

The epistemic struggle for credibility: Rethinking media relations

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Abstract The challenges of attracting positive media attention are likened to a contest in which various organisations attempt to promote and circulate their version of events; however, this is particularly difficult when attempting to circulate less established, unpopular or critical knowledge. Although complying with, and managing, news values is an important starting point, the need to move beyond news values to consider the commercial values and realities of media organisations is highlighted. In this paper, a case study is undertaken of the Greenpeace media relations in New Zealand when a proposed controversial expiry of a moratorium to release genetically modified organisms into the environment. The predicament for Greenpeace is that in attracting media attention through dramatic protests it risks jeopardising its reputation as a credible news source that can influence the framing of news stories. Insights are offered into the need for organisations to understand and manage the story or knowledge to be circulated and comply with contradictory news values.

KEYWORDS: media relations, epistemic struggle, strategic flexibility, Greenpeace, critical knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Effective media relations has been widely acknowledged as an essential means of communicating with multiple stakeholders, promoting an organisation's public profile, and gaining credible independent publicity at minimal cost. For advocacy and non-profit organisations, media reporting of activities is also a way of circulating particular knowledge in order to raise public awareness, influence public opinion and gain support for interests or causes. Media coverage may also serve to legitimate the particular

knowledge or views being promoted by advocacy and non-profit organisations. The ability of advocacy and non-profit organisations to generate media coverage, however, can be restrained by a lack of resources to fund personnel with sound media relations expertise and experience.

This paper examines the key strategies that non-profit advocacy organisations need to adopt to successfully attract positive media attention in order to circulate less established, unpopular or critical knowledge. The analysis draws upon a one-year case study of the media

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reporting of Greenpeace New Zealand's campaign against the lifting of a national moratorium on the application for the commercial release of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), that is, organisms that have been genetically altered to form a new substance or perform new functions. It provides an in-depth insight into the need to think beyond news values¹ as the key to success in gaining media attention and coverage. The case study underlines the importance of news that is aligned with the commercial values of the media organisation and its journalists. The paper initially explores how media relations has been traditionally theorised from a functional perspective in terms of strategies for gaining media attention. Greenpeace New Zealand's media relations and news coverage are analysed and the implications for nonprofit advocacy organisations considered. The analysis conceptualises media relations as a knowledge creation process, involving epistemic struggles to meet media expectations, gain credibility and legitimate critical knowledges.

MEDIA RELATIONS PERSPECTIVES

The primary motivation for any organisation seeking media attention, be it an NGO, government or corporate, is the desire to capture the attention of large and widely dispersed audiences.² In these terms, the strategic value of media coverage lies in its potential to 'create broad public awareness, or a generalised knowledge, of organisations, causes, products and services'.³ From a public relations perspective, however, news does not always just *happen*, it frequently has to be *created*.⁴ Hallahan states that, 'gaining attention in the public media arena involves infusing [the organisation's] story with either news or entertainment values (or both) and, thereby, making the story or idea attractive to media producers'.³ The 12 values, or conditions that

contribute to an event or issue fulfilling the criteria of 'news' were identified by Galtung and Ruge.¹

The dimensions of a story that contribute, either singly or in combination, to its becoming 'newsworthy' are that, in terms of frequency it must take place within the publication cycle of the news medium reporting it (for example, within the last week if it is a weekly publication). Additionally, it must pass a particular threshold in terms of magnitude of size or importance. There needs to be a clear, unambiguous, understanding of what has happened that can be communicated to the audience, and the event must be able to be represented as having a meaningful relationship to readers in terms of cultural proximity or relevance. Related to cultural proximity, is the condition of consonance, which requires that the story is framed from a perspective that typifies the culture and expectations of the audience. Yet, while expectation plays a role in determining newsworthiness, to be selected as news, stories need to be unexpected or unpredictable and involve an element of surprise. Once the story has become news and thereby achieved the status of a matter of public interest or concern, according to the logic of continuity, it will likely continue to be reported on. The composition of an entire news report or newspaper page can also have an impact on whether a story is featured given the pressure on media producers to cover a range of types of events such as crime, human interest, business and politics, for example. But it is the actions of the elite persons and elite nations that are more likely to be covered than those of unimportant persons, and events that can be represented in terms of individuals, or human interest, are deemed more newsworthy than those of an abstract nature. Finally, Galtung and Ruge¹ identified stories with a negative angle as

more likely to gain media attention than those with a positive angle or outcome.

