ARE NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES POSITIVELY INFLUENCING DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION? EVIDENCE FROM THE 2008 ELECTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

This research is a case study analysis of the 2008 national elections in Zimbabwe. The elections are considered crucial in the history of the country because long-time President Robert Mugabe suffered an unprecedented defeat at the hands of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai in the first of the two rounds of voting. This study presupposes the view that as digital technologies become more accessible and affordable, more people are able to easily coordinate, organise and advance their interests. It aims to critically examine the overall role played by the Internet in propelling democratic reforms in Zimbabwe, specifically focusing on its role during the 2008 elections. The major question in the research pertains to the assumed use of new media technologies by Zimbabwean exiles to channel pro-opposition information into the country, effectively leading to President Mugabe's losing. The paper refutes, based on empirical interviews conducted with Zimbabwean expatriates and immigrants living in the UK as well as a sample of locally based Zimbabweans, the notion that new media technologies helped the opposition Movement for Democratic Change see off Mugabe in the elections.

I. Introduction

This paper seeks to answer two key questions: Did the Internet in broad terms, and online news media specifically, play a role in Mugabe's election loss to Morgan Tsvangirai, and if so, then to what extent, how and with what impact? Furthermore, in what way and with what success and potentiality is the Internet influencing and enhancing democratic reforms in Zimbabwe? The research focuses on the first round of voting won by Tsvangirai – and not the run-off of 27 June 2008, which Badza (2009) dismisses as "inexcusably flawed and therefore discredited, particularly by the West" (p. 149). The study's initial hypothesis was based on the notion that, facing a grim future because of a struggling economy back home and angry that Mugabe had denied them the right to vote, Zimbabweans abroad hammered friends and relatives with anti-Mugabe messages. It is in this context that this research is dedicated to proving or disproving the contention that the largely Britain-based community of Zimbabweans, deliberately or not, used the Internet as a media tool to discredit the Mugabe government and encouraged relatives back home to vote for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

The introduction of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) powered principally by the ever-increasing use of Internet and mobile phone networks and based on their perceptible potential provides an excellent opportunity for changing the operations of political landscapes in Africa and beyond. The digital media's potential is indeed detectable. In 2009 alone, there were an estimated 2.2 billion mobile phones in the developing world and 305 million computers (Governance and Social Development Research Centre, 2010). This research questioned and sought answers to the view that widespread exposure to online news could have promoted citizen participation in the 2008 election and that the Internet was used effectively as a platform for political change. Under e-democracy, participating citizens have the opportunity to use information and communications technologies to influence a political

process. Indeed, cyber democracy could be seen as an essential element of free expression that could be used in Zimbabwe or elsewhere as a building block of public participation. Loader (2001) argues that the ICT revolution has offered citizens a chance to engineer change in democratic institutions and practices. Thus, the new media, just like the voters, could play a critical role in influencing political and governmental change. Is such a scenario applicable to the Zimbabwe case?

II. Methodology: Voices in the Diaspora

I resolved to carry out 50 interviews, 25 of which were questionnaire-based and the other 25 in person, with Britain-based Zimbabweans. In Zimbabwe, I also conducted 20 interviews with policy-makers and politicians, journalists and members of the NGO community, as well as Zimbabweans with relatives living abroad, in a bid to corroborate hypothetical conclusions of the Internet's contribution with realistic assessments on the ground. Engaging them would serve to verify or reject the hypothesis that Zimbabweans in the diaspora made use of their exposure to the Internet to discredit Mugabe in the 2008 elections, leading to his losing. To ensure accuracy, I endeavoured to interview people from across the political, educational and racial divide. To be more precise, students currently studying in the UK on a Zimbabwean government scholarship, a Zimbabwean diplomat, Zimbabwean professors lecturing in UK Universities, nurses and factory workers, as well as undocumented Zimbabweans living in the UK were all interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with former white farmers, representatives and supporters of the Movement for Democratic Change in London, Zimbabwean musicians and several Zimbabwean journalists. In Zimbabwe, random selections of people with relatives abroad were used, as well as representatives of all of the country's ten provinces, even though they were not necessarily related to Zimbabweans interviewed abroad.

