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The Implications of Capitalism for Media: How Democracy Suffers Introduction Only days since the FCC’s controversial relaxing of regulations for media corporations, now is an opportune time to discuss the effects of media on democracy and capitalism on media. A widely held and reiterated argument for capitalism is that it is a brilliant counterpart to democracy; that the two systems, economic and political respectively, go hand in hand. The defense of this position alludes to the bidirectional stimulation of growth; where capitalism creates a “ constituency for personal freedoms" through the free market and the “ transparency and accountability" of democratic systems prevents much of the corruption that would otherwise impede a capitalist economy (Dahl, 1998). It is also asserted that the two systems contribute to the utility of the whole by allowing each member to seek his own self-interest. Thus, the parallel between the two: the elites, politicians and capitalists, must answer to the voting and consuming bodies in order to maintain their position. Seemingly, only those elites who cater to the utility of the whole will remain in power. However, this argument takes for granted that a system of surveillance exists so that the masses can judge the decisions made by their representatives. In America, this system is the news media, and it clearly exists, but we must investigate whether it is serving its watchdog purposes or not. We will first examine how democracy is vulnerable to the media and then how the media is vulnerable to capitalism. The Role of Media in Democracy The media indeed plays an important role in American society. Its function is to serve as the eyes and ears of the voting body so that the goals of our political system are met. First, we must define what those goals are. The United States of America has been a democracy since its founding in 1776. This political system was a solution to the gripes of the American colonies under the rule of imperial Great Britain. The most notable rally call, “ No taxation without representation" holds great weight and clues us in to the purposes of this system. Each citizen is affected by the government’s decisions; therefore, each citizen deserves a voice in the construction of that government. As Lincoln put it, “ democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. " The term “ the people" implies an egalitarian group of citizens and not a mixed group consisting of stratified classes of citizens with varying degrees of voting power. This is precisely why the system allots one vote to each voter, because each citizen should be equally represented in his/her government. However, while the system accounts for official votes, it does not account for the ability of some individuals to influence the voting of others. Imagine a hypothetical situation in which one person can manipulate the votes of his peers. His peers are still voting, and each votes once, but the voting power of that manipulating individual is the sum of his and his peers. He is more powerful and more heavily represented in politics than the others. This kind of influence can not be accounted for when the manipulating individual is privy to the same knowledge that his peers are. This is the “ man on the soapbox" argument. Conrad Black, a Canadian newspaper owner, compares himself to a “ man on a soapbox on the corner of the street" when speaking of his influence over others in politics. Of course, there must be an acceptable range of influence among the voting body, specifically, in politicians vs. non-politicians and voters with greater abilities to argue for their positions. Black does not fall into either of these categories and thus raises the question of whether his amount of influence in the political system lies within that acceptable range. The answer is a resounding “ NO" and that is because unlike our man on the soapbox, the information that Black is privy to differs harshly from that of the people he influences. With the man on the soapbox, a listener can verify the information he is obtaining for himself through information sources such as newspapers, TV, libraries. But, Conrad Black is the information source. One cannot verify the validity of the media’s information in any reasonable manner because it is the media that specializes in acquiring that information--it spends a good deal of resources doing so--it is an unreasonable expectation for a citizen to replicate the work of the media business. (Copp, 2000) Thus, in order to fulfill the expectations inherent in the democratic system, the media must not have an influence outside of educating the voters. In Megamedia, Political scientist Dr. Dean Alger argues that “ the news media are absolutely central to the functioning of democracy today". A democracy is a “ marketplace of ideas" and just as in capitalist markets, it runs optimally when the products are numerous and diverse (Alger, 1998). The voting body exists to keep the government in check. If the government fails in its duties, then it can be easily replaced in the next election. The media’s role is to provide an observation window so that the voting body can evaluate its government and act accordingly. Evidence of a Problem In general, do you think -- [ROTATED: news organizations get the facts straight, (or do you think) news