

Leading Cultural Change in the Newspaper Industry: How Jeff Bezos saved The Washington Post

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Abstract: This article deals with the phenomenon of change leadership in the newspaper industry. Many traditional and long-established print newspapers find themselves in a crisis-like situation because the demand in print newspapers is decreasing continuously while digital news content is strongly on the rise. Although the financial situation of many newspapers calls for a change that embraces digital opportunities, many businesses are unable to adapt owing to path dependence and inertia. Large parts of organizational culture in the traditional print industry are not open-minded towards digital evolution. The aim of this article is to analyze the successful change leadership of Jeff Bezos at The Washington Post since his takeover in 2013 in order to find implications for other newspaper businesses that find themselves in a similar situation of digital inertia. The adopted research method is the case study approach by analyzing secondary data: Various qualitative sources (e.g. newspaper articles or research papers) regarding the case of the Washington Post are put into the theoretical context of change leadership. The key results implicate that Bezos was able to save the company from a financial downward spiral by setting a strong and motivating vision that focused on digital performance, changing workplace structures and incentive systems, hiring technological affine employees and fostering digital experimentation. A change in the culture was, however, only possible because Bezos found the right balance between introducing new and keeping traditional values to not overstrain the employee's change ability.

Keywords: newspaper industry, Jeff Bezos, The Washington Post, change leadership, cultural change
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Introduction

Within the past decades, the traditional newspaper industry has come under severe pressure (van Weezel, 2009; Wadbring & Bergström, 2015). Various scholars and journalists even regard to the situation as undeniable “crisis” (e.g. Jones, 2009; McChesney and Pickard, 2011). Many newspapers around the globe are facing significant drops in readership and lower circulation which, in turn, lead to lower revenue streams, staff dismissal, or even bankruptcy and closure of once established newspaper businesses (Macnamara, 2010; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). Various factors have led to this desperate state in which many traditional newspapers around the world still find themselves today. The media landscape has changed drastically, and we are far from living in a society in which we only inform ourselves by reading printed newspapers. The first wave of transformation occurred in the last century with the emergence of radio and television (Muehlefeld et al., 2012). This audience-fragmentation has become even more significant with the disruptive appearance of the internet: Ever since, online newspapers, blogs and social media are challenging the traditional print media industry drastically. Socio-demographic changes have altered the way in which people, especially among the millennial generation, perceive and interact with news content (Lauf, 2001; Macnamara, 2010). The smartphone or the computer as source of information have overtaken the importance of traditional newspapers for many people who are thus not willing to invest money and time into reading printed newspapers (Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015). Apart from having less subscribers, newspapers are struggling with their financial sourcing model as

advertising incomes are diminishing, too. Declining newspaper audiences and comparably high advertising prices make other advertisement spots (e.g. online) more appealing (Ryfe, 201; Thurman and Myllylahti, 2009). These developments have forced the traditional newspaper companies to rethink their business models in order to survive on the market. Such an organizational change demands a corporate culture which facilitates the strategic reorientation (Küng, 2008).

Today it can be said that some newspapers are very successful in combining the online and the offline world since they have embraced the required changes whereas others are still struggling or have already vanished from the surface. How can this phenomenon be explained? Why are some newspapers able to fruitfully adapt and some are not? This question is too big and possibly could not be answered since there are countless individual factors playing a role. The aim of this article is to light into the topic by analyzing the successful case of The Washington Post which was taken over in 2013 by none other than Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon. This case represents a journey of a regionally focused print newspaper which was close to failure and got back on its feet to playing in the global top-league by becoming a major digital player (Cassidy, 2018; Pope, 2016). It will be outlined which role Jeff Bezos as the new company leader played in this change and whether he was able to change the cultural mindset in this company. The thesis of this article is that it requires visionary change leadership in order to change a newspaper’s culture to embrace digital opportunities.

First, a literature review will clarify the concepts of organizational culture and inertia

regarding the newspaper industry. Further, theory on change leadership will be presented. After a short explanation of the methodology, the case of The Washington Post will be described in detail and will be connected to the theoretical concepts that have been presented before. A conclusion summarizes all findings and derives recommendations for other newspapers which are stuck in a cultural state of inertia.

