

Good dog, bad dog: Exploring audience uses and attitudes to hyperlocal community news media through the prism of banal pet stories

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Abstract

Hyperlocal media is a form of online community news usually (in the UK at least) run by citizens, offering local information to residents in a village, town or city. Research has thus far typically been framed within journalism studies, discourses of social change, citizen journalism and civic engagement, and has focused on practitioners. Quantitative audience studies have been useful in identifying reader motivations and uses, but richer work exploring everyday narratives is lacking. This paper draws on ethnographic work (online, observing a Facebook page, and offline, attending community events and interviewing audience members) in order to explore the uses and value of such media for the audience of residents. The paper focuses on *one* aspect of this media, banal stories about lost pets, and suggests that hyperlocal media offers a unique but sometimes problematic platform for community discussions in which readers and editors work together to source, write and share online content to a collaborative end. This paper demonstrates through this prism of animal stories the value of hyperlocal media in offering unique opportunities for residents to be heard and participate within their communities, whilst appreciating the tensions inherent in such an editorially and technologically mediated online space.

KEYWORDS: hyperlocal media, citizen journalism, ethnography, everyday, audiences

Context

My case study explores editor/audience relationships in “hyperlocal” media, so it is first important to ground our understanding on the traditions of media and communication within which hyperlocal is often situated. Whilst differing from mainstream local news in being citizen-led, participatory and largely independent, hyperlocal media follows Chris Atton’s definition of ‘alternative media,’ where it does not always necessarily intend to *oppose* traditional mainstream news media but rather presents differing takes or completely new stories, is aimed at minority concerns and audiences, or offers exposure to alternative voices (2002: 2). Hyperlocal media is, however, distinguishable from the case study of the

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radical Schnevs freesheet of the 1990s that Atton explored. Firstly, the Internet redefined journalism practice as a partly responsive mode, filtering and making use of a vast array of web sources, conceptualised as gatewatching (Bruns 2005). In participatory media such as hyperlocal sites, this includes the readers themselves as such sources. The audiences of hyperlocal media also share, comment and “Like” news items to contribute to a “‘reflexive’ culture of news consumption through citizen participation’ (Goode 2009: 1287). Thus, the audience is heavily involved in the blogs, Facebook pages (or groups) and Twitter accounts of hyperlocal organisations, combining the role of user, source, writer or creator to become producers (Bruns 2008). Where this leans away from a media based on professional journalism standards, communities instead benefit from forms of communication, expertise and local knowledge that resonate with discourses of the professional amateur (Leadbetter & Miller 2004), silly citizenship (Hartley 2010), and the everyday (Pink 2012).

Another significant shift is in the increasing use of smartphones in certain societies. Apps, mobile ready web pages, and users themselves reshape participatory media practices, within contexts that illustrate the role of pervasive technologies in everyday life (Moore 1993) and, when observed in hyperlocal media, can be understood as micro-acts of reader-citizen journalism, such as photographing traffic incidents (Väättäjä et al. 2011; Berger 2011). It is not only in citizen reporting that these tools become significant, but also in forms of engagement and reading, as mobile devices are situated within rhythms of neighbourhood life in ways that would be impossible with desktop computers: at the bus stop, hairdresser, shops, workplace, or even in bed.

Banal, everyday media

Regardless of whether hyperlocal media can be considered “newsworthy” in a traditional, mainstream sense, an understanding of the technology and contexts of use contributes to a picture of online community media as a layer of communication (Mesch and Levanon 2003; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Sutton 2006), which can be conceptualised as a collaborative third place (Oldenburg 1997), online public sphere (Habermas 1991), or more specifically ‘field stations ... those stopping places in which field agents interact with other agents, ideas and technologies on a regular basis’ (Postill 2011: 7–8). Individual posts can similarly be observed as ‘field arena[s] ... bounded, spatial unit[s] in which precise, visible antagonists, individuals or corporate contend with one another for prizes and/or honour’ (ibid.), sometimes earning social capital (Coleman 1988). These scenes are played out by various organisations and representatives but also provide voice, means of communication and a sense of “belonging”, as we will see in my study.