organizations' stories and reports are often inaccurate]? Facts straight Often inaccurate No opinion % % % 2003 May 19-21 36 62 2 2003 Feb 17-19 39 58 3 2000 Dec 2-4 32 65 3 1998 Jul 13-14 ^ 50 45 5 1989 Aug 9-28 ^ 54 44 2 1988 Aug 24 ^ 40 50 10 1988 May 13 ^ 48 43 9 1988 Jan 8-17 ^ 44 48 8 1985 Aug 17 ^ 50 38 12 1985 Jun 22 ^ 55 34 11 ^ Items not rotated. WORDING: In general, do you think news organizations get the facts straight, or do you think that their stories and reports are often inaccurate? http://www. gallup. com/poll/releases/pr030530. asp Is there a problem with today’s media? The problem manifests itself in the skepticism with which media consumers view it. A May 19 Gallup poll shows that 62% of those polled feel that the media is “ often inaccurate". A CNBC broadcaster interpreted this as “ healthy" because, he argued, that viewers should not take everything they see in print or on TV as fact. However, in 1989, only 44% of people felt the same way. This is a significant increase considering the weight of the question. Inaccuracy is very different from bias, though both can be unintentional. News agencies are granted a reasonable amount of leeway when it comes to bias, but not inaccuracy. The Society of Professional Journalists requires an ethical reporter to “ test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error"(SPJ, 2003). Thus, for the media to be “ often inaccurate" as the majority of the polltakers accuse, it is bordering on incompetent or even worse: unethical (Gillespie, 2003). The Media’s Influence The controversial topic of the media’s influence permeates discussions in all spheres of public and private life. This issue manifests its significance in new rating systems for TV, videogames, and music, questions surrounding Columbine and other high school shootings, and the lack of surprise for public opinion shifts regarding the war on Iraq. In news media, we have seen that viewers are already skeptical of the information that they are receiving. So do the media have any influence on public opinion? In a few examples, Wes Pippert suggests that the media’s influence may be less than is often assumed. He cites examples of candidates who, opposed by local media, were still elected to office, particularly liberal democrats Jimmy Carter, Ralph Yarborough, and George McGovern who all ran in Georgia, Texas, and South Dakota respectively. Perhaps Mobil public affairs vice president has it right when he says, “ The public does not believe that the leaders of our institutions and our government are really as dumb or corrupt as they appear in the press. " However, Pippert goes on to say that the media’s power does not lie in its ability to shape a voters opinion, but “ in its selection of the stories for its audience and in setting the ‘ agenda’ for them" (Pippert, 1989). This assertion is back up by data in Justin Lewis’ Constructing Public Opinion. In two examples: the environment and drugs, public concern more closely resembled the level of media coverage rather than the severity of the problems. As the media coverage of environmental issues such as water pollution, air and soil pollution, wilderness destruction, and global warming decline, people polled demonstrate less concern, though the increasing problems should be cause for more concern. In the case of drugs, public opinion concern followed media coverage very closely. In the early 1990’s, media coverage of the country’s drug problem was low and public concern was at 3%. In the mid-nineties, TV news reports ran more stories of drug abuse and drug crimes and public opinion rose to 50%. In the late nineties, media coverage of the drug problem declined and public opinion returned to 3%. One may argue that the media coverage was depicting the problem and reflecting public concern, but the peaks in the public concern graph occurred slightly later than the peaks in media coverage, and the drug problem has not improved–it has worsened (Lewis, 2001). In other examples, the media will run the stories, but in a misleading manner. For example, in coverage of the first Gulf War, ABC’s 20/20 and CNN’s 60 Minutes both presented prepared video clips (called VNR’s for Video News Releases) as “ coverage" of a congressional hearing during which a Kuwaiti girl named Nayirah testified that invading Iraqi soldiers had killed “ hundreds" of Kuwaiti babies in a hospital near the border. The VNR’s were manufactured by PR firm Hill & Knowlton, which had a sole purpose of promoting the war. Neither of the media programs cited the source of the video footage. The footage proved successful in promoting the war, but embarrassing in terms of responsible journalism when the entire account was found to be false. Nayirah was daughter of Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States and was coached to lie before congress. When the scandal was uncovered, the media did not present it with as much vigor (Stauber et. al. 1995). The media indeed have the power to influence the public, not so much in opinions, but on how and what problems get attention. More Media Shortcomings The media’s power now clear, we must examine the ways in which it falls short of its duties. The news media’s problem seems mostly to be one of coverage. When some issues are covered more frequently than others, they seem more important. This is based on the assumption that the news media gives the public information