## 3.1. The Active Audience: Transforming Journalism from Gatekeeping to Gatewatching

Axel Bruns

Queensland University of Technology

In what to many Australians was an interminably slow lead-up to the federal election held in late 2007, an unusual spectacle played out across the pages of the important national newspaper *The Australian* and a multitude of news, current affairs, and commentary weblogs and citizen journalism websites. A publication of News Ltd., the domestic arm and foundation stone of Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp empire, *The Australian* has long positioned itself as a loyal supporter of the incumbent government of Prime Minister John Howard, and is widely regarded as generally favouring the conservative side of politics. It continued to do so even in the face of opinion polls (some by News Ltd.'s own polling agency, Newspoll) which throughout 2007 consistently showed both a commanding lead for the opposition Labor party over the conservative Coalition government on a two party-preferred basis, and a strong preference for opposition leader Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister (see e.g. Newspoll, 2007; Roy Morgan Research, 2007).

*The Australian*'s commentators sought hope amidst the conservative despair, however: small upward movements in poll results in favour of the government were described more often than not as another sign that 'the honeymoon is over' for the opposition leader, while movements in the opposite direction were explained away with references to the polls' margins of error. Australian political bloggers and citizen journalists, meanwhile, found great pleasure in analysing and critiquing such commentary (and, to a somewhat lesser extent, that of other newspaper and broadcast journalists): dubbed the *Government Gazette* (see e.g. Bahnisch, 11 July 2007), *The Australian*'s editorial pages and their online counterparts were examined and found wanting on an almost daily basis. As many of the paper's editorial pieces were also published on News Ltd.'s *News.com.au* website (combining material from *The Australian* and other Murdoch papers around the country) and there featured direct commenting and discussion functions for users, a significant amount of such criticism also found its way onto the *News* website itself, displayed immediately alongside *The Australian*'s editors' and commentators' opinions.

Ultimately, the persistence and vigour of such grassroots criticism appeared to have a surprisingly strong impact: on 12 July 2007, the paper published an extraordinary article openly attacking bloggers and other "sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper" (*The Australian*, 12 July 2007), ostensibly for daring to voice their disagreement with *The Australian*'s own journalists' and pundits' interpretation of the political mood of the electorate. The article denounced grassroots online commentators

as "out of touch with ordinary views", and culminated in the remarkable assertion that "unlike [political commentary site] Crikey, we understand Newspoll because we own it".

**The Decline of Gatekeeping**

This meltdown at the "*Government Gazette*" points to a larger challenge for the mainstream journalism industry. "A.J. Liebling once said, 'Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.' Now, millions do" (Bowman & Willis, 2003: 47; original quote: Liebling, 1960); similarly, while those millions who are now active as part-time news bloggers, citizen journalists, and political commentators do not (yet?) operate their own opinion polling services, there is little to stop them from offering their own interpretations of available polling data, informed by their own experience as 'average' citizens rather than by the accepted wisdom of professional journalists or the political spin of media minders. Indeed, at least in the Australian example, some of the most insightful analyses of polling data are available from blogs such as *Poll Bludger* or *Mumble*, operated by student and professional psephologists – scientists specialising in the statistical analysis of voting intentions and election results. (One of them, *Mumble*'s Peter Brent, was the only blogger mentioned by name in the editorial, having been informed by phone the previous day that the paper would "go" – Australian slang for 'attack' – him; see Brent, 11 July 2007.) Especially in such cases, the expertise of non-journalists in 'reading' the mood of the populace clearly exceeds that of journalists and pundits, regardless of who owns the polling services themselves.

What *The Australian*'s tirade against citizen journalists points towards, then, is a deep-seated and justified concern amongst industrial journalists (well beyond Australia) that their new grassroots counterparts have begun to undermine mainstream journalism's traditional position of influence and importance. Once able to lead – indeed, to form – public opinion, papers such as *The Australian* now appear hardly able to follow or comprehend it; those whom Jay Rosen has referred to as "the people formerly known as the audience" (2006) have begun to look elsewhere for news and informed opinion, or have begun to create and publish their own reports, commentaries, debates, and deliberations on news and current affairs, especially in the online environment. To some extent, this shift is one of journalism's own making, as the industry's failure to update its products for a new, Internet- and convergence-driven environment has alienated younger audiences, and as many journalists' inability to remain politically and commercially independent has been highlighted by the utter failure of mainstream journalism in the United States, Australia, and elsewhere to debunk the unsubstantiated Weapons of Mass Destruction claims used as a pretext to start the war in Iraq, by cases of preferential treatment for major advertisers, and by the growing conflation of news and entertainment content especially in television broadcasts (Lowrey and Anderson, 2005). Newspaper readership and credibility has fallen to record lows (Project for

