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EPISODIC AND THEMATIC FRAME STORIES

FOUND IN ILLINOIS NEWSPAPERS

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Across the country increasing attention has been paid to political corruption, which means the abuse of public office for private gain (Blake & Martin, 2006). Incidents of political corruption have rocked Illinois for over one hundred years.

According to the recent report by Dick Simpson (2012) of the University of Illinois Chicago, Illinois is the third most corrupt state in America, and corruption costs Illinois residents about $500 million each year. This appears more shocking considering that most international measures of corruption rank the United States among the lowest 10 percent of corrupt countries worldwide (Glaeser & Goldin, 2004).

Public corruption has been a serious problem for Illinois politics for a century and a half. Even before Governor Blagojevich tried to sell a vacant U.S. Senate seat, the people of the state had to hear continuously about outrageous political corruption scandals (Gradel, Simpson and Zimelis, 2009). Since 1972, there have been three governors before Blagojevich, two members of Congress, nineteen Cook County judges, thirty Chicago Aldermen, and various other statewide officials who were convicted of public corruption. Altogether there have been more than 1,000 public officials and businessmen convicted of public corruption since 1970. This level of continuing corruption causes us to ask many questions, including how to set up and implement a comprehensive anti-corruption strategy across the state.

Although there have been many attempts to account for the prevalence of corruption in Illinois, this paper focuses on the media coverage of political corruption. For a long time, it has been recognized that having news organizations which actively cover politics is indispensable to maintaining a healthy democracy (Snyder & Stromberg, 2010). Scholars often believe the media lead people to be informed, and informed citizens, in turn, are better able to hold public officials accountable. The media are especially expected to play a major role in preventing and fighting corruption by serving as watchdogs and mobilizing popular opinion against corruption. The media exert their influence over public opinion by publicizing political corruption affairs (Giglioli, 1996). For instance, coverage of the Watergate scandal symbolically demonstrated the potential of the media to expose political corruption to the public (Fuszara, 1999).

A large number of people are still distrustful about whether the media are playing their basic roles in revealing corruption and suggesting rational and practical solutions. This doubt may be inextricably related to the special way the media deal with corruption issues. The media usually provide a certain interpretation of corruption influencing the way they are discussed and evaluated in public debate. In the process of the social construction of political affairs, the media often adopt a framing strategy (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Valeda, 2002; Verdoolaege, 2005). Frames, first conceptualized academically by Goffman (1974), refer to, “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). The manner of framing the news has a significant impact on how people come to understand social, cultural, and political realities (Gamson, 1992).

This study deals with how the media portray political corruption, based on the framing theory, i.e., how the media frame news about corruption and describe its consequences. Among the numerous variants of the framing approach, this paper especially employs Iyengar's episodic/thematic method. According to Iyengar (1991, 1996), media coverage of political issues falls into two distinct genres: "thematic" and "episodic" news frames. The thematic frame places an issue in some general context and usually takes the form of an in-depth, structural report, whereas episodic framing describes issues in terms of individual instances or specific events. If the episodic frame predominates over the media coverage on political corruption, we can say the media are not doing their watchdog role well, which a majority of audiences expect in a democratic society. To this end, this study analyzes the news articles about political corruption published by the *Chicago Tribune* for the last ten years. The present paper then suggests some alternative solutions to overcome the inappropriate framing routine of the media.

Defining corruption

The term corruption originally meant, "the process by which a well-functioning system of government decays into one that fails to deliver and maltreats its citizens" (Glaeser & Goldin, 2004, 5). The Greek historian Polybius (c.200-118 BC) stated that monarchy corrupts into tyranny, aristocracy into oligarchy, and democracy into mob rule (McGing, 2010). During the nineteenth century, the definition of corruption focused on systemic failure of a regime changed into a notion specifically related to public officials receiving bribery from private individuals. Bribery was generally an illegal reward in

exchange for some government-controlled resources, such as an overpayment for a service or public property or an exemption from government regulation. During the nineteenth century, a considerable number of city governments frequently took bribes as a reward when they made a contract for street cleaning or construction services, etc. Corruption occurred when city governments distributed public-owned property such as public land. As a result, public-owned property was often sold not to the highest bidder but to the most generous briber. Some city governments were involved in bribery in the process of enacting rules such as prohibitions on gambling.

