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Citizen journalism and the public sphere: a study of the status of citizen journalism

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Abstract

The production and dissemination of news is changing. News is now expected on demand, around the clock and from around the world. Technology and its accessibility in some parts of the world have been one of the drivers making these changes possible. However, the rise of new media and its potential cannot be viewed in isolation. Falling readership/viewership/revenue of the traditional media coupled with its declining credibility with the public is giving rise to independent online journalism via public participation in the news process. This study of citizen journalism takes place within the wider context of the role of the press as a conduit of the public sphere where a variety of views are articulated. It seeks to understand the growth of these new participatory forms of journalism, and the utilisation of these forms by the Australian mainstream media to survive in the current uncertain environment.

Introduction

A significant shift is taking place towards public involvement in media content. Historic world events are being recorded and reported by the general population on the ground with the use of mobile and new media technologies. This involvement, made possible by technological advancements, is also changing the nature of media consumption. Kovach notes:
Technology has filled the world with a flood of undifferentiated information that is changing the audience for news and information from passive receivers to proactive consumers, who decide what they want, when they want it, and how they want it. (2005, p. 1)

Public participation in the 2008 U.S. presidential election using digital media, and in the 2007 Australian federal election may be perceived as a revival of the public sphere "ideal". Habermas states in his translated original writing (dated 1964):

Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. (Habermas, 1974, p. 49)

Add to the list of the "media of the public sphere" the new media, which is increasingly used by individuals to share their version of events and views about matters public and private. In 2005, when the London bombings took place, news agencies around the world relied on first-hand witnesses for photographs (mostly taken with mobile phones) (Sambrook, 2005). In 2006, when Cyclone Larry tore through far north Queensland, the ABC's Brisbane office set up a "You Report" page and invited the public to submit photos of the disaster (see www.abc.net.au/news/indepth/featureitems/s1596452.html). In 2007, when thousands of Burmese activists defied military orders to stop pro-democracy marches in Rangoon, students came armed with mobile phones to take secret pictures of the event, and posted them on the internet (Holroyd and Miletic, 2007). The internet and Web 2.0 applications have removed many of the barriers to independent publishing. A new wave of open source and collaborative software along with mobile technology, and a growing awareness of the "wisdom of crowds" is changing the scope and definition of media.

The idea of citizen or participatory journalism is not new; previous phases of public-focused journalism represent a similar concern for public inclusion in news production. The dissatisfaction with the "corporate media" (McChesney and Nichols, 2002) and the one-way, homogeneous, mass-produced features of mainstream media in recent years has led to the rise of alternative media (Gans, 2003; Harcup, 2005; Rosen, 1999). Although the mainstream media have tried to include the general public's views via letters to the editor and other audience feedback mechanisms, these have generally been moderated by the editor/journalist-in-charge, thereby exercising gatekeeper control. Saunders (2007) says the media has remained inattentive to the diversity of public opinion, creating a narrow and incomplete representation of modern society.

In the 1990s journalists and non-journalists, including academics, began promoting journalism that was "for the people". Jay Rosen (1999, p. 21), a leading figure in the development of public journalism, says the movement grew out of a concern for the role of the press and the ways in which the press could contribute to the public sphere. Lambeth, Meyer and Thorson (1998) characterised the practice of public journalism as involving professional journalists reporting issues and events with particular concern for the opinions and inclusion of the public. As a result, public journalism challenged the traditional journalistic benchmark for objectivity and impartiality. By 2003, the movement seemed to peter out, and presently has evolved into citizen or participatory journalism where "every citizen is a reporter" (the motto of OhmyNews).

Here, citizen or participatory journalism refers to the active involvement of usually untrained individuals in the media (Bowman and Willis, 2003). Often, these citizen journalists are part of a minority group unrepresented in traditional media or people discontented with mainstream news coverage (Shaffer, 2005). More often their efforts are a product of circumstance, involving
spontaneous video or camera footage of an event or disaster, which are used by the traditional media to meet the demands of a 24-hour news cycle (Sambrook, 2005; Garrison, 2005; Quinn and Quinn-Allan, 2006). This paper uses the term "citizen journalism" because of its pervasive use and acceptance in discourses as a representative term to describe the concept of journalism practice by members of the general public as opposed to media professionals. The meaning of the word "citizen" is used to capture the concept of "ordinary person", as opposed to a citizen of a nation state. There is no one kind of citizen journalism practice, but the concept has different layers as described by Outing (2005). These range from opening up a news web site to readers' comments to Wiki journalism where the readers are editors.

