ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Beyond Wartime Propaganda: Argumentation And Hostilities In The Age Of Information And Democracy

1. Short Abstract

The vogue currently enjoyed by the notion of a 'propaganda war' points to two assumptions as widely held as they are suspect: that war and argument are fundamentally incompatible; and that the overriding need to win a war demands and justifies an 'anything goes' type of spinning and manipulation. Such assumptions are unsupported by the history of warfare. They betray an inadequate understanding of war as continuation of political relations. And they fail in particular to take into consideration the specific historical context in which the anti-terror war is being waged. To win 'hearts and minds' in our age of information and democracy, wartime argumentation is the only effective and ethical means.

2. Long Abstract

A self-contradictory message is being conveyed by the sudden rise of 'propaganda war' as a voguish topic in the current campaign against international terrorism. While *propaganda's* newly gained respectability underscores the urgent need to win 'hearts and minds' as a top objective of the on-going fight, the historical connotations the term carries with it virtually deny any significant role, in the pursuit of that very goal, to a normatively regulated, reasoned discourse, which alone holds the key to the minds to be won over.

Two assumptions underlie such a message and explain its inherent incoherence: that war and argument are fundamentally incompatible, and that the overriding objective of winning the war demands and justifies an 'anything goes' type of spinning and information manipulation. Despite their prima facie reasonableness, both assumptions involve gross oversimplification of the rhetorical situation concerned. Historically, public debates over whether the differences between

conflicting parties are indeed beyond reconciliation and whether taking up arms is the only remedy for the clash of interests date back at least to the classical age. The very character of war as 'continuation of political relations', and the imperatives which the constant need to re-condition, regulate, and sustain such relations necessarily imposes, decide that behind-the-scenes, unpublicized public arguments would go on even or especially after the hostilities broke out.

While the absence of a generalizable interest between the warring parties would usually justify employing otherwise unethical rhetorical sleights of hand (e.g., disinformation, distorted communication) against each other or even as boosters for the morale of one's own side, wartime propaganda risks becoming more counterproductive than useful in our age of information, democracy, and globalization. The effectiveness of such propaganda is called into serious question when the Internet and the satellite TV are readily available throughout the world and attempts at one-sided control of information are rendered all but impossible. Trying to manipulate what the citizens know or to curtail their right to participate in what is basically a political process 'by other means' can only backfire (e.g. the Vietnam War) when the hostilities do not end quickly. A 'decent respect for the opinions' of an emerging global community and an emerging globalized public sphere dictates against using the war as an excuse for withdrawing from or suspending an on-going reasoned discourse among nations, cultures, civilizations.

Replacing 'wartime propaganda' with 'wartime argumentation', argumentatively engaging the diverse opinions and perspectives widely in circulation, making commitment not only to justifying the use of weapon, but to using bona fide justification as the most potent weapon of all: on these an ultimate victory against international terrorism may well depend.

3. The Text – The Problem with a 'Propaganda War'.
No sooner had the current War on Terror started than the U.S. administration began to wage concurrently a large-scale propaganda campaign aimed at winning the 'hearts and minds' of the Arab-Muslim world. Alarmed and frustrated by the sympathy which popular opinions in that part of the world appeared to be showing toward the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack, and keenly aware of the need to deny terrorists of their 'breeding ground' as the only effective way of eradicating the scourge of terror, the Bush administration launched what the *New York Times* terms the 'most ambitious communications effort since World War II' (Becker). Coordinated directly from the White House and led by an old Madison

Avenue hand, the PR offensive enjoyed unanimous political support from the American public, was endorsed by opinion-makers across the entire ideological spectrum, and had at its disposal every conceivable kind of resource, from access to influential mass media in the Middle East to the volunteered help from the Hollywood. Several months have passed since its inauguration in fall 2001, and yet, to the disappointment of many, the campaign does not seem to be producing the kind of result it has been expected to yield. A November 2001 *New York Times* column by veteran foreign affairs correspondent Thomas L. Friedman best captures the bitterness of the general disappointment. '[To] read some of the commentaries in the Arab press', Friedman writes, 'is to understand that bin Laden and Saddam Hussein still have a great deal of popular support. It is no easy trick to lose a P.R. war to two mass murderers — but we've been doing just that lately' ('One War, Two Fronts').