that matters in a hierarchical fashion. The most important story should get priority coverage. It would be difficult to imagine highlights from the past night’s baseball game during the morning of September 11. That is merely an extreme example of the same sort of thing that goes on. For example, beginning December 2002 and continuing to today, the national news media has been covering the Modesto, California missing persons case of Lacy Peterson. As Scott Yuhas from the Daily Guardian, an online opinion paper, writes, “ The media was absolutely captivated by this story and the only thing important enough in America to bump it from wall to wall media coverage was the opening salvos of U. S. cruise missiles aimed at a bunker in Iraq. " (Yuhas, 2003) Does the amount of coverage reflect the importance of the story? The following chart shows the statistics from 2000-2003 for California missing persons cases. Lacy Peterson would have qualified for “ Unknown Circumstances" when news channels first started running the story. Her case would thus be 1 of 4, 207 in California. The story, however, is even less relevant to the nation yet was covered nationwide. CALIFORNIA MISSINGS PERSONS STATISTICS Adult Missing Persons 2000 2001 2002 Suspicious Circumstances - missing under suspicious circumstances that may indicate a stranger abduction 603 492 546 Unknown Circumstances - when circumstances surrounding MP's disappearance are unknown. 3, 444 3, 825 4, 207 Children Missing Persons 2000 2001 2002 Suspicious Circumstances - missing under suspicious circumstances that may indicate a stranger abduction. 644 580 596 Unknown Circumstances - when circumstances surrounding MP’s disappearance are unknown. 4, 489 4, 902 5, 069 http://caag. state. ca. us/missing/ Clearly, it can not hurt for the public to know something about a missing persons case, even if it is irrelevant to their lives. The problem lies in the fact that media has a limited coverage capacity. When it covers something too much, it is covering something else inadequately. Lewis shows some of these inadequately covered issues in Constructing Public Opinion. In one poll, 46% of the public believed that the U. S. is not the world’s largest military power even though the U. S. is the largest military power in the world five times over. People polled on proportions of the U. S. budget said that it comprised of 45% foreign aid, 32% welfare, and 23% military spending; yet, in reality, the budget is 1% foreign aid, 4% welfare, and 22% military spending. These are grave and consequential misconceptions that the media could remedy with more coverage (Lewis, 2001). Alexandra Pelosi, NBC News producer, independent filmmaker, and daughter of House minority leader Nancy Pelosi, painted a dire illustration of the plight of political reporters on campaigns. When asked why she did not push George W. Bush for an answer to why “ the little people and the unemployed" should vote for him for president, she responded, “ I was there as an NBC News producer. Anyone can say, ‘ Well, if I was there, I would have said this or that,’ but that's all bullshit because nobody could even get there, number one, and if they got there, they could NOT say those things because he'd walk away and then you'd have no more access and I think that's counterproductive. Now if I was there as somebody else, it would be a different conversation. I had a role and I had to play my role… I'm not willing to jeopardize it all. And that is the dirty little secret of American political reporting and I say that in the movie. The truth is that all of our careers were tied to George Bush during the election campaign…People need to understand how the media operates and how they're in bed with the candidates" (Wells, 2003). Pelosi’s self-explanatory description of the political reporting situation reveals what she appropriately dubs a “ dirty little secret". Reporters are in a position where they must restrain themselves from asking important questions in order to maintain their careers. The news media also has a power to “ recentralize" the American public. Lewis describes the media’s participation in public deception regarding former President Bill Clinton. A majority of people polled thought the Clinton opposed the 1996 Telecommunications Act, 44% thought he signed the world ban on land mines, and 60% thought he supported the single payer health care system. The public apparently bought into the media portrayal of Clinton as a liberal, when in fact, his economic policies are moderate. As Lewis puts it, Clinton is not a fiscal liberal, but “ he played one on TV". (Lewis, 2001) Media Motives These rather suspicious shortcomings within American news media evoke questions of “ why? " What motivates the decline of integrity in news reporting? Capitalism seems to be the root of the problem. In each of the anecdotal cases presented above, there is a condition involving the acquisition of capital. Let us analyze these one by one before delving deeper into this theory. TV news’ participation in the fabricated Nariyah story is predictable by the theory that every agency wants to be the first to break the story. The VNR’s were prepackaged news stories and not genuinely taped and reported by the agencies that ran them. They accepted the footage and aired it almost as soon as it arrived because, to question it, would make them last to break the story. As