Pictured: Journalists participate in a training course run by the Myanmar Journalism Institute in Yangon, 15 March 2015, when opportunities were many and freedom of the press was improving.

How the West Helped (and Failed to Help) Myanmar TV Journalism, 2010-2021

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Abstract

This article describes the relationship between the new generation of Myanmar journalists, and the participants and donors from Europe, Australia, and North America that funded and trained these journalists from 2012 onwards. Written from the perspective of a European practitioner, it describes how Myanmar journalists, growing up in a country deprived of free media, learned to handle the new press freedoms from 2012 onwards, until the moment the Myanmar military generals ended their experiment with democracy, deciding it (and press freedom) had stopped suiting their interests. The article describes how Western trainers and coaches tried to help form a new tradition of journalism for the country and how this both succeeded and failed. The author, a Dutch media director and producer, worked for over 12 years with Myanmar journalists. Together they had their victories, when millions of people watched their investigative documentaries, and together they also had their failures.

A Background in the West

In the 1980s, communication science was still dominated by the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer and the "culture industry".[1] The general concept was that the mass media was used by elites to influence people into being docile citizens. In this view, the

[1] The term culture industry (or 'Kulturindustrie' in German) was first presented in 1944 by Horkheimer & Adorno in the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972, pp. 120—147). They claim popular culture is the standardized production of films, radio programs, magazines, etc. that is used to keep mass society passive.

media is a social-political instrument for governments and business conglomerates. When I studied at the University of Amsterdam in the mid-1980s, most of my lecturers had come up during the turbulent 1960s and were skeptical of authority. But we students were more practically inclined. From 1980 onward the Netherlands had been in an economic recession, and we prioritized our careers over ideological commitments. The development of new media was just about to explode, and there were increasing creative and business opportunities. Even though I decided to pursue a career in the media following my master's degree, I was influenced by my education and always harbored a fundamental distrust of large media organizations, both private and state owned.

Two years after I left university, I got my first job as a television journalist at the news department of RTL-Veronique.[2] This was the first commercial broadcaster in the Netherlands, so I was anxious to experience how private advertisers would influence the sector. Instead, I saw how television journalism was not so much hindered by governments or multinationals, but rather by the limitations of the journalists themselves, and the budget they had to work with. As a fresh journalist working at a fledgling news organization, I witnessed all kinds of mistakes and saw how personal relations sometimes influenced the news.

There was the time one reporter refused to get out of the bathtub in his Prague hotel because he claimed he had earned some time off from work. By doing so, he missed Václav Havel's famous speech at Wenceslas Square, ending communism in Czechoslovakia.[3] To make things even worse, his hotel was

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[2] RTL-Veronique was the Dutch subsidiary of the CLT (Compagnie Luxembourgeoise de Télédiffusion), the present RTL Group SA. This company has had commercial television stations in Luxembourg since 1954. When European broadcasting was liberalized from 1988 onwards, RTL expanded their operations to other European countries. The Dutch TV-station RTL-Veronique (now RTL4) started in 1989.

[3] On 23 November 1989, over 300,000 people gathered on Wenceslas Square as Havel, leader of the Civic Forum, presented a declaration on the movement's program. This led to the successful Velvet Revolution. Three weeks

situated on the very same Wenceslas Square. Another example is more personal; once, long before the internet was widely available, I played the wrong videotape during the daily news broadcast. I played images from a demonstration in Serbia during a story about a demonstration in Bulgaria. Both countries use a Cyrillic alphabet and I could not tell the difference. But the Serbian and Bulgarian viewers in my country sure could, and many called to complain to my editors. I learned the hard way what it means to start a news show and try to build the public's trust.

