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### **The Unexpected Mentor: Participatory Culture instructing Participatory Democracy**

MIT Comparative Media Studies student Stephen Schultze offers an interesting hypothesis: Skills that emerge in the course of participating in pop culture can become powerful forces when translated into tools of citizen engagement.<sup>1</sup>

With digital government as our framework, we will investigate the ways in which participatory culture can inform, model and support a more responsive participatory democracy. Henry Jenkins, founder of the MIT Comparative Media Studies program, describes participatory culture as "culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content."<sup>2</sup> An apt definition of participatory democracy is more difficult to establish, and we are often hard pressed to provide examples beyond things like voting, voicing a concern at a city government meeting, signing a petition, or attending a political rally. We will see that perhaps participatory culture can suggest new ways for citizens to interact with government and political life.

Participatory culture can offer new ways of thinking about democratic participation in everyday life. Participatory pop culture can 1) support and extend current notions of democratic models, and 2) create new frameworks for democratic participation. Presently, we see participatory frameworks boosted with the availability of inexpensive, digital technologies like camera phones and user-friendly software applications like Photoshop and iMovie. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Schultze, Berkman Center for Internet and Society lunch talk, Harvard University, February 7, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p. 290.

with the spread of broadband networks, users can upload and download content quickly and easily on the web.<sup>3</sup> However, the ubiquity of content creation technologies, fast digital networks and creative Web 2.0 sharing services do not come without a cost. We, as a participatory citizenry, are faced with various challenges in extending and developing these new media for democratic communication and interaction.

When we look to the future of participatory democracy, we realize that participatory pop culture needs to work hand-in-hand with changing notions of politics and governance. We observe that just as we enjoy and participate in the various forms of pop culture in everyday life, so to must we create, use, and champion this same sense of involvement, engagement, and empowerment of the public for social and political reform.

Web 2.0 services are instructive because they provide many examples of creativity and development of participatory cultures online. We recognize the ongoing digital divide in the U.S., but also realize that the discrepancy is less stark today than in the 1990s—many more people have at least a baseline level of web connectivity through schools and libraries.<sup>4</sup>

### **Support and extend traditional communication**

Participatory popular culture tools like YouTube and Second Life can support and extend traditional democratic models like the town hall meeting or informational pamphlet.

We observe that as new media and entertainment technologies emerge, they are immediately co-opted by users for political purposes. We see this in the use of websites like Meetup.com, originally a place for Beanie Baby and Lord of the Rings enthusiasts, but later used as one of the

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Gillmor, "Virginia Tech: How Media are Evolving," Center for Citizen Media, April 17, 2007. <http://citimedia.org/blog/2007/04/17/virginia-tech-how-media-are-evolving/>

<sup>4</sup> Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, p. 236.

main grassroots organizing technologies for Howard Dean supporters during the 2004 election. Below, participatory culture is used in other ways to support more conventional notions of communication and information dissemination:

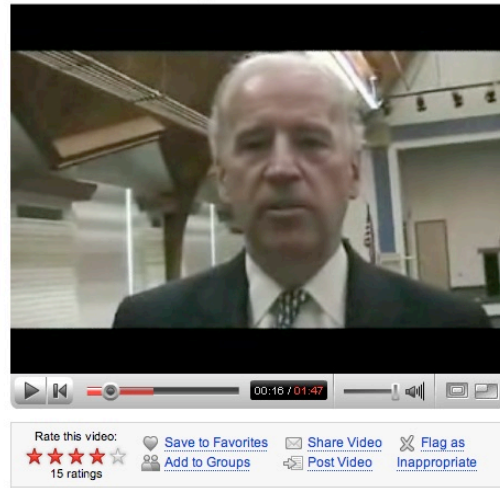
### YouTube supporting a "conversation"