Literature Review

Organizational culture represents a topic of interest in the literature in the last decades (Marinescu and Toma, 2015). It is the rather invisible but an impactful force influencing organizational member's behavior, choices and routines. E. Schein defined organizational culture "[...] as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved problems of external adaption and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered as valid[...]" (2010, p. 18). Thus, culture evolves with the historical learning process of an organization and is gradually shaped internally by the member's beliefs, norms and values, as well as the external context the organization is confronted with. It helps the organizational members to collaborate with each other by providing shared behavioral guidelines to reach a commonly accepted goal. Further, it fosters identification with the organization and its choices. By this, a common culture supports organizational stability (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). However, organizational cultures that have been proven to be successful for some time can be challenged by external developments and require adaption in order to stay competitive. Especially in today's digitalized and

connected world, the pace of global developments has accelerated strongly and become unpredictable in great parts. This requires firms to be flexible, also in terms of their underlying organizational culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). If a firm's culture tends to rather embrace stability instead of flexibility, a cultural change may be necessary. An alteration of organizational culture, however, cannot be forced upon organizational members and is a complex process (Sebastian & Niculina, 2011). The reason behind this is that humans strive for cognitive stability. Changing the fundamental values and assumptions can thus lead to a mental state of upheaval and even promote anxiety (Schein, 2010). Therefore, cultural adaption needs to be undertaken in a sensitive and careful manner to not overstrain the cognitive capabilities of the organizational members (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). The execution of such change therefore demands a strong, suitable and proficient change agency.

In 2003, R. Caldwell introduced a four-fold classification of change agency models in which he differentiates between leadership, management, consultancy and team change agents. This article focuses on the leadership change agency model in which Caldwell defines leadership change agents as "[...] leaders or senior executives at the very top of an organization who envision, initiate or sponsor strategic change of a far-reaching or transformational nature" (2003, p. 140). This theory especially attributes the change leader with a strong ability to create and sustain a vision leading to commitment among organizational members. J. P. Kotter has argued into a similar direction: "Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to

make it happen despite the obstacles" (1996, p. 35). Having a strong vision and bringing this to the people is the fundament on which strong change leadership is built (Behling and McFillen, 1996; Marinescu and Toma, 2015; Toma, Marinescu and Constantin, 2016). This goes in line with the leadership triad, according to which leaders must be able to produce vision, motivation and momentum in a group (Ionescu, 2014). In order to accomplish this, leaders should possess native charismatic traits which foster their role to be respected by the organizational members (Behling and McFillen, 1996). An empathic orientation towards the human resources is crucial, too. Besides this, the change leader needs to understand leadership in its architectural function and know how to successfully transform the required organizational structures and tasks (Holten & Brenner, 2015). Kanter highlighted that leaders must signal availability and time investment to their organizational members, since a lack of these attributes can impede credibility and lead to a loss of the workforce's motivation (1984). According to Balogun and Johnson, the neglect of the organizational culture in a major change process is a typical reason of its failure (2004). Thus, change leaders need to be familiar with the organizational culture and introduce change initiatives that consider the firm's cultural prerequisites while sensitively altering certain values if necessary. Dulewicz and Herbert (1999) stress the importance for a change leader to take risk in order to promote innovation. Schein also points out that a change leader needs to overcome learning anxiety by creating a setting in which failures are embraced. Such a risk-embracing environment promotes psychological safety among organizational members when

failures are seen as part of the learning process (Garvin, 1993; Schein, 1996; Newman et al., 2017). According to Edmondson and Lei, psychological safety fosters employees "to feel safe at work in order to grow, learn, contribute, and perform effectively in a rapidly changing world" (2014, p. 23). Thus, psychological safety is also a moderator for innovation and performance: When psychological safety is high, employees tend to embrace the integral steps of the learning process more. Also, it is important not to confront the workforce with too many changes in a short time frame as this could diminish the employees' psychological safety and may even lead to a state of anxiety (Frazier et al., 2017; Schein, 2010).