Friedman, who had been among the most enthusiastic champions of the communications offensive only a month or so earlier, now believed that '[the] most important way we win the public relations war is by first winning the real war' and that 'we can't win the PR war with polite arguments', which is as good as declaring that he had all but given up his hope of making people in the Arab-Muslim world see things differently through persuasive means, without resorting even to some indirect, situational kind of coercion. And yet although the 'real war' has long been won on the Afghan battlefield since that column of his was first published, the PR war, contrary to his prediction, remains bogged down in what increasingly looks like an exercise in futility. That even a shrewd and usually sharp-eyed observer on international affairs such as Friedman should have made an uncharacteristic about-face in his attitude toward the 'propaganda war' and should have been so off the mark even in his re-assessment of the situation should surprise no one. The PR campaign's lack of progress was perhaps preordained from the very beginning, when the entire project was first conceived. For in piecing together a hodge-podge of resources and efforts, from 'words, film, newspaper headlines, radio broadcasts, and food drops' to 'demonising the enemy, spinning the truth, censoring information' (Blackhurst), within the framework of a gigantic 'propaganda' offensive or counter-offensive designed to win 'hearts and minds', the campaign had made a fatal conceptual mistake which all but sealed its fate.

This is the error of assuming that 'hearts and minds' can be won through means

other than honest communication and reasoned persuasion, and that it is possible to secure the true adherence of an audience just by subjecting its members to a sophisticated, technically advanced form of propaganda. Propaganda, in its proper definition as an effort to induce a change of mind 'not through the give-and-take of argument and debate but through the manipulation of symbols and of our most basic human emotions' (Pratkanis and Aronson 5-6), certainly is capable of exerting tremendous influences on decision-making processes. Yet its primary techniques, such as 'spinning the truth' or 'censoring information', are meant to confuse rather than clarify, mislead rather than inform, bamboozle rather than enlighten. Its one-directional approach precludes the possibility of a genuine dialogic exchange. And in presupposing the gullibility of its target audience as one of its own conditions of possibility, it sows the seed of an outraged backlash later on destined to undo whatever short-term gains it may have succeeded in making. While it is often effective in momentarily disorienting its target audience and securing the kind of temporary attitudinal or behavioral change it desires, propaganda is eminently ill-fit for the kind of long-term or permanent reconfiguration of 'hearts and minds', which the need to deny bin Laden and his followers of their 'breeding ground' would demand.

The short-sightedness of thinking about all non-military efforts against terror in terms of propaganda is demonstrated, ironically, in the dubious effects which a right move by the U.S. administration seems to be producing. Instead of merely applying pressure on domestic and foreign media to exercise self-censorship concerning al-Qaeda's propaganda, the administration wisely adopts the policy of delivering a live rebuttal on Arab airwaves each time a bin Laden tape is aired by al-Jezeera TV station. For the implementation of this policy, it has introduced what the *Time Magazine* hails as a 'new secret weapon' to 'the propaganda war', an Arabic-speaking former U.S. ambassador to Syria by the name of Christopher Ross, known, according to the same magazine, for his 'considerable experience and powers of persuasion in the Arab world'. Ross's performance is very positively assessed on this side of the Atlantic. The way the *Time Magazine* describes it, his 'rapid-fire real-time Arabic response – he was interviewed live within two hours of Bin Laden's broadcast – certainly gives bin Laden and the Taliban a run for their PR money', and '[anecdotal] reports from the region suggest Ross's rebuttal went over well with middle-class Arab audiences' ('The War for Muslim Hearts and Minds'). A very different evaluation, however, is being offered by Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said, who in a commentary

published in *Al Ahram*, a leading Egyptian weekly, criticizes Ambassador Ross for offering only 'the standard U.S. government issue' in the 'long statement' he read and for '[choosing]', in response to sensitive follow-up questions about U.S. presence and policy in the Middle East, 'to insult [his Arab audience's] basic intelligence' by persisting in his line that 'only the US had the Arabs' interests at heart'. 'As an exercise in propaganda', Said concludes, 'Ross's performance was poor of course; but as an indication of the possibility of any serious change in US policy, Ross (inadvertently) at least did Arabs the service of indicating that they would have to be fools to believe in any such change' ('Suicidal Ignorance').

