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TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE:
ROLE OF NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THE MASS MEDIA

AMIC 9TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
THE DIGITAL MILLENNIUM: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ASIAN MEDIA
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1. Introduction

The global advent of many new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and in particular the Internet, is heralding a new era for the media and in terms of people’s expectations regarding issues of governance. In the context of the Southern Hemisphere, and particularly in Asia, the 21st century will see a huge growth in the way the mass media uses ICTs to exploit and elicit news and information. The global agenda of good governance and civil society is gathering momentum, and this is also being spurred on by growing transparency and accountability, as the public aided by the emergence of ICTs become better informed on issues of relevance to them.

As d’Orville points out, “the substantive potential and indeed the strategic impact of ICTs are widely acknowledged: they can foster and facilitate sustainable human development, assist in the fight against poverty and informed and participatory decision-making and governance at all levels.”¹

This paper explores some of the challenges and opportunities being faced in relation to good governance, as ICT tools are used increasingly by the media in an effort to promote about transparency and accountability. ICTs have radically changed the way information is disseminated and shared around the world, but just as they have the potential to foster greater openness and democracy, they also can be a dangerous tool for political control, manipulation and misinformation. An independent media is critical, and has a key role to play in ensuring that good governance is promoted. In facing up to this challenge, it should also be seeking to optimise its own use of ICTs.

This paper expands on the topics introduced, and in the following sections seeks to provide a basic understanding of the key concepts and available technologies, and then with reference to examples from the Asian context, it proceeds to address two central questions:

♦ How have information technologies promoted transparency and accountability in government affairs? (Section 4)
♦ How can Asian media exploit information technologies to promote good governance? (Section 5)

2. Key Concepts

Governance is a complex and dynamic concept, and it would be dangerous to oversimplify the interactions between State and the Public, particularly as vested interest groups vie for power and global markets and technological forces reshape agendas and defy the physical boundaries of the past. However, the objective of this paper is to provide insights into the interplay between good governance, the media, and use of ICTs, and in order to do this some key concepts need to be introduced. There is no attempt to provide academic definitions, as the concepts are themselves emerging, imprecise and in some ways relative depending on cultural context. For the purpose of this paper, the explanations provided below provide a foundation for understanding.

¹ d’Orville, H., 2000.
Civil Society

Civil society can be defined as:

"A civic culture of generalised trust and social solidarity, peopled by citizens willing and able to co-operate in ventures; it is an important prerequisite of a vital democracy."²

Civil society embodies certain values such as individuality, plurality, publicity, freedom from unlawful persecution and freedom of the press/information media.

The emergence of civil society is being felt more and more, as people in developing countries demand more democratic freedom for formation of a civil society, along with basic human, political and economic rights.

A cordial relationship between governed and governing is an important aspect of any civil society and good governance. Interaction in civil society brings forward issues that go well beyond just politics, issues such as good and efficient and effective governance.

Good Governance

The core ideals of good governance are fairness and justice in the institution of civil society. Good governance can be characterised by "...high standards of transparency, accountability and access."³

During the 20th Century the concept of good governance underwent a major shift away from a centrally controlled and extensive state, to a leaner democratic institution that could facilitate private sector enterprise, and provide protection to the public through legal and regulatory frameworks.

Good governance means providing opportunities and proper delivery of goods and services to the people in a fair, just, effective, responsible and open way.

Transparency

The concept of transparency relates to availability and accessibility of appropriate news, information and knowledge regarding the government and its activities vis-à-vis the public and the media.

"Transparency means openness in the laws, rules and procedures, and the decision-making processes of government and its public institutions. And, equally important, it empowers the civil society,

² http://www.puaf.umd.edu/ippp/summer98/american_civil_society_talk.htm (Please see bibliography for details.)
³ WOCSOC, 1999.
individually or through their associations, as well as the media, to correctly assess the performance of their government in all major sectors, such as economic, social, security and the like."

Accountability  
The concept of accountability means government and its institutions must be duty bound to honestly account to the public and the media, in relation to their performance in carrying out their responsibilities.  