The promise of hyperlocal media

My study identifies ways in which hyperlocal practice in the UK does not sit comfortably with expectations that it should fill perceived gaps left by receding local media,¹ consist

¹ During my ethnography, the local Express and Star newspaper announced staff cuts of 76 at the parent Midland News Association, including ‘12 in editorial, 12 in advertising, 21 in circulation and 12 in transport’ (Linford 2014). This, at a time when the paper was often criticised for not reporting local news.

of journalistic ‘original news reporting’ and be ‘drivers of civic engagement’ (Metzgar et al. 2011: 774). A 2014 study of UK hyperlocal media suggested that, whilst sites were seen to be serving their communities with local news and information, they did not always aspire to journalistic standards (Williams, Harte & Turner 2015). This is possibly unsurprising given that alternative media writers do not necessarily frame themselves as journalists, but rather construct their identity from previous experience e.g. as bloggers, designers, and other roles (Forde 2011). Most importantly though here, the multi-faceted and participatory roles of *audience* members must be recognised as they often source, write, corroborate, oppose and finally resolve stories, with little mediation necessary by editors. As a result, the news “gap” is not necessarily filled (in fact, mainstream media stories are often reposted in hyperlocal spaces) but given that much hyperlocal content would appear alien and out of place in a local newspaper, it can be observed that citizens are developing new forms of everyday, banal media (Coleman 2010). This contributes to a sense of local media plurality or, at least, a ‘plurality of socialities’ (Postill 2011: 102).

Method

This ethnographic study consisted of offline and online observation of a hyperlocal media organisation’s audience² from September 2013 to June 2014. The catchment area is part of a city in the West Midlands region of the UK; residents referred to it as ‘the village’ whilst outsiders might recognise it as a suburb. Online observation focused on the hyperlocal organisation’s Facebook page, as it generated more participation with residents than their Twitter, YouTube or blog activity. I also looked at online accounts of local print media but also other online sites and pages, where they contributed to the wider field of residential affairs (Postill 2011).

Offline observation focused on those events discussed on the hyperlocal blog/Facebook. I attended (amongst others): a PACT (Partners and Communities Together) meeting (often “live tweeted” by the hyperlocal organisation and typically consisting of policing updates), “fun days” (charity or school fete events), meetings of the local history society, resident meetings at a community centre, and leisure events.

Ten audience members were interviewed, six females and four males, recruited through the Facebook page itself or using a site-based approach, where ‘the site director/gatekeeper would introduce the investigators to potential participants’ (Arcury & Quandt 1999: 131). Semi-structured interviews were carried out: four in a neutral community space, two at places of work, and four at their homes, where this setting offers additional insight regarding context (Moore 2000). Observation formed the main body of data, whilst the relatively small number of interviews were used to illustrate findings or drill into certain narratives. Whilst the study focused on audiences, the two editors (a married couple) were usually available for comment and contextualisation where necessary, and an interview helped explore their own perceptions of the audience.

² As of 29 January 2015 it had 7,373 followers, where the 2001 census records a local population of 33,555.

Findings

The conversations taking place on the hyperlocal Facebook page covered various subjects but, contrary to expectations of political or civic engagement as discussed, they typically centred around more immediate, everyday and “banal” issues e.g. charity or fundraising events, traffic incidents, crime. Lost cat and dog appeals provide a useful focus for this study because they exhibit many of the typical behaviours observed: they were sourced by residents, engaged readers in conversation, and also rolled over into offline contexts, with dozens of “found” or “lost” pet stories over the nine months. Through these narratives, we can explore the functional value of the platform, but also the potential for motivating civic engagement and activism.