Excellence in Journalism, 2007); indeed, at least in the United States, many appear to prefer to receive a good part of their news in the form of the pithy news satire provided by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert (see Fox *et al.*, 2007).

On the best evidence currently available, there is little indication that this trend in print and broadcast news is likely to be reversed any time soon; like other informational industries from software to music, the news industry in print and broadcast is operating under a business model which no longer suits the emerging cultural and economic framework (Jenkins, 2006). Both print and broadcast proceed from an industrial logic which is founded on the twin assumptions that their means of production are expensive and concentrated in the hands of a small number of major operators, and that access to their channels of distribution is tightly policed and therefore scarce; neither assumption, however, still holds true in a post-industrial, Internet age. Today, textual as well as, increasingly, audio and video content can be produced and widely distributed at a negligible cost by a very broad range of participants; further, both production and distribution can be organised through the harnessing of collective and distributed activities just as effectively as it has been, traditionally, through centralised, corporate efforts. Not only, then, do traditional print and broadcast journalism operators face new competition from the online journalism industry (which, for the most part, still has to find its own models for sustainable revenue generation); industrial journalism as a whole is now also in competition with an almost entirely new group of collaborative, citizen journalism projects.

It becomes all the more important, then, to develop research methodologies which provide clear quantitative as well as qualitative insight into the make-up, agendas, and models of operation and collaboration in citizen journalism and the wider news and political blogosphere – and ethnographic approaches play an important role in this context. Work done in this field to date remains limited, however – both because of a lack of established research tools and methodologies, and because of a limited understanding of how we may define citizen journalism itself. Before we explore possible avenues for research, then, let us theorise the practice of citizen journalism.

In part, citizen journalism remains a somewhat nebulous concept also because some industrial online journalism operators have been quick to claim their sites as 'citizen journalism' for little more than the fact that they offer on-site forms for audience responses. Beyond such window-dressing, however, citizen journalism is described more appropriately as a form of journalism where citizens themselves, rather than (or at the very least in addition to) paid journalists claiming to represent the public interest, are directly engaged in covering, debating, and deliberating on the news. Such sites break with the traditional logic of journalistic operations (justified itself by the concentration and scarcity of the means of production and distribution in industrial journalism), by which journalists and editors play a

crucial part in the preparation and selection of those news reports which are ultimately presented to audiences as 'all the news that's fit to print' (or to broadcast).

That logic introduced three bottlenecks into the news production process: one at the input stage, where editors and journalists make a preliminary selection of what current and upcoming news events may be worth covering for the next edition of the newspaper or broadcast bulletin; one at the output stage, where editors pick the final selection of articles or reports to be included in the publication; and one at the response stage, where editors again select a small sample of reader or viewer comments to be presented on the 'Letters to the Editor' page or in call-in radio or TV shows (fig. 1).
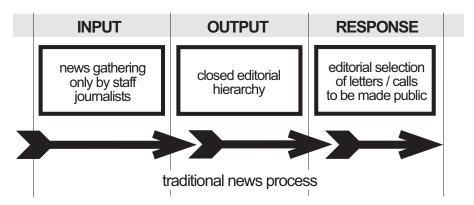


**Figure 1:** Stages of the traditional news process

Each of these bottlenecks is justified in journalistic tradition by noting the scarcity of the print or broadcast medium – where the newshole (the total amount of column inches or broadcast minutes available for covering the news) is strictly finite, it clearly is of the utmost importance that the content which does make it into the final product is tightly policed to be as relevant for the intended audience as it can possibly be. This process of selection, known as gatekeeping (see McQuail 2005, pp. 308ff.; Shoemaker, 1991), remains one of the fundamental activities of any journalist or editor, taking place as it does at each of the three stages (input, output, and response) as well as at levels ranging from that of the individual article (where ideally, gatekeeping ensures coverage of the core facts and excludes less relevant information) to that of the publication as a whole. As a process of selecting what events to observe, what stories to cover, and what responses to publish, the quality of gatekeeping necessarily depends on the expertise of staff (and on their independence from commercial or political interference), and is tied directly to the availability of time and resources sufficient to enable considered selection decisions to be made; in news organisations where gatekeeping decisions are largely devolved to junior staff or outsourced to transnational wire services, the diversity and quality of news as well as the relevance of news to local audiences is likely to suffer.