Citizen journalism revival of the public sphere discourse?

Ideas of the role of the press have been underpinned by an essential awareness of the public sphere, and, more broadly, by a concern for public welfare (Rosen, 1999; Dahlgren and Sparks, 1991). Habermas described the concept of the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (1974, p. 49). McKee (2004) says the public sphere is a metaphor for thinking about how individuals come together to exchange ideas, information and emotions. It is useful in understanding how liberal societies function, with the individual having input into the formation of general consensus, as opposed to the totalitarian or Marxist model where the state/party has ultimate power in deciding what people think (McKee, 2004, p. 9). Habermas provided an "ideal" vision of the public sphere which was free from conflict and non-serious discussion.

The public sphere should ideally deal only with serious issues of real importance – only party politics, and not celebrity issues, sport or entertainment. It shouldn’t be sensational, easily accessible or commercialized: it should refuse to dumb down to consumers, and rather demand that they work harder to improve themselves. It should only engage in rational, logical argument: not emotional or spectacular appeals. And it should be unified and homogenous, refusing the fragmentation of niche audiences and different kinds of culture. (McKee, 2004, p. 14)

Habermas’s writing on the public sphere has been criticised for being elitist and restrictive (McKee, 2004; Stevenson, 2002). McKee argues that in today’s post-modern era there are many public spheres:

... much of the modern writing about other forms of culture is written from a position of, what seems to me to be, ignorance. Writers condemn popular culture, Black culture, feminized culture, Queer culture or youth culture without actually being able to give examples of how it works or explain the trends in its forms of representation – because they don’t know much about it. (2004, p. 212)

Similarly, Stevenson says Habermas wanted the “discursive” discussions in the coffee houses to be open yet closed. These discussions took place between groups of people who were predominantly “rational”, male and propertied, excluding a large number of participants, including women (2002, p. 49).

In the second half of the eighteenth century, daily political newspapers and literary journalism assumed an important role in the public sphere. Later, in the transition from the literary journalism of private individuals to the public orientation of mass media, the public sphere was transformed by the entry of private interests, which became prominent in the mass media (Habermas, 1974, p. 53). Habermas initially considered the emergence of the newspapers as a positive development.
The bourgeoisie public sphere could be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body, which almost immediately laid claim to the officially regulated "intellectual newspapers" for use against the public authority itself. In those newspapers, and in moralist and critical journals, they debated that public authority on the general rules of social intercourse in their fundamentally privatized yet publically relevant sphere of labour and commodity exchange. (Habermas, 1974, p. 52)

In post-modern society the media has increasingly become a property of private interest. The "ideal" public sphere has become fragmented and filled with trivia and entertainment, thus creating a population disengaged from politics and political conversations (McKee, 2004, p. 205).

The commercialization and commodification of the popular press has undermined their ability to act as rational centres of debate and has also contributed towards a form of cultural fragmentation, where the depoliticized masses are excluded from the central debates of our political culture. (Stevenson, 2002, p. 53)

It is argued that the top-down model of mainstream media inherently excludes individuals from participating in public debate and political discourse (Gans, 2003; Harcup, 2005). McChesney (1997) says: "While democracies by definition must respect individual freedoms, these freedoms can only be exercised in a meaningful sense when the citizenry is informed, engaged and participating" (McChesney, 1997, p. 6). Public participation in the news process forms part of a wider discussion on the role of the press in a democratic society and the public sphere, where it is argued that a participatory news environment is more conducive to public engagement and facilitates the enhancement of the political process (Harcup, 2005; Bowman and Willis 2003).

