

"WHAT GOOD CAME OF IT AT
LAST?" ETHOS, STYLE, AND
SENSE OF AUDIENCE IN THE
REPORTING OF WAR BY
CHILDREN'S NEWS PROGRAMS

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With fire and sword the country round
Was wasted far and wide;
And many a chiding mother then
And newborn baby died!
But things like that, you know, must be
At every famous victory.

...
Great praise the Duke of Marlborough won
And our good Prince Eugene
"Why, 'twas a very wicked thing!"
Said little Wilhelmine.
"Nay, nay, my little girl," quoth he,
"It was a famous victory!
And everybody praised the Duke
Who this good fight did win."
"But what good came of it at last?"
Quoth little Peterkin.
"Why that I cannot tell," said he,
"But twas a famous victory."

— Southey in Cross (1950, pp. 368–390)

Robert Southey's poem, written in 1797, about the Battle of Blenheim in 1704, uses a technique that has become familiar in media discussion of the morality of war: using the naive perspective of two children to highlight the human waste and suffering of war (dead mothers and babies), and then to question the point of it all. The last four lines have been widely quoted in everyday speech in England—my father quoted them to me often. He had been an English conscript soldier in World War II, which, like most British people, he did not actually think was pointless, although he could never have been described as a “my-country-right-or-wrong” patriot. For instance, he was strongly opposed to British policy in Ireland and the use of British troops there. Nevertheless, his fondness for these lines represents a common adult approach to children in discussing war during peacetime: a sense of the futility of it all, and a warning to the next generation not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Like many former soldiers, he wanted us not to have the experience of war that he had had.

But not all adult belligerents take this view, and some contemporary children may well grow up to believe that military action, including terrorism against civilians, could be justified, possibly even glorious. The shock aroused by the fact that the London tube train and bus bombings in July 2005 (like those in Madrid in 2004) were carried out by home-grown terrorists led inevitably to a widespread public and private concern in the United Kingdom about sources of information: Where were these young people being taught to believe that bombing buses served the interests of their value system? The fact that these questions could be asked implied a gulf between mainstream media, such as the BBC, with its rationalist, enlightenment attitude to public service broadcasting, including children's programming (see Buckingham 2000; Davies 2001; Home, 1993), and the information and attitudes apparently being imparted to children and young people from alternative, nonmainstream media sources, such as, according to several news stories, radical mosques.

The apparent ideological power of nonmedia influences in these cases exposed a gap in the arguments of media cultural pessimists such as Postman (1982, 1994), Winn (2002), and Gerbner and his colleagues (1993, Gerbner, 1994) that broadcast media are the primary source of negative socialization in contemporary societies, overriding supposedly more benign traditional influences, such as religion and community. As Walma van der Molen (2004) argues in an article on “violence and suffering in television news,” traditional academic definitions of violence on TV, as discussed by these writers, have often excluded real-world violence. Thus we know little about the impact of the representation of social and political violence, and also of broader, sometimes nonviolent social conflicts, on children.

The view that mainstream media are totally hegemonic is challenged by the powerful influence of traditional, supposedly outmoded influences, such as religion, on some contemporary British young people. Young, cricket-

playing Yorkshiremen, one of whom blew up a bus near my London flat, killing 13 people and himself, do not acquire the motivation for this from *Blue Peter*, *EastEnders*, or even *Big Brother*, although commercial media could be seen as provocative examples of Western decadence to be resisted (reinforcing Raymond Williams's [1976] notion of *resistant readings*). In Britain we are having to accept that there must be more potent sources of socialization for some young people than broadcast mass media, and that it is possible for these sources to flourish in a sophisticated, globalized, secular, postmodern, urban society that prides itself—as London does—on tolerance, diversity and resilience. The myth that “London can take it”—a headline in the *Daily Mirror* of July 8, 2005, echoing the title of Humphrey Jennings's film of the 1940 German bombings—is a myth in the proper sense of expressing an undoubted truth about the city's turbulent history. It draws on a long tradition of London withstanding alien attacks: the Blitz, the IRA bombing campaign of the 1980s and 1990s, right back to the destruction of Roman London by the British queen Boudicca in AD 60–61. The contrast between the press's invocations of these mythical historical touchstones, and the lack of such references in the more low-key broadcast coverage, including children's news coverage, was marked.