But for us at RTL-Veronique, being the newest journalists on the block also had its advantages. We were nimble. During the Gulf War (1990-1991), Iraqi president Saddam Hussein had a habit of giving regular 7 p.m. televised speeches. Our daily news show started at 7:30 p.m. That gave us very little time in which to report on the speeches. We had to first listen to the speech (in Arabic) and judge what the most newsworthy soundbite was, get the quote to a translator, edit the quote with subtitles and make sure the videotape (!) was ready in the studio downstairs before the news started, because it was often the opening story. The Netherlands public broadcaster would broadcast its own daily news report at 8 p.m., and even though it had more time than us, it still could not manage to edit and subtitle the quotes. Once when I watched its show, all the way at the end of its report the anchor read from a piece of paper: "This is just in, Saddam Hussein told the world..."—that was at 8:30 p.m., one hour after our news had the same quote, translated, as the opening of our bulletin and the presentation, fully prepared on autocue. The public broadcaster, which was 40 years older than our channel, seemed to us to be bureaucratic, slow, and arrogant.

During my three years working for that commercial station, I never experienced any influence from its owners, the government, or from powerful advertising companies. On the contrary, the many newly formed commercial television stations across Europe instead recognized that news is at the heart of any

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later communist rule in Czechoslovakia (now divided into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic) was over.

television station. This was especially true in the early 1990s, when the Iron Curtain fell, the Gulf War took place, the Soviet Union collapsed, and war erupted in former Yugoslavia—all in less than five years' time. Commercial television executives created adequate budgets for their news shows, understanding that if your channel's news is not credible, you have a serious problem establishing your overall brand. What really impacted newcomers to the news business was incompetent people doing sloppy jobs, reporters (such as myself) and desk editors without proper historical knowledge, and executive editors giving poor instructions. From this experience, I learned that good television news means journalists working under experienced seniors: editors who understand the stories, understand the context, but also understand the creative and technical possibilities and limitations of news production. I learned the importance of mentorship.

To Myanmar

This links the narrative to Myanmar, and to all the young men and women who wanted to become journalists after the democratization process started. Because of the history of their country, they did not have any institutionalized guidance from senior journalists and there was a lack of the kind of advice needed to learn the trade. Mentorship was sorely needed. In this deprived context, the white knights from Western countries, with all their amassed experience, came to save the day. Or did they?

After experiencing most aspects of news production, including being a war correspondent in Yugoslavia, I considered returning to university to do a PhD on bias in television journalism. But the lure to make lasting documentary films was greater. For the next two decades I worked in documentary film. In 2009 I was directing a series about press freedom in vulnerable countries and one of the episodes was about the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB),[4] at that time the biggest Myanmar media

[4] DVB started as a radio channel in 1992. In 2005 they were pushed by their donors to start a satellite television-channel.

organization working outside the country—based in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. Since then, I have worked with Myanmar journalists on documentaries for Dutch public television, international productions, and many projects with Burmese news agencies.

Television journalism is complicated, because it involves camerawork, editing, visual narratives, etc., and the combination of all these elements into one story. Thirty years ago, television journalism was an elite business. When I started my career in 1987, the equipment to make a story (camera, sound, editing, etc.) would set you back around half a million U.S. dollars. Now the same equipment (up to the 4K standard) can be bought for U.S. $5,000. That is a 99 percent reduction, the change in the value of the dollar not included. Today, kids are making wonderful TikTok videos on their phones. Of course, most TikTok videos are not prime examples of quality journalism, but with so many young people gaining experience telling visual stories, it is inevitable that new and differently skilled television journalists will continue to influence the visual language of the news in the future.

Because news production used to be so expensive, the pressure to improve quickly was enormous. When I worked for the RTL news show, I saw it professionalize rapidly in its first two years: rotten apples were kicked out and a couple of editors from the public broadcasting news department were lured away to make up for the lack of experience. Granted, this was under the pressure of the news explosion at the time, which I describe above, but still, when I began working with Myanmar organizations in 2009, I had the thought: if a modest commercial television station in Europe can change for the better, why did Myanmar's exile media organizations take so long to develop quality television news?

I think there are several reasons why television production was initially such an obstacle for Myanmar exile media. First, journalists need competition. Getting a scoop is the highest honor in the career of a journalist, but creative elements like special camerawork, undercover filming, and an original

(visual) approach of a story can be admired by one's peers as well. In Myanmar under military rule there has been little to no organic competition between private and public news agencies. Instead, there was competition between the three exile media organizations[5] (perhaps better described as trench warfare), in which getting the most money from the donors was sometimes the main objective, rather than reporting innovative news and getting a scoop.