Citizen journalism in Australia

While journalism and the media industry have undergone recent substantial changes, there has been no widespread spread of citizen journalism in Australia, and the "digital revolution" still seems a long way off (Cook, 2005; Nguyen, 2006). There are two significant trends in Australian media consumption: Australians are rapidly taking up broadband as well as changing their news consumption habits, and newspaper circulation is falling. In June 2005, Australian broadband penetration was 59.5 per cent, and by October of the same year it was 64 per cent (Australian Press Council, 2006: p. 4). On the other hand, "in the past decade alone, per capita readership of Australian newspapers has dropped 20 per cent for Monday to Friday editions, and 18 per cent on Saturdays" (Quinn and Quinn-Allan, 2006, p. 58). A survey of Australian media use by Online Opinion found that "newspapers are in gradual decline, commercial broadcasters are in steep decline, public broadcasters are on a steady rise, and the internet is leading the charge with favour, particularly among younger females" (Young, 2006).

While globally many media organisations have adapted suitably, the Australian mainstream media has been relatively slow to acclimatise to the shift of news consumption online. Most media companies within Australia have a web presence, but none has fully utilised the interactive capabilities of the online medium (Nguyen, 2006; Bruns, 2005a & 2005b). In 2006 the Australian Press Council found that for some publishers in Australia, websites were used mainly for still photographs, and 15 per cent of them contained only text. Furthermore, the level of interactivity found was astonishingly low. Although 67 per cent of the sites offered email links for comments, only three sites included reader polls and no site offered direct communication with journalists (Australian Press Council, 2006).

The case for citizen journalism may be strengthened by the high levels of concentration of media ownership in Australia. The relaxation on foreign and cross-ownership restrictions enacted
in 2006 threatens to further consolidate the market (Maiden 2006; Dwyer et al, 2006). The concentration of ownership is said to limit public choice in news, as well as the media's accountability. The lack of alternate publications and of news variety within the mainstream media lend support to the case for independent online journalism and the need for a medium that allows diversity of opinion, pluralistic debate and a right of reply (Maiden, 2006; Saunders, 2007). Dissatisfaction with the media, particularly in regional Australia, can be directly attributed to the concentration of ownership and the lack of choice available in news content (Dwyer et al, 2006). The importance of media diversity in participatory democracies has been well documented (Flint, 1995; Barr, 2000).

Nevertheless, a handful of traditional media organisations, such as The Age and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and some independent online sites, such as Scopical and YouDecide2007, have provided citizens an opportunity to participate on their news web sites. It is difficult to know exactly how many Australian blogs there are but one estimate is around 8,500 (Australian Press Council, 2006). It is argued by new media proponents that blogs should not be measured by their pervasiveness or influence, but by their unique facilitation of open debate (Bahnisch, 2005a & 2005b). The growth of blogs and independent online journalism is seen by many to be a positive addition to the diversity of voices (Saunders, 2007; Wilson, 2007).

A number of in-depth interviews were conducted to supplement a study of the existing media environment and literature research on citizen journalism. Around 15 journalists, bloggers, citizen journalists and academics were interviewed to gauge the impact of citizen journalism on the practice of journalism in Australia. The interviews, while semi-structured, were broad, mutual discussions and were conducted with an awareness of the social, political and technological context of the topic. Interviewees for the study were chosen according to their knowledge of and involvement with citizen journalism practices in Australia, and their position as decision making professionals in the media. The purpose of the study was also to determine the necessary environment for the facilitation of citizen journalism, by comparing the Australian media's co-optation of citizen journalism with trends in other nations where citizen participation in news is more prevalent.

Independent online media in Australia

There are several independent online media and blog sites which enjoy relative success as alternative voices to mainstream media in Australia. The Independent Media Center (www.indymedia.org) is probably the most widely recognised, successful citizen journalism initiative. This collaborative network of activists formed for the purpose of providing grassroots coverage of the World Trade Organisation protests in Seattle in 1999, and has since expanded its syndication worldwide to include Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. It represents a community-oriented democratic media model which focuses on presenting, in particular, the views of minorities and misrepresented groups.

Scopical was an online journalism project aimed at allowing the public to engage and interact with the media, thereby encouraging public debate. Its director, Elgar Welch, said the site aimed to foster transparency and openness in journalism and advertising in order to create a new, interactive media flow. The site allowed public participation on any topic, including politics, in a progressive and pluralistic fashion. Welch said that too often mainstream media relies on the same "expert advisor", offering the public no alternative (Welch, 2007). (Scopical was rebranded as Streem in 2008, but at the time of writing the site appeared to be inactive and was down.)