The participants were asked to confirm whether their exposure to new media sites and Zimbabwean-run mass media outlets such as *Newzimbabwe.com* and *The Zimbabwean* had

influenced their political decisions in advising their relatives back home to vote for Tsvangirai. Newzimbabwe takes a tabloid slant in reporting its news, which is largely focused on Zimbabwean sports, entertainment and political news. To improve its competitive market position, it also unveiled a print version in 2007, with the distribution focused on the UK. The increasing significance of *Newzimbabwe.com* among Zimbabweans in the diaspora may be measured by the contributions of op-ed pieces by prominent Zimbabweans including ZANU PF minister Jonathan Moyo, businessman Mutumwa Mawere, and emerging academics such as Alex Magaisa. *The Zimbabwean*, whose editor is one of the severest critics of Mugabe and his regime, has also changed the Zimbabwean media landscape since it was officially launched in the UK in 2005. Unlike *Newzimbabwe.com*, which is chiefly targeted at the diaspora, *The Zimbabwean*'s print edition is distributed on the streets of Harare. In 2008, it added a sister publication to its stable, *The Zimbabwean on Sunday*. The editor, Wilf Mbanga, is a veteran journalist, who has relied chiefly on people with no journalism background for much of the paper's content. Mbanga also pays tribute to advanced technologies, which make it possible for his "reporters" to send news quickly to his base in England. In this connection, some have questioned the reliability of news packages supplied by people without formal journalism backgrounds or training.

While emigration figures are certainly contested, since 2000 an estimated three million Zimbabweans have left the country seeking greener pastures in countries such as Britain, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa (Molokele, 2009). During the ten-year political crisis, remittances from the diaspora to family members in Zimbabwe to pay rent, buy food and cover school tuitions contributed significantly to keeping the country going, as the formal economy shrank and unemployment soared (United Nations Development Programme, 2010 Please add to the references). Under Zimbabwean election laws, nationals living abroad, as noted already, were and still are not allowed to vote. Despite this setback, this research

assumed that Zimbabweans living abroad still played a crucial role in Mugabe's losing. While the rise and overall popularity of the anti-Mugabe sites may have played a significant part in his defeat, this study also sought to investigate the extent to which these websites were contributing to democratic participation in Zimbabwe. Given that Zimbabweans abroad had more exposure to the Internet, did they promote the opposition's campaign messages while discrediting Mugabe who enjoyed privileged exposure in the tightly controlled government media in Zimbabwe?

III. Politics in the Digital Age

With prospects for independent journalism diminishing due to the government's media-unfriendly laws (Mhike, 2009), several Zimbabweans in the diaspora set up mostly pro-opposition web-based magazines. Since 2000, these web-based magazines have freely and openly reported on issues affecting the country, allowing the nation's citizenry to participate in debates aimed at finding solutions to problems at home. When a supposed authoritarian ruler loses an election, questions will be raised, especially when the defeat is the first in nearly 30 years of uninterrupted rule. That happened when President Mugabe lost the first round of voting in March 2008 to Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This research will question the extent to which, and with what impact, the opposition benefited from openly biased, anti-Mugabe websites, which appeared to have outfoxed the perceived repressive media laws.

Political parties have increasingly turned to computer technologies since the 1980s, both for internal organisational purposes as well as for direct communication with members and voters (Lusoli, Ward, & Gibson, 2002). In today's globalised world, the growth of digital media is bringing about fundamental changes in the way people think and act. ICTs have radically changed the way cultures, economies, governments, and human beings interact with each other. Similarly, the development of global information and communication

infrastructures has briskly transformed ways in which knowledge and content are created, produced, and distributed. In addition, recent technological innovations are rapidly changing political and democratisation processes across the world. To that effect, Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors propound that "technologies have great implications for the content as well as the social relations through which communication is organized" (Meyer, & Moors, 2006, p. 7).

Scholars such as Wasserman (2011) have hailed the ICT revolution for its ability to facilitate political participation and create social change across the continent. On the other hand, political decisions, observes Ott (2011), tend to be reached through small-group, face-to-face communication, and that fact is set to remain despite the advent of the Internet. Nevertheless, Ott (2011) believes the Internet allows the citizenry to challenge the status quo. As shown throughout this research, that summation, it seems, best describes current trends and developments in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular.