While Galtung and Ruge's¹ theory of 'newsworthiness' aids understanding of why some stories or events are deemed 'news' and others not, the theory does not apply universally. Miller *et al.* have found that 'news values vary between countries and news outlets and are often the outcome of a struggle within organisations'.⁵ This is significant in the context of Greenpeace's work as an environmental organisation.

Environmental issues are frequently not regarded by media producers as hard news — which is typically monopolised by matters of politics, state and business — and are relegated to the realms of non-headline soft news stories along with health and education, as indeed are most advocacy efforts. There have been periods, such as the later 1980s in the UK when coverage of environmental stories has indicated greater newsroom acceptance of the importance of the environment.⁶ Journalistic and editorial perceptions of waning public interest in environmental matters, however, combined with the fact that environmental issues are often very complex in terms of causes and explanations has resulted in low levels of coverage, and reporting that is 'event-centred as opposed to issue-sensitive'.⁶

A further difficulty faced by environmentalists seeking to develop relationships with journalists is that environmental activists are often not regarded as credible news sources, or, when they are reported, their activities are trivialised or personalised.⁷ More recently, however, this has been less of a problem for Greenpeace because some commentators now perceive it as a mainstream organisation that has become responsible for agenda setting.⁸ Yet, mainstream status does not guarantee successful media relations because the organisation has often gained media

attention that is not reported from the Greenpeace ideological perspective, or 'frame', which would secure legitimacy for the organisation.⁹ As Miller and Riechert explain, 'frames' can be understood as 'interpretative dimensions for evaluating the facts'.¹⁰ It was from this framing perspective that Hansen's analysis of reporting of Greenpeace's activities around the Brent Spar oil rig controversy in the mid-1990s found that 'While successfully 'commanding attention', Greenpeace had much less uniform success . . . in the claims making process, that of claiming or securing legitimacy'.¹¹ Thus the challenge is to move from media attention seeking to a strategy that ensures that claims or counter knowledges are circulated and accorded legitimate status.

THE CASE STUDY: GREENPEACE

Greenpeace was originally established in Canada in 1971 to create 'a GREEN and PEACEful world'¹² and campaigned to prevent nuclear tests and protect wildlife. Greenpeace has since evolved into a global, independent, non-profit organisation that uses research, lobbying and non-violent direct action to publicise and influence environmental issues. Funding is provided by membership subscriptions which protect its non-partisan status. In 1974 Greenpeace New Zealand was established and it came to national and international attention in 1985 with the bombing of the protest ship, Rainbow Warrior, by the French government in the port of Auckland. Today, Greenpeace New Zealand has 25,000 subscribed members. Local campaigns focus on 'oceans and ancient forest protection; fossil fuel phase out and promotion of renewable energies to stop climate change; nuclear disarmament and an end to nuclear contamination; elimination of toxic chemicals; and preventing the release of genetically engineered organisms into

nature'.¹² Media coverage is an essential part of Greenpeace's strategies for raising public awareness and understanding of environmental issues and subsequently influencing public opinion to pressure corporate and political decision making.

Since the mid-1990s preventing the release of GMOs into the environment has become a critical worldwide campaign issue for Greenpeace. Within New Zealand, the initial objectives of the anti-genetic modification (GM) campaign were focused on informing the public that food was genetically modified, which organisations promoted GM and advocating in the public interest.¹³ Yet it was not until 1999 that public awareness and concern about genetic modification in New Zealand escalated.¹⁴ Public concern led the Government to set up the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification to determine New Zealand's future options regarding genetic modification. The Royal Commission's consultation process recommended that the nation keep its options open, preserve opportunities and proceed with caution.¹⁵ As a consequence of the Royal Commission, the moratorium on the application for commercial release of GMOs was extended until 29th October, 2003, which allowed for further research into the implications of the science, and for legal and regulatory systems to be put in place. Opposition to the lifting of the moratorium became a key campaign focus for Greenpeace New Zealand in 2003 as it sought to keep GMOs out of New Zealand's environment and food.