Of course, a new instrument for young people's socialization has become the Internet, not TV. The Internet serves as a mechanism for spreading extreme ideologies and bomb-making lessons, but also as a forum for children and young people to debate their political views in ways not possible to the same extent in other media (see Carter, 2004). An example is “Sapphi” on July 21, 2005, on the BBC *Newsround* message board, in response to a plea from an American girl to be more understanding of Americans (spelling as in original):

what has been done in the wars in iraq and afghanastan that you draged the rest of the world into? where are the weapons of mass destruction? whats been done except kill thousands and thousands of innocent iraqi and afghanastani ppl and kill soilders piontlessly??? you seen why we think ppl from the USA are annoying now??? (BBC *Newsround* message board, July 21, 2005)

Yet broadcasting remains the dominant form of media communication for the majority of people, and many media scholars remain convinced that its influence is hegemonic and pervasive (see e.g., Lewis, 1994). So how do broadcasting organizations present news for children within an environment in which the sources of influence are uncertain and in which global conflicts are increasingly complex? How do communicators explain to a child in London why a Yorkshireman who is angry about Afghanistan is prepared to bomb a bus on their way to work in Marylebone, as happened on July 7, 2005?

This chapter discusses some of the ways in which different TV news organizations treat the topic of war for child audiences. It draws on a sample of news programs collected by the International Center Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) of the Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation in Germany, Israel, the United Kingdom, France, and Sweden, all covering the outbreak of the 2003 war in Iraq. The goal of the chapter is to identify some characteristics of children's news which distinguish it from adults' news, and to see whether there are commonalities and differences across countries.

The programs reviewed were all transmitted in March and April 2003 soon after the start of the Iraq war. They were: *Newsround*, broadcast daily on BBC1, and *Newsround Extra* (the example used was broadcast on February 12, 2003—both United Kingdom); *Logo* (Germany, broadcast by ZDF/KIKA from Monday to Friday in the afternoons at 4:50 p.m. and 7:50 in the evening, and on Saturday at 8:50 a.m.); *Mon Kamar* (France, broadcast on France 3 from Monday to Friday at 5:30 pm for 10 minutes; of which the sample included five episodes from March 17, 21, 26, and April 2, 2003); *Channel 6 Children's News* (Israel, broadcast as 'News at 5:30, on a private cable channel for children, 5 days a week for half an hour at 5:30 p.m.); and *SVT Aktuellt* (Sweden, a daily news program broadcast on SVT at 6 p.m. for 15 minutes and 9 p.m. for 25 minutes, twice weekly on Tuesdays and Thursdays). I also looked at *Willi wants to know it all* "When is war and when peace?" (from the Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation in Germany), a documentary program about the aftermath of the war in Bosnia made in 2004; *Channel 4's First Edition* (UK) from 2001 and the contemporary (Summer 2005) *Newsround* coverage of the tube bombings in London, broadcast daily. There were no examples from the United States, the chief protagonists in the war against Iraq, an absence that perhaps speaks for itself because there are no current American news programs for children.

This was a convenience sample of children's news programs chosen by IZI from countries that actually have children's news and examples of these programs that included coverage of the Iraq war. Fortuitously, this sample included one country (the UK) which had supported the American invasion of Iraq and other countries (Germany, Sweden, France) that had been part of the European opposition to military involvement. It also included a country, Israel, that was directly involved in a potential security threat. Hence the sample was able to provide a potential range of political stances on the war.

POLITICAL DIFFERENCES

In terms of these differences, British troops were militarily involved, despite widespread public opposition (including children's opposition) to their

involvement; Germany and France had opposed the action, and had no troops involved; Israel was more directly involved than any, because it is in the region and, as pointed out in its program, has technically been at war with Iraq since 1948. Israel suffered missile attacks from Iraq in the first Gulf War in 1991. Israel is thus unique among the five sample countries in being on permanent alert against attacks from Arab neighbors, Iraq among them. For the other countries, the war was much more physically distant, although British children could have had soldier parents serving in it. Therefore, it was of interest to see whether these differing political perspectives were reflected in the way the topic was treated for children in the news bulletins.