Taking now a closer look at the newspaper landscape: This industry looks back on a very long and successful history. The traditional print newspaper has been a well-established and respected institution in which journalists saw their morale task in educating and informing society through elucidating local and global topics of importance, by which they were serving a great function to support democratic values and freedom of opinion (Ryfe, 2012). Journalistic freedom and integrity were upheld privileges and the newsroom was strictly separated from marketing and sales departments in order not to undermine this crucial concept (Gade, 2004; van Weezel, 2009). Until the end of the last century, most traditional newspaper businesses were able to trust in the stable demand of their product. Thus, there was no need to scrutinize the long-established and underlying working structures and values. Even when the new media put pressure on print media, most journalists were not taking the threat seriously as they were clinging to

the thought that “there will always be newspapers” (Jones, 2009, p.1). However, the reality started to look different and there was a need to change. Many newspapers were still unable to adapt their once successful traditional print business model owing to path dependence and inertia (Gilbert, 2005; Nguyen, 2009). Path dependence describes the process in which an organization establishes a certain action pattern over time (Sydow et al., 2009). This leads to organizational inertia, meaning that the organization sticks to these patterns whereby it becomes resistant to change (Rumelt, 1995). According to Nguyen (2009) and Gilbert (2005), the majority of print newspaper businesses have tried to adapt, however, in a rather defensive manner: Instead of perceiving the new media as an opportunity and acting proactively in order to utilize the full scope of new possibilities, most newspapers have regarded to the phenomenon of online news as a threat and did not want to destroy their own revenue streams by delivering their content online. It took time until most newspapers joined the online world in some way and, by then, new entrants have already shaped the online news landscape and offered perks which the traditional print media had not been able to offer yet: latest news around the clock, tailored content and new interfaces to search for and interact with news (e.g. by comment threads), just to mention a few. Nguyen ascribes the slow and defensive adaption process in the newspaper industry to their “long-established fear-driven innovation culture” (2009, p. 91) which goes hand in hand with Curran’s view of newspaper businesses being in a state of “ostrich-like denial” (2010, p. 467) and Gilbert’s perception of large industry parts being a victim to inertia (2005). These

authors suggest that traditional newspaper cultures tend to oppose moving into the digital world by changing established patterns. Various scholars have made clear that fundamental changes in newspaper organizations demand a strong leadership which departs from old newsroom structures, norms and values while providing a solid visionary direction (e.g. Kanter, 1984). This may include a new owner or leader who is able to bring in a new perception to the newspaper business while not strictly abiding by traditional newspaper values. To be successful in the era of new media it is important to have a business model which also promotes digital content. Finding the right business architecture can be compared to walking the tightrope, since there are countless options to construct the multichannel model (e.g. paywalls, free content, social media presence etc.) (Karimi & Walter, 2016; Macnamara, 2010)

Methodology

This article’s underlying research methodology is the case study approach according to Yin (1984). It presents the case of The Washington Post while focusing on the leadership of Jeff Bezos. First, established literature regarding change leadership and the situation of the newspaper industry was gathered and is being described in the literature review. For the analysis of the case of The Washington Post, the author gathered historical and current information about this specific newspaper while focusing on the change initiatives since Jeff Bezos’ takeover, the newspaper’s culture and the leadership traits of the new owner. These findings are being presented and concludingly analyzed within the theoretical context. The analysis

combines qualitative and quantitative findings. Only secondary data, such as research papers and newspaper articles on the case, as well as interviews with employees of the Post, are being used.

Results and discussion

The Washington Post is a newspaper legacy which was founded in the year of 1877 in Washington, America. In 1933, the paper went into the hands of the Graham family and has stayed there for eight decades. By this, it was one of the last major newspaper players which was run as a family business (Fahri, 2013). It has flourished under the Graham leadership and become a successful newspaper institution which stood for democratic values and investigative, high-quality journalism. Although covering national and international stories while running bureaus all over the world, the paper's distribution was primarily focused on the Washington area (Huber, 2018). The rise of the internet, which led to financial downturns among most parts of the newspaper industry, did not spare The Washington Post. The business was dealing with years of continuous staff dismissal and strong diminution of newspaper circulation (Remnick, 2013). As a result, the Post's newspaper division had suffered a decline of 44 percent in operating income between 2009 and 2013 (Fahri, 2013). Further, the public opinion on the quality of the Post's journalism was questioned (Carr, 2014; Sherman, 2010). Donald Graham, the CEO of the newspaper, secretly started looking for a buyer in 2012 as he saw no other option to save the paper from being victim to the downward spiral. In 2013, Graham announced the immediate sale of the paper to Jeff Bezos for 250 million