Re: Question for the presidential candidates



5

Re: Question for the presidential candidates



6

Here, participants use digital video recorders to capture a question for presidential candidates (in this case, Joe Biden). Users then upload the video to YouTube and tag it with a word known to Biden's campaign staff. Later, a member of Biden's staff searches YouTube on that tag to aggregate the questions. Finally, Biden views the questions, records a response, and uploads the response to YouTube with a tag known to the original questioners. This type of call and response is interesting because it helps to extend the traditional sit-down question and answer sessions that are limited to a select few in cities along the campaign trail. On YouTube, anyone is able to view the questions and responses. Furthermore, users are able to comment on the content and quality of the questions and answers on the YouTube webpage. Naturally, Biden

<sup>5</sup> "Question/Answer for Presidential candidate Joe Biden," [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYQS\\_Hg5p6U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYQS_Hg5p6U)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

cannot answer all the questions put to him on YouTube, but this method of "conversation" should not be discounted.

## Moveon.org and the Virtual Town Hall

BARACK OBAMA: MoveOn Virtual Town Hall - Full Vid

VirtualTown Hall: **IRAQ**

ANITA TODRAS  
Coconut Creek, FL

sponsored by **MoveOn.ORG** POLITICAL ACTION videos produced by **politicsTV.com**

Pod for by MoveOn.org Political Action, www.moveon.org - not authorized by any candidate or candidate's committee.

00:56 / 09:48

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Views: 17,673 | Comments: 123 | Favorited: 54 times

7

BARACK OBAMA: MoveOn Virtual Town Hall - Full Vid

VirtualTown Hall: **IRAQ**

BARACK OBAMA  
What is the best and fastest way to get out of Iraq?

sponsored by **MoveOn.ORG** POLITICAL ACTION co-sponsored by **AIR AMERICA RADIO**

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8

On April 10, 2007, MoveOn.org hosted a "Virtual Town Hall" with the U.S. Presidential candidates. This meeting was the first in a series of upcoming virtual get-togethers. MoveOn members and other citizens gathered in public spaces around the country to watch as candidates—in geographically disparate locations—answered questions from the audience. Beforehand, MoveOn members submitted questions online and then voted for the few they thought most suitable to ask the candidates. Afterwards, MoveOn participants will vote for whose position they prefer based upon the responses given during the Virtual Town Hall.<sup>9</sup> Again, we see how

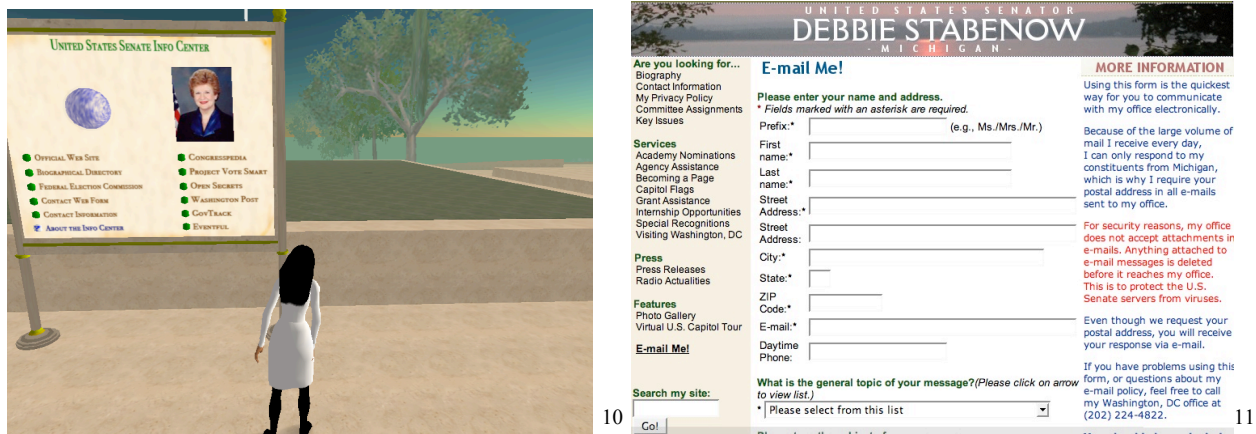
<sup>7</sup> "Move.org Virtual Town Hall," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9x8yiU9CILY>

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> "Virtual Town Hall Meeting on Iraq" [http://pol.moveon.org/townhall/iraq/report\\_back.html](http://pol.moveon.org/townhall/iraq/report_back.html)

advances in popular participatory technologies like web forums and YouTube can provide the springboard for democratic participation by more individuals in more locations.