"For the primary objective of every government is to improve upon the lives of its people in all their basic needs. Hence accountability also means that those in public office must be answerable to the people for the failures of the government they lead. Thus accountability is the linchpin of democracy."

3. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

New technologies that can be classified as ICTs include the satellite broadcasting networks, television, video, digital radio, Internet (including its wide range of applications such as e-mail, e-commerce, e-conferencing etc), Extranets, wireless communication devices such as the mobile phone, video, digital video disks (DVDs), CD-Rom, and video/voicemail. All of these technologies can contribute to a faster flow of information globally when linked into digital information networks.

Among the major sectors using these technologies there has also been a fundamental transformation taking place:

"The present information revolution is a result of confluence of technological advances in three fields viz. computing, telecommunications and broadcasting. Historically, these three sectors evolved separately, but today, due to technological developments such as digitisation, these three sectors are converging."

As the quotation above highlights, ICT’s are integral to the information revolution. Convergence in the way computers, automation and telecommunications equipment are being used, has been the basis for a drastic increase of information processing capabilities, which has led to a transformation in the way information is gathered, assimilated and presented by the media. "As a consequence, we are living in a period where time, space and distance seem to shrink", and where former barriers and constraints can be crossed or bypassed.

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4 http://www.undp.org/rba/special/engagfii/tanzan2e.htm
5 http://www.undp.org/Wspecial/engagefii/tanzan2e.htm
4. Effects of the utilisation of ICTs in communication and information dissemination by Government

As information flows more freely and access becomes more immediate and widespread, there are conflicting issues, that all need to be recognised and understood by the media, if they wish to make positive usage of ICTs. The main advantages and disadvantages brought about by the emergence of ICTs are highlighted below.

4.1 Advantages

Transparency and accountability
The growing utilisation of ICTs and in particular the Internet, has brought far-reaching changes. One of the major changes is that, national governments and even international, political or economic organisations find it increasingly difficult to suppress or hide information, and the public itself is growing more aware and demanding in its expectations for a government (whether elected or non-elected) to be transparent and accountable. This leads to less scope for corruption, and more pressure on officials to perform well.

Through use of new technologies, civil society in developing countries with the media as its' voice has the potential to demand greater freedom and democracy.

Changing lifestyles, political sensibilities and voting habits
New information and communication technologies “… are changing how we work, play, interact, experience and involve ourselves in various spheres of endeavour.” By reaching a vast number of people, the mass media is able to share not only news and information but also learning about consensus on different issues. “One of the greatest effects of the digital media and Internet is the birth of a new political sensibility that extends beyond the boundaries of the local politics. Recent studies show that the digital citizens are more optimistic, tolerant and committed to change. And they vote. They vote for more democratic society.”

Knowledge-based economies
Information and knowledge are poised to become the two primary commodities in the 21st century. “The emerging global knowledge and information society is one of the central features of a globalising world, which affects not only industrialised countries but also developing countries. Knowledge and information are becoming increasingly important factors for production, services, empowerment and a broad range of societal activities – at the global, the regional, the national and the local levels.”

Global advocacy
With new innovations in ICTs globally, methods of advocating on specific issues through the digital media have increased considerably. Local lobby groups have an unprecedented opportunity

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10 http://www.knowledgebroker.org.knowledgebroker/about.html
to promote their specific issues through ICT networks, and to enlist the support of a global lobby in addressing issues of bad governance or human rights abuse.

Activist groups advocating issues ranging as widely as human rights, freedom of expression, gender equality, environment, etc. have all discovered the usefulness of new technology in advancing their causes. There are also specific networks, such as networks of international NGOs that advocate and assist on certain development issues.

*Interaction between Government and citizens*

ICTs not only enable people to access public information, but also provide them with channels to project their own opinions to governments and others. There is more flow of communication and direct and instantaneous dialogue between citizens and their representatives, as well as information exchange on issues between and across national boundaries. With wider availability and further growth of these information technologies due to declining costs, there will be less and less government control on the flow of ideas and information. “This will have major implications for interactions between politicians and their constituents, and for economic and political development throughout the world.”

Even elections in some technologically advanced countries are monitored and facilitated through ICTs.

