

Considering Online News Comments: Are We Really So Irrational and Hate Filled?
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Abstract

Initially online comment forums seem like a good thing from the standpoint of social epistemology. They provide more opportunities to share perspectives and disseminate information on important public issues. However, comments are typically negative, misinformed, insulting, or worse – particularly when they involve social problems (race, gender, religion, sexual orientation). So should we conclude that most people are just incapable of reasoned debate and dialogue when it comes to these issues? I argue that the combination of online disinhibition effect, the divisive (non-intersectional) way most of these stories are framed in the news media, the lack of opportunity to publicly express the skepticism toward our apparently post-racial, post-patriarchal society work together to encourage the vitriol in online comment sections.

On the face of it, an increase in options for public debate seems like a good thing from an epistemic standpoint. New more inclusive and easily accessible forums for argument can bring in a greater variety of perspectives and even create opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard in the public sphere. Yet what many of us have discovered with the advent of online news forums and comments sections is that the online public sphere actually produces some of the most hostile and poorly reasoned dialogue and debate we may find anywhere. [one more point here before the transition to the next paragraph]

In a post titled, “[Why we are shutting off our comments](#),” *Popular Science's* Online Content Director Suzanne LaBarre detailed how comments on the Internet are actually bad for science at large.¹ LaBarre cited a [study](#) led by University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor Dominique Brossard in which 1,183 Americans were given a fabricated story on nanotechnology and were asked how they felt about the subject, both before and after reading fake comments. By reading both civil and “vile-trolling” responses, the study found that people were swayed far more by negativity. “Simply including an ad hominem attack in a reader comment was enough to make study participants think the downside of the reported technology was greater than they'd previously thought,” wrote Brossard and coauthor Dietram A. Scheufele in an [op-ed piece](#) in *The New York Times*.²

Popular Science is not alone in trying to manage negative comments. The popular video site YouTube instituted a new ranking and personalized system of commenting to address

¹ LaBarre, Suzanne. “[Why We’re Shutting Off Our Comments](#).” *Popular Science*. September 24, 2013. Retrieved October 21, 2013.

² Brossard, Dominique and Dietram A. Scheufele. “[This Story Stinks](#).” *New York Times, Sunday Review, Opinion Pages*, March 2, 2013. Retrieved October 21, 2013.

what one journalist described as, “a hotbed of spam and idiocy.”³ The new system requires commenters to logon using a ‘Google+’ account and commenters can decide who among their ‘circles’ can see the comments. Video posters on YouTube can also edit comments and readers can rank comments so that relevant issues stay near the top of the discussion. The goal of the new system is to reduce anonymity and add accountability and evaluation to YouTube conversations.

What most social media users know is that if a story develops that has anything whatsoever to do with race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious differences, the online comments will proliferate and take on significantly negative and hostile tones. These comments can range from outright hate filled speech to hostile biased accusations to inconsistent and faulty reasoning. As a friend of mine once remarked after reading through more than one hundred comments following a news story about a mosque planned in proximity to Ground Zero in New York City, “I had to stop reading when my eyes began to bleed.” It can feel like that. Approaching online debates about social issues with an open heart and a presumption in favor of human rationality can be dangerous. These kinds of comments are not even attempts at Ad Hominem or adversarial arguing but are simply venomous outbursts. You are not prepared when you encounter comments like:

- “Trayvon’s mother is a crack ho” (Comment on news story about Trayvon Martin’s parents),
- “You are an ignorant hypocritical slut. I hope you get cancer” (Comment in response to an opinion piece on a Tech blog)
- “The libtards keep saying that two faggots are ‘normal.’ If they’re normal why can’t they have kids.” (Comment on a story about gay adoption)
- “Repuglicans are neo-Nazi facists.” (Comment on a story about Mitt Romney)
- “When will Americans learn that Mooslims are psychotic terrorist f**ks who hate women.” (Comment on an article about American Muslim’s after 9/11)

As people concerned with epistemology and social issues what conclusions should we draw from the prevalence of these kinds of online comments? Should we conclude that increased opportunities for open and public debate actually reveal a window into the hatred and negativity hidden in the hearts of our fellow citizens? Before we jump to that conclusion it is worth taking a look at some of the research conducted by psychologist John Suler, who studies online behavior. Based on his findings Suler notes that there are a variety of factors that lead people to respond very differently in anonymous online