Dollar. This buy-out was followed by internal and public discussions on whether it was possible for the digital revolutionist Bezos to successfully turn around the Post without having prior knowledge in the newspaper industry (Richter, 2013). Michael Schrage, a former journalist at the Post, promulgated his concerns in the Harvard Business Review: He was concerned that the digital mogul Bezos and his data-driven, innovative approach would clash with the newsroom culture at the Post. He referred to the Post journalists' self-image as being "proud, defiantly elitist and self-righteously professional" which would most likely be resistant to change (Schrage, 2013). In contrast, one year later the first success stories about Jeff Bezos' leadership and his ability to turn around the paper's defeat were being published (e.g. Carr, 2014). The success continued up until today as it has risen to a pioneer in the digital newspaper domain and continues to expand its cutting-edge innovation capabilities (Pope, 2016). The business has been profitable for three years now and it has been able to hire instead of fire staff (Landwehr, 2018). In the following, the strategic change leadership of Jeff Bezos will be outlined in terms of introduced measures and their results.

Right after the deal was announced, Jeff Bezos addressed an open letter to the Washington Post's employees (Bezos, 2013). In this letter he mentioned integral points regarding his upcoming leadership. He understood that it is only natural to worry when such a long-established leadership of the Graham family suddenly breaks away. However, he wanted to reduce the employee's fear by highlighting that "the values of The Post do not need changing", since the journalistic focus to bring truth to the readers

would remain and he would not interfere with any decisions on content (Bezos, 2013). The leading team of editors and directors would remain the same and he would only get in touch with them every two weeks because he kept his day-to-day business at Amazon. Still, he mentioned that the new leadership will demand business changes in future, especially regarding the internet and its demolishing effects for the printed newspaper: “We will need to invent, which means we will need to experiment. Our touchstone will be readers, understanding what they care about [...] and working backwards from there.” (Bezos, 2013)

Although he proclaimed in the same letter that the underlying values would remain, the call for innovation, experimentation and reader-centricity would challenge The Post’s cultural ideals. Despite having a digital presence, the working and thinking patterns within the newspaper were still based on traditional newspaper publishing principles. To give examples: It was up to the journalist’s and editor’s choices on which topics to write about and not depended on data-driven results depicting which topics matter most to

the readers. Further, the newspaper was focused on journalistic quality, not on digital revolution (Pope, 2016; Stewart, 2017). Hence, one could already understand that some fundamental values would have to change.

Despite valuing his broad digital know-how, Donald Graham chose Jeff Bezos for his ability to create and follow long-term visions. Shortly after his start as the new CEO, Bezos set the main vision: Becoming the new ‘Newspaper of Records’. Hereby, Bezos targeted to beat the leading American newspaper The New York Times regarding online audience (Hazard-Owen, 2015). At this time, this goal seemed rather utopian because The New York Times had almost twice as many employees and the Washington Post was lacking forty percent of The New York Times’ online audience (Doctor, 2015). However, in October 2015, The Washington Post reached the goal to surpass the main competitor by counting 66.9 million multi-platform unique visitors which represents an increase of 59 percent within one year (cf. figure 1) (Valinsky, 2015). In March 2019, the paper was able to increase this number to 86.6 million unique visitors (WashPost PR, 2019).

Figure 1: U.S. multiplatform online traffic: The Washington Post vs. The New York Times (October 2014 until October 2015); Source: Vailinsky, 2015.