Today, the complex nature of corruption is increasingly making it difficult for scholars to agree on a single definition of corruption. The definition of corruption varies depending on differences in culture, attitude and environment. What is seen as a corrupt act in one society may be accepted as legitimate in another society (Nye, 1967). Sandholtz and Koetzle (2000) have suggested three approaches in analyzing corruption: public interest, public opinion, and the legal norm. The drawback of this argument is that it is not clear who should define the public interest – the elite or the ordinary people -- and how public opinion can be sufficiently representative of the view of the majority.

Jain (2001) identified three types of corruption: grand corruption, bureaucratic corruption, and legislative corruption. Grand corruption refers to the use of political power by the elites in creating policies that favor their private interest, not public interest. They do this by channeling resources to those sectors where it is easier to make personal gain. Jain said it is difficult to identify this kind of corruption unless a bribe is exchanged. Bureaucratic corruption usually takes place by the civil servants

who interact both with political elites and public individuals. In bureaucratic corruption, ordinary individuals could be forced to give bribes in order to speed the process of handling an official function. Or individuals could give bribes to the judiciary members in order to lessen a legal penalty. Legislative corruption involves influencing the voting pattern of legislators to serve the interest of some groups, or the members of the executive.

Political corruption can occur in an organizational dimension as well as in individual dimensions. According to Luo (2004), profit-driven organizations are willing to give bribes either to public servants or legislators. Unless the issue of organizational corruption is appropriately addressed, Luo has argued, rooting out corruption would be difficult because, unlike individuals, organizations can only face legal sanction without being arrested.

Even though the opinions for the definition of corruption vary depending on individual scholars, it seems there is some minimal consensus among scholars. Corruption can be referred to as an illegitimate exchange of resources involving the abuse of public responsibility for private ends (Jain, 2001; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Bohara, Mitchell, & Mittendorf, 2004; Golden & Picci, 2005; Wu, 2005; Chang, 2005; Luo, 2004). Therefore, despite some variations in defining corruption, the essential meaning of it should be remembered. In the next section I examine the ways the media frame issues including corruption.

How the media frame news

The mass media are the fulcrum between public agendas and individual citizens (Collins et al, 2006; Soroka 2002). Herman and Chomsky (1988) have pointed out that the, “mass media serve as a system for communicating images to the general populace” (p.16). When the mass media produce news stories about an issue, the news stories circulate certain knowledge, and then the knowledge influences people’s opinions about the issue (Collins et al. 2006; Domfeh, 1999; Tuchman, 1978). This is because the media emphasize issues by bringing them into the domain of the public sphere. Van Dijk (1993) has argued that the media have always demonstrated social power by controlling the minds of individual audiences. Ofori-Birikorang (2009) has also contended that through news production the media provide knowledge to their audiences, and such knowledge, in turn, exerts crucial influence in deciding the direction of citizens’ understanding. In other words, the media are generally viewed as an important driving force in determining how events and conditions of individual group experiences are socially defined (Gamson & Modigiliani 1999; Stallings 1990). News stories provide interpretive frames through which citizens understand or explain events that happen around them. The media function as a newsmaker by defining events, occurrences, actions, causes and consequences. By focusing on a particular news story, the media always select a few salient issues from within the range of issues that are available in the real world (Gans, 1979; Nelkin, 1995).

The diverse effects of news media on public opinion have been extensively documented in numerous previous studies (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1983; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; McGuire, 1986; Mcombs & Shaw, 1972). The consequential effect of the news media on audiences tends to be determined by the media’s ability to present the

stories in a certain style. In performing this function the media intentionally highlight a specific dimension of an issue and make it more salient. These concepts of 'selection' and 'salience' constitute an essential part of the framing theory.