³ Lardinois, Richard. “[YouTube Announces a New Commenting System Powered by Google+.](#)” *TechCrunch*, September 24, 2013. Retrieved October 20, 2013.

communications than they would in face-to-face interactions⁴. Suler explains that because commenters are not known or seen by their audience, and since they are not obliged to remain in the conversation for any duration, they tend to imagine their audience as a set of characters with qualities and values that they (the commenter) creates. Given this made up audience, Suler describes how commenters start to view their own participation in the debate as a type of game where the stakes are not very high and the consequences minimal to non-existent.⁵ By treating commenting as a game with characters, commenters can try on different roles and take different positions with no accountability to anyone in their audience. In acting out this way, the commenter is never directly responsible because they always have the option of claiming, “That’s not really me” or “I don’t really think that.” This kind of distancing between what one does and who they believe they are is what psychologists call *disassociation*.

Disassociation combined with the additional false belief that everyone who reads your comments is equal in terms of expertise and authority leads Suler to the conclusion that there is an *Online Disinhibition Effect*. That is, people interacting online are likely to take on personas that they would rarely exhibit in face to face interactions. Since their assessment of who they are communicating with is often a caricature absent of the kind of sensitivity and nuance they generally apply to people in face to face meetings, they feel no accountability for their remarks. The *Online Disinhibition Effect* means that we are most likely getting very little evidence from online comments about commenters’ firmly held beliefs and hard to revise beliefs. That is, the kind of beliefs they would continue to defend if they were engaged in a face-to-face debate. This is not to say that these comments are not revealing some ugly attitudes held by the commentator. However their appearance in anonymous blog posts means that the low stakes nature of the claims will not require any real defense. It is far more revealing in terms of firmly held beliefs to see what people will go to lengths to defend in the face of disconfirming evidence.

So are these anonymous comments giving us a window into people’s ‘true beliefs’ or ‘real self?’ Suler addresses this question directly. He writes:

“Each media allows for a particular expression of self that differs - sometimes greatly, sometimes subtly - from another media. In different media people present a different perspective of their identity. The self expressed in one modality is not necessarily deeper, more real, or more authentic than another.”⁶

⁴ Suler, John. “The On-line Disinhibition Effect.” *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 7 (2004): 321-326. The book length version of Suler’s work on this topic is available [here](#).

⁵For instance even if sites ‘ban’ commenters because of inappropriate language, the commenter can reenter the discussion by creating a new pseudonym and email address.

⁶ Suler 2004: 325.

Returning to the question of whether an increase in online opportunities for public debate has only revealed our collective irrationality and hate, one thing we can take away from Suler's research is that the venom we find in many online comments may not reflect commenters' 'true' beliefs or 'real' self as much as they reveal one aspect of people's media self-expression. This is not to say that this aspect of self is false. Rather it is important to recognize that the self expressed in an anonymous media comment should not be viewed as more real or more essential than the self expressed in other contexts. 'We contain multitudes' as the poet Walt Whitman said, and this means we may express aspects of ourselves that are inconsistent and even contradictory. Anonymous online expression is a particular kind of context where people can try on risky personas with little consequences. Yet the question remains, why should this persona take on such a hostile and ugly quality when the issue is social identity and social differences?

In trying to answer this question it is worth considering how news media frames stories having to do with social identity and social difference. Although it is possible for journalists to utilize a multitude of frames, scholarly literature indicates four ways in which news stories are commonly framed: *conflict*, which emphasizes conflict between people or parties; *attribution of responsibility*, which gives credit, responsibility or blame to a person, institution or government; *economic consequences*, which emphasizes the financial burden placed on the audience; and *human-interest*, which focuses on a person as an example or by emphasizing human emotion frames to personalize and dramatize the situation to gain audience attention and retention.⁷

In addition to these four main frames, racial frames are also described in the literature. The *racial frame* exists in various studies, often when the news stories involve political news and elections⁸ One study in particular, about minority candidates representation by the media, found that electoral races that included Latino and African American candidates were more likely to focus on race and were more dependent on the use of an overall racial frame than the coverage of elections that only had white candidates