METHOD

In researching Greenpeace's media strategies the authors were concerned to examine (1) how Greenpeace engages with the media in New Zealand and to what extent the organisation had been successful in the struggle to legitimate its position; (2) whether both national and regional

journalists regard Greenpeace as a credible news source and how they respond to its media relations strategies; and (3) what the key strategies are that an advocacy or not-for-profit organisation needs to adopt to successfully attract positive media attention.

A three-pronged approach was used in researching these questions. First, an interview was conducted with the key media spokesperson working for Greenpeace New Zealand. The interview explored how Greenpeace positioned itself as an NGO campaigning on genetic modification and what strategies it used in its media relations. Secondly, interviews were conducted with eight national and regional journalists, representing the major newspapers in New Zealand (the three national papers *The Dominion*, *New Zealand Herald* and *Sunday Star Times*; the regional papers *The Waikato Times* and *Christchurch Press*; and the monthly current affairs magazine *Metro*). All of these journalists were involved in reporting stories that focused on the lifting of the GM moratorium, though not all of them necessarily drew on Greenpeace as a news source. Thirdly, an analysis of the press reporting on the GM issue was conducted over a one-year period from January to December 2003. The analysis examined how the GM issue was framed, and served as background information to the case study.

THE GM MEDIA CAMPAIGN

The most significant media relations challenge faced by Greenpeace in opposing the lifting of the GM moratorium was a tension between the media's belief that the GM issue had been extensively reported in 2000 during the Royal Commission and the need for media coverage in order to raise public awareness of potential release of GMOs into the environment. The GM campaign objectives signalled a strategic communication shift for Greenpeace to

influencing public opinion by consumer advocacy rather than explicit focus on the environment. Although the New Zealand government had made the decision to proceed cautiously with GM, Greenpeace considered consumer pressure a way of continuing to influence government and commercial decisions. In this way, Greenpeace was attempting to mobilise consumer pressure by creating common knowledge about GM food. The Greenpeace campaign stated that 'genetically engineered (GE) ingredients are freely entering our food without adequate safeguards in place and without explicit consumer consent and knowledge. Greenpeace believes this is unacceptable. Consumers should have the right to know about GE ingredients in their food and the right to avoid GE food in all countries'.¹²

Consumer advocacy was somewhat incongruent with Greenpeace's wider concerns given the organisation's view that consumption is counterproductive to environmental protection. Indeed, the Greenpeace GM spokesperson stated that:

'I think a quite hilarious irony of this whole thing is that we are winning this through the power of the consumer. The food companies have been a lot more receptive than the government has in many ways, because they go "Right, okay, we hear you; we're going to listen to the customer." The customer is always right. And I certainly see the irony in it!'¹³

In these terms, Greenpeace can be understood to be engaging in strategic ambiguity¹⁶ in which conflicting goals are prioritised and managed. Eisenberg argued that ambiguous communication is 'a rational method used by communicators to orient towards multiple goals'.¹⁶ In this instance, Greenpeace strategically pursued the short-term goal of attempting to minimise the market for GM products so that the primary outcome of preventing

the release of GMOs into the environment would be achieved.

What Greenpeace sought to achieve as a consumer representative was 'openness in the community whereby we can have frank and open discussions about what GM is, what the risks are and what the appropriate use is and then of course in the political sphere appropriate legislative mechanisms for dealing with it'.¹³ In order to realise these strategic communication and political outcomes, Greenpeace targeted both national and regional media combining conventional tactics of attracting media attention such as media commentary and press releases with direct action, lobbying, circulating scientific reports, sponsoring international experts and the internet.

CREDIBILITY CONTESTS IN A CONTROVERSY

New Zealand media reporting of GM in 2003 centred on political, legal and commercial issues such as the lifting of the moratorium, amendments to regulations for the release of GMOs, a court case challenging transgenic livestock trials, the anti-GM protests, an accidental GM release incident named 'Corngate', and political and corporate perspectives and actions. Analysis of the media coverage established that articles in the first quarter of 2003 primarily deployed a pro-GM frame and emphasised the benefits of GM. In April, however, there was a critical change in the reporting of the issue with the release of the Ministry for the Environment and the Treasury commissioned report entitled 'Economic risks and opportunities from the release of genetically modified organisms in New Zealand' (commonly known as the BERL report). The report did not substantiate the economic rationale for GM. Perhaps more significant in terms of raising questions for journalists, however, was the timing of the report's release at the beginning of the Easter

public holiday. This caused journalists to become suspicious of the Government's handling of the GM issue. Subsequently, the media presented stories that were more critical of both GM and the economic rationale for promoting the science.