evinced by the gun-jumping of the 2000 election, breaking a story first is an irresistible prize in TV news. It is based on the assumption that viewers will tune into the program that has the latest news, even if the difference is seconds (Stauber et. al., 1995). In the case of Lacy Peterson, TV media often picks a domestic story to highlight. As people hear more and more about it, they become more involved and listen for developments. In this way, it has the same function as reality television. Events that would otherwise not concern people at all become so familiar that it is almost impossible to not listen for a resolution. Tim Graham, director of media analysis for the conservative Media Research Center in Washington, D. C. is described as saying, “ media outlets use female-friendly stories to attract female readers, a lucrative demographic for their advertisers" (Gilot, 2003). Thus, the seemingly arbitrary choices for news hype are tied to profit from advertising. The phenomenon of the news media choosing unlikely agendas for the public is not as easy to explain. It involves a deeper look how the media market is comprised and who is in control. The following chart shows the six biggest media conglomerates and some of their assets. (http://www. mediachannel. org/ownership/chart. shtml ) The link between media and capital is not as indirect as “ media depicts politics in certain way in order to cater to corporate interests because its advertisers are corporations. " While advertising is a significant source of income for these media companies, their link to capital is much more obvious: they are corporations themselves. Big media relies on a cozy relationship with certain political agencies. As The New York Times columnist Bob Herbert reveals: “ Not so widely covered was an interesting and enlightening study by the Center for Public Integrity… [which examined] the travel records of F. C. C. employees and found that over the last eight years, commissioners and staff members have taken 2, 500 trips costing $2. 8 million that were " primarily" paid for by members of the telecommunications and broadcast industries. " (Herbert, 2003) Recent news suggests that these “ trips" paid off, as the FCC relaxed regulations for media ownership. In what consumer interests groups dub “ a blow to democracy" (Kirkpatrick, 2003), the FCC’s moves will give the public “ a further consolidation of news and entertainment outlets under the control of a handful of giant corporations" (Herbert, 2003). President of Media Access Project Andrew Jay Schwartzman warns: “ The erosion of these rules portends a troubling sameness and enables a cartelization in which a handful of owners with increasingly common interests have the ability to shape public tastes, and less likelihood that one will be off the reservation. " (Labaton, 2001) Unfortunately, but predictably enough, “ the medium that the majority of people turn to for news -- television -- hardly touched the story while it was brewing" (Gillmor, 2003). Why is this relaxation of ownership rules so coveted that mega-media companies would be so transparent in their conflicts of interest? The activity of media corporations over the past two decades show how the stage has been set for reduced competition and giant mass media distributors. Rupert Murdoch, owner of News Corp., built his media empire on lowering the quality of journalism. He boosted sales of the Sun in London by introducing the “ Page Three Girl", a topless woman on page three of every issue. Ted Turner accuses Murdoch of “ going downmarket" in his news papers (Alger, 1998). This consists of using scandal, violence, or sex to sell the news. While the tactic degrades the integrity of his media, Murdoch has seen tremendous success for mainly that reason. His staunch “ anti-communist, anti-soviet" beliefs and his open backing of the War on Iraq have a very obvious connection to the political slant of his FOX News Channel. FOX News, which has surpassed CNN as the number news station in the United States, according to Media Guardian, “ has caused controversy and astounded UK broadcasters, which are bound by law to maintain impartial and balanced news services". Julian Petley, chairman of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom warns, “ if we allow into Britain the kind of journalism represented by Fox, that would bring about a form of censorship by narrowing the range of views and a coarsening of the level of debate" (Broadcast, 2003). Critics of the media also frown upon the unethical business practices of media giants. The AOL/Time Warner merger is seen as a hostile takeover by AOL. Employees of Time Warner have been openly resenting its new owners since the merger took place. Ted Turner, founder of CNN, however, is looked upon as an exception to “ the patterns seen in most other mega-media corporations, with their increasing lack of concern for the public good" (Alger, 1998). CNN was once the biggest and most widely respected news station in the world. He is well-known for his $1 billion pledge to the United Nations. He sold his companies in 1995 and served on the board of AOL/Time Warner for a period of time until resigning last week. Murdoch’s rise and Turner’s fade in the news business hints at the amount of pressure that exists in the mega-media industry. The ethical figure can not compete at the same level as he who is willing