At the same time, while in a print and broadcast environment with a small number of sources available to the audience it was incumbent on journalists to ensure they provided as broad and comprehensive a coverage of news events as possible, as part of their service to the public (to offer if not literally '*all* the news that's fit to print' then certainly the most important news across all newsbeats), this obligation no longer applies in the same way in an online environment characterised by an abundance of sources. Here, individual sources are freed from the public responsibility that comes with being granted access to a very scarce resource (the broadcast airwaves) or acting as one of a very small number of commercial news operators (in print); instead, online news outlets are safe in the knowledge that a myriad of other sources are sure to cater to a wide variety of interests, tastes, ideologies, and other audience markers. Gatekeeping as a means of ensuring broad and balanced coverage, therefore, is no longer strictly necessary; the gates have multiplied beyond all control.

This decline of gatekeeping as a feasible journalistic practice is also exactly what *The Australian*'s editors and commentators lament as they struggle to come to terms with their new citizen journalist competition. Operating the gates of journalistic publications conferred a significant degree of power on editors and journalists, allowing them to direct the public gaze towards or away from specific news topics and placing them in a position to act as opinion leaders; the more readers and viewers have transformed into browsers, users, and even what can be described as *produsers* of news reports and commentary (see Bruns, 2007b, c), the more this power is being wrested away from the mainstream news media. In this light, *The Australian*'s editorial must be read as a groan of frustration at this newfound impotence, and its assertion that only "we understand Newspoll because we own it" becomes a pathetic last claim to an authority based on exclusivity that is now fatally undermined.

**Gatewatching**

What has emerged as an alternative to gatekeeping is a form of reporting and commenting on the news which does not operate from a position of authority inherent in brand and imprint, in ownership and control of the newsflow, but works by harnessing the collective intelligence and knowledge of dedicated communities to filter the newsflow and to highlight and debate salient topics of importance to the community. The community of bloggers, citizen journalists, commentators, psephologists, activists, and others which so taunts and torments *The Australian*, for example, does not aim to supplant it or any other newspaper or online news site by developing its own comprehensive news service; what it does do is to offer a corrective, an alternative interpretation of the day's events, and to round out industrial news and other sources by adding the backstory and providing further related (and often contradicting) information enabling readers to better assess for themselves and by

themselves the quality and veracity of mainstream news stories, press releases, government and NGO reports, opinion pieces, and other material as it becomes available.

The net result of such practices is to help fellow users make sense of this avalanche of reports, commentary, and opinion in both commercial and non-commercial online news and information sources. This is decidedly not a matter of gatekeeping in any traditional sense of the word: audiences now have direct access to a multitude of sources, and no longer rely on journalists to report the statements of politicians and other public actors, the news releases of governments and corporations, or the opinions of pundits and commentators. Instead, it is a matter of *gatewatching*: of observing the many gates through which a steady stream of information passes from these sources, and of highlighting from this stream that information which is of most relevance to one's own personal interests or to the interests of one's wider community (see Bruns, 2005). Of course it should be noted that some such gatewatching was practiced already in traditional journalistic industries, too: here, journalists intently watched the gates of government and corporate organisations as well as of the news agencies to which they subscribed (not to mention those of competing news outlets), to identify any potentially newsworthy material to be fed into the subsequent *gatekeeping* process. In the online gatewatching environment, however, agency has shifted from the journalistic profession to anyone interested in getting involved in the process – from individual news bloggers highlighting, in more or less "random acts of journalism" (Lasica, 2003), those news which speak to their personal concerns, to the many citizen journalism communities collaborating to specifically gatewatch news sources within their field of shared interest.