Second, the country's audio-visual tradition (movies and television) has been on ice since the 1950s. Before the country's independence from the United Kingdom, the media was restricted by the imperatives of colonial rule. People in Myanmar lived in relative audio-visual isolation, while much of the world was inundated with such media, especially after the 1980s. Although most of the exile media journalists from Myanmar were living in Thailand, with a very vibrant television industry, they tended to ignore the Thai media environment. In Thailand I never met a male Myanmar journalist who spoke more than a few words of Thai, despite many having lived there for over a decade. Women were more likely to speak Thai, especially after Thai soap operas became popular with Myanmar audiences after 2012.

Third, most Myanmar media organizations had a tendency for 'Asian-style' (for lack of a better descriptor) top-down management. Top-down hierarchy is quite common elsewhere in the news industry, but editors also usually push their staff to display personal initiative. Furthermore, open criticism of management is a sacrilege in Myanmar. There were plenty of complaints in the pub after work, but not on the work floor.

These first three reasons are not hard to comprehend. But the fourth one is more subtle: Asian narratives do not necessarily fit contemporary (and perhaps also Anglo-Saxon) ways of storytelling. Television dictates a straightforward, assertive, and crystal-clear way of storytelling, without fear of stepping on someone's toes. These objectives are many times at odds with

[5] The three are DVB, Mizzima and the Irrawaddy.

common customs in Asia. (But to be clear, many top journalists, far better journalists than me, have worked for these exile media organizations that were, and still are in most cases, run by intelligent and highly motivated local journalists, with courage, determination, and good instincts.)

In 2010 the generals decided to release Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest.[6] I saw the first images while drinking *sapi*[7] at a bar on the Chinese border of Kachin State. My colleagues and I might have even had one or two cups too many that night. We hoped her release would change everything, for the country, but also for journalism. The generals were finally going to take democracy seriously. When DVB representatives went to the capital, Nay Pyi Taw, in 2012 for the first time to negotiate opportunities for free media in Myanmar and the possibility for their return to the country, they were truly amazed at how they were received. At the Ministry of Information,[8] they were only asked: "What do you want? How can we help you?" When I came across the DVB representatives returning from the capital the same evening, they were euphoric and could hardly believe what they had experienced that day.

There was freedom of the press for the first time, but that did not solve the problem of professionalization, or the lack of experienced leaders to supervise the impending explosion of media. Fortunately, Western donors, who have supported Myanmar's exile media for years, foresaw this. It was 2013, two years after the start of the democratization process. Exile media had settled in Yangon and money was released for countless training sessions and workshops. Every self-respecting donor had a jar of money for media training. And thousands of young people in Myanmar wanted to get into journalism.

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[6] The first images of people gathering at Aung San Suu Kyi's house were broadcast by DVB on 13 November 2010.

[7] Kachin beer fermented from purple rice.

[8] The meeting was in February 2012 with Minister of Information U Kyaw San and Ye Htut, the Director General of the Ministry of Information. Ye Htut later became Minister of Information.

I conducted several training programs and weekly courses on investigative journalism for the Myanmar Journalism Institute (MJI).[9] The problem was that many donors had very similar training programs to one another aimed at the new generation of journalists. At one point my favorite fixer and dear friend told me he would choose which journalism workshop to attend that day by checking the hotels that they were being held in. Different hotels have different catering and he liked to have the best lunch. Usually, he was available after lunch for working with me, as he skipped the afternoon (after lunch) program.

These many training opportunities came mostly from the Anglo-Saxon journalism tradition. Anglo-Saxon media from the UK and the U.S. dominates journalism globally, and news stories and television documentaries often follow a number of Anglo-Saxon rules of storytelling. Other big European countries with a long audio-visual tradition, like Germany, Italy, and France, claim to have their own style of television production. But if you look at their international outlets,[10] you can see they are in fact still largely modeled on their Anglo-Saxon contemporaries. The same goes for Chinese and Russian international news outlets, although they mainly use persuasive techniques of storytelling and have less respect for openness and the truth.

