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Mediatized solidarity, governmental support and metacommunicational narratives: The War on Gaza in leftist Latin American media

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyse the media discourses about the War on Gaza, a relevant topic in the case of public media associated with self-proclaimed left governments. The study encompasses three cases of public Latin American media: (1) Granma, *the official journal of the Cuban Communist Party; (2) Telesur, a pan-Latin American television network headquartered in Caracas; and (3) Andes, a news agency created by the Ecuadorian government. Three main themes were analysed: (1) the construction of the good/bad narrative tension; (2) the representations of solidarity and governmental positions; and (3) the media discourses on (other) media discourses about the war. The findings indicate that, in the case of public media linked to these kinds of left-wing governments, the narratives regarding the war are in line with the official positions, underlining its readings on the tension between good and bad*

sides, reporting its statements and using a metacommunicational discourse as part of their argumentative strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Interrelationships between communication and politics have traditionally been a relevant topic of research, from the original Magic Bullet Theory that assumed a powerful and direct flow of information from the sender to the receiver – suggesting that the mass media could influence a very large group of people directly and uniformly through appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response – to positions that questioned the accuracy of these assumptions by analysing the relationships between the media and political behaviour during election campaigns (Lazarsfeld et al. 1968), and more recent approaches on communication studies that pay an increasing attention to 'the processes by which meaning is produced rather than simply those by which it is transmitted', in line with a perspective of social construction of meaning and the point of view of the 'politics of meaning, experience, and sensuality – a politics of everyday life' (Deetz 1992: 1–2).

On this path, studies on politics and communication have moved from analyses in terms of media and influences (Huckfeldt 1995) to theorizations from the perspective of mediations (Martín-Barbero 1998). This second perspective offers a more complex understanding of the interrelationships among those social fields, particularly in a context where, given the increasing role of information and communication technologies (ICTs), it has been considered that communication becomes the main space of politics, which tends to simplify political media messages, personalize politics and turn negative messages into 'the most effective political weapons' (Castells 2000: 13).

In such a context, while, on the one hand, politics is understood as communication (Meadow 1980) and discourse – as a practice that produce frames of sense, through which it is thought, spoken and written (Somekh and Lewin 2005) – on the other hand, some authors noted that there has been a crisis of the communicative channels between political parties and society, producing an increasing distance between parties and social life and, consequently, making communication and culture to become strategic scenarios for recovering the symbolical dimension of politics - i.e. its capacity for representing the sense of belonging and the links between citizens (Martín-Barbero 2002, 2004).

In this scenario, governments that assume a radical left position – such as a group of Latin American ones, including Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia or Ecuador – give a particular importance to the interrelationships between politics and communication. As previous studies have noted, left governments have traditionally put in practice what has been called a 'politics of symbolism', showing that 'the interpretation and manipulation of symbols is an important aspect of politics' (Feinsilver 1989: 4). In current Latin American left governments, this tendency has its continuity in the importance given to the politics of representation, as demonstrated in cases such as the Venezuelan government, where since the election of President Hugo Chávez, television has become 'a crucial theatre of partisan class conflict' (Leary 2009: 25).

Consequently, the study of the coverage of some relevant events by media from these countries is an important issue for understanding the interrelationships between institutional politics and communication, governments

and media, particularly how it is expressed in media discourses. The recent War on Gaza becomes a significant issue of the media agenda for this analysis, given its global impact, the political relevance and the symbolism of the agents involved in the conflict – Israel and Palestine – as well as the history of the conflict and its meaning for both the left and the right groups worldwide. In that regard, the article aims to analyse the articulation among the media coverage and the official positions regarding the conflict, in order to examine the mediation of governmental posture in media discourse.

METHODS

The analysis is conducted through a multiple-case study and uses qualitative methodology, involving the discourse analysis of media content. The multiple-case study presented here deals with media from three of the Latin American countries placed in the most radical position against the so-called Washington Consensus: Cuba, Ecuador and Venezuela. The cases include three media types, print, television and news agency, and both recently created media and other media channels with a long history; all of them are public or official media. The three cases are: (1) *Granma*, the official journal of the Cuban Communist Party – founded in 1965; (2) Telesur, a pan-Latin American terrestrial and satellite television network headquartered in Caracas, Venezuela, launched in 2005 and defined as a public company, which has some Latin American governments as its sponsors (Venezuela, 51%; Argentina, 20%; Cuba, 19%; and Uruguay, 10%); and (3) Andes, a news agency created by the Ecuadorian government in 2009, defined as a public enterprise and the official governmental service for information.