YouDecide2007 (as described elsewhere in this issue) was a citizen journalism project focused on providing independent and representative accounts on key election issues leading up
to the 2007 federal election. The project aimed to encourage public involvement in the political process (Wilson, 2007). One of the creators of the site, Jason Wilson, says it sprang out of a shared interest and understanding that mainstream media does not cover election campaigns in a pluralistic or inclusive manner.

There were blogging sites, such as Possums Polloys, Larvaus Prodeo, the Pollbludger, and Crikey.com, which came into limelight during the 2007 federal elections due to their capacity to link into national election issues and debates. In fact, psephologist bloggers were right in predicting a victory for the Labor Party, much before the traditional media (Rodrigues, 2008).

**Mainstream media and citizen journalism**

In recent times, almost all mainstream media organisations have made changes to the news process. Perhaps the biggest of these changes is the transformation to an increasingly converged newsroom. Newsrooms are now multimedia operations and many are struggling to learn how best to utilise these changes. The sacking in 2008 of editorial staff at Fairfax under its "business improvement program" was an example of the clash of cultures as traditional ways of working were challenged. Rupert Murdoch's landmark speech to American editors called for a recognition of change and for the media to adapt accordingly:

> What is happening right before us... is a revolution in the way young people are accessing news. They don't want to rely on the morning paper for their up-to-date information. They don't want to rely on a God-like figure from above to tell them what's important. And to carry the religion analogy a bit further, they certainly don't want news presented as gospel...Jeff Jarvis, puts it this way: give the people control of the media, they will use it. Don't give people control of the media, and you will lose it. (Murdoch, 2005)

Further impetus for change is the rapid growth in online advertising sales. In 2005 online advertising grew four times faster than that of other media (Australian Press Council, 2006). According to Quinn (2007), there are clear discernable differences in how the most prominent media proprietors have approached new challenges to the media industry. Most newspapers and news sites offer an opportunity for user-generated content to be uploaded on their web sites. Blogging is a staple part of most major media outlets. However, it would seem that the impetus for change in Australian mainstream media is chiefly commerce: to protect revenue streams, to defend brand position, to keep audiences and to continue to "drive eyeballs to advertising" (Quinn, 2007).

Fairfax, traditionally a metropolitan newspaper company, now claims to be a 24-hour news operation. The organisation has sought to reinvent itself as a digital media company. Journalists use handheld computer devices from which they can shoot video, record audio and file electronically from the scene. Many of the staff are trained in multi-media reporting and can contribute to the website as much as they like (Johanson, 2007). The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age operate the two most accessed newspaper websites in Australia (Australian Press Council, 2006). However, it is debatable whether Fairfax has become more audience-oriented or whether its audience is more involved in the news production process.

News Ltd, too, has morphed into 24-hour news operation and is making substantial efforts to keep pace with technological change and altering audience demands. Following Murdoch's intervention, there has been considerable onus on the organisation to provide its audiences with a choice to personalise their consumption of news and to participate if they wish to. Several News journalists blog, including Gary Hughes at The Australian, and Andrew Bolt and Neil Mitchell at The Herald Sun. Hughes says he makes a personal effort to respond to every comment placed on his blog and has no doubt that blogging has informed his journalism and improved accountability.
Hughes, 2007). The employment of a well-known and influential blogger, Tim Dunlop, and his popular "Blogocracy" blog has added to News Ltd's profile in this area.

The ABC has established itself as a multi-media organisation by providing space for interactive forums and download of podcasts of its programs. The ABC has been less involved in the active facilitation of citizen journalism, perhaps because the Australian network has limited financial resources (Saunders, 2007; Quinn, 2007). Commentators generally agree that the ABC is doing what it can to move with changing audience demands and technological advances (Saunders, 2007; Quinn, 2007). The ABC is developing a more audience-oriented news platform which can be tailored to suit the users' personal preferences and story "tags". A continual emphasis on "your news when you want it" is a bid to satisfy the growing demand for mobile, versatile and independent news choices. The public service broadcaster has made significant efforts to enhance interactivity using new media communications and has recently launched its Internet television service iView to cater to online interactive audience. Courtney Gibson, the head of Arts and Entertainment, says: "In order for the ABC to play a leading role in the digital age there is more to be done — certainly in the area of communicating with our audiences. We can and will do more with user-generated content" (Gibson, 2007).

