons. First is the historical longevity of newspapers and their demonstrated ability to adapt successfully to other monumental changes in communications technology throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The newspaper industry has survived everything from the advent of the telegraph in the early 1800s to that of the **mobile** telephone a century and a half later – with landline telephones, film, radio, broadcast and cable television, and more in between. As a result, the culture of newspaper journalism is simultaneously – and somewhat paradoxically – the most deeply rooted and the most flexible of all **newsroom cultures**. This seemed to us

an interesting backdrop for the current challenges posed to journalists by an open and interactive network.

The second reason is that despite the many and ongoing changes in the ways that people access information, leading newspapers generally retain an authoritative role as providers of “the news of record” – certainly in the eyes of their own employees, but also in the eyes of many other social and political leaders. Although print circulation has been declining steadily in many Western nations, particularly the United States (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2010), the medium is likely to remain a staple for opinion leaders into the foreseeable future (Meyer 2008).

And the third reason for focusing on newspapers is that in the brief history of online media, newspapers have generally been the first to innovate, and with a few exceptions – the BBC in the UK and National Public Radio in the United States spring to mind – they have done so more extensively than their magazine or broadcast counterparts. Although their critics have pointed out, not incorrectly, that newspapers have missed a great many opportunities over the past two decades, those innovations have been quite significant indeed for the people whose jobs, roles and self-perceptions have been fundamentally shaken. Their reactions and responses form the heart of this book.

1.2.1 Online Newspapers

Changes never occur in a vacuum, and these are no exception. The news industry in the early twenty-first century faces a strikingly severe economic crisis, and the occupation of journalism has been buffeted by changes in newsroom structure, organization, tasks and working conditions (Deuze 2010; Fortunati *et al.* 2009; Ryfe 2009; Gade 2008).

“Even before the recession, the fundamental question facing journalism was whether the news industry could win

a race against the clock for survival: Could it find new ways to underwrite the gathering of news online, while using the declining revenue of the old platforms to finance the transition?" the authors of a recent report about U.S. media said (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009). They were not especially optimistic about the answer, particularly for the newspaper industry, described in 2009 as being "in something perilously close to free fall" (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism and Edmonds 2009).

While the revenue from online news is not booming, its usage is. Journalists who write for newspapers, in particular, have far more readers now than at any time in the past. Traffic to newspaper websites has grown enormously in the past few years, as their familiar and (at least to some extent) trusted brand names have successfully made the transition to the Internet.

The websites of some national papers, including many of the ones discussed in this book, routinely attract tens of millions of readers every month – far more than they have in print. They are not the same kinds of readers – the print kind tend to be more regular readers, and they are much more likely to see more than just the one or two items that the click-in-click-out crowd sees. But they are consumers of the newspaper product nonetheless.

There are not, however, far more journalists working for these newspapers than before. On the contrary, at a great many papers, considerably *fewer* people are in the newsroom than were there a decade ago. The journalists who remain typically generate content for both the print and online products, as well as other platforms such as mobile. And they are working – in various ways, with varying attitudes and with variable results – with some of those millions of readers and their contributions, from comments to photos to blog posts and more.

This cacophonous world of participatory journalism is an exciting place but one that is still largely unfamiliar to many of these journalists. This book, based on the insights and the early adventures of top-level professionals at some of the democratic world's biggest and best newspapers, will help you prepare for the adventure on which you are about to embark.

1.2.2 Participatory Journalism in Online Newspapers

This book is about participatory journalism in online newspapers. It draws on lengthy interviews with 67 print and online editors, and other journalists at about two dozen leading national newspapers in ten Western democracies. A full list and a brief description of each newspaper and its website, along with a list of interviewees (by job title in order to preserve the confidentiality that some requested), is provided in the appendix at the back of the book.

The fact that all are democracies is important because of the premise underlying this form of government: It rests on a public that is both informed about matters of civic importance and, importantly, able to talk about those matters with other citizens. Journalists have always seen themselves as fundamental to the democratic role of informing the public (Gans 2003), and that perception is a key aspect of a broadly shared journalistic culture. Today, the shift of journalism from a lecture to a conversation (Gillmor 2006) highlights the second requirement, too. Indeed, this connection between discourse and democracy (Habermas 1989; Dewey 1927) has been highlighted over many centuries and in many cultural contexts, and it surely is no less valid in our times.

This book is unusual in incorporating perspectives from journalists in so many different countries, even countries

that broadly share a political ideology. It would have been logistically much easier, of course, to write a book based on interviews with journalists in a single nation, with a shared political, economic and legal culture informing their work. Journalists do think about their roles within the context of those aspects of their own society. And although website **users** can access a site from another country as easily as one from their own, the traffic to most (though not all) of the newspapers in our study comes mainly from within their national borders. These citizens also construct their identities and social roles within a particular national context.

That said, we are interested here less in the national culture than the professional one – the culture of journalism, at least as it is understood by practitioners in relatively free and open societies. All over the world, the nature of an unbounded, participatory network is challenging traditional journalistic practices, policies and self-perceptions. Our interviews did suggest some national idiosyncrasies (as well as some personal ones), and you'll read about them as you go along. But we also found a great deal of similarity among journalists in the various countries in the ways they thought about themselves, their products and their audiences. Those similarities suggest to us that the fundamental change currently under way transcends national boundaries, and it is the nature of that change that we will explore together in the pages of this book.