Internet usage has indeed been on the upswing since the Dakar Declaration on the Internet and the African Media of 1997. According to Kagan (1999), the declaration specifically advocated the establishment of "a culture of online communications and ensuring African content on the Internet" (p. 1). Chari (2009) calculates that Africa has enjoyed unparalleled Internet growth of 1,030.2 percent between 2000 and 2008 compared with the average world growth of 280.6 percent (p. 8). Better still, Columbus and Heacock (forthcoming) declare without hesitation that despite economic difficulties the country has experienced over the last decade, Zimbabwe has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in sub-Saharan Africa. The continental growth of the Internet in Africa has forced others, such as De Bruijn (2008), to assert that high access to mobile phones has risen from 1 in 50 persons at the beginning of the 21st C to 1 in 3 just a few years later in 2008. Despite these promising figures, I observe that the Internet is still very much controlled and accessed by members of an elite club, most of whom live in the major cities, thereby excluding the rural folk from participation. Buttressing

this viewpoint is Nyaira's (2009) assessment that "the only problem in using online media for a country such as Zimbabwe, and indeed much of Africa and the Third World, is that these countries are not wired enough to allow the majority of citizens, who live in poor rural areas, to access the news and be part of the public discourse on events which affect them" (p. 12).

The term 'electronic democracy' takes its roots from studies by a pool of scholars, including Tsagaraousianou, Tambini, Brian (1998) and Chadwick and May (2003). Stanyer (2008) claims electronic democracy best describes the intermediary role of digital technologies in augmenting citizen participation in the political stratum: "The way news is accessed is also changing. News can be down-loaded as a podcast from news websites and watched at the audience's convenience" (p. 4). In view of these notable changes, I was quite certain that news distributed by Internet news sites was having an impact on the way the political battle was fought in Zimbabwe.

The flourishing use of the Internet has, for example, helped *Newzimbabwe.com* establish itself as one of the leading providers of Zimbabwe-focused digital news, drawing readers both in the West, Africa and beyond. Its concentration on social and political events has allowed it to provide the "Zimbabwean" viewpoint, as opposed to the mainstream news providers that Zimbabweans in the diaspora have become accustomed to in their various locations across the globe. While the majority of Zimbabwean emigrants have moved to Western countries, some have opted to stay within Southern Africa. Many, especially academics, have moved to Botswana, Namibia and Lesotho. However, the reliability of news produced in a fast-paced digital environment has forced others like de Jong (2011) to revisit and re-emphasise Aristotle's ethos paradigm, which credits image and reliability as fundamental cornerstones of any news organisation. Media representation of Mugabe, for example, has – as will be demonstrated in the later parts of this dissertation – not always been honest and accurate. De Jong (2011) concludes, "A good orator has to take three factors into consideration. First of all:

ethos. He must appear to be reliable and honest. Secondly: pathos. He has to be able to touch the emotions of the public. Finally: logos. His reasoning must be sound." The honesty and reliability of online news is one of the issues I have tackled in the final of the four empirical studies tied to this research.

It is assumed that in today's globalised world the emergence of new media technologies has jump-started the "democratization" of media content in terms of its creation, publication, distribution and consumption. Andrew Chadwick and Nick Anstead (2008) argue that the Internet's increasingly influential role in election campaigning and voter participation was long ago predicted in the mid-1990s. Alluding to the American case, Smith (2008) states that a majority of American adults went online in "2008 to keep informed about political developments and to get involved with the election." While not every Zimbabwean citizen has access to the Internet, I was quite convinced that the nation's expatriates had used their own access to spearhead campaigns that helped shape events at home. Electronic mailing lists, chat rooms and blogs centering on the political crisis emerged before, during and after the March 2008 vote. Ahead of the elections, I interviewed opposition candidate Simba Makoni, who even maintained a profile on social networking site *Facebook*, and the then opposition senator David Coltart, who reached out to voters on his personal website to gauge their sentiments on the potential boost from the Web. They were equally upbeat. As this research aspired to find out, their efforts were sustained by Zimbabweans abroad who sought to use their Internet spotlight to "educate" others back home.