Given the typical framing options that journalists rely upon, including the racial frame, it is clear that conflict, credit/blame, and a focus on individuals rather than history, culture, and institutions of power, become the focus of the story. If the story is about mostly white individuals for instance, race will not be a feature of the story. However if the story involves Latino and African Americans then race will become a feature in how the story gets told. If the story involves differences between whites and Latinos or African Americans then conflict will often take precedence as the primary frame. Yet in telling the story and reporting the news, it is likely that the focus will remain on conflict as it is played out between individual persons who are identified as either clearly worthy of

⁷ Valkenburg, Patti M., Holli A. Semetko, and Claes H. De Vreese. "The Effects of News Frames on Readers' Thoughts and Recall." *Communications Research* 26 (1999): 550-569.

⁸ Caliendo, Stephen M. and Charlton D. McIlwain. "Minority Candidates, Media Framing, and Racial Cues in the 2004 Election." *The Harvard International Journal of Press Politics* 11, no. 4 (2006): 45-69.

praise or blame, rather than on the history and context of the communities to which the white and Latino or African Americans belong.

For instance consider recent news stories having to do with the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year old African American male who was shot by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in the town of Ferguson, Missouri. The story led national headlines and created a firestorm of controversy and debate both online and in public demonstrations. Though there were wide ranging reports on the incident from reporters ‘on the ground’ covering protests to columnists and editorial writers online analyzing the players involved – for the most part the story focused most centrally on the issue of whether or not there had been a conflict between Brown and Wilson so threatening that it could justify Wilson’s use of lethal force. Though stories about the Brown family and their grief were well documented, an example of the human-interest frame, these reports added emotional dimension and furthered audience retention of the conflict. The question of who was to blame played out in initial reports of Brown as a young man on his way to college with a bright future ahead of him. Secondary reports as well as a video emerged that portrayed Brown as hostile and abusive roughing up a local storeowner and leaving without paying for a box of cigars.⁹ Wilson meanwhile was reported to be a good cop, a longstanding civil servant without a previous record of violence or instability. Secondary reports noted that Wilson just three years before had been a member of the all white Jennings police force (just 4 miles from Ferguson) who were all uniformly fired by the city council after a series of complaints of racial bias, harassment, and strained relations with the predominantly African American community. The conflict between Brown and Wilson was heightened by these stories portraying each as either saint or sinner. The racial differences between Ferguson residents and the mostly white Ferguson police force were also highlighted and added a further element of conflict to the confrontation between Brown and Wilson. Supporters of the Brown family, including prominent African American leaders, marched in the streets of Ferguson demonstrating their solidarity with the black community. At the same time, a group emerged in support of Wilson made up of a majority of white supporters who led counter protests on the streets of Ferguson. The group created a Facebook page and a ‘GoFundMe’ campaign that managed to raise \$430,000 for Wilson’s legal fees.¹⁰

Adding to the increasing vitriol and divisiveness in stories like Ferguson is not just the media’s attention to and presentation of racial conflict, but also the various forms of media available. While the conflict frame has a long history in journalism, it is now easier for users and recipients of news media to become very involved in all aspects of a case; a person can now continuously seek out stories they are interested in via social media sites, including Twitter, Facebook and blogging, as well as traditional news networks’ websites.

⁹ Waters, Michael. “[Convenience Stores and Convenient Narratives.](#)” *Huff Post: Black Voices*. August 15, 2014. Retrieved September 6, 2014:

¹⁰ Manuel-Logan, Ruth. “Michael Brown’s Killer Ex Member of Fired Police Force Due to Racism, Co\rruption,” *News One: For Black America*. August 25, 2014.