Following the works of Domfeh (1999), Obeng-Quaidoo (1988), Iyengar and Kinder (1987), Pratt et al. (2002), Sanders (2000), Reta (2000), Smith & Wakefield (2005), Valeda (2002) and Verdoolaege (2005), this research uses framing analysis as a main theoretical framework in understanding how local newspapers represented stories on political corruption scandals in Illinois. Framing analysis is important because it makes clear that the identification of the particular patterns of the representations within the informative narratives can potentially influence the way the phenomena are perceived by a large number of audiences (Valeda, 2002) by promoting a particular angle of "definition, causal interpretation, and moral evaluation and/ or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, 52).

Framing as an analytical research tool was first raised by Goffman in 1974. Giltin (1980) further elaborated this concept by arguing that, "Frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens and what matters" (p. 6). Gitlin (1980) has also attempted to define media frames as, "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (p. 7). Dearing and Rogers (1996) have argued that framing is, "the subtle selection of certain aspects of an issue by the media to make them more important and emphasize a particular cause of some problems" (p. 64). In short, framing determines how issues are constructed or structured in news

stories. Communication scholars have used frames as the method of communicating how much and in what manner the mass media report information for audience consumption.

Framing provides an audience with a scheme to interpret news events (Entman, 1993). Pickle et al. (2002) and Entman (1993) assert that the contents of news stories include latent implied questions for which frames provide answers. Frames provide answers to the implied questions by performing four functions: defining and diagnosing a problem; identifying a source or cause; providing a judgment; and justifying a solution for the problem. Through this process, the mass media actively define the frames of reference through which audiences engage in public issues (Tuchman, 1978).

In several studies, Iyengar (1990, 1991,1996) has suggested that news stories can be mainly divided into episodic and thematic frames. For instance, in the analysis of television news reports about domestic poverty in the USA, Iyengar has found that two categories emerged, one describing poverty primarily as a social or collective outcome (a thematic frame), the other describing poverty in terms of particular victims (an episodic frame). The episodic news frame depicts issues in terms of specific instances--for example, a group suicide, a homeless person, or an illegal immigrant worker. Episodic reports are essentially illustrations of issues. The thematic frame, by contrast, depicts political issues more broadly and abstractly by placing them in historical or societal context. A thematic report on corruption might present information about recent trends in the rate of corruption and the main reasons for the increase of corruption. In appearance, the thematic frame takes the form of background coverage on a specific issue.

Episodic reports tend to provide good pictures of an occurrence. Usually, episodic reports include vivid, sensational, or provocative images. They are less likely to require reporters to bother to interpret an issue. A number of content-analytic studies have documented the pervasiveness of episodic framing in news (Gamson, 1989; Altheide, 1987). In the thematic frame, the news might consist of information bearing on general trends (e.g., the corruption rate, the number of states experiencing significant increases in corruption, etc.), or matters of public policy (a government's proposals to curtail political corruption, anti-corruption movements among civil groups, etc.). In the thematic frame, there are background stories in which the object of the coverage is abstract and impersonal. In the episodic frame, by contrast, an issue is approached from the personal experience or viewpoint.

Thematic and episodic frames give a different influence on media users' perception of the issue the media report. While thematic frame stories evoke more structural attributions, episodic frame stories evoke more individualistic attributions (Iyengar, 1990). The manner of framing the news has a significant influence on how people come to understand social, cultural and political realities (Gamson, 1992).

Data and Measures

This study intended to target a media entity with sizeable public reach. Therefore, the *Chicago Tribune* was chosen because it is the biggest daily newspaper in Chicago and Illinois. Using the *Chicago Tribune*'s electronic archival database and the *ProQuest* Service, I conducted a ten-year retrospective search from July 1, 2001, to June 31, 2011, of *Chicago Tribune* articles. Collecting articles was done in two stages. Initially, I

searched for articles with the keyword “political corruption” in the title and the body. This yielded a total of 5,362 possible articles. Among these, 300 news articles were chosen finally by using a random sampling method.

Then, episodic and thematic frames were coded according to several yardsticks. An article focusing on the following topics were regarded as a thematic frame story: systemic (e.g., societal or historical) explanations about political corruption occurrence, remedial actions, and the extent and scope of influence of corruption. The episodic manipulation includes the following types of news stories: mere description of a specific corruption case, simple delivery of conflict between interested parties, and a narrative based on individual perspective. If two different frames are found in the same article, the dominant frame receiving the most space within each story was chosen as a coded frame.