Several organisations have also pointed to a potentially positive effect of new media technologies in Africa, especially on the democratic and economic front. The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), for example, concluded in a report that ICTs had proven to be the engine for economic and social development in the 21st century. It added, "Since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005, African

governments have been far more proactive in pursuing policies and public-private partnerships that will bring affordable connectivity to their countries" (SIDA, 2009, p. 25). Democracy, though, which is often understood as "rule by the people," is a highly debatable process. Democracy is a difficult concept with no agreed definition, as the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. In theory, Dahl's (2001) view that democracy revolves around competition and participation – meaning candidates for public office compete in elections and citizens participate by determining who are the winners and losers – appears comprehensible. However, in practical terms there is a wealth of evidence revealing unequal patterns of voter access to balanced media, for instance. In addition, when everyone is claiming to respect democracy, how is a true believer or defender of democracy distinguished from the rest? Despite leading the country uninterruptedly for more than 30 years, President Mugabe still maintains his allegiance and commitment to democracy, even though critics openly talk about his alleged failures to guarantee equality and freedom to members of the opposition (Berger, 2009).

IV. New Media and Democracy

Garcia (1995) claims that citizens in a democratic society count on the media to articulate and circulate "a full and open discussion of ideas and issues that provide them with the tools they need to make informed decisions about their government and their lives." However, recent events in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa suggest a tense relationship between Garcia's rationalisation and what exists in practice. Correspondingly, McChesney (1999) defines democracy as "rule of the many" (p. 6), a view ostensibly defied by many regimes in Africa, among them Zimbabwe, where some scholars have argued that democracy appears to be tailor-made with the aim of defending the political power of the ruling ZANU PF party (Chemhuru, 2010; Moyo, 1992). Several Western nations vigorously criticise Mugabe's regime for allegedly failing to implement democratic reforms. Mugabe brushes such criticism

aside, arguing that he is not prepared to take democracy lessons from the West since it was from his fight against white minority rule that a new, democratic Zimbabwe was born (Nyoni, 2008). If democracy thus has different meanings for different people, is there any room to investigate what exactly is "real democracy?" Indeed, the real meaning of democracy is the subject of heated debate.

It has been repeatedly claimed that freedom of speech and expression is the lifeblood of democracy. Media and democracy appear inseparable, as the two words are often used interchangeably. "We should care about journalism because it's central to democracy, citizenship, and everyday life, and we should care about journalism studies because it helps us understand this key social institution," explain Wahl-Jorgenson and Hanitzsch (2009, xi). The power of the media, however, is sometimes overrated. Can media alone instigate change? As noted. Some have pointed to recent developments in North Africa to support the school of thought that media can indeed foster change. In the case of Zimbabwe, new media may certainly be helping advance democratic change, but it could also be argued that it takes a combination of factors. These include the political climate in the country, infrastructure, access to the Internet, and illiteracy. Bucy and Gregson (2001) are of the view that the emergent form of technology-driven democracy goes beyond net activism, taking into broader consideration the participatory engagement of citizens online and the wide exposure to political messages. Their position further strengthens the view that even though new media has the power to effect change, people in a particular country still need to have access to digital technology. This gap can, however, be drastically reduced if one considers the potential mediating role played by the diaspora, as is the case in this research (Kluver & Banerjee, 2005).

Democracy, explains Barber (2003), is a process of learning and sharing information. This view strengthens the deep-seated relationship between media and democracy. Nkosi Ndlela