*Global communication*

New communication technologies allow simultaneous communications among people in different parts of the country or from different parts of the world. The Internet, allows interactive communications and “...information to flow back and forth among millions of sources at practically the same time.” This allows many different views from the public to be discussed at national, regional or global levels in public discussion forums. Today the public-at-large has access to similar means of communications that the governments had in the past, thereby putting it on a more-or-less equal footing for the first time in history.

People can access more news and information, and this gives rise to a broader perspective. Through interactive communications using electronic discussion groups, bulletin boards, chat rooms, e-mail, mailing lists, newsgroups and websites, information is both shared and divulged.

4.2 Disadvantages

*Security risks and circulation of unethical material*

Governments may no longer be able to control the flow of potentially dangerous or unethical information. As recent events have shown, viruses can also have a devastating and catastrophic economic effect, and crime over the Internet has the potential to threaten national and personal security.

*The 'Digital Divide'*

There is a very real danger of a growing divide between the information 'haves' and 'have nots'. The 'have nots', who are most likely from groups that already suffer extreme poverty or

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11 http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_4/ott/
12 http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_4/ott/
marginalisation, lack infrastructure, capacity and suitable content, and this unequal access is now commonly referred to as ‘information poverty’.

By contrast, many multinational corporations, governments and businesses have taken advantage of the changing trends to reap the benefits of ICTs.

Unless appropriate policies (including infrastructure development in rural areas and capacity building) are rapidly put in place and implemented, use of ICTs will lead to a polarisation of the world “into the connected and the isolated, the info-rich and the info-poor, the techno-sawy and the techno-illiterate.”

“Deploying ICTs in ways that benefit the poor requires imaginative local policymaking which reflects the priorities of all sectors of society.”

Media Moguls
Concentration of media power in the hands of the media Moguls, may lead to misuse of information, false news or propaganda.

Political misuse
There is also great potential for political misuse of ICTs to protect autocratic regimes. In this regard, the dissemination of information through new communication technologies with a fast and wide reach, can prove to be a double-edged sword. Care needs be taken in how ICTs are governed. This requires co-operation and co-ordination at national and international levels in providing global ICT governance structures.

5. The Asian media’s use of ICTs
5.1 Promoting transparency and accountability

Having introduced the key concepts, and examined some of the positive and negative ways in which ICTs can be used, the paper now proceeds to focus specifically on the role of the media. It is argued that this role is critical in shaping the way governments act, and in providing the basis for creating an open society; and hence, transparency and accountability.

A liberal and independent media is crucial, and can play a very powerful role as “the media constitutes the most pervasive knowledge network in existence for most people in most countries” and “...well-informed, investigative reporting can provide a key element of public accountability, both for national governments, for international institutions, and for NGOs and other civil society organisations.”

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14 http://www.oneworld.org/panos/knowlpap.htm
15 http://www.oneworld.org/panos/knowlpap.htm
16 http://www.oneworld.org/panos/knowlpap.htm
However, if governments do not follow democratic practices and misuse the modern information and communication media, then the media can be manipulated to give either distorted communication reports or falsify information.

The difference in the style and content of information communicated by a media service such as the BBC and CNN, which are totally free of any government interference, and a government-controlled media service such as the Door Darshan in India, PTV in Pakistan and NTV in Nepal is quite apparent.

An effective media should seek to use ICTs to promote transparency and accountability by:

- raising public awareness socially, politically and economically;
- facilitating access to a broad range of information;
- ensuring that there is adequate disclosure of information where this is in the public interest;
- enabling individuals to examine the correctness of information and to assess issues in a balanced manner.