Said's perspective and assessment are, needless to point out, as interested as that of the *Time Magazine's.* Yet his complaints, supposedly on behalf of the Arab TV audience, against Ambassador Ross's alleged failure to take their basic understanding and perception seriously are not inconsistent with the role Ross is meant to play, i.e., a 'weapon' in a 'propaganda war', and with the character of his mission as a counter-propaganda move. As such, making sure the official line would prevail intact is necessarily Ross's overriding concern, and the communication process of such a 'live interview' is in no sense informed with a real interest in the kind of give-and-take with the audience that characterizes reasoned persuasion. Ambassador Ross, in other words, has no use for argumentation on such occasions, at least not for the kind which argumentation theorists have long held up as the norm for communicative discourse. The 'use of argumentation', Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca famously observe, 'implies... that value is attached to gaining the adherence of one's interlocutor by means of reasoned persuasion, and that one is not regarding him as an object, but appealing to his free judgment'. It also means a 'readiness to see things from the viewpoint of the interlocutor, to restrict oneself to what he admits, and to give effect to one's own beliefs only to the extent that the person one is trying to persuade is willing to give his assent to them'. 'Every justification', the two scholars go on to quote E. Dupréel as stating, "is essentially a moderating act, a step toward greater communion of heart and mind' (55).

Given the widespread dissemination of this general understanding of argumentation as the only way toward a genuine 'communion of heart and mind', and given also the well-established association of 'propaganda' with highly negative notions such as 'deception', 'misrepresentation' and 'manipulation', it is puzzling why anyone should choose to dub a serious effort to win hearts and

minds as a 'propaganda war', and why a patently illicit concept such as 'propaganda', one that has traditionally been reserved for the 'bad guys', should be enjoying the kind of popularity among intelligent and righteous opinion makers in the West. While commonsense would seem to suggest that the very announcement of one's intent to convert someone else to a new perspective through 'propagandist means' would instantly doom that effort, Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. ambassador to the U.N., apparently is not even aware of the possibility that this could be a problematic or counterproductive course of action when he starts an opinion piece in the *International Herald Tribune* with the following words:

Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or, if you really want to be blunt, propaganda. Whatever it is called, defining what this war is really about in the minds of the billion Muslims in the world will be of decisive and historic importance ('The Anti-terrorists Are Losing the Battle of Ideas').

Lumping together everything from 'public affairs' to 'psychological warfare' under the rubric of 'propaganda', and prescribing it as the means for 'defining what this war is really about in the minds of the billion Muslims', Holbrooke's comments are at once confusing and revealing. For in failing to make some distinctions of vital importance to the kind of communication he is talking about, he may inadvertently lead us to a second dubious assumption as the true culprit of the problematic situation.

Conspicuously absent from the program Holbrooke outlines here is an effort to distinguish between the 'billion Muslims' on the one hand and the small gang of 'enemy combatants' on the other; between those to be won over with reasoned persuasion to a justified viewpoint and a just cause, and those to be crushed and eliminated through military actions; between honest and credible public communications aimed to promote an ever increasing 'communion of heart and mind', and a 'psychological warfare' designed to confound, disorient and demoralize members of terrorist organizations so that they can be more easily disposed of militarily. By failing to make these crucial distinctions, whatever effort made in the name of 'public diplomacy' or 'public affairs' risks losing its credibility completely, for the simple reason that people affected would tend to take it only as a fancier way of referring to what in effect is a campaign to hoodwink and mislead them. The 'billion' people in the Arab-Muslim world are likely to be further alienated when they find themselves treated as targets of the same psychological warfare against members of al-Qaeda and its allies. While it

does not take special expertise to see these as the most probable outcome of the on-going 'propaganda campaign', all indications point to a deeply entrenched belief closely associated with the notion of a war as what has prevented sophisticated observers like Holbrooke and Friedman from seeing the situation as it really is.