## Second Life as interactive information portal



Virtual worlds like Second Life are offering new ways for citizens to collect information, receive services, and interact with government and political issues. Virtual worlds offer a unique approach towards interaction in that they draw upon an interactive, game-like approach. Jenkins suggests that instead of divorcing popular culture from politics, we should support and encourage new forms of political interaction that can incorporate these ideas of game-play, fantasy and creative culture.<sup>12</sup> There is an area in Second Life called "Capitol Hill" that provides portals to information about presidential candidates, voting registration, and current Congressional

<sup>10</sup> Quinn Foulon in Second Life, U.S. Senate Info Center, Capitol Hill

<sup>11</sup> "Debbie Stabenow contact form redirect from Second Life portal," <http://stabenow.senate.gov/email.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Beyond Broadcast keynote address," MIT, February 24, 2007.

representatives. Avatars can interact with these bulletin-board-like portals in various ways. Users can send data (such as your ZIP code) to the client via chat, and the system will display the user's Congressional representatives on the bulletin board. From there, users can click on links to the representatives' webpages and even be taken directly to a web contact form. These new virtual technologies may increase the ease of information retrieval and interaction, and incorporate the mixing of entertainment with politics.

### **Create new forms of communication and participation**

Participatory culture can offer models such as mashups, citizen journalism and wikis as examples of new forms of democratic participation and interaction. Mashups are a creative, engaging, and poignant way to make a point. Mashups support an ideal of semiotic democracy,<sup>13</sup> where viewers remix, repurpose, and recontextualize cultural images and media for their own uses. Citizen journalism uses the participatory framework to bring viewers directly to the source of information without the filter of the mass media. User-generated content sites like Wikipedia show that strength in numbers can support accuracy and demonstrate the power of a new form of aggregated information portal.

### **Mashups can mix pop culture and political messages**

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<sup>13</sup> "Semiotic Democracy," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotic\\_democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotic_democracy)

Hillary Clinton 1984 Video



Donald Trump Fires George W Bush



Here, mashups use video editing technologies and the web in order to provide entertaining content tinged with political critique. On the left, Obama supporters (not officially sanctioned by Obama's campaign) took the iconic "1984" Apple Computer ad and mashed it with archival video likening Hillary Clinton to "Big Brother." On the right, fans of the NBC reality TV series "The Apprentice" mashed up video of Donald Trump's famous dismissal monologues with photographs and video of George W Bush in the place of Trump's employees, effectively giving Bush the boot.

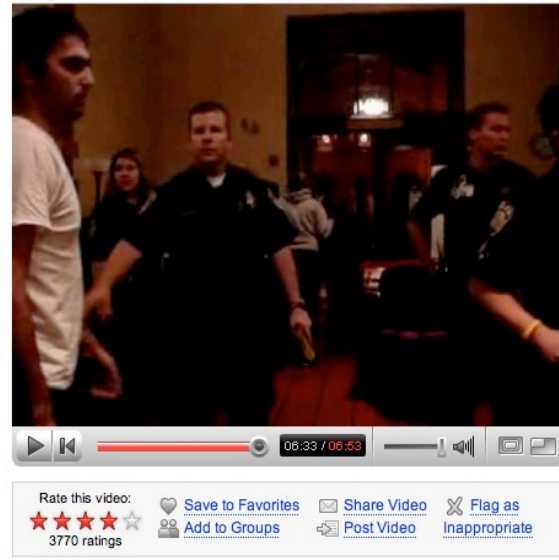
### Citizen journalism and community watchdog