In addition to episodic/thematic frames, this study content-analyzed other variables that can help understand the general mechanism of media coverage on political corruption. These variables included the tone, content type, and information sources. The tone was assessed according to what value attitude a news story shows to political corruption scandals and the perpetrators of them. A positive, negative, or neutral tone was assigned to each story. Topic types include election campaign, anti-corruption actions, court ruling, investigation (by the police or the prosecution), and human interest story. Information sources refer to citations within the story from “prosecution,” “police,” “court,” “politicians,” “a journalist’s observation,” and “anonymous.” If more than two sources appear in one article, each separate source was counted.

Results

Descriptive analysis

Eighty-five percent of the articles showed a negative attitude toward corruption scandals, while fifteen percent of the sample articles held a neutral position. The neutral tone articles did not indicate any specific judgmental attitude.

The analysis revealed that the *Tribune* prioritized investigation as a subject over other content types. About one third (37.6 percent) of all cases were about investigations, hearings, trials from the police, prosecution, and court (see *Table 1*). By comparison, stories about systemic explanations or remedial actions accounted for only 17.3 percent of all news stories. Stories describing individual life explained 6 percent of all stories.

Table 1 - Corruption Coverage by Content Type, 2002-2011

Content type	Number	Percentage
Investigation	113	37.6
Remedial actions	28	9.3
Systemic analysis	24	8.0
Election campaign	29	9.7
Human story	19	6.3
Other topics	87	29.0
Total	300	100.0

Our analysis included a record of the use of identifiable sources in individual stories. The police, prosecution, and court were the dominant information sources of this newspaper (57.0 percent). This result is in tandem with the content type analysis above. Anonymous sources were very rare. Journalists seldom consult the experts. Experts as an information source usually appear in stories dealing with court rulings. In other cases journalists do not consult external experts even when work on new legal regulations is in progress or campaigns are launched. At most, they turn to politicians asking them for their comments.

Table 2 - Corruption Coverage by Information Sources, 2002-2011

Information sources	Number	Percentage
Police	98	15.5
Prosecution	163	25.8
Court	99	15.7
Politicians	63	10.0
Experts	38	6.0
Anonymous or other sources	171	27.1
Total	632	100.0

Episodic and thematic frames

The results indicate that episodic framing stories outweigh thematic stories, although 38% of the articles were classified as thematic-frame stories which deal with structural causes, background, impacts, or solutions of corruption (*Table 3*). According to this analysis, the typical readers of the *Chicago Tribune* over this period would have been more exposed to news articles about a particular instance of an individual perpetrator than stories about corruption as a systematic or societal outcome. From the perspective of the newspaper, corruption is viewed as an individual-level phenomenon rather than as a societal phenomenon.

Table 3 Corruption Coverage by Episodic/Thematic frames, 2002-2011

Frame types	Number	Percentage
Episodic	186	62.0
Thematic	114	38.0
Total	300	100.0

News stories classified as episodic are shown in several different categories. The first category includes news stories that only describe specific cases of corruption. These types of news articles usually deal with corruption cases announced by the police or the prosecution. For instance, the *Tribune*, in the article titled, “Judge won’t delay Blago Trial” (18 May, 2010), reports that a federal judge refused to postpone the start of

ousted Governor Blagojevich's corruption trial. This article includes little additional content except what the court announced. In this category, the media tend to depend on press releases of the police, the prosecution, or the government, usually avoiding analyzing in more detail those releases. Therefore, in this case, the frame of a corruption case set by the investigative organizations or the government is not much different from that of the press.

The second type of episodic frame is news stories that deliver the conflicts among interested parties regarding a certain corruption scandal. The article, "New anti-corruption rule are testing for universities," (*Chicago Tribune*, 7 November, 2010) is one of such examples. This article deals with the conflict between the state and the public universities over a newly-established transparency law that aims at thwarting corruption with the adoption of strict measures like disclosing lobbyists' fees. According to the article, while the state argues that the law can heighten the transparency of transactions, the public universities claim that such strict regulation brings unintended consequences such as delaying urgent projects and increasing contract costs. This kind of reporting attitude may result in promoting the indifference or cynicism of readers and lead to undermining the right of political control that should be exercised by citizens (della Porta and Vannucci, 1999).