This collaborative gatewatching effort differs from traditional journalistic practice in a number of significant ways, then. On the one hand, at the input stage, it clearly foregrounds the information discovery effort inherent in gatewatching over the information summary effort of traditional journalistic writing: rather than synthesising multiple sources into one coherent news report which (after a gatekeeping stage aimed at shaving off any apparently extraneous material) is then published as a product in itself, gatewatching merely compiles one or a number of related reports on a newsworthy event, thereby *publicising* the event and the stories which cover it rather than *publishing* a news report. On the other hand, the gatewatching process is not at all complete at this stage; it typically remains open for users to add further gatewatched information during the response stage as well, enabling an ongoing coverage of the event even beyond the initial report. Through such responses, the initial reports are fleshed out, examined, critiqued, debunked, put into context, and linked with other news, events and background information; this process externalises and turns into a widely distributed collaborative effort similar processes which previously took place either entirely within the minds of active news consumers, or within small, relatively isolated groups of consumers discussing the news of the day.

Gatewatching as we have described it here can today be seen in process across a wide range of online news sites. It is found in the technology news site *Slashdot* as much as in the operations of many individual and group news bloggers; it takes place in collaborative pro-am news experiments like *OhmyNews* (which combines both volunteer citizen journalists and professional editors), and even in the automated gatewatching of *Google News*. How these sites manage their operations differs from case to case, and it is important to examine the implications of these differences (as I have done in Bruns, 2005) – some sites operate as a free-for-all where all gatewatched content is published to the wider Web immediately; some combine their gatewatching of external sources with a kind of internal gatewatching process which enables their community to collaboratively highlight from all incoming submissions those reports which are seen, communally, to be of the highest importance; some even retain a small degree of internal gatekeeping as a means of sorting through the material discovered through gatewatching. None of these models are inherently better or worse, of course; the appropriate model must be chosen as suitable to the communities and contexts it is meant to serve. What is important, at any rate, is that the gatewatching model departs crucially from the gatekeeping model employed traditionally by the journalism industry (fig. 2).
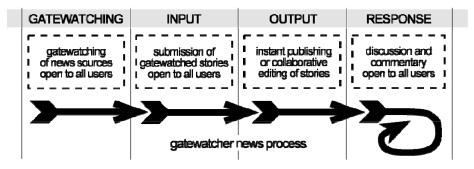


| GATEWATCHING | INPUT | OUTPUT | RESPONSE |
|---|---|---|---|
| gatewatching of news sources open to all users | submission of gatewatched stories open to all users | instant publishing or collaborative editing of stories | discussion and commentary open to all users |

gatewatcher news process

**Figure 2:** The gatewatcher news process

As a result, news turns from a relatively static product to be consumed by audiences into a dynamic, evolving, expanding resource which is actively co-developed by the users of such citizen journalism sites, participating a process of *produsage*. Such news produsage follows the same logic which has seen the active co-development of software under open source models or the collaborative co-creation of encyclopaedic resources in the *Wikipedia*, and here as well as there significantly affects industry incumbents. If, as has been pointed out in a number of contexts, there is an overall shift from passive consumption to active participation in our societies (see Jenkins, 2006; Benkler, 2006; von Hippel, 2005), then this poses a key challenge to a journalism industry built traditionally on a conception of its audience as passive consumers, and – as *The Australian*'s editorial documents – most of the industry has yet to develop strategies for addressing this challenge effectively.

Some industry responses to the emergence of citizen journalism have been predictable: much like the software and encyclopaedia industries, for example, the world-

wide journalism industry has repeatedly attempted to denounce its citizen counterparts as unskilled amateurs providing low-grade and untrustworthy content; such criticism is undermined, however, by the recent history of significant failures in industrial journalism itself. More progressive elements in mainstream journalism have attempted with varying degrees of success to incorporate elements of citizen journalism into their own operations; this has ranged from the mere provision of more or less tightly policed online discussion fora for readers on *News.com.au* to the *L.A. Times*' failed experiment with enabling its readers to revise its daily editorials, wiki-style (Glaister, 2005). Such experiments are frequently undermined, however, by the already poor relationship between news corporations and their readers (who regard most attempts to embrace the citizen-reader as little more than cynical window-dressing), and a common failure of news organisations to change journalistic attitudes at the same time as they are changing news technologies (Chung, 2007; Hermida and Thurman, 2007). The attachment of blog-style elements (such as commenting and discussion functions) to online op-ed columns, for example, is of little consequence if op-ed pundits maintain a generally condescending attitude towards their audience or fail to respond to them altogether; indeed, it only serves to highlight the growing detachment of the punditariat from overall public opinion which is being observed in a number of Western nations.