Traditionally, studies on media representations of reality have used techniques aimed at examining texts in a general sense, like quantitative and qualitative content analysis, moving towards a more complex, comprehensive and integral perspective of enquiry, based on discourse analysis. A proposal for the specific examination of the journalistic discourse is presented by Van Dijk (in Franzosi 1998), based on an outline of the textual superstructure that characterizes the journalistic text. This author proposes two main dimensions in the journalistic discourse: summary and story. The first comprises the headline and opening, while the second consists of the situation and comments. The latter are formed by verbal reactions and conclusions. The situation is, in turn, composed by the event and its antecedents. Each of the elements of this last pair is also shaped by two aspects: the incident, which integrates the main event and the consequences, and the antecedents, which include the story and the preceding context (previous facts and circumstances). These categories not only 'organize the global content (themes, macrostructure) of news, [but also] perform cognitive and social functions in the informative production and the understanding and memorization of the news' (Van Dijk 2009: 254).

This perspective breaks with the so-called classical content analysis and, as part of the tradition of critical or ideological analysis of mass media discourse, there is a 'concern for the (re-)production of ideologies in and through the media' and an 'explicit attention for the ideological analysis of media messages', moving away from 'the more manifest units of quantitative content analysis' towards 'an account of underlying meanings or processes of "signification"' (Van Dijk 1985: 4). In line with this approach, other conceptualizations have proposed some potential resources and strategies available to the analyst for deconstructing the text and explaining the meanings contained therein.

For instance, Franzosi (1998) proposes a discourse analysis, particularly of the narrative dimension of discourse, which is also relevant to the examination of meanings present in the journalistic text. It is about transcending the traditional views that focus on the search for the meaningful, i.e. in those words supposedly more loaded with meanings (like adjectives). According to this perspective, it is also relevant and necessary to search for the meanings contained in the structure and the narrative sequence of texts, because they have certain 'narrative adjectivations' (the conversion of nouns into adjectives) inscribed in them, as well as patterns of causality, temporalities (order, duration, frequency, narrative duration/actual duration of the events described), perspectives (issues in the foreground or background), and even social relations and questions around these (Abbott, in Franzosi 1998). This involves a transition 'from variables to actors, away from regression-based statistical models to networks, and away from a variable-based conception of casualty to narrative sequences' (Franzosi 1998: 527).

From this perspective, the article aims to describe the media discourses about the War on Gaza, as part of the analysis of the media framing on this issue. Media-framing perspective is in line with a critical discourse analysis, since it 'offers an alternative to the old "objectivity and bias" paradigm', reflecting the richness of media discourse, since it 'has the potential of getting beneath the surface of news coverage and exposing the hidden assumptions' (Tankard 2001: 95–96). The framing analysis provides a constructivist approach for the analysis of media discourse by focusing on the conceptualization of media texts into empirically operationalizable dimensions: syntactical, script, thematic and rhetorical structures (Pan and Kosicki 1993).

In this regard, the study examines the media discourses of the selected media on the war, published during the military operations between 8 July and 26 August 2014. The analysis includes only a few texts that were published after this date, all of them related with the relief aid sent to Gaza. The text looks at three specific dimensions of the media discourses: (1) the construction of the good/bad narrative tension; (2) the representations of solidarity and governmental positions; and (3) the media discourses on (other) media discourses about the war.

FINDINGS

The good and the bad side in the media discourses

Discourses of the selected media take as a central narrative axis the distinction between what are considered the good and the bad sides of the conflict, following a simple and common argumentation when events such as wars are covered by the media. In this regard, there is an emphasis on a long-term analytical perspective of the issue, by proposing that it must be understood in light of the history of the conflict. From this perspective, the media acknowledged that the three young Israelis that were kidnapped and killed – generally considered the starting point of the war – were 'victims', but questioning if their 'side' was the 'good guy side' (Telesur 2014a).