Commercial broadcasters have outwardly adopted new media technology. All commercial television stations now regularly advertise their web sites and invite their audiences to contact them via SMS or email. However, there has generally been little effort to engage the public in news production. It is hard to measure how much interaction is suitable and there is a real question as to whether commercial media operations have any duty to include the public at all (Quinn, 2007; Dullard, 2007). The invitations to submit user-generated content by commercial broadcasters can be easily seen as a token effort to engage younger audiences and retain advertising share. Fletcher (2007) argues that often mainstream media promises community involvement but in reality all contributions undergo rigorous filtering and editing. Network Ten executive producer of news and current affairs, Allan Russell, argues that the network is first and foremost a business with responsibilities to shareholders. He admits that the network would not be embarking on any citizen journalism projects in the near future unless it could reap substantial profits from them (Russell, 2007). Radio talk back host, Neil Mitchell, also argues that commercial media has in itself no obligation to the public but says that anything which increases feedback and interaction with the public is positive. He says that new media forms cannot rival the immediacy and simplicity of talkback radio (Mitchell, 2007). There seems very little concern among commercial broadcasters as to how interactivity and greater public awareness can produce better quality journalism. While there does seem to be an understanding that audience feedback is on the whole a positive thing, there does not seem to be any recognition that commercial broadcasters have a public responsibility.

News from elsewhere

Around much of the world moments of crisis have provided an impetus to citizen journalism (Johnson, 2005). As a result, not only have citizens provided unique, first-hand, on-the-spot testimonies (and traditional media organisations have relied heavily on citizens to bring them the news), but awareness of blogging and other activities has grown (Perlmuter & McDaniel, 2005). In Asia, and particularly in China, a key dimension of this has been the presence of heavily-controlled media in much of the region. China especially has sought to stifle even the internet. Yet "the blogosphere has allowed many different ideas and views to surface that previously were unavailable" (Guangqin & Clarke, 2008, p. 10). Similarly, in South Korea the uptake of citizen journalism has arisen out of several features of society - not just the use of mobile and communication technologies (Budha, 2003), but also a desire to counter the heavy censorship of
The lack of plurality in the national media, coupled with a history of intense civil rights activity, have motivated South Koreans to be dedicated contributors to new and freer media, such as OhMyNews, which by the end of 2008 had more than 60,000 reporters in over 100 countries.

The UK's experience in audience-generated news came in the wake of the 2005 London bombings. The inundation of user-generated content the BBC received pushed the public broadcaster to invest in citizen journalism in a new way (Sambrook, 2005). In the same year, the BBC reassessed its coverage-to-date on the Iraq war and concluded that they had failed to give an accurate depiction of the lives of Iraqis under the occupation of the Allied Forces. As a result, the citizen journalism site One Day in Iraq Project was launched to give viewers a first-hand account of the situation (Anderson, 2007). The BBC has since then launched many citizen journalism projects and has drastically changed the production of its news to encourage citizen participation. The British newspaper The Guardian has also led the way in involving the public in its production through online journalism. The paper's group blog, Comment is Free, had more visitors from outside the country then from within (Anderson, 2007).

There has been a widespread shift in North American media production and consumption that seems to recognise audience demand for interaction. Against a background of higher general uptake of citizen journalism, political blogging and user generation of content, US media companies have increasingly utilised the forms. Perhaps the biggest success stories of America's movement into citizen journalism have been the many hyperlocal initiatives in small communities. The MyMissourian web site allows mid-Missourians to write and publish their own stories and photos, and is edited and organised by the University of Missouri's Journalism School as part of an online journalism subject. In the US a high presence of "hyperlocal" journalism forms, and a high uptake of blogging and citizen journalism have led to these activities exercising a considerable influence on the wider public and the mainstream media. In turn, the mainstream media has made a greater investment in and have more widely utilised new media forms and participatory models.