The third type of episodic frame is news stories that approach corruption from the perspective of individual public officials who are or were charged with some kinds of corruption. "Loren-Maltese trading Cicero politics for Oak Park pizzeria" (*Chicago Tribune*, 8 April, 2010) and "Ex-governor: Why not Oprah?" (*Chicago Tribune*, 29 June, 2010) are examples that fall within this category. Articles of this type are often criticized

for their sensationalism because they tend to highlight the story of an individual perpetrator ignoring the gravity of corruptive behaviors committed by him or her.

Like episodic-frame stories, thematic-frame stories can also be divided into several categories. News articles that focus on the fundamental mechanism or roots of corruption can be one type of the thematic frame. The news story titled, “Line Fuzzy between Finder’s Fee, Kickback” (*Chicago Tribune*, 15 October, 2006) is a good example. This article illustrates vividly to the readers how a so-called “finder’s fee” practice works behind the scenes, by using Rezko and Blagojevich cases as examples. Usually these types of articles need considerable effort to cover, thus some journalists are not willing to delve into such stories without forced pressure from the above editors in their news affiliations.

The second type of thematic frame is the article that suggests preventive or remedial actions against political corruption. For example, the article titled,“2011 Reforms Take Aim at Old Scandals” (*Chicago Tribune*, 31 December, 2010) deals with the necessity and impact of some reforms that were suggested to eradicate corruption. Articles that cover anti-corruptive campaigns undertaken by the civil groups can also be subsumed in this category. These articles usually include the role of the laws regulating the issuing of licenses, the reduction of the discretion of the public officials, and the necessity of regulations curbing corruption.

News articles having thematic frame also tend to deal with the broad influences over society that result from corruption scandals. For example, the news article titled “In Teaching Government, Theory Beats the Reality” (*Chicago Tribune*, 1 June, 2008) analyzes how the rampant corruption scandals affect high school students’ perception.

According to the article, students justify cheating on exams or assignments by pointing toward dishonest public figures, and such prevalence of corruption certainly has the potential to skew the viewpoints of some students. By emphasizing the fact that political corruption even affects students' attitudes, this article has succeeded in awakening people to the serious dangers of corruption.

To sum up, many episodic articles interpreted the scandals in strongly populist terms, emphasizing the criminal and sensational aspects of a corrupt politician's individual behavior. It was also found that episodic news stories often dramatized corruption scandals by vividly portraying the process corruption scandals went through. This dramatization often leads to the loss of systemic approach to corruption. Episodic articles were also found to frequently depend on a clear dichotomy, considering public prosecutors as "brave heroes" and depicting corrupt officials as "amoral villains." This is a kind of ethical approach. Many episodic articles claim that the problem belongs to the sphere of ethics, not to the institutional, structural, or societal sphere.

More than anything else, episodic frame stories have a tendency to be devoid of a clear definition of corruption. Many episodic articles use the term "corruption" merely in connection with crimes committed by public officials ignoring the diverse dimensions of corruption such as individual cases of corruption, officials involved in corruption, the different impacts of corruption, official reports on corruption, press releases on corruption, anti-corruptive measures, public opinion polls, and suggestions from the experts. Instead, political corruption is portrayed as simply one of the crimes that can happen in our neighborhood. Such coverage routine in the media may signal public

officials and ordinary individuals that corruption is inconsequential if only they can avoid detection.

How might the predominance of thematic frame stories over the episodic frame stories influence how people assign responsibility for corruption? First, this kind of coverage on corruption may undermine the sense of political efficacy of citizens (Gradel, Simpson, & Zimelis, 2009). It is axiomatic when one feels incompetent about social or political issues, one is less likely to express one's opinion or go out to vote. The spread of episodically-framed news may also erode the support and trust of citizens in democracy, in public institutions in general, and the political class in particular (Johnston, 1986).