Is War Compatible with Argumentation?
This is the belief that war is fundamentally incompatible with argumentation, and the overriding demand to win the war at all costs would justify an 'anything goes' type of spinning and information manipulation and would rule out the utility, throughout the war, of a normatively regulated, reasoned discourse as an appropriate mode of communication. This belief is not without its prima facie justification, especially if one has in her mind the World War II kind of total wars in which nations are engaged in a mortal combat against one another and the survival of entire peoples is at stake. Under those grim circumstances, indeed, one would be crazy to insist on, in Friedman's words, 'polite arguments' as the most appropriate form of public discourse for dealing with the citizens of an enemy state or even for reaching a national consensus on issues of policies or strategies. And yet, one has only to glance over the history of warfare to understand that even within that kind of horrible situation argumentation of one form or another persists. It never ceases to be useful. And the role it plays even in that kind of situation, though less visible, remains just as vital and indispensable.

If Thucydides's historical reconstruction is not to be rejected lightly, public arguments were being staged all through the Peloponnesian War. The open debate at a Spartan assembly, first between the Corinthians and the Athenians, and then internally between the majority of Spartans and their king Archidamus, led to Sparta's decision to declare war on Athens and the beginning of hostilities that were to last for several decades (Thucydides 1.67-1.88). Even the Peloponnesian War's violent outbreak did not spell the end to reasoned persuasion. Rather, arguments and debates continued to be organized throughout the entire course of the conflict, as the basis for settling almost any conceivable kind of public issues related to the conduct of war (e.g., 337-3.49; 4.17-4.22). Lest this be dismissed as a semi-fictional anomaly, there is no lack of well-documented occasions in even modern world wars where argumentation was used as the chosen mode of communication. One might cite the intensive argumentative exchanges among members of the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Council of

Ministers following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand on the eve of World War I (Keegan, 1999, 54), or the internal American debate over the unconditional surrender policy concerning Japan, which took place in the spring of 1945 and pitted the 'retentionists', those who favored retaining the imperial system of Japan as an incentive for its acceptance of a virtual unconditional surrender, against the 'abolitionists', who saw Japanese militarism and the warrior system as rooted in the Imperial system and argued strongly against keeping it as part of the deal for bringing peace to Japan (*Frank Downfall,* 215-221).

Even though the timing of these two cases, at the beginning and the concluding stage of a major war respectively, would disqualify them as an adequate basis for a broad generalization on wartime argumentation, one has every reason to believe that behind closed doors policy makers and military staff members never ceased to debate one another over strategic issues and the choice of general courses of action throughout both wars, that if anything, the grave national crisis confronting members of such a behind-the-scenes 'debate club' would tend to reduce, if not entirely eliminate, incentives and justification for partisan bickering or ideologically inspired political propaganda. Regardless of their pre-war affiliations or associations, those involved in the internal discussion simply cannot afford any more to continue spinning the truth, controlling information or misrepresenting the situation they knew of. There can be no 'business as usual'. An imposed imperative for argumentation in the most strict sense of the term would necessarily have brought about an entirely different pattern of communication behavior among the discussants. If argumentation suffers quantitatively during total wars, as a result of a dramatic reduction of the number of people actually involved in it or of the occasions deemed appropriate for it, it gains qualitatively where it is allowed to continue.

The WWI- or WWII-like, 'total', zero-sum, annihilation kind of war, moreover, is just one particular, and not necessarily the most representative type of warfare. Any survey of the history of war-making would show, as Clausewitz points out in a discussion on the 'ends to be pursued' in a violent conflict in his classical study of warfare, that wars 'do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat'. Rather, they range from '*the destruction of the enemy's forces, the conquest of his territory, to a temporary occupation or invasion... and finally to passively awaiting the enemy's attacks*' (94, italics original). If argumentation in its more discreet and restricted form should continue to perform its vital function even during the two

World Wars, one can easily imagine how much larger its scope of application, how much higher its visibility, must be under the more relaxed circumstances of a limited war or of a 'cold war' as Clausewitz has defined here – one in which the belligerents simply find it to their best interest to adopt the approach of 'passively awaiting the enemy's attacks'.