<sup>14</sup> "Vote Different," Hillary Clinton "1984" video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h3G-IMZxjo>

<sup>15</sup> "Donald Trump Fires George W Bush," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fKPKhXFxs4>



**UCLA Police Taser Student in Powell**



16

17

Mash-ups can provide a unique platform for critiques of media, as we see when news stories are aggregated onto a single webpage. On the left, a blog combined news stories discussing the plight of hurricane Katrina survivors—one news story calling African Americans "looters" and another naming white individuals "finders" and "foragers." While citizen journalism extends back to even before the Zapruder film, today's amateur news journalists hold much more power because of the ubiquity of digital cameras, audio- and video recording technologies. Anyone with a video-enabled camera phone can record events like the UCLA student tasing and upload the content, for free, onto sites like YouTube within minutes for the world to see.

**Collective intelligence, information access and aggregation**

<sup>16</sup> "Looting vs. Finding," <http://www.illuminati-news.com/graphics/looting-finding.gif>

<sup>17</sup> "UCLA Police Taser Student," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g7zIJx9u2E>



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**Welcome to Debatepedia. Debatepedia is the new free wiki encyclopedia of arguments and debates.** As a "wiki", it enables anyone (you included) to easily present and organize the unique arguments made by third-party sources (ie. by scholars, experts, leaders,...) on both sides of a debate. By providing an innovative "logic tree" debate methodology, it enables you to organize debates in the most understandable way. Debatepedia is quickly becoming an indispensable resource for uncovering all the unique arguments in important public debates and for developing a complete and rational position.

**04/15/2007 Debatepedia Team Notes:**

**Debatepedia is International:**  
 Responding to criticism, it is important that we note that Debatepedia is an idea that transcends nationality. Its debate topics are to include ANY public debate - international, scientific, philosophical, historical, etc - as long as these debates have two clearly opposing published arguments and cases.

**Software development project:** Debatepedia is currently developing dynamic software around its unique "logic tree" method. The software will also integrate What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get (WYSIWYG - Wiz-EE-Wig) technology with this "wiki" so that editing will be like editing a Word document, rather than

**Key Political Debates (not limited to US policy):**

- [Minimum Wage in the United States](#) Should the United States minimum wage be increased?
- [Stem-Cell Research](#) Should federal funding be provided to all forms of stem-cell research?
- [Ban the Estate Tax?](#) Should the US estate tax be banned?
- [Iran, Military Ops Against](#) Would the United States and Israel be justified in launching a counter-proliferation strike against Iran to forestall the development of its alleged nuclear weapons program?
- [Oil Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge](#) Should the US House and the Senate open the

18

Websites like Debatepedia.com connect the collective intelligence of user-generated encyclopedia sites like Wikipedia with engaged citizens who wish to learn and contribute to the debate political issues. The site aims to support a participatory model that can ultimately produce a more informed public that can propose and rationally defend arguments of a debate.

Participatory social networking services like Facebook, MySpace, and MeetUp can provide a platform for information and motivation. These services were conceived for entertainment, but now provide interesting mobilization tools for petitions, informational web resources, and advertising of real-life political events, meetings and rallies.

## Analysis

<sup>18</sup> "Debatepedia.com," [http://debatepedia.com/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://debatepedia.com/index.php/Main_Page)

Participatory culture presents a wealth of opportunities for a more participatory democracy. At the same time, this participatory framework presents various social and political challenges.

A participatory pop culture can tie ideas of entertainment with grassroots political organizing. In this way, models of participatory culture can work to inform a more supportive government, inclusive political parties, and responsive community organizations. New media helps create political transparency, increase accountability of decision-makers, provide a platform for voices usually unheard, spur individual creativity, and support group mobilization efforts. Participatory technologies encourage citizen to use culture for the remixing, repurposing, and retransmission of artifacts representing their views on contemporary issues.