What led the tarnished paper to become so successful this rapidly? Right in the beginning, Jeff Bezos decided to take a fundamental new approach: Move away from the regional focus and target the national and international readership. He argued for this change by highlighting the integral advantage of the internet for the newspaper industry: global distribution channels free of cost (Huber, 2018; Kennedy, 2016; Stewart, 2017). Still, Bezos has not come empty-handed. It is no secret that he has helped The Post with a capital injection to make the intended changes happen. How much he invested is not known, however he made clear that the money should not be invested over-generously and that it should be regarded to as a “runway” since the business should sustain itself in the long-run (Pope, 2016). With Bezos’ private investment the paper was able to hire around 200 new employees until today (Lee, 2019). The selection of new staff was focused especially on digital-affine journalists and editors, as well as engineers and employees with a background in data processing and IT (Pope, 2016; Wiczer, 2017). Also, he quickly initiated a move of the headquarters from the rather outdated facilities into a modern office with open workspaces. Employees of different divisions, such as editors, journalists and IT staff should share workspaces in order to boost synergy effects and break down the departmental silo-mentality (Kennedy, 2016; Kolb, 2016; Pope, 2016). These synergy effects aimed at accelerating his probably most important goal: Foster innovation and digital excellence by promoting experimentation. Bezos had stressed that his three fundamental values at Amazon would apply for The Post as well: “Put the customer first. Invent. And be patient” (Bezos, quoted by Fahri in

The Washington Post, 2013). When experimenting, the employees should try out many digital opportunities and not fear to fail. But if a project was failing, the employees should not hesitate to let go of it and look for new possible ways to innovate (Kennedy, 2016; Pope, 2016). The strategic focus on experiments was not only embodied in the mission but was also implemented in the new compensation model for employees: Instead of only meeting operating income targets like before, the employees now had three further criteria which valued their performance: 1) pace of moving (which is rather subjective); 2) push for experimentation; 3) commitment to agreed on decisions (whereas prior debates are welcome) (Pope, 2016). This culture of experimentation has brought the newspaper to introduce various successful measures in terms of digital competences. To name an example: The Post has established a content-management system called “Arc” which consists of an interconnected set of tools. It has proven so successful that today it is being licensed to newspaper businesses around the globe and thus creates a new revenue stream (Kennedy, 2016). Joey Marburger, the Post’s director of product, highlighted that Bezos would not usually delegate specific improvements to the workforce but rather give guidance and challenge the employees. However, he occasionally brought up ideas to advance the digital performance. For instance, he demanded that the loading-time of the online articles should be diminished to the least possible minimum in order to enhance readership numbers. This measure turned out to be very effective (Kennedy, 2016; Pope, 2016).

In the following, these findings will be evaluated regarding the theoretical context and provide insights on the leadership

characteristics of Jeff Bezos at The Washington Post.

As outlined previously, it is very important to provide a suitable vision which is clear, motivating and which gets adopted by the workforce of the regarding organization (Behling and McFillen, 1996; Kotter, 1996; Schein, 2010). Bezos did so quickly after his career at the paper started by outlining the goal: to become the "Newspaper of Records". By this, he was setting the new focus of the paper, namely digitalization. Coming from a time where defeat and downsizing were accompanying daily business for the Post's employees, having a leader stating that this ambitious target can be reached filled many employees with hope and motivation. Belief in the people is a major catalyst for embracing a vision among organizational members (Kanter, 1984). Also, a vision needs to be inspiring (Kotter, 1996). Without a doubt, Jeff Bezos counts to the most visionary and inspiring figures in today's business world as his vision led Amazon to being named among the most innovative firms globally (Ringel et al., 2017). Joey Marburger, the Post's director of product, stated the following in an interview with Kyle Pope of the CJR in 2016: "The sheer thought of him spread throughout the company. Over night, we thought there wasn't much we couldn't do". Thus, it can be argued whether the vision itself was inspiring or whether it was rather the personality of Jeff Bezos that inspired and motivated the employees to pursue this vision.

Still, inspiring employees does not turn around a businesses' underlying mindset. As described above, the paper's main focus under the Graham leadership was to deliver high-quality journalism and rely on stable values and structures. Bezos' call for

innovation, instead, questioned many of the old cultural foundations as it required innovation and experimentation by overcoming learning anxiety (Dulewicz and Herbert, 1999; Schein, 2010). The new CEO boosted creativity and innovative capabilities by establishing the cross-departmental workspaces and introducing the new payment scheme, which also included experimentation marks. Also, the mission that has led Amazon to its success was applied for the Post and guided the employees according to which mindset tasks should be accomplished. What also helped was the hiring of new staff: Not only did more employees with digital skills have a major impact on the paper's orientation to innovate. Also, the sole fact that staff was hired let the employees worry less about their job security because financial recovery was being signaled. These factors fostered psychological safety among the staff and let more room to experiment, which goes in line with the arguments of Edmondson and Lei (2014). This psychological safety was further promoted by keeping the same people at director's level and Bezos' approach to not interfere with the journalistic content. By this, the employees did not have to adapt themselves to new characters in the direct leadership level and the journalistic autonomy, the possibly most integral part of newspaper cultures, remained the same. Instead, the change was being initiated by Bezos but carried out by the same leaders as before. By this, a good balance between new and old values could be reached and the change was smoothly integrated into existing patterns and structures.

