

Fake News, Cognitive Pollution and Environmental Awareness

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Abstract

This essay pursues the idea that within our new media eco-systems fake news, trolling—and other forms of unethical pseudo-communication—are simply an updated version of the age-old idea of mythmaking. This is a phenomenon which could be better navigated if literature is regarded as a probing tool, as in the teachings of the Toronto School of

Communication, instead of seeing literature simply as a subject. Fake news is a growing tree, with roots in classical mythmaking and with branches spreading across a complex inter-media scenario that affects our way of being human (or transhuman), as well as our way of inhabiting our hyperrealities.

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I. A Humanistic Legacy to Retrieve

From the late 1950s and all through the 1960s, a group of scholars at the University of Toronto triggered a profound cultural change that, in 1963, led to the establishment of a brand new Centre for Culture and Technology. Directed by Marshall McLuhan—a professor of letters who became famous as a media guru—the Centre attempted to change the old educational paradigm, incorporating the study of media and new forms or technologies of communication into more traditional university syllabuses. Rooted in literary studies, anthropology, the arts, economics, and urban studies, scholars such as Harold Innis, Eric Havelock, and Ted Carpenter carried out innovative research which urged humanities scholars to give up the dusty prestige of their academic ivory towers and enter the control towers of society. They set out to explore the extraordinary conceptual, cultural, and technological change that was taking place in the 1950s and ‘60s and reconsidered the status and role that the humanities could play during a time of rapid change, turning each area of study into a probing tool. As McLuhan wrote to his student Walter J. Ong: “Literature is not a subject but a function—a function inseparable from our communal experience” (Molinaro, McLuhan and Toye 187). This approach was extended to all other subjects and became the motto of what we now refer to as the Toronto School of Communication, established when media studies did not yet exist as a university program.

These scholars were pioneers in what was later termed “the study of communication.” According to them, humanistic knowledge was neither traditional nor conservative but innovative and challenging. They were among the first to understand the complex ground on which new media of the time acted, pursuing not interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary studies (which became fashionable from the 1980s onwards), but a different approach to both knowledge and experience. They advanced the idea of *interface* in relation to cultural processes, interface being the meeting of structures, cultures, or conflicting technologies, and the way they change each other. In particular, they began to “apply the method of art analysis to the critical evaluation of society” (McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* v) and created a new language with which to bet-

ter appreciate deep cultural change in its making. The original storytelling of Innis, Havelock, and McLuhan—the founding fathers of the Toronto School—was interfaced, operating as a shocking counter-environment to the dominant cultural forces; it brought innovation and a shift in awareness of the relationship between media and change or permanence. Nowadays, the paradigm and methodology proposed by the School of Toronto can function as a guiding mechanism to approach new media not as mere figures acting within a broader scenario, but as ground *per se*, similar to our environment. This helps us to acquire a deeper consciousness of where we stand, as well as of the technological and cultural languages that we share. As McLuhan writes: “The present is always invisible because it is environmental. No environment is perceptible, simply because it saturates the whole field of attention” (“Understanding Canada” 114). The Toronto School developed a probing strategy, deeply humanistic at its core, that needs to be retrieved for us to probe the way new radical digital changes are affecting communication today, as well as the (more or less visible) languages they employ. Fake news is one of those languages, a prevailing one in our digital age.

II. Approaching Environmental Digitelling

The digital was not part of the Toronto School’s reality. However, members of that school developed forms of writing that today we would consider as transmedia *avant la lettre*: forms of writing that bridge the gap between a variety of expressions, technologies, performative strategies and cultures. The spirit and essence of that writing form was somehow *digital*, in juxtaposition to, and developed through discrete components that contrast with linear discourses, following a creatively conceived pattern. The best example is McLuhan’s mosaic (see Lamberti, *Marshall McLuhan’s Mosaic*). The goal was to make words resonate as complex systems:

Words are complex systems of metaphors and symbols that translate experience into our uttered or outered senses. They are a technology of explicitness. By means of translation of

immediate sense experience into vocal symbols, the entire world can be evoked and retrieved at any instant. (McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 85)

McLuhan's original and immersive storytelling became a probing tool for all his environmental explorations, a strategy that proved particularly useful in foreseeing the long-term implications of the evolving mediascape, what he called "the global village."¹ At the time, most academics and scholars contested this form of writing and probing. The major criticism was that it was too avant-garde, too artsy, and not as rigorous as more traditional academic jargon. As often happens, what at the time looked inconsistent or far-fetched, nowadays looks obvious, as the digital has turned discontinuity into an accepted strategy of communication.