Coincidentally, I rewatched the tapes of these children's news programs on a day (July 28, 2005) when the massive police hunt for the disaffected young Muslims who had bombed the London transport system on July 7 and 21 was being carried out. News of this hunt alternated with the dramatic announcement from a longer standing paramilitary organization that had carried out bombing campaigns in Britain, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), that they had officially ordered all units to abandon their weapons. IRA and Muslim fundamentalist recruits who grew up in Ireland and Britain almost certainly watched the BBC's children's news program, *Newsround*, in their childhood. But *Newsround's* style is to give explanations that are as even-handed and politically neutral as possible.

REPORTING WAR

In their 2003 content analysis of the Dutch children's news program *Jeugdjournaal's* coverage of 9/11, Walma van der Molen and de Vries identified some key characteristics of children's news programming, a primary one being what they called *consolation*. In dealing with traumatic news (such as the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001), they found that three main consolation strategies were used: strategies applied at the program level (e.g., alternating heavy and light topics); strategies applied at the level of the news item (e.g., taking a child's perspective); and strategies applied at the shot level (e.g., not showing the most graphic film footage). Other substrategies included: "expert explanation; personal accounts of children and paying attention to the reactions of viewers."

In my analysis of the previously named programs, I observed all these strategies and some others. For example, an important characteristic of children's news, often articulated by producers, was the need for greater explanation and contextualization for child audiences than for adults—a need linked with a different style of linguistic address for children. In a research

project on Channel 4's news program for schools, *First Edition*, broadcast from 1998 to 2003, we interviewed the presenter and producer of the program. These were their comments (Davies & Allan, 2003):

Jon Snow (presenter): September 11 would be a good example [of children seeing traumatic adult news]. One was conscious of the child perhaps for the first time being lured into adult news viewing in a very big way and so one was trying maybe to fill in the bits that the adult programming hadn't provided for.

Lca Sellars (producer): I think the difference in *First Edition* is that you always have to start with the first paragraph, you couldn't assume knowledge as you can with adults' news. And using simpler language without being patronising—simpler language, shorter sentences. But otherwise, we use the same news agenda.

Children's news programs, no matter how grim the stories in them, also have a particular semiotics common to children's programs generally, such as the use of colorful graphics, music, rapid cutting and editing effects, vivid logos, and upbeat introductory sequences, which in Britain at least is less common in adult news (see Buckingham, 2000; Davies 2001). Children's media, not least for commercial reasons, always have to be connoted as fun—obviously difficult when dealing with serious and traumatic events such as war and terrorism. Sometimes the fun motif is simply inappropriate; Walma van der Molen and de Vries (2003) point out that the sandwiching technique of alternating light and heavy stories was dropped by *Jeugdjournaal* in its treatment of September 11. A further aspect of news coverage generally (see Philo et al., 1976) is positioning: where the camera is placed and whose point of view the child viewer is being invited to take. In my analysis of this small sample of children's news, all these strategies and features were found; some characteristics appeared to be common across countries, whereas other aspects were more specific to one country (for children as political actors, see Davies, 2004, Davies & Mosdell, 2001, 2005), and appeared rarely, and this is discussed later.

In discussing these programs, it has to be borne in mind—as with all regular TV shows—that individual programs cannot represent the overall impact on the audience of shows that are likely to be seen regularly, every day or every week, throughout the year. My sample is a snapshot of individual episodes, primarily reporting on the very start of the 2003 war. However, because all of these news programs are regular—some daily, some weekly—it is likely that the buildup to the war and some background explanation of why this was happening had already been given to the regular child audience. Hence, these examples cannot be found wanting if there is a lack of context and background in some of their treatment of the story

because almost certainly the lead-up to the war had been covered in previous programs.

Certain elements were common to all: All led with the story of the American invasion. The French show, *Mon Kanar*, and the British show, *Newsround* (March 17), gave the most political-historical background. The French programs were particularly detailed, including the use of maps to illustrate the positioning of weapons and an expert in the studio explaining military strategy. One of their programs included a discussion between adult political experts and children, in which everybody democratically sat on the floor. The French program made the least concession of all the shows to children's "childishness." Their reporting was full of information, assuming (I suspect optimistically, but why not?) children's interest in military matters and politics. There was no obvious political positioning, but the emphasis on the danger to Iraqi children, rather than to the child audience at home, indicated a stance sympathetic to Iraq.