Not only does the Internet allow news media to be more accessible, it is also changing the content and frames of the news, in part because people are producers of their own information.¹¹ Also, technology can allow for evidence and other trial-related coverage to very quickly be disseminated, often without time for adequate fact checking.¹² Take for example a supposed image of Darren Wilson that circulated on social media in late August and early September 2014 showing Wilson lying in a hospital bed with a very serious injury to his eye. The image was combined with reports that Wilson had suffered a fracture to his eye socket in an altercation with Brown before the shooting. Syndicated correspondent Larry Elder picked up the image and the story, as did a variety of conservative news and social media outlets. Fox News reported that Wilson did sustain a fracture to the eye but this report was then disputed by CNN who reported that though Wilson was taken in for x-rays they proved negative for any fracture. The image that had circulated on social media and in Larry Elder's column turned out to be a photo of motocross rider Jim McNeill from an injury he suffered in 2006 (McNeill later died from a different injury in 2011).¹³ This example is just one instance of the relative loss of authority news sources suffer due to the dissemination of inaccurate information. A journalist's published report can end up next to a bloggers opinion piece in a Google search and users may often fail to distinguish the differences in the sources – the boundaries are therefore further blurred between news media and personal opinion.

Returning to the question of why news stories about social identity and difference are particular breeding grounds for ad hominem attacks and biased and prejudicial reasoning, I have suggested that we consider the oppositional and constricted nature of our news media presentations. Because social identities like race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation are framed as conflicts between individuals and then reinforced through false information and personal biases that get taken as evidence, we have little opportunity to think and talk about the more complex realities of social identity. Feminist theorists in particular have done important work on thinking more 'intersectionally' about social identity and taking normative measures to challenge the oppositional and reductive discourse of social categories. Patricia Hill Collins' one of the pioneers of the intersectional theoretical framework was informed by Gramscian theories on the dynamics of domination and power in societies. Building upon Gramsci's hegemony theory and using African American women's experiences as a locus for investigation, Collins argued that dominant groups control social institutions in society, such as schools, the media and popular culture, which produce controlling images that are rife with stereotypes about subordinated groups.¹⁴ These controlling images are not passively

¹¹ Pavlik, John V. "New Media and News: Implications for the Future of Journalism." *New Media & Society* 1, no. 1 (1999): 54-59.

¹² Whitebread, Charles H., and Darrell W. Contreras. "People vs. Simpson: Perspectives on the Implications for the Criminal Justice System." *Southern California Law Review* 69 (1996): 1587-2193.

¹³ "[Socket Error](#)." *Snopes*.

¹⁴ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 1999.

accepted by marginalized groups, as there are cultures of resistance within subordinated communities. Collins (1990) explained: “Subjugated knowledges...develop in cultural contexts controlled by oppressed groups. Dominant groups aim to replace subjugated knowledges with their own specialized thought because they realize that gaining control over this dimension of subordinate groups’ lives amplifies control” (228). At the same time, Collins recognized there are segments of subordinated communities that internalize and perpetuate dominant ideologies. Thus, the processes of domination and oppression are complex. The result is, “African-American women find themselves in a web of cross-cutting relationships, each presenting varying combinations of controlling images and women’s self-definitions” (Collins 1990, 96).

The concept of intersectionality (Collins 1990) refers to this “web of cross-cutting relationships” taking into account how various forms of oppression (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality) interlock with one another. As such, “both/and perspectives,” rather than “either/or perspectives,” of social locations are used to understand the ways in which individuals (and social institutions) are situated within interlocking forms of privilege/dominance and oppression/ subordination.

An intersectional account of social identity would reveal that in the case of Ferguson Missouri for example, though there is a criminal question about Wilson’s guilt or innocence in the shooting of Michael Brown, the conflict between the white police department and the black residents is a much more complex story of socioeconomic class, the militarization of the police force in the United States, and the increasing use of the police to subdue protest particularly around issues of inequality and injustice. The mothers and fathers who marched with Michael Brown’s parents for example have intersecting interests and identities with the mothers and fathers who supported Darren Wilson. Both live in working class and lower middle class communities. Both face job insecurity, an unstable economy, student debt, and concerns about their children’s future. Yet because they are reduced to being on one side or the other in a conflict between blacks and whites, they fail to see their common interests and are instead encouraged by the media to maintain interlocking systems of oppression and subordination that leave institutional power dynamics unchallenged.