to turn media into a tool of manipulation on one hand and substance-free entertainment on the other. Where is Today’s Democracy We have painted a picture of a serious problem- the media plays a significant role in American democracy, it wields serious influential power, it often uses this power in compromising ways, capitalism situates the media in a conflict of interest, the media is shifting news towards tabloid news, the mega-media corporations are growing fewer in number and more powerful by the week. What are the tangible results for the status of our democracy today? We will construct a democracy report card. We have already seen that media skepticism is at an all-time high and the public is largely uninformed about budget issues and where the center actually lies in the U. S. political spectrum. Lewis tells us that the American public tends to agree with conservatives in regard to abstract fundamentals, but leans towards liberals in terms of specific policies- especially liberal fiscal policies. Given the question: “ Do you believe that the government should be able to regulate private property, or that the owner should be allowed to use property however he sees fit? " The public answers conservatively: the government should not intervene. However, when asked a more specific question: “ Do you believe that the government should be able to regulate private property in the interest of the environment, or that the owner should be allowed to use property however he sees fit? " To this question, the public is overwhelmingly liberal and supports the government intervention. Opposing government intervention in the first question but not the second is not considered a rational answer since environmental regulation is a subset of all other government regulation. This shows how the media can avoid labels of bias when it presents the public as conservative leaning, though it is farther left than imagined (Lewis, 2001). Mick Underwood argues that this phenomenon actually undermines the view that the media has any role in shaping public opinion: “ This view is put quite convincingly by Abercrombie at al (1994), who point to various studies showing that the subordinate classes' values are often a contradictory mix of political positions, e. g. support for the welfare state together with support for New Right individualism and free market doctrines. That one can certainly not simply assume that the dominated classes' values are those of the dominant, nor indeed that they are a coherent set of 'resistive' values is quite evident from the range of ethnographic and similar studies which have been carried out in research since the eighties" (Underwood, 2003) His argument quickly falls apart when one examines the evidence. In cognitive science, the phenomenon that we have shown regarding private property falls under studies of rational behavior. All humans contradict themselves when it comes to vague vs. specific questions, but only show their true positions on subjects when asked specifically about them. So, if the media wants to know about whether the public supports increased spending on welfare programs, it would be defined by modern cognitive psychology as manipulative to ask whether or not it supports “ free market doctrines". Indeed, Underwood’s argument crumbles further when one examines the public’s stance on specific issues. Lewis shows that when asked about increased spending, 60% support it for inner cities, 75% for the environment, 75% for health care, 78% for minimum wage, and 75% for education. He also shows us that 80% support more restrictions on gun control and 80% support campaign finance reform. This situates the public far left of center when it comes to fiscal policy- so far left that even Washington democrats fail to adequately represent up to 60% of the public. This information about the public’s placement in the political spectrum coupled with the public’s misjudgments as to how liberal some politicians really are shows a serious problem with today’s news media- one that immediately influences our democracy (Lewis, 2001). The dire situation of our democracy at the hands of the media, which is at the hands of capitalism, shows how minimal the public’s voice is in the governing of the country. It is clear with the emerging media elite that the people with the most say in how the news is broadcast also have much to lose from accurately depicting the liberal stance of the public on fiscal issues. Its underhanded tactics take the form of the following example of ABC News. Lewis showed footage of an ABC broadcast that reported indeed that 75% of the nation supports increases in public education funding. However, immediately after reporting that statistic, it ran a story on how a principal in a small community was able to improve his school on a very low budget. The news did not report on inner city schools or other schools that do not even have sufficient funding for up-to-date textbooks. Meanwhile, the public is unaware that the U. S. military budget is 18 times that of all of the U. S.’s non-allies combined. (Lewis, 2001) Possible Solutions There is an undeniable problem with modern democracy due to the media, which has been degraded due to the influence of capitalism. How can we solve this problem? To trump the democracy-killing mechanisms inherent in capitalist system, the government must put limits on that capitalism. This