The Swedish program, *Aktuell*, could also be interpreted as sympathetic to Iraq. This was the only show to mention Iraq's oil as a reason for the United States "wanting to get rid of Saddam." The standard consolation strategy of the expert interview was used here, with a Swedish political commentator stating: "It can't hurt us here." A consolatory strategy of a somewhat different kind was used in the *Newsround* item in July 2005 dealing with the aftermath of the London bombings; they brought a counselor onto the program to advise children to talk about their worries and seek help from other people (e.g., through Web sites and to "think about pleasant things" to drive away unpleasant ones).

Like the German program, the images of children used in the Swedish news were of Iraqi children (including a Kurdish child) showing school and family life. Such images are not usually seen on adult news; they are another way of emphasizing (as in Southey's poem) what is at stake in war. Such images carry a pacifist implication, whether intentional or not. In the German *Logo!*, Iraqi children were shown as bored because they could not go to school. The commentary pointed out that wherever there is fighting, "children will be in a poor state." All of these strategies are not so much consolatory as inviting identification from the child audience with the children in Iraq and again, whether intentionally or not, requiring a pacifist response: War must be wrong because it hurts children like us. A child interviewee in Glasgow in the *First Edition* project (Davies, 2004) astutely noticed this about media war coverage: "At the time of war in Iraq, children were shown in hospital near to death, which made us feel: why did we go to war if we are hurting innocent children?" (Girl, 12).

The Israeli program did not show Iraqi children, but a similar strategy of identification was used. In this case, an Israeli family was shown preparing for possible attack in their *sealed room*, with emphasis on components

that would be reassuring for the children: the presence of toys, computers, TV, candy, and so on. The Israeli program set out to answer this question: How did the war begin and what is it to do with Israel?" As in the French and German programs, experts were used to answer these questions, including a female military officer. The perspective was entirely focused on Israel: There was no footage of Iraqi children. Again, there is a political implication here, which is not made explicit and perhaps could have been—that the potential victims are Israeli children, rather than Iraqi ones.

CHILDREN AS POLITICAL AGENTS: NEWSROUND

UK *Newsround's* opening line on March 17 was: "America starts the war on Iraq—our top story." The bulletin covered a lot of ground, including adult news footage of bombing, a mention of Iraqi censorship of journalists, film of photographers photographing children, and a hospital scene. The program also provided some historical background, starting with the 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, footage of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) inspectors, film of September 11, the UN resolution, the discovery that there were not any WMD, and then the news of the full-scale attack. No editorializing was evident; it appeared that children were expected to draw their own conclusions about, first, the relevance (or otherwise) of 9/11 and, second, whether the elusive WMD were in fact sufficient reason to go to war. *Newsround* was unique among this sample of programs in one important respect: It was the only bulletin that showed children as political actors. As part of its summary of events associated with the war, it announced: "Across the country, school pupils took to the streets in protest. In Devon children were warned about suspension." The program then followed its film of these protests with what was obviously a specially arranged visit to a high school in Cardiff, where the selection of children's comments indicated a clear political line. One boy was shown saying: "Tony Blair ignored the protests and followed George Bush." Another said: "It's a waste of time, money, and lives." There are at least two possible reasons for this. First, it really did represent an interesting news event. Children's, and especially teenagers', involvement in the antiwar demonstrations in Britain in 2003 was extensive and organized, and it had received widespread press coverage. Given that *Newsround* is a children's news program, it was obviously important to allow this strand of public opinion to be shown. However, it could also be seen as a subtle form of editorializing on the part of the program's producers: Using children to make seemingly naive antiwar points is a way of adults expressing these views on their own behalf (as in Southey's poem). This is

my perception after watching the programs closely and repeatedly; I am not proposing that such apparent editorializing would have been assumed by all members of the audience.