1.3 Chapter Preview

After this introduction, we begin the exploration by offering a fuller overview of the audience participation options offered by online newspapers, describing how they fit into the multifaceted process of producing news. In Chapter 2, Alfred Hermida provides a summary of journalists' views of

the newly active audience in connection with a series of **news-production stages**, proposing ideas that are then explored in more detail throughout the book.

In Chapter 3, Ari Heinonen explores changes in the relationship between journalists and readers who once were undifferentiated members of a relatively passive "**audience**" but who, in increasing numbers, are emerging as active individual "users" and even co-producers of website content. Heinonen provides an overview of our journalists' attitudes toward these users, examining the ways in which traditional journalistic roles are being shaped by new relationships and exploring the various roles that practitioners see website users filling – or not filling.

The second section of the book, beginning with Chapter 4, offers a closer look at how journalists are managing user contributions. Steve Paulussen leads off by focusing on the reasons why online newspaper editors have decided to develop audience participation platforms, as well as the effects of their decision within today's newsrooms. What are their motivations and their rationales, and how are those influencing their organizations' structural changes?

In Chapter 5, David Domingo takes us inside these newsrooms to investigate changes in workflows and news production routines that journalists have made to accommodate and integrate contributions from users. Domingo discusses various approaches and investigates the reasoning behind them, then highlights the best strategies identified by our interviewees.

With Chapter 6, we focus still more tightly, as Zvi Reich turns user comments into a framework for exploring a host of issues raised by participatory journalism in all its forms. Comments are enormously popular on newspaper websites, but their popularity causes management problems, particularly when user contributions are seen as superficial or offensive.

The third and final section of the book broadens the perspective to consider wider issues and implications of participatory journalism. In Chapter 7, Jane Singer looks at the ethical and legal issues that editors see as important in handling user contributions, as well as their strategies for dealing with those issues. She considers challenges to long-standing professional norms, along with the difficulty of heading off potential legal problems created by this ongoing global discourse.

It is painfully evident that economic pressures play a significant role in all manner of journalism, and that certainly is no less true for the participatory kind. In Chapter 8, Marina Vujnovic explores the impact of user contributions on commercial models for media organizations, as well as journalists' responses to both existing and potential economic pressures. In Chapter 9, Thorsten Quandt begins the process of tying the pieces together by considering the broader impact of participatory journalism on traditional media and on journalists, both historically and in today's environment. Quandt examines how journalists think about themselves and users, delving into the ideological and professional essence of journalism.

In the last chapter, Alfred Hermida returns to offer lessons learned and a look ahead. In addition to providing a summary, he outlines recommendations for better practices, considering the future in light of journalists' experiences, practices, perceptions and aspirations.

There is a lot of ground to cover, and much of it may be unfamiliar to you at first. Because we include newspapers in so many different countries, published in eight different languages, you probably won't have read them all yourself! So we have incorporated some things that we hope will be helpful, such as:

- A unique model for breaking the process of "making news" into five readily understandable stages. The

model, which is explained in Chapter 2 and referred to throughout the book, will help you understand how newspaper editors are thinking about audience participation at each stage.

- Profiles or descriptions of the various newspapers in an appendix, which you can use as a refresher when you encounter references to them in the chapters. They are listed in alphabetical order by country, starting with Belgium and ending with the United States. We identify each newspaper by the URL of its affiliated website. Participatory journalism is a rapidly changing subject, so we strongly recommend that you visit these sites to track new and ongoing developments.
- Questions at the end of each chapter, inviting you to think more deeply about the issues raised and to probe further to understand the current paths that newspapers are navigating.
- A glossary of terms related to participatory journalism. Within each chapter, the first significant reference to a glossary term is highlighted in this **bold typeface**. You may already have noticed some of these terms in this introductory chapter.

The journey on which journalism embarked in the twenty-first century is not an easy one; it requires journalists not only to change their everyday work routines and practices but also to take up the much harder task of changing their occupational culture and even their self-perceptions.

Journalists, who long have cultivated a professional distance from their readers and sources, find themselves integrated into a network in which the distances have collapsed. Physical distances have been erased by a global network that instantaneously delivers information everywhere and anywhere, while social ones have been erased by the inherently open and wholly participatory nature of that network. The journalists whom you will meet

in the pages that follow, are figuring out where they fit into this world and how to help make it an even better one.

Which is where you come in …

Note

1 The work of Mark Deuze, who has been conducting research and doing a lot of serious thinking about participatory journalism for more than a decade, has been especially valuable to us. Examples of his work include the book *Media Work*, published by Polity Press in 2007, and a series of journal articles that include "Participation, remediation, bricolage: Considering principal components of a digital culture" (*The Information Society* 22, 2006: 63–75); "Towards professional participatory storytelling in journalism and advertising" (*First Monday* 10/7, 2005: http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1257/1177); and "The Web and its journalisms: Considering consequences of different types of media online" (*New Media & Society* 5/2, 2003: 203–230).

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