is already done in many ways- regulating the environment, anti-trust laws, public education, etc. The most sought after solution to the problem of today’s media is increased regulations on ownership. According to the late Senator Paul Wellstone: “ A proliferation of new media outlets does not guarantee any greater diversity of viewpoint. After all, one corporate conglomerate can still exercise control over the content of media that reaches citizens through many different outlets. The safest and best way to ensure diversity of viewpoint is through diversity of ownership. " (Carter, 1999) Wellstone’s comments reflect the position of many analysts in a call for increased diversity of ownership which would lead to diversity in viewpoint and increased competition. It is easy to see that diversity in viewpoint would dilute the manipulative power that any media-conglomerate currently has, but how else will Wellstone’s solution enrich our democracy? Diversity of ownership would place a more representative demographic behind the wheels of media broadcasts, instead of only people higher in the socio-economic ladder than the top ½%. The conservative-favoring news represented by the top 6 media conglomerates would come alongside more local newscasts that would inevitably be more representative of the public’s views. Rhonda Abrams, Gannett News columnist, delineates how the reduced competition will affect small business: “ 1. Advertising rates will rise. With fewer media owners and less competition, prices go up. It's going to cost more for a small company to get its message out. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 made it easier for conglomerates to own more radio stations. The result? According to the FCC, radio station advertising rates increased 81 percent. 2. Less coverage of small businesses. To save money, national media companies produce content centrally. Local news budgets and locally originated shows get slashed. That means it's going to be a lot harder to get coverage for the annual pet parade that your pet store sponsors. " She goes on to give an anecdotal account of how concentrated ownership could actually be dangerous for the public: “ When a train carrying ammonia derailed in Minot, N. D., according to news reports, police called the radio stations – all six are owned by Clear Channel Communications. Because Clear Channel, based in San Antonio, had reduced its local staff, no one answered for more than an hour. If the police can't get a local emergency covered on nationally owned media outlets, what chance do you have for your pet parade? "(Abrams, 2003) The FCC’s opposition to the Fairness Doctrine, which restricts media ownership, is based on arguments that Bollinger describes as “ serious flawed". He says they “ do a disservice to thoughtful reconsideration of the wisdom of having public regulation…by being so incomplete" (Bollinger, 1990). Bollinger is referring fractious and unsubstantiated claims that the Fairness Doctrine actually led to a narrowing of opinions represented in media due to “ the costs of presenting alternate viewpoints". The FCC’s argument is based on the assumption that diversity in ownership will not lead to diversity in viewpoint. Jim Naureckas of Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR, 2003) leaves us with his analysis of the FCC’s recent moves towards deregulation: “ The FCC's …are discouraging for those who advocate for media diversity. [FCC Chairman] Powell has been very clear about his intentions to turn over more and more of the publicly owned broadcast spectrum to already huge media corporations. These moves reaffirm those corporate-friendly principles. The FCC's total lack of interest in protecting Americans as citizens or consumers is shocking and disgraceful." (FAIR, 2003) Summary The media’s role in shaping democracy is growing as it expands. Even as the public, its consumers, are leaning towards the left in terms of fiscal policies, the media is shifting towards the conservative. The public, in theory, should have an influence in the government not just though the vote, but through the window of the media. The media should accurately report public opinion and the government should represent that public opinion under the check of the media. Otherwise, the media should report to the public how politics is misrepresenting them. Unfortunately, as media industry grows, it is becoming less and less economically viable for the media to remain the “ watchdog" or “ fourth institution" of the government. As the quality and educational value of news is degraded, so is democracy. While the solutions include further regulation of media ownership, the FCC, with its conflicts of interest, are pushing the national media situation farther and farther from that solution. Unfortunately, this worsening situation fails to get the media coverage it deserves. Works Cited Abrams, Rhonda. “ Media deregulation to put squeeze on small business: With consolidation, expect costlier ads, fewer local stories" Gannett News Service. 26 May 2003: http://www. courier-journal. com/business/news2003/05/26/biz-2-abra26-5327. html Alger, Dean. Megamedia: How Giant Corporations Dominate Mass Media, Distort Competition, and Endanger Democracy. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Lanham, Maryland. 1998. Barringer, Felicity. 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