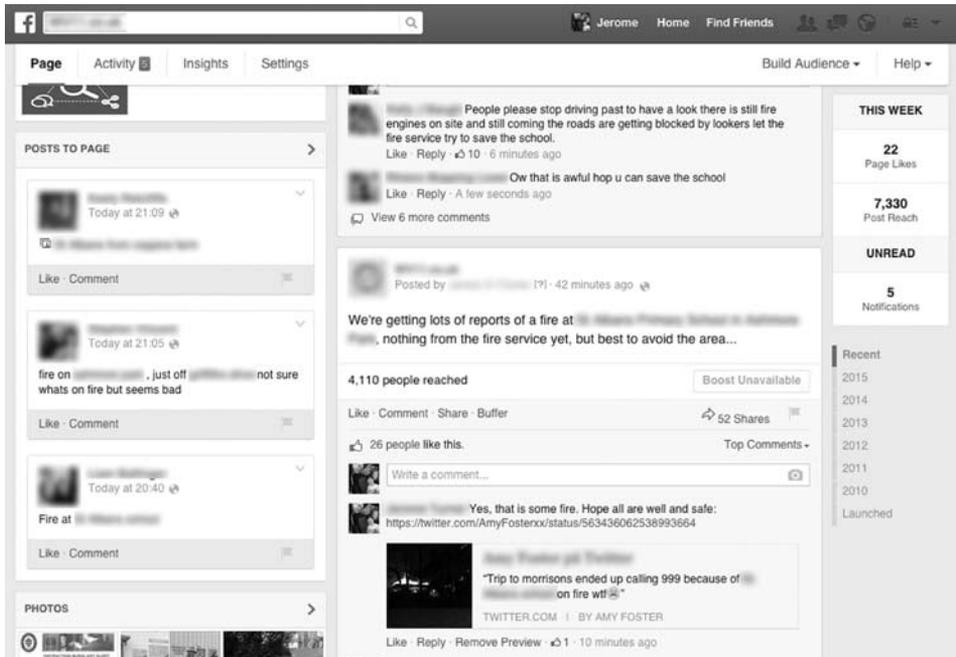


Figure 1: The Wall (Posts to Page box) can only be seen when clicking into the page and scrolling down

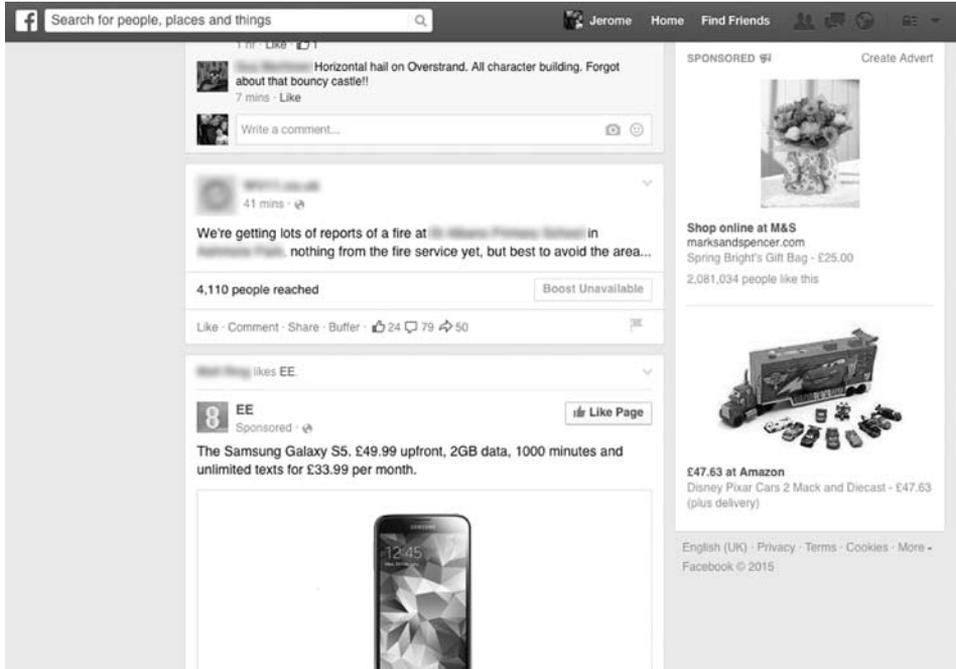


Figure 2: Stories written or shared by the editors are “pushed” to their followers’ personal stream

The relationships between editors and audiences within hyperlocal media demonstrate a precarious power dynamic. The space sets up certain expectations in the readers (e.g. that their stories will be shared with the wider audience), while the editors attempt to cope with a steady flow of reader demands, fitting this role around work and home life – for the editors more than anyone, this is not just *everyday* media but *all day* media. To understand this dynamic, it is important to briefly describe the mechanics of the participatory Facebook page. Readers can either post stories to the page’s Wall (Figure 1) or more directly Facebook Message, email, or otherwise, ask the *editors* to post or share a story (Figure 2). In the former method, visibility is an issue, given that some interviewees did not as a rule habitually scan this part of the page. The latter method recognised the fact that most people simply used the content that was pushed to their feed³ (Figure 2); the editor’s sharing of a Wall story could sometimes boost “Likes” or “Shares” from just a couple to a hundred or more, so the key to readers’ stories being presented in this space is editorial promotion. Given the powerful influence of the editor, the following Google Chat conversation might raise some concerns about the extent to which such participatory platforms afford citizens a voice:

³ At the time of data collection (2013/14), Facebook as a technology tended to push all of a page’s posts onto a user’s timeline. More recently (2015), not all page posts will appear on a user’s timeline and to see all content the user must navigate to that page.

- Researcher Quick question. You know you posted the lost dog thing on the [Hyperlocal] timeline? Do those get posted just based on whether you see them at the right time on the wall?
- Because some you do repost, others you don't.
- Male Editor Pretty much yes, although it's a combination of how charitable we're feeling ([Female Editor] likes dogs more than me!) and how much the person bugs us via private messages on Facebook!
- In that case, the lady messaged us and seeing as she'd at least tried herself by posting it to the wall, I figured I'd share it as I had time to do so.
- ...
- We do what we can to help, but sometimes I feel like we're running 'Lost pets in [Area Name]' anyway!
- I think we manage to maintain a balance of stuff that's more important/interesting to a wider audience and stuff that's important to a few people (like a lost dog)...but there're no rules or policies, we just tend to make it up as we go along

Online chat interview with male editor

While participation was encouraged on the platform, it was clear that readers should follow certain (often unwritten) protocols in order to increase their chances of being heard. However, (as we see in the interview above) even if these efforts were made, they were often at the mercy of the editor's immediate mood whilst gatewatching (Bruns 2005); the relative broadness of editorial guidelines; the editors' own sense of responsibility towards the readers. This sometimes confused and frustrated audience members who could see the editors were active on the page at a particular time but were not reposting their story for them, even after repeatedly asking or, as the editor above describes it, 'bugging.' Further barriers to participation include the potential for 'primary definers' to be 'voiced' more than others due to offline relationships, typically those with leadership positions within the community or a superior grasp of the technology (Atton & Wickenden 2005: 348) for example, positions observed in church leaders, councillors and neighbourhood volunteers. Citizen's voices were also sometimes overlooked when larger breaking news emerged, however much of the space otherwise presented itself as being one of banal, everyday narratives (e.g. lost pets).

Whilst this editor/audience power dynamic is undeniable, a level of control and "ownership" is necessary to ensure the page stays on message; another local Facebook nostalgia *group* was criticized by its audience when people started posting off-topic. While the posting process was more open, the space lost focus as a result.

When the audience sets the banal agenda

In addition to the editor's role, it is also necessary to recognise where the *audience* influences in declaring and creating the norms of the space through their participation. The significant number of animal stories both on the Wall and reposted by the editors suggested to the audience that these subjects were acceptable, even if the editors reveal "backstage" that this was not something they encouraged (see interview above). The danger, however, is that it generates a feedback loop (the more people that see animal posts, the more they assume it is appropriate and post more) and the editors admitted in the interview that they 'don't post every single thing we receive in quick succession because of this.'

The audience's decision to use, and thus construct, the Facebook page in their own image demonstrates the role of such communal online spaces in everyday life. Through an appreciation of Postill's field of residential affairs (2011) and Dahlgren's similar conception of a 'constellation of communicative spaces' in community media (2005: 148), we can recognise that the hyperlocal page was one of various sources (both online and offline) that could be used to reunite pets; hyperlocal media tells *a* narrative of the locality, and is by no means definitive. However, the hyperlocal media method clearly appealed to readers, rather than phoning appeals into pre-Internet agencies such as kennels, the police, and other. One interviewee suggested that people post on a hyperlocal platform because of the speed of response and the editorial mediation process; 'people don't trust agencies,' but she thought they were more likely to trust the editors. In many such cases, kennels and vets are included in the conversation, where the pets are taken to be checked for tracking microchips and the editors, and other readers often act as mediators. The danger is that this starts to create an over-reliance on the hyperlocal media space to provide answers or a way of delegating responsibility, when in many cases older methods of resolving an issue would be just as effective, such as by telephone, or using a web search to provide an answer rather than asking the audience. This has the potential to impact on the local knowledge we retain as individuals or set up hierarchies of 'those in the know' when the information is, in fact, more widely available.