Our language, our social and political systems, and the media that relies upon and reports on them, all carry a history of opposition, aggression, and inequality. This history impacts the information we receive and share on both conscious and unconscious levels. Yet the contemporary narrative of our society today is that we are better. We are apparently post-racial and post-sexist and post-inequality. This cultural transformation is celebrated with words like ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion.’ So if you do not experience the world as ‘post’ all those oppressive things then there is some failing in you rather than in world. The evidence often presented, that Obama has been elected President, women are now CEOs, celebrities are openly gay, all contribute to the idea that inequality and oppression have been replaced with a happy and colorful image of ‘difference.’ But these differences are not simply about color and race and a rainbow world. They involve

the intersections of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, and ability (as well as other identities). They include social privilege and social disadvantage and estimations of winning and losing power as well as the need groups have to preserve their identities and values. Given that all of these concerns challenge the happy diversity narrative they have to be rerouted and expressed in alternative forums like politically polarized news programs, satirical cable news shows, social media, and online comments sections. While these forums may provide some outlet for people's frustration with the happy diversity model, they too contribute to the oversimplification and polarization of these issues by prioritizing adversarial styles of argument or treating the problems like impossible jokes with no chance for social change. Online comments in particular allow people to channel their own individual frustration in a public and still anonymous low stakes forum. Because many people now feel pressured to publicly say that they don't see race, or gender, or sexual orientation as a relevant factor – because there are legal and professional ramifications – anonymous online comments sections provide the chance to blow off the steam that is not 'politically correct' in most public circumstances. Much of the touting of the end of racism, sexism, homophobia is superficial and not a reflection of social reality. Tensions remain and social inequalities and divisions exist. If it is not okay to gripe about this reality in public then an online forum becomes a semi-public outlet.

Consider a recent case involving feminist blogger and media critic Anita Sarkeesian that illustrates how sexism specifically is still a pervasive aspect of our culture.¹⁵ Sarkeesian was interested in 'tropes' or stereotypical portrayals of women in popular culture and so started an investigation into different mediums. Sarkeesian decided to choose video gaming as one of the sites for analysis and mounted a web campaign to raise funds for a series of short films she planned to produce on the topic. The issue was 'Whether or not video games portrayed women in stereotypical or biased ways.' To answer this question Sarkeesian needed to purchase or rent a wide selection of video games. In addition she wanted to set up a poll to survey video game users' attitudes about female characters. To do all of this she needed to raise some money for research and so she set up the web fundraising campaign to introduce the project and her plan for researching the issue.

Sarkeesian's web campaign was met with an avalanche of negative comments on her fundraising site, the Youtube video she posted announcing the project, and on her online blog. The anonymous comments included *ad hominem* attacks and abusive language like: "You are a dumb bitch," "Stupid Jew!," "If you are such a feminist why do you have long hair and wear hoop earrings?" "You alienate guys for being guys. You are an ugly girl hiding behind feminism and trying to spoil other people's fun."¹⁶

¹⁵ Watercutter, Angela. "[Feminist Take on Games Draws Crude Ridicule, Massive Support](#)." *Wired Online Magazine*, June 14, 2012. Retrieved on October 20, 2013.

¹⁶ McHugh, Molly. "[Kickstarter Campaign Leads to Cyber-Bullying](#)." *Digital Trends Online Magazine*, June 11, 2012. Retrieved on October 21, 2013.

These kinds of comments targeted Sarkeesian herself and used name-calling, insults, religious and gender bias and speculation about Sarkeesian's motives, rather than an engagement with the reasons Sarkeesian gave for undertaking the project. *Ad hominem* and abusive attacks like these, aside from being disrespectful and cowardly, are also significantly illogical since they are not relevant to the reasons Sarkeesian presented for why she wanted to undertake the research.

We can attribute some of these attacks to the Disinhibition Effect described above by Suler. That is, commenters have created 'bogey men' (or 'women' as in Sarkeesian's case) with all the worst qualities the commenter associates with that particular social identity. So when Sarkeesian identifies herself as a feminist interested in analyzing the tropes about women used in video gaming, (a still majority male activity¹⁷) she is recast by many commenters as a man-hating shrew out to destroy a great source of pleasure and virtual community in the name of women's superiority. If much of the commentator's anger really stems from their fear of the monster they created, then why not express the fear instead of the anger? If the Online Disinhibition Effect explains the tendency for commentators to take on a role and cast the people they are addressing as characters, couldn't the role be more compassionate and the characters more likeable?