The shift to more investigative and critical reporting of GM resulted in the Greenpeace spokesperson being consulted and, more significantly, becoming a media spokesperson and an expert adviser to journalists. Traditional advice to organisations seeking media attention has emphasised the importance of establishing relationships with media. Greenpeace strategically promoted a single knowledgeable campaign spokesperson who worked proactively with journalists to increase their understanding of the GM issues and promote Greenpeace knowledge claims. Journalists interviewed agreed that building relationships was essential and stressed the need to 'come to an understanding about what happens in their conversations' (Journalist A). Journalists confirmed that the Greenpeace campaign spokesperson was an articulate and informed spokesperson for the anti-GM lobby with an efficient professional approach to media relations. A journalist commented 'I have a lot of respect for them' (Journalist B).

Developing positive relationships with media personnel is not, however, an end in itself: relationships need to be complemented by media strategies with carefully crafted key messages. The Greenpeace spokesperson explained that the key campaign messages would clarify 'why GE is a bad idea, and GE release and crops are a bad idea, why it shouldn't be in our food chain and why precautionary principles are important'.¹³ The key messages of Greenpeace may be conceptualised as a form of critical knowledge, that is, knowledge that questions or resists legitimated or popular understandings. Both Greenpeace and

media organisations engage with critical knowledge and controversy, however they adopt different approaches. Greenpeace emphasises direct action and lobbying whereas media organisations emphasise evidence, facts and objectivity. Thus, a difficulty in circulating critical knowledge is that it requires fact-based verification and is subject to considerable scrutiny and interrogation.^{9,11,17} In this context, Journalist B explained: 'It is crucial to produce evidence of claims and back up a press release, statement or story with facts'. Yet, critical knowledges include other ways of knowing such as social, spiritual or cultural values, beliefs and attitudes and are therefore more likely to be represented as emotion or opinion rather than fact. Although positive perceptions of the campaign spokesperson were influential in piquing initial journalist interest one journalist explained the facts were verified by scientists; 'I actually found Greenpeace pretty intelligent and really well informed by and large, certainly with the spokesman... he's a pretty smart guy. So they would say raise an issue, I would then perhaps talk to our local scientists... because they're so involved in it' (Journalist C). Greenpeace was thus acknowledged as an agenda-setting stakeholder in the media coverage through its ability to offer leads on a story. Science, however, acted as an 'epistemic authority'¹⁸ whereby Greenpeace's leads were checked or contrasted with local science perspectives. As Fishman has stated, in this way, 'journalists participate in upholding a normative order to authorized knowers in society'.¹⁹ The contested nature of scientific claims or the vested interests at stake were rarely examined or reported.

During controversial issues organisations such as Greenpeace are involved in a 'credibility contest' to gain epistemic authority, that is, to determine 'who has the legitimate power to represent a sector

of the universe — on what grounds'.¹⁸ Epistemic authority is accorded to organisations and individuals who comply with media expectations and are judged to be knowledgeable and credible sources. Decisions on epistemic authority may also be based on a newspaper's stance on an issue. One journalist explained that the editorial stance was to legitimate the status quo: 'there was certainly an editorial stance that pretty much favoured the Royal Commission approach . . . we agreed that the arguments had been gone through and proceed with caution had been decided and we should back that . . . that was the view we took'. (Journalist C). Hence the newspaper saw its role as to support and legitimate the recommendations of the government sponsored Royal Commission. The journalist did, however, observe that not all papers took that perspective and that GM reporting could vary.

In one notable instance, Greenpeace became the source of a story about GM-contaminated dough that was exported to Japan, and, through this, a source of information on the regulation and labelling of GM food products. At this point, Greenpeace was able to capitalise on its strength as highly informed and up-to-date on environmental regulatory decision-making processes and policies and assume epistemic authority. Journalists spoke off the record about the need for expert advice with legal and regulatory issues. In this instance, Greenpeace was not only able to set the media agenda and play a key role as a media spokesperson, but also to assume epistemic authority.