The media is itself in a very influential position, and needs to operate according to high standards, particularly as the ICT tools it possesses are ever more powerful. The Asian media has already made positive and effective use of the rapidly expanding ICT options, as illustrated by specific examples that follow in this paper. Desirable outcomes are, however, not automatic, and "...it is important that the mass media be responsive to concerns of peoples and individuals, thus promoting the participation of the public in the elaboration of information." 17

One positive example of new communication methods helping the democratisation process can be seen from a civil society initiative in Southern Africa, where the Internet and Websites are linked to connect electoral commissions. "This project [SANGONet] aims to foster cooperation between its members in order to promote a culture of democracy and free and fair elections in [Southern African Development Community] SADC countries. [The use of new communication technology is]...facilitating information dissemination and sharing and thereby in the democratic development in the region." 18

This example illustrates how ICTs can be used to support the democratic process. However, press freedom, rights to information, and liberalisation of regulations controlling the media, remain major obstacles in some Asian countries, which hold on to the belief that the media is there "...to support the Government and the ruling party, right or wrong!" 19

Cultural attitudes to information access vary throughout the world. "Western countries see it as a right pertaining primarily to the individual, and only subsequently and secondarily to the state. On the other hand, developing countries see society and state as the primary locus, with the state having powers to restrict the right in the interest of the public." 20

Although access to information is a right guaranteed under the charter of the United Nations, many governments continue to

17 http://www2.hawaii.edu/~rvincent/funprin.htm
19 http://www.undp.org/rba/special/engagfii/tanzan2e.htm
restrict or curtail news and information, and this poses a threat since "...news, radio and television could be used as deadly enemies of freedom, democracy and truth, and thus are the perfect companions to political dictatorship, non-recognition of otherness and xenophobic propaganda." 21

The Asian media needs to play an active role by investigating and reporting on important and sensitive issues relating to the public. A free press operating in an open and civil society that values the principles of transparency and accountability, represents the ideal scenario. However, as examples will subsequently illustrate, even if these conditions do not prevail, the media can raise public awareness and galvanise international support through responsible use of the Internet and other ICTs, both as a global publishing forum and as a communication network. Information service networks can be harnessed, and individuals and minorities can be greatly empowered by the media as their voices reach a global audience and consciousness. Flow of information and communication can be virtually instantaneous, and distribution can reach literally millions of people around the world.

The media, working on behalf of civil society, should be active in avidly promoting reforms leading to transparent and accountable institutions, and this should include the media itself. It needs to be recognised that "...the ways people get information, and the incentives they have to gather and provide it, are affected by the way society is organised: legal rulers and social conventions, institutions and governments, all determine how much information people have and the quality (that is, the accuracy and completeness) of that information." 22 Failure in this endeavour is likely to result in strengthening of government mechanisms for controlling information to serve the vested interests of so-called 'public servants'. It is also likely to seriously restrict broader usage of ICTs as effective tools that a country can use as it strives to develop, eradicate poverty and promote economic growth.

5.2 Achieving good governance

Concepts of accountability, transparency and good governance are highly intertwined. However, focussing specifically on the goal of good governance, the media can seek to use ICTs to:

- enhance freedom of expression;
- enable citizens to more directly participate in democratic processes, and in policy and decision-making;
- encourage the interchange of questions and answers on non-governmental or governmental issues and policies;
- promote social reform;
- educate the public through access to information and knowledge assimilation.

Media networks and organisations like the CNN, BBC and print media like the International Herald Tribune have extended the flow of information world-wide, and play a powerful global role in shaping views and expectations on issues of governance and human rights. This has been

21 Bakarcic, K., 1999.
made possible as satellite telecommunications, mobile phones and video conferencing have transformed the way information is distributed to the masses.

However, there are millions who still lack access to ICTs, and in promoting the spread of good governance, where all voices are heard, it is more important than ever to construct mechanisms whereby rural and poor communities have more equal access to information of relevance to them. The Asian media can be an effective intermediary in this regard, through dissemination of information and news, through community radio, the local press and interactive services e.g. electronic and video conferencing. In this way it can also promote greater political participation.