By comparison, the Australian media has not matched a wider social adoption of digital technologies and the online domain (Quinn and Quinn-Allan, 2006; Lowenstein, 2007). Among the reasons suggested for this have been, on the one hand, a lack of opportunity for decisive citizen journalism action in the form of the kind of " tipping points " which have occurred elsewhere (Shaffer, 2005). On the other hand, it has been conjectured that Australia lacks an alternative media culture from which to draw its citizen journalists. Australians continue to consume old media at a significant rate and it would appear that in general terms the public still does not view independent, online media as a viable and trustworthy source of news and information (Bethell and Quinn, 2006). Discussions with media professionals show that there is a general distrust of the benefits of citizen journalism, and a firm belief in the importance of trained journalists (Russell, 2007; Hughes, 2007; Scanlon, 2007). For example, the online editor of The Age, Simon Johanson, expressed the belief that news-making was not a public process:

The concept of citizen journalism, at least in my opinion...is a bit of a misnomer...there is a failure to understand the complexity and resources needed to report properly...to actually engage in providing balanced, accurate, fast, strong reporting, it takes a lot of resources. (Johanson, 2007)

Others have doubts about citizen journalism's capacity to contribute to the news-making process due to its chaotic articulation online in the form of too many voices and too many opinions, but little substance. Tilley and Cokley (2008, pp. 98-99) note that the concept of citizen journalism has the potential to democratise, pluralise and enable change in traditional media, as well as to "devalue, erode and undermine" society by enabling unchallenged and unchecked access by false "citizen" voices with commercial or criminal interests rather than the public interest.

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Conclusion

Dahlberg (2001, pp. 627-30) developed a set of requirements from Habermas's theory of democratic communication to measure the extent to which the public sphere is being facilitated through the Internet. He demonstrated that online public discourse can be structured "so as to stimulate reflexivity, foster respectful listening and participant commitment to ongoing dialogue, achieve open and honest exchange, provide equal opportunity for all voices to be heard, and maximize autonomy from state and corporate interests", thereby fostering a fully developed rational-critical deliberation and enable an expansion of the public sphere. Dahlberg argues that accessibility to the internet alone is not sufficient to expand the public sphere: people need to be drawn into rational-critical discourse to promote a deliberative culture and a sovereign public.

It can be speculated that the disparities between the US and Australia in the popularity and uptake of new participatory media forms represent the contrasting political and social climates and cultures of the two countries. According to Quinn (2007), Australians are a little "too relaxed and comfortable" to participate meaningfully in large numbers in news-making and the political process. Compared to the US, Australian blogs (which rarely break news) are not relied on by the mainstream media and do not sway public opinion. Australian blogs comprise less than 1 per cent of English language blogs (Philipson, 2007). The individualised and personality-based nature of US politics and its aptitude for scandal may also explain the relative quiet of the Australian blogosphere (Saunders, 2007). At the same time, there is a relatively higher degree of press freedom in Australia than in other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, where citizen or participatory journalism has burgeoned. Finally, relative prosperity and political stability may work against significant levels of public activism (Young, 2007).

All this begs the question whether the public sphere, as idealised by Habermas, is served by online citizen journalism in all conditions. Or will the traditional media's increasing adoption of audience participation through the provision of space for comments, debates, blogs and news and visual contributions from citizens have the same effect? What seems to be beyond doubt is the need for more inclusive dialogue and debate, and for the existence of more independent voices. There is evidence that the existing media are capable of accommodating these. For example, community participation in the media occurs at the levels of public service, commercial and community broadcasting. In 2006 four million listeners (25 per cent of the population over 15 years) regularly tuned in to community radio stations to hear "local news and information" (McNair Ingenuity 2006 in Meadows, 2008). Medows (2008) argues that community journalism with its elements of "local talk" as an alternative to mainstream journalism "has managed to tap into the 'imaginative capacities' of its audiences far more effectively". This suggests that in some situations creating a public consciousness, contributing to the public sphere debate and the democratic process, can take a different form.

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