Clausewitz, however, would have scoffed at these pragmatic attempts to argue for the notion of a 'wartime argumentation'. As he sees it, there is a deeper, more fundamental, hence far potent reason with which to give the lie to the assumption that war and argument are mutually exclusive. For war, in the final analysis, is no more than a means to an end. And that very end to be served by whatever military action one takes is always politics or 'policy', which Clausewitz believes should be the unifying principle for conceptualizing and understanding a violent inter-group conflict in all its 'contradictory' manifestations:

This unity lies in *the concept that war is only a branch of political activity; that it is in no sense autonomous...* the only source of war is politics – the intercourse of governments and peoples; but it is apt to be assumed that war suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own. We maintain, on the contrary, that war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means... In essentials that intercourse continues, irrespective of the means it employs. The main lines along which military events progress... are political lines that continue throughout the war into the subsequent peace. How could it be otherwise? Do political relations between peoples and between their governments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Is war not just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic. (605, italics original)

From Clausewitz's insight that war is 'simply a continuation of political intercourse', that '*in essentials* that intercourse continues', and that war is just 'another form of speech or writing' for the expression of those 'political relations between peoples' that always exist, with its 'logic' identical to that of its counterpart 'genres' in peace time, one cannot but derive the conclusion that the normatively regulated, reasoned persuasion as a key component of the pre-war 'political intercourse' in any normally functioning society would *as a rule* endure, just as does its less reputable double, the strategically oriented, manipulative type of communication. The conclusion is entailed by the imperative to continue the kind of compromise-making and consensus-building that defines 'political

intercourse' as such. It is presupposed also by the need to articulate and sustain whatever shared interests there may still remain after the breakout of a war. And it receives corroboration from any up-close look into how wartime communication among the parties involved tends to be conducted. Political scientist Charles Reynolds in his study of the politics of war, for example, directs our attention to the persistence of the normative as a key component in the decision-making by warring states:

An important aspect of political decision-making [during a war]... is the assessment of the likely consequences of a contemplated action in terms of countering action. Expectations of proper action are central to the underlying reasoning. What is deemed 'proper' action may have a normative component in that the adversary state may be expected to conform to constraints of a legal, moral, ethical as well as of an expedient, character... the use and threat of violence in this context is within a framework of rules that amounts to a common rationale that broadly has a restraining influence. The constraints that hold here, if indeed they do, are normative rather than material. (227)

Wartime Argumentation in the Age of Information and Democracy
Those unspoken rules and tacitly binding 'legal, moral, ethical' norms Reynolds refers to do not, of course, function merely as 'restraining influence' on the reasoning and the decision-making per se. They must necessarily also constitute the basis of, and impose restraints on, the kind of discursive exchanges indispensable to the decision making process, turning those exchanges into what we would call argumentative interactions. Knowing this, according to Reynolds, is 'of more than a passing interest to the citizens' affected by decisions about war and peace, and is hence of crucial importance to democratic politics. For if citizens of a democracy are excluded from 'participation in or even knowledge of preparations for war' and precluded from a 'genuine knowledge of policy and its assumptions', they could 'fall easy prey to political manipulation', ending up having 'little choice in decisions to go to war' (264). To base such decisions on the consensus of an informed public, there is no way the government of any democracy could afford to rig and distort the political communication process through the release of 'a judicious mixture of selected information' or by making 'a bogus appeal to commonly held values and political beliefs', as Reynolds takes many governments of Western democracies to task for practicing during the Cold War period (264). Trying to manipulate what the citizens know or to curtail their right to participate fully in what is basically a political process 'by other means'

would cause enormous harm to the democratic credentials of the government or administration concerned. And it is ill-advised even from a practical point of view: as what happened during the Vietnam War vividly illustrates, going to war without first achieving a genuinely informed, argumentatively induced, and rationally and morally justified national consensus is more than likely to backfire when the hostilities do not end quickly.

The imperative that such a consensus by a well-informed public be achieved, as an indispensable condition for a democracy to wage and engage in war, throws light on yet another highly questionable assumption underlying the ill-conceived 'propaganda' campaign: this time, it is the hopelessly outdated belief that separating a domestic discourse from a 'for international audience consumption only' discourse remains a possibility in our age of the Internet, satellite TV and globalized information network. For no one who thinks otherwise and who sees no way to compromise the demand for both a fully informed domestic public and a publicly justified course of action concerning war and peace would never have cast their vote or vote of confidence for that campaign in the first place. With the instant and global-reaching communication long a reality, to inform the domestic audience is to inform a world-wide audience, and, conversely, to withhold, control and otherwise manipulate information for bin Laden and his followers is to do so, to a significant extent, to the domestic audience as well.