The challenge to broaden access to information by using ICTs is endorsed by the recognition that there is a strong relationship between democratisation and network interconnectivity. "Coincident revolutions in the 1980s-breakouts of democracy around the world and breakthroughs in the communication and information technologies-have inspired the notion that democratic freedom and electronic network interconnectivity might be positively correlated."23

A case can be made here, for the Asian media to conduct a campaign, for 'Freeing of the Net', as the Times newspaper has been doing in the UK. Such a move would broaden political awareness, provide economic opportunities and increase access to knowledge and education. Whilst a completely free service may remain a pipe-dream, operational costs of the new communication technologies remain a major barrier, and need to be brought down. As more Asians gain access to services such as the Internet, interchange of ideas increases, knowledge spreads more widely defying the laws of supply and demand, and public awareness regarding civil liberties increases. "Apparently, at least, the use of the Internet may lead to the democratisation of information, as such a network makes the information that is available in electronic format widely accessible to everyone."24

Benefits of the ICT revolution are more immediately seen among the elite, by larger businesses and in urban areas that are served well by telephone and electricity infrastructures. However, at the community level "...whether in mainstream or new media, opportunities abound in utilising digital tools and systems not only to improve bottom-lines, but also to create a positive impact on people's lives, some predict to lift poor communities."25 Civic consciousness can be promoted and utilisation of ICTs by the media can facilitate discussions on social concerns, and hence influence a push for social reform movements. "Social movements articulate new social concerns and projects; they generate new values and collective identities. In struggles over democratisation, they seek to reform not only the polity, but also the institutions of civil society itself."26

Asian media can further open up the process of government to the understanding of the broader population by recognising cultural and linguistic diversity and contextualising its content. In this context, "Star TV has started regionalizing its services, launching major production operations in several Asian countries, including Taiwan, Hong Kong and India. The goal is to offer programmes

23 http://www.eff.org/pub/Infrastructure/d...acy_and_network_interconnectivity.paper
26 http://www.puaf.umd.edu/ippp/summer98/american_civil_society_talk.htm
of immediate cultural relevance to people of Asia. Other international broadcasters have also begun to Asianize their services.\textsuperscript{27} The mass media must also be aware of other aspects of the globalisation of information technology, such as how its growth affects development issues, politics, cross cultural identities, balance of power and economy.

Another benefit of the Internet or the digital media is that it also facilitates long distance learning and education. "And distance education offers the potential to extend learning opportunities to millions who would otherwise be denied a good education."\textsuperscript{28} People who can not afford to go to distant places can now get access to information and learning without necessarily travelling at all. As education is extended to a greater percentage of the population, the demand for good governance and democracy may also be expected to increase.

5.3 Examples from the Asian scenario: Malaysia, Indonesia and China

Examples are now given from a selection of Asian countries, which illustrate the usefulness of ICTs for the mass media in addressing issues of governance, promotion of democracy and civil society, and in countering repressive regimes:

(i) Malaysia

The Asian media can exploit the new information and communication technologies to reveal and share information about democracy and human rights violations, even when a government attempts to censor and control information. Experience of the Web/Internet media in Malaysia provides a prime example of this. Since the imprisonment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, freedom of expression has been severely curtailed by the present Malaysian government, and the press strictly censored.

"While newspapers toe the official line or risk losing their printing licence, the government’s desire to foster a thriving technology has led to a hands-off policy towards the Internet."\textsuperscript{29} The opposition groups have taken advantage of this policy to have their views and voices projected to the people through the use of ICTs. The Malaysian opposition Islamic Party or Pas, have used their Internet service to incorporate video footage of bulletins that would not be aired by other television channels. This Internet television service, the Harakah Web TV, "...is the latest weapon in the arsenal of Malaysia’s opposition."\textsuperscript{30} Through utilisation of Internet television, information has been able to flow to the public, updating the people through uncensored news items.

In the long run, it is likely that such use of the ICTs will help in gaining a potential platform for promoting open and free flow of news and thereby influence the norms of a civil society.

(ii) Indonesia

Indonesia’s recent struggle for democracy provides an even more striking example, as it highlights the power of new communication technologies, in counteracting attempts at government control

\textsuperscript{27}Goonesekera, A., 1997.
\textsuperscript{28}World Bank, 1998/99.
\textsuperscript{29}Dhume, S., 2000.
\textsuperscript{30}Dhume, S., 2000.
over the media. This undoubtedly contributed to the eventual success of the student led democratic movement:

In June 1998, Indonesian media personnel were asked by the military not to give coverage to the pro-democratic demonstrations taking place in the country. “The military also banned all electronic media in Indonesia from broadcasting the rallies.” However, government censorship did not stop information from circulating both inside and outside the country. The media and the public managed to get news from international radio broadcasts, satellite television, and the Internet. “Protesters gathering at the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) headquarters in Central Jakarta distributed printouts of the ‘Indonesia-L’ mailing list. They also faxed the news reports to their provincial offices and plastered the uncensored reports on the wall.” The use of the Internet enabled the Indonesian and international mass media to not only share information but also to successfully advocate for political freedom.