Civic engagement and activism

When audience members encountered lost animals in the neighbourhood, their response was informed by their experience of using the hyperlocal platform, aligning with civic engagement discourses of online activity affecting offline behaviour (Rheingold 2008). One interviewee found a dead cat by the side of the road and took it to a veterinary practice as well as then posting on the hyperlocal page, resulting in a reunion with the owner. She also demonstrated the reverse, online activity leading to offline involvement: 'I have been known to drive 'round streets looking for [lost dogs],' and others also described a heightened awareness of free-roaming animals in the neighbourhood due to the online animal narratives. In some cases, this resulted in multiple sightings of the same lost pet from different readers. Such narratives imply that engagement in the online results in some users thinking differently about their neighbourhood. However, rather

than assuming offline engagement *leads* to online activism or the reverse, the way people talk about their experiences reveals a more tangled “chicken/egg” paradox that presents the offline and online aspects of local everyday life as two sides of the same coin.

Sometimes residents were seen to ‘play into’ the space, recognising the social capital to be earned from creating a ‘field arena’ or ‘winning’ in such a space (Postil 2011: 8). In at least one case, it was unclear how distressed or in need of help the animal was: is a cat behind a dustbin truly lost?

Young black cat found behind my dustbins in [street name]. It’s got a collar but no microchip. Please message me if you have lost your cat (From a reader’s Wall post).

Sometimes people gave more detail than necessary to describe their efforts, again, possibly subconsciously motivated by the online recognition they would receive:

She was sitting in the middle of the road ... and then, after a quick fuss, she decided to follow me home. I did try to encourage her to go back where I found her but because she is so friendly, she kept following me back. I have tried to upload some photos but unsuccessful at the moment (From a reader’s Wall post).

In addition to the functional value to residents, the Facebook platform was also a stage for establishing ‘public opinion’ (Habermas 1991: 64) informed by localised community identity, a form of placemaking (Alevizou et al. 2013). People tended to sympathise in lost posts (possibly when it was a cat they knew), offer advice as to where the owners might look, which catteries to call, and *mention* other Facebook friends in comments so they would be drawn to the stories. It was very rare that owners were chastised for losing or not properly securing their animal in the first place (even though there were repeat offenders and people often admitted to not having a collar or microchip in place); such supportive attitudes in these banal cases reflected possibly subconscious banking of social capital with an understanding that it might be them (or their pets) requiring help next time (Coleman 1988). On several occasions, horses were spotted on park land or roaming on busy roads; reader-sourced stories alerted drivers in the area and possibly hoped to bring out the owners, but also displayed concern for the welfare of the animals. Such concern for animals was reinforced in the story of a pitbull dog that had attacked its owner; the audience sympathised with the dog when it became clear it had been antagonised, possibly because bull-type breeds such as “staffies” (Staffordshire bull terriers) were popular in the area (Hallsworth 2011). In a separate instance, an owner posted a photo of an enormous dog sat next to a young girl: Have you seen [Name]? He went missing from [street name] at the top end of [Estate Name] earlier today; he’s on medication, and his owner is worried sick (Post by editors, after request from reader).



Figure 3: Photo used in a lost “staffie” appeal, resulting in 478 “Shares” by readers

Whilst some might have been put off by the size of the dog, and been concerned about encountering the dog on the streets, no one in the string of comments mentioned this; one called him gorgeous. The story was shared 478 times before he was eventually reunited with his owner. It was not just the fact that people responded favourably, but the consensus they reached as a readership that is significant. Commenting on posts, sharing stories, even simply reading this alternative media (Bruns 2008) make readers feel they are participating and, even when my interviewees admitted they could not always respond to stories such as attending events, they appreciated that it gave them a sense of belonging and positive activity taking place in the neighbourhood. While some of my interviewees were housebound due to poor health, old age, or felt excluded from social cliques such as mothers at the school gates, online local media allowed them to feel included, informed and part of a conversation. Of course, there is potential for this to form an online clique in itself, where newcomers may feel it is not their place to visibly disagree with any common consensus reached, or even participate at all.