A case in hand is Pentagon's decision to set up the Office of Strategic Influence and then to have it closed down hastily after news about the existence and operation of this shadowy office was leaked to the press. Meant to be the U.S. Defense Department's special contribution to the 'propaganda war', the short-lived Office took up the task of 'planting false stories in the foreign press and running other covert activities to manipulate public opinion', through efforts that were to include 'using a mix of truthful news releases, phony stories and e-mails from disguised addresses to encourage the kind of news coverage abroad that the Pentagon considers advantageous' ('Managing the News'). This, of course, was not the reason that its program was terminated abruptly. Nor was it even a gradual realization that, as the *New York Times* observes, '[such] promiscuous blending of false and true can only undermine the credibility of all information coming out of the Pentagon and other parts of the government as well ('Managing the News'). Rather, what was instrumental in Pentagon's sudden change of mind was more likely its awareness that 'a report on the Agence France-Press wire or

aired on Al Jazeera will, especially in the age of the Internet, appear in the U.S. media soon enough', and its claim that it lied only 'overseas' was utterly indefensible ('Artifice of War'). U.S. laws ban any government agency from 'undertaking propaganda activities in America'. The Defense Department could thus 'fall foul of the law if stories placed by the unit are picked up by the American media and later found to have been false' ('Pentagon "Ready to Lie" to Win War on Terror').

What this case has demonstrated is that with the collapse of the domestic/foreign or the internal/external dichotomy in communication, as a result of technological advances and of the accelerated process of globalization, those who wish to set up and run a two-track system that combines domestic argumentation with overseas propaganda have been undercut conceptually. Even more telltale is that classified formation about the secretive Pentagon office 'appeared to have been leaked', according to *London Times* Washington correspondent Damian Whitworth, 'by Pentagon officials who fiercely oppose [the program] and hope to ensure widespread outrage at home and abroad and increased scepticism about US statements on the War on Terror, especially in countries where they are expected to have an impact' ('Pentagon "Ready to Lie" to Win War on Terror') . That well-placed and well-informed domestic recipients of the kind of misinformation the 'propaganda war' machine has generated should hope to 'spread outrage' not just at home, but abroad adds further evidence to the fast disappearance of the distinction between the 'home' and the 'foreign' front as far as communication is concerned. It calls attention in particular to the intensity of the resentment which reducing consumers of information to objects of propaganda has aroused even in war time.

Or particularly during war time. For it is in the proper management of 'personality and personal relations', as Clausewitz tells us, that the key to a quick success in war efforts may lie:
One further kind of action, of shortcuts to the goal, needs mention: one could call them argument *ad hominem*. Is there a field of human affairs where personal relations do not count, where the sparks they strike do not leap across all practical considerations? The personalities of statesmen and soldiers are such important factors that in war above all it is vital not to underrate them... It can be said... that these questions of personality and personal relations raise the number of possible ways of achieving the goal of policy to infinity. To think of these

shortcuts as rare exceptions, or to minimize the difference they can make to the conduct of war, would be to underrate them. (94)

Perhaps keenly aware of their potentials for '[raising] the number of possible ways of achieving the goal of policy [i.e. the end of war or that of which war is a mere continuation in other means] *to infinity*', Clause does not specify what he exactly had in mind when he put down these somewhat ambiguous words. He might well be talking about addressing the 'statesmen and soldiers' on both camps and taking measures both to boost the morale of one's own side and to demoralize the enemies simultaneously. One thing, however, is clear: that by 'argument *ad hominem*' he does not refer to that fallacious, deceptive kind of reasoning we use it to signify nowadays. Rather, he means it to be 'arguments' that truly appeal to human psyche and effectively promote the right kind of human relations. For him, a wartime argumentation (as an amoral concept) is something that 'it is vital not to underrate'. For us today, both moral and strategic imperatives would dictate that we substitute a wartime argumentation to the on-going but non-productive 'propaganda war', as the only true 'shortcut' to the goal of rooting out terrorism.

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