Given the lack of opportunities and tools for engaging in honest dialogues about social identity and social differences, anonymous online comments become the release valve for a frustrated segment of the society. As comments become less about presenting information and evidence and more about contempt and derision, participants shelter themselves within their own beliefs and further debate becomes unproductive.¹⁸ The anonymity of online forums masks not only the speaker but also the audience. This lack of 'face-to-face' contact contributes to the dehumanization of participants in online forums and dehumanization in turn fuels opposition and aggression. Research on social bias and prejudice shows that "dehumanized groups are thought not to experience complex emotions or share beliefs with the in-group."¹⁹ Sociologists Margaret Zamudio and Francesco Rios found in their research that though 'race talk' was viewed as socially unacceptable, 'racist talk,' was still widely practiced by individuals when they thought their conversations were in private.²⁰ Anonymous Internet forums with a focus on controversial issues of social identity present a strange new context. On the one hand it is a relatively risk-free, unaccountable open space, which encourages the dehumanization of 'opponents' in a 'public' debate, while on the other hand, commenters write from the

¹⁷ Phan, Mikki H., Jo R. Jardina, Sloane Hoyle, and Barbara S. Chaparro. "[Examining the Role of Gender in Video Game Usage, Preference, and Behavior](#)." Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting 56, no. 1 (2012): 1496-1500.

¹⁸ Hwang, Sungwook and Glen T. Cameron. "Public's Expectation about an Organization's Stance in Crisis Communication Based on Perceived Leadership and Perceived Severity of Threats." *Public Relations Review* 34, no. 1 (2008): 70-73.

¹⁹ Harris, Lasana T., and Susan T. Fiske. "Dehumanizing the Lowest of the Low Neuroimaging Responses to Extreme Out-Groups." *Psychological Science* 17, no. 10 (2006): 847-853.

²⁰ Zamudio, Margaret M., and Francisco Rios. "From Traditional to Liberal Racism: Living Racism in the Everyday." *Sociological Perspectives* 49, no. 4 (2006): 483-502..

intimate space of their homes and personal computers lending a ‘private’ quality to the experience.

So rather than concluding that the hostility in online comments is evidence of the essential racism, sexism, etc., in the hearts of our fellow citizens, I would suggest instead that we see it as a result of a variety of interrelated and unique factors. First, that people are complex and multifaceted and what they say in anonymous online comments might only reveal some limited aspect of their beliefs. Secondly, news media often frame reports of social difference in terms of individual actors engaged in a conflict of guilt and innocence. While that framing may have legal relevance it is applied to all facets of the story draining it of important social, historical, and intersectional elements. As social media joins news media in telling the story, false and biased reports get blended with accurate reporting so that normative standards for judging evidence devolve into everyone being ‘entitled to their own opinion’ since it is all appears biased anyway. This empowers commenters to put forward their own opinions as evidence. Third, because inequality and oppression still exist and because we have not adequately addressed how it is institutionalized and reinforced in variety of contexts, most of us lack the language for thinking and reasoning about social issues in more complex and intersectional ways. Our language, our media, and our biases continue to operate in very reductive categories regarding issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, socioeconomic class. Moreover, we are apparently living in a post-racial, post-sexist, society if we are to believe the celebration of ‘diversity’ and individual stories of success in the media. This tension, between the experiences that many people have of social inequality coupled with public prescriptions to not see race, gender, sexual orientation creates the need for a release valve that comments sections can provide. Yet fourthly, the strangely ‘public-private’ nature of online discussions means that they can encourage our worst tendencies to dehumanize and publicly humiliate others while at the same time, giving us the illusion that we are engaged in a private conversation. What we should conclude from these four factors is not that irrational hate filled people surround us everywhere, but instead that online comment sections house the perfect storm of disinhibition, reductive representations of social conflict in the media, an erosion of expertise and authority in media sources, and a lack of effective methods for publicly framing social difference and power. If online comments are to ever serve an epistemic and social good – scholars of social epistemology along with journalists, news and social media contributors, and social activists should join forces to promote intersectional analyses of social identity and social power as well as clearer norms for credibility and legitimacy in news reporting.

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