Media analyses challenge the accuracy of the timeline of the conflict proposed by other news discourses that 'start the clock with the kidnapping of the three young Israelis' by mentioning both the general situation of the Israeli 'military occupation and siege' of Gaza and some specific previous events in the zone, all of them against the Palestinian, such as the killing of two Palestinian teenagers in the West Bank by Israeli troops. This leads to

denunciations of 'the arbitrariness of timelines and starting points' (Telesur 2014a) set by other media narratives. In the same vein, some media outlets go so far as to say that the '[Israeli] war against Gaza was planned years ago' (Andes 2014a). Using a filtration from Wikileaks as a source, the media claim that 'the slaughter of civilians in Gaza could be premeditated', arguing that 'the deliberate action by Israeli troops against civilians in Gaza, [is] a strategy implemented in previous confrontations' (Anon. 2014a).

As part of this argumentation, media discourses include news as well as editorial-opinion pieces. The main scripts, in both cases, include references to the chronology of the conflict, in particular the Israeli military actions against the Palestinian people, underlining 'the military siege of Gaza, the constant raids, arrests of children, targeted assassinations, denial of Gazans' right to move'(Telesur 2014a). Particularly in breaking news about the conflict, media discourses highlight the 'images of the terror in Gaza', the 'death and destruction that has been inflicted […] by the Israeli army' (Telesur 2014b); the 'destruction of homes, media centres, growing areas and mosques' (Anon. 2014b); also comparing 'Zionist attacks against Gaza' with the 'number of missiles fired from Gaza into Israel' (Anon. 2014c).

A particular discursive dimension in drawing the good/bad divide is the number of persons killed by Israeli airstrikes when comparing it with the number of Israeli soldiers killed. As part of this, the media coverage of the war specially underlines the number of Palestinian children killed as a consequence of Israeli military operations (Anon. 2014j) and the number of civilian buildings destroyed. For instance, all the media report about the Israeli attack against a school from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on 24 July 2014 (Anon. 2014d; Telesur 2014c).

Discourses of the three media analysed do not only mention, frequently, the number of Palestinian civilian people killed, but also use numerous adjectives for describing the conflict and the situation of people living in the Gaza Strip. They refer to 'the suffering imposed on the residents of the Palestinian territory', qualify the Israeli attacks as 'unjustifiable' and denounce 'the danger represented by [Israel's] actions in Gaza to the lives of many thousands of innocent human beings' (Anon. 2014e), underlining that 'casualties are mostly civilians' (Andes 2014b). The war is defined as 'a permanent genocide' (Telesur 2014f) as well as 'a real slaughter of the [Palestinian] population' and an 'outrage against them' (Andes 2014c). The 'brutal Israeli offensive in Gaza' is considered 'a deliberate action' that 'constitutes a war crime against civilians' (Telesur 2014b), and news discourses 'denounce the serious situation' of institutions such as hospitals in the zone, due to 'drug shortages' (Andes 2014d), describing the situations as 'a health and humanitarian disaster' (Telesur 2014d).

A common trend in the three media discourses, when drawing the good/bad divide between Israel and Palestine, is to consider the United States as an ally of the former, which has the 'unreserved and total support [of the U.S. government] for its actions' (Telesur 2014e). This support is particularly criticized by media, condemning that the United States 'will continue supporting the atrocity of Israel against Gaza. It will not impose sanctions on Israel, and there will not be any moral criticism' (Andes 2014c). Some American politicians are particularly criticized, such as the Republican Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, qualified as 'the most fanatical supporter in Washington of the Israeli slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza' (Anon. 2014f).

A particularly relevant discursive strategy in the media, as part of the coverage of the war, is to recover the notion of Holocaust for referring to the issue, describing the situation as a Palestinian Holocaust. This is presented through the inclusion in media of Jewish survivors and descendants of survivors and victims of the Nazi Holocaust, condemning the Israeli action in Gaza, as well as the US government 'for providing Israel the funding to carry out the attack' (Andes 2014f).