Anglo-Saxon journalism is a respectable tradition, but it embodies a superiority complex that marginalizes local traditions. I felt the reactions to this among the young journalists being trained at the MJI. They wanted to listen to the lessons, but at the same time they felt that the trainers failed to try and understand their country. These suspicions were justified. The Western media trainers I met in those days were often freelancers who simply needed jobs to pay for their stay in Asia. Some foreign trainers had been promoted to Myanmar-based jobs and

[9] This institute gave full-time and part-time training sessions for starting journalists and was co-founded by Deutsche Welle Akademie, a German NGO that provides training for journalists in several countries. Their budget comes from Germany's Ministry of Development Cooperation.

[10] The French international news channels are France 24 and TV5 Monde and Germany's international news channel is Deutsche Welle news.

were bitter about their experiences at their home offices. They vented their ill-will onto the trainees. The good ones in this cohort of trainers were those who tried to understand Myanmar and opened up their hearts to the country. Not infrequently, people in this group had an intimate relationship with a Myanmar person. That makes a difference, of course. My own way of really getting in touch with the young journalists was by putting a few words of Burmese in my class. Immediately the atmosphere in the group changed. "Hey, this man has a thing for our country, he's not just here for that generous daily allowance he gets."

Despite the problems I mention above, many young journalists became much wiser through the training sessions. There was plenty of work for them due to the boom in media outlets, so they were able to immediately put their new lessons into practice and develop into professionals. But for me it was not enough. I saw too big a gap between the talk of the Western trainers and the actual stories in the media. The development of TV journalism was going too slowly. Not to mention the development of investigative journalism, my specialty. That is why I changed tack and opted for the hands-on technique: guiding a small group of talented journalists in making investigative documentaries that expose the deeper layers of injustice and corruption.

I started out working with an exile media organization. After being an independent freelancer, paying people per day, I had to get used to the dynamics of a media organization, which sometimes have a different work ethic than freelancers, who are dependent on their next job and need to make their temporary employer happy. Quite a number of my new colleagues did not mind cutting corners and were very disappointed when asked to repeat a task more completely. One foreign producer of the first news talk-show in Myanmar, the multi-camera "DVB Debate",[11] recalled to me that the crew call for the first recording of the show was 9 a.m. on a Saturday. He told me the crew arrived

[11] DVB Debate was broadcast from 2013 till 2020. It was funded by USAID.

unwillingly at around 10 a.m., most of them with hangovers. When he asked: “Where is the equipment?” the reply was: “You didn’t tell us to bring the cameras”. This may sound like an isolated incident, but stuff like this happened. The DVB Debate went on to become a huge success, and after a few months the crew worked like a well-oiled machine. But this anecdote shows some of the healthy resistance to foreign producers. As a foreign media expert, you had to work to prove that your way was worthwhile.

A major obstacle to fostering a culture of balanced journalism in Myanmar was the premise, basic to Western journalists, of attempting to tell both sides to a story. This often manifested in Myanmar journalists’ unwillingness to seek out interviews with representatives of the military and its affiliates. This seemed to have two main causes. Why interview people who only lie about the ways in which they enrich themselves and make people suffer? The other, and more common, reason was fear of repercussions. In 2021, I was filming an elections meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi in the Ayeyarwady Delta. I worked with a local journalist to assist with travel and filming. While I was plowing through the crowd to find a spot to film from, my colleague saw a man who they recognized as one of their interrogators during their time as a political prisoner. Although the journalist was not on a wanted list at that time, he panicked and immediately fled the scene. He called later to apologize for his behavior, and I told him that I understood what happened, which was partly a lie, as it was hard for me to understand his emotional reaction. While we had worked together before, we still had to learn a lot about each other. The ghosts of the past were still omnipresent, although younger journalists were more assertive towards authority than the older generation, not having been affected by so many decades of oppression by military dictators. Documentaries featuring these culprits were much more appreciated than the more activist-style expository documentaries. However, preaching to the choir does not make for exciting video journalism.