Journalists, however, expressed concern about the difficulties and complexities in reporting science. One journalist explained 'you don't want to be an expert as a journalist, that's not your job, you know it's up to the scientists to be the experts or the Greenies to be experts in activism' (Journalist D). Greenpeace was recognised

as an authority on direct action and controversy and able to participate in agenda setting through identification of controversial issues but not accorded the 'legitimate power to define, describe, and explain the bounded domains of reality'.¹⁸ Greenpeace was successful in positioning itself as an expert news source, setting media agendas and establishing positive relationships with journalists. It struggled, however, to position itself as an epistemic authority that was widely quoted.

FRAMING

The GM issue gained significant coverage in the latter part of 2003, as the lifting of the moratorium approached. At this time, Greenpeace aimed to influence the interpretive frames the media deployed to report GM issues, framing the issue in a broader sociopolitical context rather than focus on the micro-issue of the lifting of the GM moratorium. It adopted an ideological frame of environmental and consumer advocate and the approaches used were described as 'creative confrontation of activities that we see as being destructive or counter to the interests of the environment or participating in informed processes such as making submissions to select committees and government bodies'.¹³

Lobbying food manufacturers and supermarkets was a tactic that resulted in the Greenpeace perspective being the dominant frame for reporting the GM issue. The press release announcements that leading brand manufacturers and supermarkets had agreed to become GM free not only resulted in positive framing, but also included mentions of the Greenpeace GE-Free Food Guide and even included URL references to electronic versions of the guide on the Greenpeace web site. This suggests that lobbying on behalf of consumer interests was an example of successful strategic ambiguity and an astute positioning tactic which

complied with the news value of consonance identified by Galtung and Ruge.¹

Greenpeace adopted the additional tactic of sponsoring influential 'elite' spokespeople's visits to New Zealand in order to raise awareness of GM and to participate in the political process. For example, the visit of Bob Willick, a Canadian former GM farmer coincided with the announcement of New Zealand's co-existence strategy for GM release but his views were dismissed by the Chairman of the New Zealand Grain Committee. Michael Meacher, former UK Environment Minister, was invited by Greenpeace to present to the Select Committee during the hearing of the New Organisms and Other Matters Bill, but the Select Committee refused to hear Meacher's submission. Greenpeace press releases explaining the disregard for and dismissal of knowledgeable representatives escalated the controversies, provoking widespread and detailed reporting of these spokespeople's experiences of GM controversies from other countries. Thus, critical knowledges were able to circulate because they met the negativity news value identified by Galtung and Ruge,¹ escalated the controversy and encapsulated entertainment values of drama and emotion. Both spokespeople then assumed epistemic authority in media coverage. The use of epistemic intermediaries to promote the Greenpeace view created media interest, provided longevity for the controversies and enabled the Greenpeace framing of the issues to succeed.

At this time, however, the media framing of the coverage was primarily political. The view of journalists on framing the issue was summed up thus: 'It's not so much to do with environmentalism as to do with the political emotion side of the debate' (Journalist D). Consequently, media coverage on the issues emphasised the

Labour Party relationship with the Green Party and portrayed an adversarial relationship between political leaders, in particular the Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party, Helen Clark, versus Jeanette Fitzsimons, the Leader of the Green Party. Such coverage focused on personality rather than ideological differences on the GM issue. Moriand²⁰ argued that when scientific explanation is too uncertain, difficult or complex, social meanings of events are represented. Although the analysis of the coverage suggests that the press were primarily targeting politicians as spokespeople on GM issues, a protagonist-antagonist binary was a favoured media strategy. The Greenpeace spokesperson's position was often contrasted with voices from the pro-GM lobby such as the Life Sciences Network, and was characterised by the Greenpeace spokesperson as an 'adversarial tit for tat'. From the Greenpeace perspective, journalists were perceived as providing 'uninformed' coverage that lacked journalistic investigation, and coverage of the GM issue was characterised as 'an endless argument'. Journalists explained that the media technique of balancing quotes had been especially prevalent at the early stage of the controversy when they did not understand the science or the issues and described the technique as a means of trying to ensure accuracy and fairness, rather than objectivity.