Solidarity and governmental positions regarding the War on Gaza in media discourses

In line with the condition of public media, the three cases analysed frequently include official statements on the war, both from their respective governments and others in the region that share the same radical position (Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil). In that regard, members of these governments are included as sources by these media outlets in their reports on the situation in Gaza. Official statements from the Cuban, the Ecuadorian and the Venezuelan governments were published by *Granma*, Telesur and Andes.

On 11 July 2014, *Granma* published a statement by the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressing that 'Cuba strongly condemns the new Israeli attack against the population of the Gaza Strip', denouncing that 'Israel uses its military and technological superiority to execute a policy of collective punishment with out-of-proportion use of force, which causes the death of innocent civilians and huge material damage' and calling 'to the international community to demand that Israel ends its escalation of violence' (Anon. 2014g). Three weeks later, the newspaper published a second statement from the same source, reaffirming that 'Cuba energetically reiterates its condemnation of this new aggression […], and reaffirms its unwavering solidarity with the Palestinian people, supporting their right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent state' (Anon. 2014h).

The newspaper also published an article by the former Cuban president, Fidel Castro, entitled 'The Palestinian Holocaust in Gaza', stating that the Israeli attacks against Gaza show that 'a new, repugnant form of fascism is emerging with notable strength'. The leader compared the global outrage towards the Nazi genocide of Jews with the supposition by the Israeli government that 'the world will be insensitive to the macabre genocide which today is being perpetuated against the Palestinian people', denouncing also 'the complicity of the U.S. empire in this shameful massacre' (Anon. 2014i).

The Ecuadorian government's statements regarding the war were also published by Andes. The news agency reported on the declarations of the Ecuadorian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Integration, Ricardo Patiño, who declared that the conflict was not 'a war between parallel or similar forces' but 'a real slaughter of the population', considering it 'essential that it finishes and the United Nations fulfils the role it has' (Andes 2014c). The official statements by the Venezuelan and the Ecuadorian governments were also reported by Telesur, underlining that both governments condemned the war and considered the military operation as 'unjust, disproportionate and illegal' (Telesur 2014g).

All three media outlets also published news on other official statements by different Latin American governments and international organizations, condemning the Israeli attacks on Gaza. For instance, media discourse included reports on the UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon's declaration that

the 'attack against innocent civilians and civilian buildings' was 'unjustifiable' (Anon. 2014k), and the condemnation by the regional bloc Mercosur of 'the disproportionate use of force by the Israeli troops in Gaza', and its call to 'the international community to act within international law' (Telesur 2014h).

Media discourses also devoted a large space to solidarity with the Palestinians, underlining that 'all the world expresses their solidarity with the Palestinian people' and 'people around the world have shown it in different ways and in all continents, and have manifested against the Israeli military offensive', and reporting on manifestations that took place in different countries condemning the military operations and 'the crimes of Israel' (Anon. 2014l). Expressions of solidarity by artists, scientists and intellectuals from all over the world (Anon. 2014) and demonstrations 'in solidarity with the Arafat's country, always under attack' (Telesur 2014i) are frequently present in news discourses.

All media also devoted a large space to the humanitarian aid sent to the Palestinian people by their governments. In that regard, actions associated with the governmental aid received a broad media coverage, including news on the opening of the Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs' headquarters in Caracas to all those people wanting to make donations of humanitarian aid for Gaza, as a 'testament of solidarity' with Gazans (Telesur 2014j); the amount of relief aid to be sent and what it includes (Telesur 2014k); or the Cuban government's willingness to receive in its hospitals people injured as a consequence of the airstrikes (Anon. 2014n). Media coverage included all the steps in the process of sending the relief aid, from its collection up to its arrival in Gaza and the challenges faced during the process (Telesur 2014l; Andes 2014g).

Criticism to media coverage of the conflict

Another core dimension in the coverage by these three public Latin American media outlets of the War on Gaza is the critical analysis of the coverage by other media, in particular those considered as 'liberal' and associated with the Washington Consensus and the dominant global order. They denounce that 'Western liberal news media consequently includes recurring propaganda themes that facilitate Israeli over Palestinian interests' (Telesur 2014m) as part of their coverage of the conflict. According to this perspective, there is what is defined as a 'media maze' about the issue, configured as a result of a particular informative dynamic through which 'there are headlines [regarding the conflict] that are not included in the mainstream Western media' (Anon. 2014o).