One of the best journalists I worked with on these documentaries had spent years in prison. It took many days of work before he decided that an objective, rather than activist, approach was more important for good journalism. Of course, I could understand that he still had a bone to pick with the military, but in the end, objectivity was his strongest weapon. In 2019, we made a documentary in which no fewer than two top generals and two leading administrators from the previous Than Shwe regime were interviewed about the way low-ranking army veterans are treated by the Myanmar military. It became our biggest success, with more than six million hits on Facebook and YouTube. Myanmar people are actually begging for stories about their violent past and present, partly because during the democratization process there was a tacit agreement not to talk about the past. This denial of the extent of suffering and injustice is one of the reasons Myanmar is now once again an overt military dictatorship. If you ignore gross human rights, you lay the foundation for new human rights violations.

News media plays a crucial role in the collective processing of a dark past. In a documentary we produced about forced labor in Kayah State in the mid 1990s, we interviewed both military commanders, responsible for the execution of forced labor, and victims, mostly Karenni villagers. One of the forced laborers tells his story: How he tried to escape, how his friends died in front of him, about the punishments he received. In his last quote he thanks the filmmakers, with tears in his eyes, for giving him the opportunity to tell his story after 25 years. When you feel the pain, when a story touches your heart, is when the media is part of processing the past. I cannot emphasize enough how important trauma processing is for millions of people in Myanmar, especially now that the military has added another, even bloodier, tragic chapter to the country's history. When there's an opportunity, politicians, donors and the international community all want to move on and 'hit reset' to build a better country. But ignoring the past and denying victims a platform to express their grief and anger means you do not deal with the reasons for

the state the country is in. Especially when your country is one with severe structural social and economic inequality.

I am trained in Anglo-Saxon journalism with a Dutch twist. All I can do is train others the same way, with respect for local cultures and habits. Because the documentaries my team made were meant for a Myanmar audience, any international viewers were considered a bonus, and I had to trust the journalistic instincts of my colleagues. Only a Western fool thinks he understands the country better than the people who live there. I could still instinctively feel what stories were most needed (maybe you learn this over the years). I had the advantage of not being influenced by herd-journalism: when all the media jumps on one story at the same time. Sometimes my team wanted to go that way; even though we were ostensibly focused on long-form investigative documentaries, it was tempting to jump on every piece of raw meat that was the center of attention. I explained that in fact we should only be interested in a story after the herd had moved to another piece of raw meat. Investigative documentary needs time, it needs people to talk with reflection, and this usually happens only after the dust of the media storm settles.

Cooperation between Myanmar and Western journalists was often hindered by language barriers. Poor education under military rule meant only a few journalists spoke English well. My best colleagues learned English by themselves, though pronunciation was still a challenge. There is a subset of journalists—strangely enough, mostly men—that almost refuse to spend time learning English. My motto was always: a good Myanmar journalist knows English, because he or she always needs to be able to communicate with foreigners, and in international journalism, even in Asia, English is the lingua franca.

Language was also a problem when writing documentary voice-overs. Usually, we started with a Burmese narration, which was translated into English, edited and translated back into Burmese. A 27-minute documentary with an English voice-over became a 30-minute documentary with a Burmese voice-over. At first I thought this was inherent to Burmese grammar,

but after a while I discovered my colleagues just liked elegant writing. Sometimes viewers would comment: "That is very well written narration". Narration should not be badly written per se, but it should prioritize being direct, clear and short. In our line of work, you want to communicate to the widest Myanmar audience possible, which means to people who have not had much schooling. If you want to make literary art, you should not make investigative documentaries. I tried to convince my team to write plain and simple voice-overs but made little headway. Sometimes you just have to accept the position you're in.

Our project was only a small part of the professionalization of journalism in Myanmar. Independent journalism grew from non-existence into an enormous media offering, especially in print, in the early 2010s. But the joy was short-lived. The media sprawl soon proved to have no economic basis, and journalists found themselves in trouble for not covering all the bases in their stories, as they were pushed too hard by their bosses to score. At the same time, donors were phasing out their contributions to the media in Myanmar. That was perhaps the biggest mistake they could have made. They had good reasons for doing so, as the funds distorted competition and were addictive for media organizations. But all those smart people working for the donors should have known that the margins for start-up news organizations were very small and that running a serious TV news department needs support unless you have a big (international) company behind you (there are no such companies in Myanmar for in-depth journalism—they exist only for football and international formats like the Voice[12]). In the rest of Southeast Asia, critical and independent TV journalism is not at the top of the priority list either. When Mediacorp[13] launched its operations in Myanmar with a big party, it forgot to invite its own

[12] The Voice is an international format created by the Dutch company Talpa. It has franchises in more than 35 countries, including almost all the Southeast Asian countries, China, and Mongolia.