Conclusion

Online posts about lost pets demonstrate that it is sometimes unhelpful to think of hyperlocal media in terms of “news journalism”, and assess it by those particular standards. Neither editor or reader always assume a specific need for balanced or investigative reporting, especially when the responsibility for such standards emerges through the “telling” of the story; for example, it is briefly posted by the editor and reader comments add colour, accounts, and first-hand experiences. In such situations, readers and editors alike respond immediately when they have seen or lost a pet and also often *become* the story by acting offline, rather than maintaining what journalists might describe as professional distance. Hyperlocal editors and the producer audience also appreciate, as residents themselves, the most appropriate methods and stories to engage readerships, as opposed to traditional mainstream newsrooms, where structures are not always in place for reader participation (Thurman & Hermida 2010; Paulussen & Ugille 2008). However, perhaps most significantly, we cannot see hyperlocal media as filling the role of receding local newspapers because these very local stories and conversations are traditionally not covered in local news, partly due to the static nature of even a daily print run, but also as their banal nature may not be considered newsworthy. Whilst hyperlocal organisations often re-post mainstream local news stories, it is rare that the reverse occurs.

Rather than thinking in terms of journalism then, editors often need do little more than offer the conduit and curatorial channel by which narratives of everyday, local life are sourced, assessed, and then re-broadcast to the audience. This affords citizens a voice, but also exposes the power relationships between editor and audience, where primary definers are likely to be favoured, and the editor’s good nature is sometimes as much a limited resource as their time, even if readers are seen to be following correct and honourable protocols in attempting to get stories to their community. The transparency of this power dynamic is not always apparent to readers, so that they may become frustrated when their stories are not immediately shared, contributing to a ‘plurality of socialities’ (Postill 2011: 102).

Despite these tensions, hyperlocal media is, for many residents, key to an everyday understanding of their neighbourhood, a network of local information and events sitting outside of corporate or mainstream media that can encourage unexpected forms of civic engagement. Lost animal stories illustrate some of the more banal crises that take place in this online space, where the value to residents can be understood in terms of how they can relate on an immediate, everyday level. The localisation of communication provides spaces that are practically relevant on an everyday level; when media covers a smaller geographical area can we also assume the concerns are proportionally *smaller* than mainstream notions of newsworthiness? But, most significantly, hyperlocal media, and the lost pet stories we have explored here demonstrate the significance of participatory and communal practices that audiences contribute to on an everyday level.

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Povzetek

Hiper lokalni medij je vrsta spletnih novic, ki jih tipično (vsaj v Veliki Britaniji) vodijo člani skupnosti, ki ponujajo informacije prebivalcem določene vasi ali mesta. Raziskave so do bile do sedaj večinoma omejene na novinarske študije, diskurz družbenih sprememb, državljanske novinarje in udejstvovanje meščanov ter so se osredotočale praktike. Nekatere kvantitativne študije so bile sicer uporabne pri indetificiranju rab in motivacij bralcev, manjkajo pa raziskave, ki bi se poglobile v vsakdanje naracije. Članek temelji na etnografskem opazovanju – tako spleta, z opazovanjem strani na Facebooku, kot izven spleta, z obiskovanjem dogodkov skupnosti in intervjuji občinstva – z namenom raziskati uporabnost in vrednost takšnih medijev za prebivalstvo. Članek se osredotoča na en vidik tega medija, na banalne zgodbe o izgubljenih domačih ljubljenceh in ugotavlja, da hiper lokalni mediji ponujajo edinstven, ampak včasih problematičen oder za skupnostno razpravo, kjer bralci in uredniki sodelujejo, da ustvarjajo in delijo spletne vsebine s skupnim ciljem. Skozi prizmo živalskih zgodb tako prikazuje vrednost hiper lokalnih medijev, saj ti ponujajo edinstveno priložnost, da je vsak prebivalec uslišan in lahko sodeluje v skupnosti, hkrati pa upošteva trenja, ki so inherentna takšnemu redakcijsko in tehnološko razvitemu spletnemu prostoru.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: hiper lokalni medij, državljansko novinarstvo, etnografija, vsakdanjik, občinstva

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