DOCUMENTARY PROGRAMS

I also reviewed two half-hour documentaries in this sample: first, a UK *Newsround Extra* on the children of Iraq, 3 months after the war had supposedly ended. The rationale for the program was to travel to Iraq "to see how things have changed now the war is ended and Saddam is gone." Unfortunately, with hindsight, this was clearly overoptimistic; the impression given about "life getting back to normal," with friendly soldiers talking to children, has not been borne out by subsequent events. There was a political agenda here, too, with an implication that the war *had* been worth it, that "some good came of it at last." Two children whose neighbor had been killed were interviewed and said: "Now we feel free from fear; we can protest; we can visit." The other documentary, the German "When is war, and when peace?" introduced by a popular (and rather off-beat) presenter, Willy Weitzel, was a very thoughtful investigation focused on a Bosnian Muslim family after the Bosnian war, in which the father was persuaded to say on camera that he had actually shot at people. Willy asked: "Did you kill them?"—the only occasion in any of these programs where the fact that war requires children's fathers to kill people was made explicit. The man smiled rather sadly and said: "I don't know. We only wanted to keep them at a distance." The program team also followed Special Force for Reconciliation (SFOR) to the villages where people were giving up their weapons—again, an explicit point being made that for wars to end, guns have to be relinquished. This program particularly emphasized the universality of childhood. A girl was quoted saying: "We're all the same, speak the same language, look the same." As is the case with documentaries about current events for adults, these examples illustrate the value of the short documentary form; this gives more scope for an examination of political and ethical issues than short regular bulletins and is certainly a form worth trying to preserve in the competitive marketplace of children's television.

STYLE OF PRESENTATION

Over and above content, there was the question of style and editorial selection (the emphasis and the language of reporting, the visuals, the use of dif-

ferent presenters, and differences in these elements between children's and adults' news). All the programs in the current sample chose a style of adult presentation that either invited reassurance (mature and fatherly, as in Israel) or identification (young and upbeat—all the other programs). Israel, Germany, and France had children involved in the actual news presentation as presenters (Israel), through phone-ins (Israel), or in studio discussion (France). (C4's *First Edition* also regularly used child interviewers and presenters.) *Newsround* does not use child presenters, but it regularly employs a number of ways in which the child audience can engage with the news. The program receives e-mails "from all over the world," and the presenters invite children to join in an interactive chat after the program. The *Newsround* Web site and associated chatrooms are a valuable source of information about children's spontaneous responses to news stories (Carter, 2004; Carter, chap. 6, this volume). All the programs use music and graphics, all have upbeat introductory sequences, and the Swedish program uses the sandwiching technique, with light-hearted items interspersed with the war news.

"A WORLD REPUBLIC OF CHILDREN"

Presentationally, there were thus many elements in common across the five countries, giving rise to a perception of, in Paul Hazard's phrase, "a world republic of childhood," with few cultural differences among children, the main opposition being between innocent child victims and aggressive, conflict-ridden adults. The assumption is that children around the world, regardless of nation or culture, will agree with each other in being in favor of peace and opposed to war, a representation of childhood also found in adult news (see Davies, 2004). This perception is widely fostered by much media war coverage, including the propaganda video footage of injured Iraqi children used to inflame the British terrorists (featured in C4's *Dispatches*, August 8, 2005). Such coverage generally portrays children as universal victims: helpless, passive, suffering, and innocent, whichever side they are on. In all the programs I reviewed, children were interviewed and featured extensively. But none of the programs featured children arguing the case for war on either side—saying it was a good thing to invade Iraq or, conversely, that the American and British troops should be actively resisted by the Iraqi "insurgents." For instance, the Israeli program—whose audience was most likely to be directly involved in violent action—focused heavily on protection. The child viewers who asked telephone questions wanted information about the war and why it started, but none expressed a point of view about the politics. One might argue that this is because Israeli children do not have a point of view. But I suggest it is more likely due to

the standard editorial approaches of children's TV which rely on the safe and uncontroversial construction of war as being bad for children, thus avoiding uncomfortable ideological and political controversies that could antagonize adult audiences.