'Most Western states' are considered as 'staunch supporters of Israeli policies' and, coherently, the western liberal news media provides coverage of the war that is in line with the interests of western states. (Telesur 2014m). In order to exemplify how this 'propaganda' works in the discourses of these media, it is affirmed that 'it might be worth fleshing out some of those themes as they have come up during the recent Israeli assault on Gaza'. To this end, media discourses underline, in particular, that this propaganda is based on four lines of argumentation: (1) Israel's action is presented as a response to Palestinian provocations; (2) the terrorists and extremists are always on the Palestinian side; (3) Israel is at war; and (4) the violaion of International Law (Telesur 2014m).

With respect to the first line of argument, media discourses highlight the 'regular headline and front-page news coverage' and news media that

'emphasized in countless items that the Israeli military responded to rocket attacks by Hamas', following what is defined as a 'framing of issues' that implies 'a cause (Hamas) and effect (violent confrontation) framework that promotes a particular solution (Israeli military offensive actions to stop Hamas's rockets)'. This 'news media framework', according to the analysis proposed by these media, includes both 'a subjective narrative that fostered a violent solution' and also a 'contradiction' with the 'available evidence', and, as proof, it is provided a chronology of the conflict before the kidnapping and murder of the three Israeli youths (Telesur 2014m).

Regarding the second line before mentioned, media discourses point out that, while 'in regular news media coverage of Gaza, Hamas and its members were often labelled as terrorists or extremists', some 'prominent international law experts have pointed out that Israel's attacks on the heavily populated Gaza Strip may amount to violations of the laws of war', to extent that they even consider that 'Israeli actions may constitute terrorism'. This becomes a 'positive depiction of Israeli actors' by the western news media, with a tendency to '[enhance] the legitimacy of Israel's actions whilst Palestinian actions appear to be delegitimized' (Telesur 2014m).

About the third argumentative line, it is argued that, based on a 'myth' of war that 'evokes connotations of reciprocity and heroism: battles between two equally strong sides and debilitating tasks for the soldiers', liberal media justify the Israeli military operations and its consequences. However, media discourses deconstruct this argumentation by comparing the number of people killed on each side of the conflict, and thus '"war" constitutes a myth [in this conflict] because its defining property has largely been a missing element in Gaza' since 'these numbers point to a massacre and not a war'. From this position, the myth is considered to be used for hiding 'the effects of unnecessary Israeli offensive actions and Israel's responsibility for civilian deaths' (Telesur 2014m).

Finally, with respect to the last aforementioned line of argument, the media discourses about the coverage of what are defined as liberal western press underline that, when covering Gaza, the latter 'has favoured Israeli over Palestinian rights' in a trend that is considered constant, since these media 'had largely neglected to cover the conflict in consideration of Palestinian rights enshrined in international treaties'. Consequently, it is argued that these rights 'are not evoked by the western press when covering Gaza and the Israel Palestine conflict', neglecting that 'the recent Gaza assault lacked legitimacy in the light of international law' (Telesur 2014m).

As part of this critical analysis of coverage by other media, the censorship of the coverage of the war by liberal western media is also denounced. An issue which has been highlighted in this context is the demission of Diana Magnay, the CNN correspondent who covered the Israeli military operations against Gaza, after sending a tweet describing those ones who were celebrating Israeli airstrikes as 'scum'. This was considered as a proof of 'the evident Zionist control over major American news media and other western countries' (Anon. 2014o).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This media discourse analysis shows the articulation between the media narratives on the War on Gaza and the governmental positions of the countries where these public media are based. There is a close correlation between

the pro-Palestinian argumentation by the media included in the study and the position of the local government. In particular, media scripts propose a classification of the good/bad sides of the conflict that is in line with the positions assumed by their governments. This reading of the two parties involved in confrontation is based on a long-term perspective of the conflict, in contrast with the dominant view that attributes the war to the kidnapping and killing of the three young Israelis.