[13] Mediacorp is the Singaporean public broadcaster, founded in 1937. It has six tv-channels, including Channel News Asia.

Channel News Asia correspondent and her crew. That is how important Mediacorp considers its news channel to be.

The donors should have realized that independent television journalism in Myanmar cannot support itself. Not in Myanmar, and not in virtually any developing country. Western governments support serious journalism, especially documentaries and investigative journalism, but in Myanmar the new independent media had to make their own money, to reduce donor dependence, which the donors had created.

There was something else most donors failed to see coming: the coup d'état by Min Aung Hlaing. I am not a highly paid political adviser, but I could predict that after a period of ascendant democracy, there very well could be an army coup. That was only logical and had precedent in Myanmar and the wider region. On the night before the coup, I had a glass of wine with an experienced journalist in Yangon celebrating that the threat of a military coup was no longer on the table. The day before, Min Aung Hlaing had said that there was no question of a coup (just as Russia would not invade the Ukraine). We were all wrong. But those consultants and donors, in particular, should have known this, or at least kept the option open.

This error of judgment was not only made by the donors, but also by the Myanmar media itself. When I advised the management of DVB in 2018 to prepare an exit plan in case the military took power again, I was laughed at. Donors should have used their influence to compel media organizations to draft an exit strategy. They also should have intervened in the old-fashioned management culture across different media. The donors would say: "That is going too far. We cannot force our partners to do anything". This is understandable, but when I do a video edit with my Myanmar colleagues and I see a particularly bad or dangerous mistake, I don't say: "Would you like to think about that?" No, it's more like: "How could you make such a serious mistake?" That's how I was trained by my supervisors and that's how I raise my team members. It may not make them happy, but they know that I only strive for better documentaries and that I want to prepare them, willingly or unwillingly, for their own

future leadership. If they sometimes wake up at night sweaty and screaming because they had a nightmare about documentary editing, I say: "They have had a 'sustainable' change in their mindset".

Conclusion

This article is not a straight story you can put a ruler along. It is a summary of experiences over the last 12 years, in which a journalistic miracle happened in Myanmar, thanks in part to money and efforts from North America, Europe and Down Under. A period in which Myanmar journalists did amazing things (and sometimes messed up). Above all, this was a period in which, perhaps against our better judgment, we dreamed of a permanent situation of press freedom. Then came 1 February 2021, and everything was broken at once.

I need not elaborate further on the drama that unfolded after that evil day and how the generals in a Pavlovian response banned most media soon after the coup. What did the media have to do with the supposed 'election fraud' that was the reason for the coup? In fact, one of our journalists made a documentary about the shaky preparations for the 2020 elections, which, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, was pushed through by the incumbent National League for Democracy (NLD) government as they expected a big win. Yes, yes, politicians... What would we do without them?

The donors can now only make up for some of their mistakes by continuing to support Myanmar journalism wholeheartedly and engage the question of "How do you cover the resistance to the coup without openly supporting them?". How do you cover the activities of the National Unity Government, which seems to have a big problem with criticism? These are important matters in this military-created chaos and misery. There are already rumors about shrinking donor budgets for journalism and exiled media agencies fighting over donor money. This is a shame, as journalism is an effective weapon to undermine the military regime without bloodshed, and perhaps more importantly, an

instrument to critically monitor politicians during the next democratic period, if it comes. The colossal mistake of NLD MPs has been that they have not involved the population enough in the democratization process. Like the military, they told the people of Myanmar: “We are your parents, you are our children, and we will arrange everything for you”. Such an arrogant attitude not only underestimates the dynamism of ordinary people, especially those in Myanmar, but it also paves the way for corruption and despotism. And it is precisely honest journalism that is a powerful tool against military regimes, governments and opposition groups that are not so careful with the truth. Even more so in the times of ‘fake news’, because it is especially in the worst of times that people want, and deserve, to hear, see, and read balanced and unbiased stories that present as best they can the facts, without fiction.

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