Talk of "participation" insinuates a new form for interaction with culture and media. The role of the citizenry is shifting from solely information consumer to consumer/producer. We no longer live in a world where we get our best information only from top-down, few-to-many sources.<sup>19</sup> Benkler describes how this distributed communication architecture (many-to-many) helps reduce communication costs to speak across associational boundaries. These advances have "altered the ways in which individuals can now be active participants in the public sphere as opposed to passive readers, listeners, viewers."<sup>20</sup>

Participatory frameworks present many challenges, including information overload, increased citizen responsibility and overall expectations, the lure of the single-minded information environments, and the conflicts of the grassroots colliding with the establishment.

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<sup>19</sup> Doc Searles, Doc Searles weblog, Thursday, April 19, 2007. <http://doc.weblogs.com/>

<sup>20</sup> Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, p. 212.

## **Information Overload**

Advances in online participatory culture reveal a rich wealth of political content now available to the average person. Websites, email lists, RSS feeds, and Web 2.0 technologies make it possible for citizens to gain access to volumes of information and rich media. Will the cacophony of voices that now have a voice dilute—or even pollute—online communication channels? Schudson fears that "the gap between readily available political information and the individual's capacity to monitor it grows ever larger."<sup>21</sup> Does the multiplicity of messages lobbed at us from every angle online water down the overall political message, or even scare people away from becoming involved in the first place?

### **Everyone speaking, who is listening?**

Just because we are able to increase overall democratic participation in government does not necessarily mean we arrive at a greater political understanding between groups with conflicting interests. Powerful collaborative filtering sites and free RSS feed readers offer novel tools for data aggregation. Social networking sites like Facebook and Orkut connect friends, family, students and co-workers. While these sites are useful, they can limit the types of information that a person receives. In an online environment, we only have to encounter ideas and people with whom we agree. Amidst an enormous sea of information online, Cass Sunstein suggests that a constrained information horizon—what Negroponte coined the "Daily Me"—has consequences for creating a true participatory democracy. Sunstein writes, "when options are so plentiful, many people will take the opportunity to listen to those points of view that they find

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Schudson, "Click Here for Democracy: A History and Critique of an Information-Based Model of Citizenship," *Democracy and New Media*, p. 56.

most agreeable."<sup>22</sup> Our view of the internet as a democratic medium, which allows us to communicate with groups that were not possible to communicate with before directly conflicts with the urge to consume information and ideas with which we agree.

Assuming we can create more participation in democratic practice, will political representatives, government officials and community leaders listen? West suggests that the "cognitive, cultural, and sociostructural embeddedness of organizational practices and relationships helps to explain a surprising resilience in the face of new information and communications technologies."<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, engaged citizens should question superficial efforts made by representatives who seem to put a lot of effort into developing feedback forms and online communication venues but who remain uninterested in taking these communications seriously. We do recognize areas of government and policy-making that value citizen participation and online engagement. At the same time, we see that representatives can be overwhelmed when so many more citizens want to be heard. When legislators receive hundreds of online messages per day, we need to rethink our communication structures in such a way that enables decision-makers to "view these new requests for information as an opportunity to convey their views to more citizens...[and] redesign internal processes to achieve this goal."<sup>24</sup>

### **Responsibility and Expectations**

Multimedia editing capabilities are now within the grasp of the average citizen, which may explain the deluge of mashups and remixes of content online. While we should celebrate the

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<sup>22</sup> Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com*, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Fountain, *Building the Virtual State: Information Technology and Institutional Change*, p. 190.