(2010) concurs when he says, "One of the main justifications for freedom of expression is therefore that it is a vital part of democracy, facilitating participation in decision-making, facilitating the formation of public opinion." New media technologies are impacting this seemingly ever-changing relationship between the two paradigms. Using China as a case study, Kluver and Banerjee (2005) say they are supportive of using Internet as a good apparatus for promoting democracy. Online news and social media are considered democratising tools for the Internet. However, other forces such as email also play a bigger role in communicating messages among activists. In 2006, the Zimbabwean government introduced the Interception of Communications Bill, which would have allowed the military, intelligence services, police and the office of the President to monitor email correspondence, and telephone conversations. Even though the bill became law in 2007, the lack of technological capability, manpower and monitoring equipment needed to intercept communication appears to have scuttled the government's plans. No arrests have been made.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on findings from this research, one can conclude that new media technologies, far from eloquently improving the way Zimbabweans participate politically, are yet to fully demonstrate their full potential. This is not because of their inability but rather the citizens' unwillingness and powerlessness to actively participate in politics due to their fear of the unknown. You may have the Internet, you may have unrestricted access to it, but what is important is your willingness and determination to use it for political purposes. That is still lacking in the case of Zimbabwe. There are plenty of fearless people who have confronted Mugabe. Indeed, there are plenty of people who have taken Mugabe to task by using the Internet and new media platforms to denounce his alleged misrule. However, there is still a long way to go before the platforms can have a direct influence on the Zimbabwean political climate.

There was a great deal of renewed hope among Mugabe's opponents that the Internet could be a tool to remove him from power and usher in a new era of democracy. For some, the Arab Spring could have been a point of departure to unseat the long-entrenched president. However, Mugabe's image in the West in recent years has been one-dimensional, lacking nuance or historical context. From the findings of the interviews, it became clear that Zimbabweans were actively involved in the political process back home. Respondents, acknowledged transmitting and to some extent sharing news with friends and relatives at home. However, not all of them said they had distributed anti-Mugabe views. Two students, who both admitted to having relatives within Mugabe's party, for example, said they saw it as useless to relay anti-Mugabe news back home because it would have little impact, since most of their relatives were Mugabe supporters and would vote for him in any case. In Zimbabwe, some respondents admitted being influenced in their voting choices by relatives from abroad, but still chose to vote for a candidate of their own choice. This, therefore, leads us to question whether Mugabe was entirely disadvantaged by the views from the diaspora. As has already been shown in this study, Mugabe himself has a large following among the diaspora, contrary to the popular belief that Zimbabweans living abroad exclusively approve of Tsvangirai's policies.

Clearly, new media technologies played a crucial role in selling the image of the opposition party. Some pro-Tsvangirai respondents admitted telling their parents they would stop sending money home if they voted for Mugabe. They said they were convinced Zimbabwe's economy would improve if Tsvangirai took over the leadership, thanks to Western aid that his government presumably would receive. Notably, however, six of the 20 respondents interviewed in Zimbabwe said they had planned to vote for Tsvangirai whether they had been advised by relatives and friends abroad or not. This confirms that relaying information to relatives abroad in some cases had a minimal effect on the voting patterns.

Still, the Internet offered Tsvangirai an unmatched platform for political campaigning, considering the state media gave minimal coverage of his political campaign compared to that of Mugabe.

The involvement of Zimbabweans in the diaspora in the country's political affairs was always going to be there. After all, Zimbabwe is not the only country that has citizens abroad. While some were bluntly clear that they were eager to effect regime change, the majority of them said they were not concerned who was the political leader in Harare as long as their families and friends could afford the basics. The regime change agenda purportedly instigated by Western powers has been one of the major bones of contention between President Mugabe and his erstwhile allies in the West. Interestingly, only three respondents suggested that they were seeking regime change in Zimbabwe at all costs, including the possibility of a Western-backed military action. For the rest, a "free and fair" democratic election was the only way to solve the problem even though they expressed reservations that the possibility was slim given the history of violence-led voting in Zimbabwe.

New media thus empowered Zimbabweans with information, but political participation requires more than just access to information. They may be exposed to information, but the biggest threat to full and enhanced participation lay in their inability to overcome the fear of the unknown, that is, the fear of the government's secret service. They are fighting and perhaps winning, a cyber-war against Mugabe, but that does not change the status quo in Zimbabwe. Mugabe remains in power and it looks as if he alone, and not even the West, will decide when and how he can go. Notably, there are conspicuously thousands of brave people, who by all means choose to fight Mugabe's alleged totalitarianism, but one quotation from an interviewee summarizes what appears to me the general view about active participation in Zimbabwean politics: "To live happily in Zimbabwe, stay out of politics." In other words, the masses are afraid. The fear factor plays a crucial role in keeping the Mugabe regime intact.