Second, episodic frame news may confuse people's judgment for causal responsibility of corruption. Iyengar (1987), through an experimental study, found that causal responsibility was significantly influenced by media framing. When poverty was described in thematic terms, individuals assigned responsibility to societal factors -- failed governmental programs, the political climate, economic conditions, and so forth. Conversely, when news coverage of poverty dwelled on particular instances of poor people, individuals were more apt to hold the poor causally responsible. From this, we may draw a conclusion, if tentative, that episodic frame stories lead readers to assign responsibility of corruption to individual factors, while thematic frame stories are connected to societal factors.

Conclusions and Suggestions

This research has found some significant results. First, although the number of media reports about political corruption scandals is considerable, local newspapers typically do not engage in meaningful corruption debates. Second, media coverage tends to employ the episodic approach, ignoring the wider context in which the corruption scandal has occurred. This bias leads to an illusion that the corruption problems will disappear when the perpetrators are convicted. And by obscuring the connections between an individual corruption scandal and its context of occurrence, episodic news trivializes public discourse on fundamental reasons of the scandal. Third, popular perceptions about corruption are distorted due to the type of media coverage received. Citizens would not be active in anti-corruption debates if the information they obtain from the media puts little emphasis on the backgrounds, consequences, and solutions of corruption and no active public participation is encouraged.

Political corruption is less a question of individual morality, but more the consequence of structural causes such as the ever increasing voracity of political parties, the symbiotic relationship between corporates and politicians, and the lack of change of government. Della Porta and Vannucci (1999) demonstrated well the systemic dimension of corruption: “[C]orrupt exchanges facilitates the emergence of new norms, and these norms make corruption more and more attractive. Perverse mechanisms produce and reproduce the resources necessary for corruption” (p. 255-256). In other words, corruption tends to revolve around vicious circles. Consequently, the essential remedies and solutions for corruption should be thematic and structural in nature instead of episodic. The news stories in Illinois papers did not center on the

structural variables that nurtured political corruption, but on the individual, moral, and ethical problems. The protagonists of the story were not structural entities such as the political system or the party structure, but concrete subjects such as the politicians investigated. The media did not bother to throw light on the structural factors favoring corruption, preferring to concentrate almost exclusively on the lack of professional ethics among politicians.

The preponderance of the episode frame over the thematic frame has another serious political repercussion in that it discourages citizens from attributing responsibility to government and public officials. Although it is often entertaining when the press goes on a feeding frenzy and topples a powerful politician, the public is seldom invited to think about larger questions of power, systemic corruption, or the possibility of participating actively in devising institutional reforms (Paletz & Entman, 1981). Rather, media coverage characterized by personalization and dramatization consistently marginalizes citizens and the vitality of democracy is threatened (Bennett, 1992).

What specific measures are needed in order to reduce the dominant use of episodic news frame by the media and to make them contribute to the curtailment of political corruption? This paper suggests two ways for this: the restoration of watchdog journalism and the reinforcement of professional standards of journalists.

Borner, Brunetti, and Weder (1995) argue that watchdog reporting is “potentially a highly effective mechanism of external control” against corruption. By constantly digging for information and by subjecting the government and officials to rigorous questioning, watchdog journalism can get over the routine of episodic framing and approach more closely to the essence of scandals. The watchdog press can make real policy and

personnel changes possible. It keeps democracy alive by forcing institutions and individuals to be accountable for what they do. It can raise the awareness of citizens about wrongdoing and abuse so that they demand such changes. Citizens feel empowered if their outrage over media exposés is reflected in public-policy changes. This sense of popular empowerment, in turn, leads to a more participatory and responsive democracy as well as more effective governance. By playing its watchdog role, the media help bring about reforms and in the long term, assist in creating a culture of civic discourse, transparency, and government accountability (Schmitt-Beck & Voltmer, 2007).

Another suggestion to foster the increase of thematic framing is that measures to raise professional standards of journalists should be adopted and implemented by the media. This means improving the level of professionalism in every area of journalism, let alone enhancing working conditions: training journalists in professional skills and standards; instituting awards for excellence in reporting; Supporting more funds for watchdog journalism; making media organizations more transparent about their editorial decision making process and the pressures and restraints on reporting; encouraging and supporting free and independent journalist unions and associations that keep watch on reporting. These can help raise the social status of watchdog journalists and thus may overcome the predominant tradition of episodic framing.

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