Instead, journalism would do well to re-imagine its audience and re-invent its professional practices, much in the same way that parts of the software industry already have in the wake of open source: here as well as there, there still remains an important place for the industry professional, but their role now is one of guide rather than leader, of (complementary) service provider rather than (sole) content producer – professional journalists can participate most effectively when they contribute original research and promote public debate, rather than acting as gatekeepers to summarise, contain, and conclude public debate.

**Researching Citizen Journalism**

This, then, lends even more urgency to the need for further research into the wider ecology of journalism – an ecology which now irrevocably contains both industrial and citizen journalism, existing in a variety of adversarial, parasitic, or symbiotic relationships. The research necessary in this field spans a wide range of approaches from the local and specific to the global and generic, and from the qualitative to the quantitative; it must examine the conduct of individual participants and publications as much as it needs to provide insights into the interconnections and patterns of information flow between individual sites and between their communities of users. A variety of research methodologies are now being trialled to achieve such aims, even if few have as yet risen to significant prominence in the field – this is

hardly surprising, perhaps, given the still highly fluid nature of citizen journalism communities and practices, as well as the continuously changing and evolving technological frameworks upon which they are built.

In the first place, direct ethnographic studies of participants in specific citizen journalism sites and projects will yield important information about their practices and motivations. In this context, it will be important to avoid overgeneralisation, and to distinguish clearly between different modes and levels of participation – bloggers only tangentially concerned with discussing news or current affairs engage in citizen journalism in a vastly different way from those participants who are regular contributors to a *Slashdot* or *Kuro5hin*, for example, and cultural and political contexts for such practice must also be recognised: participants in hyperlocal US citizen media sites (see Schaffer, 2007) are likely to bring vastly different attitudes to their content production than do the citizen journalists registered at the Korean *OhmyNews*, or the pro-democracy bloggers operating under the radar in a number of Middle Eastern nations (see e.g. Goussous, 2007) or in China (see Lagerkvist, in this book).

Broader ethnographic and demographic studies – including for example the work done at the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2007) – may also help to address another crucial question: that concerning the real impact of blogging and citizen journalism on wider public perceptions. While many mainstream journalists are clearly irritated by the rise of alternative, citizen-led media forms, do such reactions accurately reflect the role of citizen journalism in changing the overall mediasphere, or do they stem from a more general frustration with the decline of professional journalism? Put simply, do news blogs matter as much as journalists think (or fear) they do? A continuing growth in blogging and blog readership (and in access to and participation in citizen journalism more specifically) does appear to support that belief, but such figures alone may only indicate interest, not impact. Indeed, such research points to a broader question about how the public sphere may be reconfigured in a networked age in which the influence of conventional mass media has declined markedly.

Many answers to such questions may also be found through what has been labelled virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), and through other, related approaches to content and network analysis. Such research has been boosted significantly in recent years with the development of increasingly sophisticated tools for the automated gathering of large datasets containing the footprints of participant interaction in blogs, citizen journalism websites, and the wider Web, but clear methodologies for the analysis of such data are in many cases yet to be established (Hine, 2005). Such research builds on the fact that in the online context, participants are represented solely by their utterances, most of which in the context of citizen journalism are publicly visible and highly interconnected, providing a rich resource of textual data linked to individual contributors and discursive communities (at the same time, however,

a focus on the online dimension necessarily misses any offline characteristics of individuals and groups, and would therefore also benefit substantially from being complemented by further ethnographic study using more conventional methods).