As the lifting of the GM moratorium neared, Greenpeace became a lesser voice in the GM controversy and single-issue activist groups — Mothers Against Genetic Engineering (MAdGE), the Sustainability Council, the Seed Carriers Hikoi, Take Five, GE-Free — gained greater prominence, in addition to the views of the various political parties. Where Greenpeace was mentioned on this issue it was in relation to direct action protests such as the dumping of dirt outside

Premier House (the Prime Minister's residence); a GM onion application protest; the wearing of chicken suits and climbing grain silos to protest against GM chicken feed; and the October anti-GM march. Despite the national journalists interviewed expressing irritation with Greenpeace's 'stunts for the camera', and a desire not to report protests, they were a very effective publicity strategy. Therefore, although journalists appear to be cynical about photo-opportunity protests, sub-editors use the pictures. The dilemma for organisations such as Greenpeace is to determine whether publicity and entertainment or knowledge circulation is more important. Stunts result in coverage but may jeopardise an organisation's epistemic credibility and the possibility of that organisation's perspective being the dominant frame.

One advocacy group, MAdGE, gained significant coverage through the use of unique tactics such as removing their shirts in parliament to reveal pink bras. Because the GM issue was perceived as 'boring and complex' (Journalist C) there was considerable pressure to write stories that would appeal to sub-editors and readers and MAdGE capitalised on the need to make the issue more interesting and entertaining. Emotion, not factual, sensible information was described as a key element in framing a story: 'emotion is one of the things that gets a story on the front page' (Journalist E). As another journalist summed up, 'What I'd hope is that you provide factual, sensible information about your point of view, now clearly that doesn't work so [laughter] I'm at a loss' (Journalist A). Although journalists were aware of the contradictions in the need for facts versus emotion and opinion, they expressed frustration that many sources did not understand who the readers of their papers are and what would appeal to the readers. Journalists expect sources to know what

sells newspapers, that is, an understanding of how news is to be framed to appeal to readers.

The dialectical tension between judgments of what made an effective credible news source and what made an issue newsworthy and marketable was acknowledged as a dilemma in reporting the GM issue. This dialectical tension served journalists' need for good leads and trustworthy sources but conflicted with the news values of what sells. Organisations need to understand that the news values that function as the ultimate determinant of what is news are commercial and characterised by emotion and drama. Thus organisations such as Greenpeace must comply with epistemic expectations but at the same time must provide controversy and emotion. Traditionally Greenpeace has been stronger in emotional appeal than epistemic credibility and has had to practise strategic flexibility, in which it offers both credible news and emotion. The challenge for organisations such as Greenpeace is to balance the two requirements so that they may gain access to public media and the opportunity to influence public opinion during a period of controversy. In order to engage in a controversial credibility contest Greenpeace has to deploy strategic flexibility, demonstrating understanding of the science and engaging the imaginations of sub-editors who make the commercial decisions about news.

EVALUATION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE MEDIA RELATIONS CAMPAIGN

During a public controversy, media relations may develop into an epistemic struggle to circulate critical knowledge in the form of public information and advocacy. Conceptualising media relations as an epistemic struggle shifts the emphasis from relationship building to knowledge

production and circulation, thereby highlighting the importance of gaining epistemic authority, understanding media expectations and the need for strategic duality to comply with the news values criteria. Greenpeace deployed strategic ambiguity in order to manage the conflicting demands of environmental and communication goals, positioning itself as a consumer advocate in order to gain epistemic authority and mobilise public opinion. Although Greenpeace initially focused on public information, it later moved into an advocacy and lobbying role. Greenpeace was successful in establishing itself as a source of news leads, but was less successful in establishing itself as an epistemic authority whereby the framing of news stories represented the Greenpeace perspective. The exceptions were in areas where the media lacked expertise, where Greenpeace was able to gain epistemic authority from associations with experts and elite persons or where Greenpeace deployed strategic flexibility, providing facts but framing a story to meet commercial news values. Greenpeace considered that within the campaign they had struggled to get meaningful, in-depth coverage of the issues. Greenpeace, however, had successfully facilitated the circulation of critical knowledge about genetic modification and involved society in considerations of the scientific controversy, thus increasing public engagement and democratisation of science.

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