This long-term analytical point of view is complemented in the media discursive dimension of breaking news, by the use of numerous negative adjectives when referring to the military operations of Israel and underlining its consequences for the civilians, in particular the number of civilian deaths caused by airstrikes, the number of children killed, as well as the attacks against civil buildings – including schools – and its destruction. Even the notion of 'war' is questioned as the most appropriate name for the conflict. As part of this rhetoric, a particular argumentation is the recovery of imaginary of the Holocaust and the genocide against Jews during World War II; for instance, some of the words used for the Israeli airstrikes are 'genocide' or 'slaughter'. According to this strategy of rhetoric, the victim in the past (Jews) becomes the victimizer now (Israeli State), in a narrative that has, among its sources, Jewish survivors and descendants of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust.

Following Van Dijk's classification about the dimensions in journalistic discourse (Van Dijk 2009), there is, in the summaries –particularly in the headlines – a significant trend of emphasizing the consequences of the Israeli airstrikes, mainly for civilians. Stories, meanwhile, underline the antecedents of the conflict, including previous facts and circumstances associated with it. The articulation of these two tendencies creates a singular rhetorical structure of media discourse that has, as a core dimension, the past–present tension, overcoming in this way a script focused only on breaking news. This tension has consequences for the media narrative of the story (in particular, the event and its antecedents) that become, in this case, the history, with a singular ideological dimension.

In a discourse where the thematic dimension (Pan and Kosicki 1993) underlines the condemnation of military operations against Gaza, this tendency is argued by quoting many different agents (artists, intellectuals, members of civil society, representatives of international intergovernmental organizations, etc.) as sources for arguing this position. Both popular manifestations of solidarity with the Palestinians and governmental official statements condemning the Israeli bombings – by the three governments where the media included in the study are based, but also by other Latin American governments, mainly those where ruling parties are defined as left ones, such as Bolivia, Argentina or Brazil – are important arguments as part of these media narratives. At the same time, the complicity and even the support by other governments – mainly the US – to the Israeli military operations are specially underlined, as part of the position of denouncement assumed by the media.

Media discourses articulate solidarity and official relief aid by governments as two core dimensions of their news on the war. There is wide and complete media coverage of the sending of governmental aid, including all the steps of the process. These tendencies show how institutional politics mediates media coverage in this case, configuring a media narrative on the war that is in line with the official statements. Media discourses visualize governmental positions and also promote social solidarity with the Palestinian people, both at national and international levels. These articulations between governmental

positions and media discourses are in line with the public nature of the media analysed. In this case, there are closer links between governmental and media positioning that reach a complete correspondence between both public discourses.

The wide media coverage of the War on Gaza during the military operations does not include only breaking news on the issue and opinion and editorial articles, but also some analyses on the coverage of the issue by what are defined as the western liberal press. This metacommunicative discourse (media discourse on media discourses) shows the importance given by these Latin American media to the role of the press in visibilizing the conflict from certain perspectives. In that regard, it can be considered part of the narrative strategy for establishing the division between the good and the bad side in the conflict, since the denouncement of the media manipulation and censorship by the western liberal media is associated with the interests of the Israeli state and those ones considered its accomplices, particularly the US government.

The use of this metacommunicational narrative is also part of a strategy of the Latin American media for validating their own narratives on the conflict. It can also be understood as an expression of the importance given by the self-proclaimed left governments – to which these media are inherently linked – to the role of the press as part of the confrontation with the ideological positions that are considered as opposite to their own political postures. The ideological positioning assumed by the governments ruling the countries where these media are based mediate, in a central way, the media discourses on the war.

In conclusion, the media coverage of the War on Gaza by these Latin American public media, associated with the most left radical governments, positioned against the Washington Consensus in the region – Cuba, Venezuela and Ecuador – exemplifies how the institutional politics mediates in these cases the media discourses about the issue, in a tendency that can be understood in the context of the public nature of the media included in the study, and the ideological importance given to the press by the respective governments to which these media are linked. The ideological nature of the interrelationships between media and governments leads to a strong articulation between media discourse and governmental positions, in a process through which the first visibilizes the second – providing argumentations for its positioning and against the governments placed in opposite ideological positions – and the second is used as frequent media sources by the first, becoming a core part of the ideological basis for a media discourse that highlights the bad/good divide in the conflict and the demand for solidarity with the Palestinians.

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