<sup>24</sup> David Winston, "Digital Democracy and the New Age of Reason," *Democracy and New Media*, p. 138.

democratizing effects that easy-to-use technologies and fast networks provide to our society, we need to critique uses of the same technologies when they are used to promote racism, sexism and hate. Siva Vaidhyanathan, Professor of Law at New York University, worries that creators will no doubt repurpose images of Virginia Tech shooter Cho Seung-Hui to produce racist or xenophobic collages. He writes, "when people got hold of the horrifying photos of U.S. soldiers torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib, artists immediately recycled the most powerful of them to make stunning comments about the policies at stake. Mashups give everyday people the power to affect public perceptions and deliberations. But they can just as easily be shallow, hateful and harmful."<sup>25</sup> With the chains removed from the typical means of production structures, we find ourselves with a powerful toolset to create remixed works.

### **Bottom-up collides with top-down**

Just as grassroots organizations are learning creative ways to use participatory technologies to further their messages, so are large corporations attempting to ride the wave of grassroots legitimacy and co-opt the bottom-up culture of legitimacy. We must recognize when big media attempt to appropriate grassroots ideals, and work to reserve this space for those who truly create and support it.

Just as embedded social and political structures are slow to adopt new participatory frameworks, so too will traditional power and money structures remain resistant to change. Jenkins proclaims, "history teaches us that old media never die."<sup>26</sup> While technology changes, entrenched power structures remain the same. The grassroots participatory media will need to

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<sup>25</sup> Siva Vaidhyanathan, "Material from killer should not have aired," April 20, 2007. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18220512/from/ET/>

<sup>26</sup> Jenkins p. 13.

work in cooperation with big media, even as it slowly chips away at the mammoth information machine. Similarly, Benkler suggests, "money will dominate the capacity to be heard on the internet, even if it no longer controls the capacity to speak."<sup>27</sup>

### **Everyday pop culture, everyday participatory democracy**

Pierre Levy, a philosopher and Professor of Communication at the University of Ottawa, envisions a world where "grassroots communication is not a momentary disruption of the corporate signal, but the routine way the new system operates."<sup>28</sup> We find ourselves at a place where grassroots participation in culture and politics can once again regain status as the norm, similar to the place grassroots American media occupied before the rule of television and one-way mass communication. While current government participatory tactics "do little to encourage activity outside of periodic elections,"<sup>29</sup> new participatory culture can propose interesting, supportive ways to get citizens involved everyday in political discussion and action. Pop culture represents a common language that cuts across social and political boundaries. Benkler writes, "culture is much more intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life than political processes and debates."<sup>30</sup> As a result, we must continue to experiment in developing participatory structures that support more robust participation in political action. To dispel myths that participation online showcases just lazy political activism, we need to champion successes in

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<sup>27</sup> Benkler, p. 234.

<sup>28</sup> Jenkins, p. 215.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Bevir, "Democratic Governance: Systems and Radical Perspectives," p. 430.

<sup>30</sup> Benkler, p. 298.

mobilizing citizens, both online and in face-to-face interactions, while working to refine tools and best practices for community participation in government.

### **Culture and politics, working together**

Perhaps we've only scratched the surface of learning how to use popular participatory culture tools to instruct and mobilize a participatory democracy and digital governance. The pockets of creativity popping up online are gaining steam and credence with a motivated citizenry and open-minded decision makers who realize the inevitability of interactive communication tools.

We may be able to see pop culture as the spanning layer that can bring disparate communities together. We should work to support creative communities, from Second Life avatars building safe sex information portals, teenage Facebook members organizing online discussion groups addressing school violence, or individuals mashing up Bush and Blair lip-syncing "Endless Love" on YouTube. If we can strengthen social bonds through widespread participation in entertainment and pop culture, we can create the common ground we need to be able to open communication for other issues.

We should not divorce pop culture from politics, but find ways that each can interact with and learn from one another. Meshing the cultural world with the political does not require that one must submit to the other. With society constantly learning new uses for participatory tools and technologies, we must assert that decision-makers take the time to learn and understand the power of new communication technologies. With easy tools, fast connections, and an open mind to experimentation, we can begin to close the participation gap in political life.

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