Sources of information for such research include the utterances themselves (including relevant metadata such as URLs, date and time of publication, peer quality ratings, and further contextual information), the hypertext interlinkages between individual pieces of content, as well as more generic information such as the Google PageRank or Alexa rankings, or the Technorati authority scores, of the pages or sites on which the content was published, or the level of annotation through del.icio.us and similar social bookmarking services (see e.g. Golder & Huberman, 2005). Using a variety of tools from the content analysis software Leximancer to network analysis tools such as IssueCrawler, it is now possible to extract a variety of quantitative information from such data; this provides synchronic as well as diachronic, momentary as well as longitudinal insight into the patterns of interaction, the flows of information, and the processes of opinion formation in online environments. Tracking the take-up of memes (terms, topics, links) over time as well as tracing the networks of interlinkage between sites can provide can provide an indication of current key themes in the news and a clear indication of influential 'opinion leader' sites whose content is of great salience to specific interest communities (see e.g. Bruns, 2007a); more longitudinal approaches can also chart more general trends in blogs and citizen journalism – for example, they offer an insight into the levels of consistency or churn amongst the so-called 'A-list' of influential bloggers in a given field of interest (see e.g. Kirchhoff, Bruns & Nicolai, 2007).

Additionally, such work can identify clusters of closely interconnected interest communities in citizen journalism, the blogosphere, and the wider Web (most likely existing around the main opinion leaders), patterns of interconnection between related clusters, as well as peaks and troughs of authority and influence in the network; again, of course, this research may be further enhanced through more manual forms of content analysis and ethnographic study which would, for example, be able to divide overall clusters or networks according to specific demographic or ideological factors (see e.g. Hargittai, 2003, for an analysis of patterns of interlinkage between political bloggers from opposing political camps in the United States). Further research following on from such studies would also return to a more conventional ethnographic mode, for example, by engaging directly with key actors in the network to study their practices and motivations, and to identify the factors which contribute to their ability to gain and maintain a position of recognition and influence in the citizen journalism arena. This work would mirror similar ethnographic studies of newsroom practices and journalist attitudes as they have been conducted in the journalism industry during much of the second half of the twentieth century.

Once fully formed, research approaches as we have outlined them here will be valuable in their own right, as methodologies for the study of broad-scale online (and

especially Web-based) communication, interaction, and collaborative publishing well beyond the citizen journalism or overall journalistic field. More specifically, they will contribute significantly to the development of a theory of the networked public sphere – or perhaps more correctly, a theory to describe the structures of the networked environment that supersedes the conventional model of a mass-mediated public sphere which is now increasingly out of step with observable reality (Bruns, 2007d) – by tracing information flows and opinion formation on the network and thereby providing a counterpart to studies which investigate other aspects of the overall media ecology. Only in combination will such studies be able to accurately describe the full operations of mediated communication at local, national, and global levels.

In the first place, however, the major contribution of this research is to offer a clearer and more detailed picture of how news and political blogging and citizen journalism operate in practice, of what contribution individual participants make to the distributed collaborative project, and of what motivations they have for their actions. Such information is of use to professional journalists and the journalism industry, of course, as it cuts through misperception, misunderstanding, and misinformation (as well as, in some cases, outright ignorance), and instead enables journalists and institutions who so choose to develop a less belligerent, proactive, and perhaps more cooperative model for dealing with citizen journalists – ultimately undoubtedly a more productive approach than simply to 'go' them, or to patronise them by offering faux pundit blogs or operating citizen journalism sandbox environments. Additionally, such research also provides an opportunity for journalism educators to more directly address citizen journalism as an area in need of well-developed journalistic skills.

There now exists a continuum of journalistic models and practices which stretches from industrial gatekeeping to citizen gatewatching, with a strong pull at present perhaps towards the central, hybrid space; industrial journalism which continues to ignore or denigrate citizen efforts is increasingly left behind public sentiment, but citizen journalism which shows scant regard for journalistic ethics or professional conduct similarly undermines its own position as a credible alternative. Professional journalists no longer 'simply' inform citizens of the news, but work with citizens in developing a shared understanding of the news, just as members of the public move from a position as informed (but perhaps passive) citizens to one as active, monitorial citizens (Jenkins, 2006: 208). Rather than indiscriminately dismissing any commentators expressing diverging views as "woolly-headed critics" indulging in "smug, self assured, delusional swagger" (*The Australian*, 12 July 2007), this means that professional journalists must treat their audiences, their users, their newfound citizen-journalist peers, with the respect they deserve – and more fundamentally, it requires the industry to self-critically reflect on the factors which have led many of the people formerly known as the audience to create their own alternatives to mainstream news.

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