Fear is one of the reasons why it will probably take a long time before Zimbabweans realise the full potential of the Internet. From a sample of 20 Zimbabweans interviewed in the country, 14 of them said if they had a chance to demonstrate, they would not do it in fear of state security apparatus. However, 12 of the 20 interviewees also confirmed that they would not see the need to demonstrate since they were content with the state of affairs at home. If you read newspapers, you will of course find articles about citizens being abducted or tortured by the secret service. Empirical evidence showing people are indeed abducted is lacking even though there is plenty of media reports providing the much-needed "proof."

Table 1

An Extract Detailing Results from Four Interviewees

Did you supply news to relatives and friends back home ahead of the 2008 elections?	I don't want to say I supplied news. I exchanged views with my father and family members based on what I was seeing here. My father would say everything is exaggerated.	Yes, I did. I called my father and certainly tried to influence his vote. But we are from Chitungwiza. We support MDC.		Yes, I think on a daily basis. I spoke with friends and updated them on the situation in their own country. That's funny, indeed.	I shared information with some people on the ground in Zimbabwe. For me, it was subconscious. I am not an activist. My husband was very much involved It was necessary.
Is the Internet a major factor in improving democratic participation in Zimbabwe?	I think it increases awareness of issues. Whether that improves democracy in Zimbabwe, I really don't know.	The Internet helps us know more of things we didn't know before. Information is important for democracy and for Zimbabwe too of course.	No, I don't think so. Dictators won't change because of the Internet.	The Internet helps us get information but it cannot change the way politics is run.	Yes, I have it very clear. It has allowed me to become a better person, to be better at what I want to do in life. It has opened lots of opportunities.

Another factor affecting the difference between information sharing between Zimbabweans at home and their fellow citizens abroad pertains to the general mistrust of Zimbabweans who are living in the diaspora. While many people can easily identify their contribution to the country's economy, not everyone, as shown from the analysis of 20 interviews with Zimbabweans living in the country, is happy with their attitudes toward the country. Some see the diaspora Zimbabweans as sell-outs, while others consider them cowards who could not stand the heat. Some are not happy that among Zimbabweans in the diaspora there were people who created versions of alleged brutality from Mugabe with the hope of securing a visa and residence permit to live in the West. All these factors have contributed to the general mistrust of Zimbabweans in the diaspora.

While the Internet should be credited with providing information to previously underprivileged citizens, it should not entirely be credited with influencing the way people participate in their political affairs. Within the context of the 2008 elections, it can be argued that the Internet played an information-providing role as evidenced by the confirmation given by some of the 50 interview respondents. However, not everybody who got the information from the diaspora unconditionally chose to vote for Tsvangirai, as six of the voters confirmed that they decided to vote for another candidate, Simba Makoni, instead. Five of the voters who got advice to vote against Mugabe still decided to vote for him, against the wishes of their friends and relatives abroad. In this case, the Internet was not entirely central to the voters' choices.

There is only one thing that can strongly validate my hypothesis. If participation means going on the Internet and sending emails to politicians, questioning their positions in order to ensure transparency, then Zimbabweans still have a long way to go before they can solidly conclude that the advent of the Internet has boosted their online political activism. However, if participation just means accessing and sharing online political information with friends and

relatives, then Zimbabweans are already doing that. However, not everyone is participating. In fact, the majority of the rural dwellers have no idea what *Facebook* is. My view is that participation should not be half-baked. It should be a process that not only involves making voting choices but taking politicians to task for the decisions they make. Participation should also mean that the distance between the political players and the constituencies they represent is shortened. That is still not the case in Zimbabwe. Politicians remain rather untouchable and it is still too early to think that the Internet is helping make them accountable for their decisions and actions. Zimbabweans should first deal with more pressing issues, such as securing access to the Internet. Despite all these problems, one would be a fool to dismiss the democratic potential of the Internet, as has been argued throughout. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that Mugabe lost the elections evidently due to external factors outside the realm of new media. For example, with inflation officially pegged at 2 million percent at the time of the 2008 election, one cannot help but conclude that this catastrophe was central to Mugabe's defeat. This study has failed to convincingly link Mugabe's loss to the ubiquity of new media technologies.

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