Thus, in this sample of children's news, even in a country, Israel, where children can expect to do national service in the armed forces, war was not presented as something that can sometimes be justified. It was generally seen as unambiguously a bad thing for children. It kills and wounds them (*Newsround; First Edition*), it traps them in sealed rooms and stops them from going to school or playing outside (*News at 5.30; Aktuell!*), it bereaves children (*Willi wants to know it all*), it divides children (implicit in the different stances taken in the programs, some focusing on Iraqi children, others, such as the Israeli program, focusing on the home audience), and it stops them from being healthy (war coverage generally, both in adults' and in children's news, showing children in hospital or suffering from lack of water and medicine—see Davies, 2004); thus, it threatens both far-off children and also children closer to home, and the overriding message of such coverage is that war has absolutely nothing to be said for it in terms of its impact on children's lives. Children are hardly ever represented in news coverage of war as agents but nearly always as victims—with the exception of the protesters on *Newsround*, and even they could be seen as victims in the sense that their government ignored their views. This primarily negative view of war—the "what good came of it at last" position—was found regardless of political orientation and regardless of which country the bulletins came from. Viewing all these programs one after another, in addition to watching children's news fairly regularly since 2002 for our research project, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the cumulative effect of children's war coverage is to create a strong propacifist position in its audience.

Nevertheless, uncomfortable as we may find this to accept, it is possible that this ethos does not reflect the views of the whole child audience. It is possible that many children in all these countries *do* actually agree with military action and do want their side to "win" (see evidence for this in Seiter, chap. 2, this volume; and Lemish, chap. 3, this volume). As psychologist Cairns (2005) pointed out: "First, in Northern Ireland, children do agree with their parents, whether Loyalist or Nationalist.¹ Second, they don't want 'peace' because it means the other side has won." According to this view, children in such cases are no different from their belligerent elders in wanting victory before harmony. Yet such robust opinions tend not to be shown in children's news—with one or two exceptions, such as *Newsround's* interview with young protesters. *First Edition*, being a school program, was also sometimes more adventurous in foregrounding political differences; in its September 18, 2001, edition (coincidentally the one that featured its first extended report on 9/11), it carried a report on the violent

scenes between Protestants and Catholics at the Holy Cross Primary School in Belfast, in which children from both communities were interviewed about their differing points of view.

This characterization of war in children's news as primarily something that causes terrible suffering to children, and thus unites them regardless of their background, can be attributed to three main considerations, all desirable and legitimate. The first is the desire for balance—the need to be fair and to represent all points of view equally. This is actually a regulatory requirement for the BBC, but it does somewhat negate the fact that, on some occasions, some points of view are more valid than others. This is particularly a problem in Northern Ireland, where the BBC and ITV are the main national broadcasters for both communities. Are the IRA to be described as terrorists or freedom fighters? Are the Unionists loyal or defending unjustly acquired privileges? What should be the broadcasters' attitude toward the forces—army and police—of the British state? Are they them or us?

The second consideration is the requirement for programs aimed at children not to set bad examples, such as showing violence. Hence, violence has to be generally condemned in children's material, and the underlying reasons for it are accordingly downplayed. There is no question that children are sometimes involved in fighting—throwing stones and abuse at soldiers, and even taking part in battle as military combatants, but this is rarely shown; if it is, it is seen as undesirable. Again, this embargo on bad examples is spelled out in various regulatory and licensing arrangements, including the European directives on broadcasting and the media sections of the UN International Rights of the Child.

The third consideration is the Walma van der Molen and de Vries (2003) category of *consolation*. Producers obviously have to be careful not to distress children, especially given that their audience includes a wide range of different age groups and the mechanisms they provide for coping with disturbing feelings (counselors, help lines, e-mail addresses, and Web sites) are obviously praiseworthy. These requirements inevitably produce an approach to news coverage that emphasizes the similarities among children and minimizes the differences. Swedish *Aktuell* featured a song with the words: "Hallo; we're the children of the world, let's stick together hand in hand." However, the overriding impression of adult news, often produced by the same news teams as children's news, sharing the same footage, and broadcast not long afterward in many schedules, is that once children are grown up these inclusive attitudes will have to be jettisoned. It would be difficult, but perhaps not impossible, for children's news to introduce the idea that, even as children, human beings have political and ideological differences, which—if they were freely expressed in child-relevant cultural forms—could begin to be peacefully resolved before children become old enough to get their hands on WMDs or set off bombs on London buses.

NOTES

1. Loyalist (broadly Protestant) or Nationalist (broadly Catholic) religions are in quotation marks because the conflict is political, not just religious, about which country, Britain or Ireland, these communities want to belong to.

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