(iii) China

Despite the pervasiveness of the communication revolution, which is evident throughout Asia, “...the open and democratic nature of the Internet can sometimes be at odds with policies and practices of certain governments and officials.” This point is illustrated in the examples already given in relation to the former government in Indonesia. It is also relevant in the People’s Republic of China.

The Communist Party has liberalised the economy without liberalising the political system. Information and news is censored by the government, and the Internet with its open access to global information and very different perspectives on issues such as human rights is seen by party leaders as “A double-edged weapon. It can help modernise the economy, yet poses a subversive threat to their monopoly on political power. So authorities encourage citizens to use the Net, but only within approved limits.”

The Party and the government are attempting to act as a media watchdog, in a fast changing world of open communications. However, seeking to control and censor Internet access is unlikely to be wholly possible, and it remains potentially the most powerful tool for the media to utilise in opening up communications and helping to bring greater transparency and accountability in both Chinese society and government.

6. Conclusions

This paper has reviewed the dynamic ways in which ICTs “…cut across all sectors and impact on virtually all human and societal activities,” and are changing the environment in which Governments are operating. The point has been stressed, and substantiated by examples from the

31 http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues3/harsono/
32 http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues3/harsono/
33 http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues3/harsono/
34 Liu, M., 1999.
Asia, that media use of ICTs can be critical in ensuring that open, responsive and democratic governments evolve across the continent.

In relation to governance, "...transparency and accountability is not an end in itself. It is instrumental to the broader goal of more effective, fair and efficient government." Universal access to public information through ICTs needs to be actively promoted, and will be crucial in ensuring that the polarisation between the information poor and the information rich is addressed.

The Asian media should function "...on the firm conviction that communication is a basic individual right, as well as a collective one required by all communities and nations. Freedom of information - and, more specially the right to seek, receive and impart information - is a fundamental human right; indeed, a prerequisite for many others." Good governance and a free and pluralistic media both need to be promoted. Neither automatically exists, and they do not automatically co-exist. However, they can and should both help to promote each other as strong reliable institutions.

The media should be an honest and independent custodian of content that should be relevant and contextualised in a way that empowers and strengthens civil society, both economically and politically. It should act openly to strengthen civil liberties and use ICTs to help in promoting good governance, and in campaigning for it locally and globally when basic rights are not being respected.

The media should seek to share the best practices in different societies and at different levels through data gathering, research, transmission of information globally and communication in various fields relating to governance.

In recent years ICTs have been at the heart of many global changes, and have become an essential tool for all engaged in power struggles, whether they are fighting to preserve old orders or revolutionise and open up societies subjected to tyranny or autocratic regimes. The media can represent the public voice for change, or can be a mouthpiece for government control. It is clear from the issues outlined in this paper and the examples presented, that the speed of information and reach of the news, is greater than ever before, as journalists have increasing access to e-mail, cellular digital telephony, communication satellites and teleconferencing.

New voices are being heard, and governments are being forced to respond with greater transparency and accountability to the public. Thus the people-at-large can assert how the government is performing and how the elected representatives are formulating policies either at the macro- or micro-level. They can also manage or influence the outcomes of such government decisions and policies through democratic processes in their community.

The best way to ensure that the media plays a positive role in Asia's future, is for collaboration and mutual support across the region, and use of ICT's in both building this network of support.

36 http://www.undp.org/rba/sepcial/engagfii/uganda2e.htm
37 http://www2.hawaii.edu/~rvinent/mebcon1.htm
among journalists, and in empowering journalists in their role as spokespeople for civil society who advocate for transparent and accountable governance.

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