The prior described points hint that Bezos' change leadership embraces main change leadership characteristics. However, Kanter (1984) proposed that high time

investment and availability are crucial aspects of leading change successfully. Since Bezos is highly occupied with Amazon and other projects, his direct contact to the Post's managers is mainly limited to a one-hour call every fortnight (Stewart, 2017). On one hand one could argue that Bezos' approach fails ideal change leadership in this regard. On the other hand, one could dispute this argument by stating that his change leadership is exceptionally efficient since he is able to transform the organization sustainably even with such little time investment. Also, within these time-restricted meetings it appears that he was able to set the right impulses and provide valuable knowledge.

Shailesh Prakash, the Post's chief information officer and vice president of technology, put his thoughts on Jeff Bezos' change leadership into the following words: "So what has he really done? I personally think that the biggest thing Jeff has done is to set the right tone for our culture—which is one of experimentation, which is one of encouragement, which is one of 'find the positive surprises and double down.' We believe we have an owner who respects the past but at the same time wants us to be innovative." (Prakash quoted by Kennedy, 2018, p. 222)

This quote underlines the above discussed findings of the presented case. Jeff Bezos was able to bring about a major change at The Washington Post by respecting the old newsroom culture while, at the same time, altering certain values and patterns in the right pace. With his visionary change leadership and profound digital knowledge, he was able to turn around the paper's mindset from being a victim to digitalization to becoming a first mover that shapes the digital news landscape and utilizes its full scope of opportunities.

Conclusion

The Washington Post was a newspaper that had suffered financial downturns for a long time. The newspaper was not able to embrace digitalization since it was in a state of path dependence and inertia. The Post was not alone with this phenomenon since many newspapers find themselves in similar situations. Traditional values and patterns are still predominant in many newsrooms and a shift in the organizational mindset is unlikely to happen if the leadership does not set a new tone for cultural and structural development. By analyzing the successful case of The Washington Post, this paper shows which crucial role leadership plays for traditional newspaper businesses which are trying to capitalize digital opportunities. Jeff Bezos was able to do so and successfully transformed the Post into a major digital newspaper player by his strong visionary change leadership. The paper is of importance since it derives several leadership implications for other newspaper businesses that want to move into a digital future. First and foremost, a change in leadership can prove very valuable, especially when the old leader is not able to promote digitalization. Here, a person with profound digital background can help to set the right parameters and formulate an inspiring vision that focuses on a technology-oriented future. Further, the change leader should try to alter cultural values and structures that stand in contrast to reaching this vision. However, it is not an easy task to change the underlying value system of a company. Thus, it is important for the change leader to diminish learning anxiety and foster a psychologically safe working environment. In order to do so, this paper depicts the following measures: 1) hiring

(tech-oriented) employees; 2) focus on experimentation and innovation (e.g. by adapting the incentive system) ; 3) build open and cross-functional workspaces; 4) formulate according mission and vision statements. The main limitation of this paper is that this exact change leadership would not have been possible without the huge monetary injection and the extensive digital knowhow provided by Jeff Bezos. Thus, the recommendations for other newspapers may not be enforceable in the same way. The speed in which this transformation was conducted is not realistic for newspapers with change leaders yielding

less extraordinary prerequisites compared to Jeff Bezos. For this reason, future research could analyze further cases of successful change leadership regarding newspaper digitalization. The findings of this paper can serve as basis for future research and be compared to further cases. Also, this paper only uses secondary data. Conducting qualitative interviews with leaders and employees of such newspaper businesses can prove very valuable to gain deeper insights of newspaper leadership and its influence on cultural change processes.

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