In fact, interfaced storytelling is no longer a futuristic counter-environment, but a widely shared language. What was new then is ordinary now. Digital media have coopted the very idea of innovation and turned it into a common language, a Do-It-Yourself code used to enter and find ways to express yourself in an artificial technological environment that is market-wise, and always dependent on what comes next. Today, digital storytelling is not only trending within the media-literacy community, but has also become a key concept in training professionals to promote themselves and their products. One could say that the digital (non-linear) environment is the way it is, because it is also the way we think and communicate with each other in real life and through media. No longer intrinsically new, no longer a counter-environment, digital storytelling has become natural to us because our mind works in a non-linear way. Digital grammar is not something we need to study, because it comes naturally. For instance, "What's up?" is no longer just a colloquial verbal strategy to start a conversation, it is a verbal app. We use the old expression "What's up?" to frame what we feel the application does, and we adjust by adjusting the language, but what if this linguistic osmosis numbs a behavioral change?

¹ As he wrote in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*: "The electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village" (36).

When a neologism is created, the novelty of a situation is made apparent. However, if we encapsulate cultural and sociological change through a language that remains the same within the environment in which we use it, we trigger perceptual schizophrenia, instead of an awareness of processes or pattern recognition.² This splitting of our perception and diminishing of our attention span through media distractions is reassuring when we know the terminology, since it domesticates our subconscious fear of the new. However, when the environment changes and our terminology does not, this terminology quickly undermines our ability to follow what is going on. Therefore, what happens when *digitelling* (digital storytelling) is not only an artsy, futuristic counter-environment, but also a widely shared form of communication in which we are not necessarily aware of any change, since our old language saturates our whole field of attention? To examine this question further, we, too, can try to apply the method of art and literary analysis to the critical evaluation of now augmented digital societies, considered through some of the overwhelming and pervasive digital narratives that are shaping our environment: the transnational digi-novel that we now inhabit, which Don DeLillo has called our “digital imperative” (24). For instance, we can approach fake news as a malevolent (but trendy) form of digitelling to explore how the very existence of fake news relies on a cognitive pollution that is, in fact, induced and preserved through a more or less conscious recycling of literary language.

In the mid-1970s, J.G. Ballard wrote that “[w]e live inside an enormous novel. It is less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer’s task is to invent the reality” (4). As said, today it is increasingly difficult to define fact and fiction, as actuality and fiction overlap constantly. Unsurprisingly, within such a habitat, fake news has become not only a popular issue, but also a transnational form of narrative that relies on old and new media and that shapes both ourselves and the enormous novel in which we live. Within our digitally interdependent environ-

² Media Ecology defines this schizophrenic approach through the idea of “the rearview mirror syndrome”: you march into the future while keeping your mind focused on the past, meaning that your perceptive sensorium is unbalanced towards a situation that no longer exists, because you are immersed in a newly forming one.

ment, fake news cannot be framed simply as bad journalism. Instead, it must be investigated also as a more complex form of group narrative precisely because mobile and social media have turned each of us into not only a writer, but also a witness and a critic in real time. This is why they can be compared to a new form of mythmaking, which can be called mythmaking 2.0. However, whereas Ezra Pound wrote that “literature is news that stays news” (29), we could instead say that fake news is literature that becomes obsolete in an instant. Life expectancy thus differentiates ancient mythmaking from mythmaking 2.0: the narrative has shifted from *eternity* to *ephemerality*. This is a crucial change, which can enlighten some fragilities of our digitalized world-novel.

III. Probing Fake News as Mythmaking

Every year, in mid-spring, the Italian city of Perugia hosts the International Journalism Festival (IJF). Each year, this festival focuses on so-called “hot topics” which are determined by the news and translate into an overwhelming narrative created by internationally shared headlines. Fake news has been a hot topic in the more recent editions. The point is that fake news is being discussed not simply as a transversal topic, but also as a *narrative*, and so questions the ontological (and ethical) status of both journalism and storytelling in the so-called post-truth age.

Among the various talks and presentations of the 2017 edition of the Festival, I was particularly taken by one given by journalist and author Claire Prentice, who spoke about “Fake News: Nothing New.” She pointed out that the very idea of fake news originated with the idea of journalism itself in the eighteenth century, and that the problems of trustworthy accounts and fact-checking have always been part of journalistic scenarios across the world. She gave a variety of examples, including one that led her to write an interesting book called *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island: Headhunters, Luna Park, and the Man Who Pulled Off the Spectacle of the Century*. As Prentice writes, her book

unearths the incredible true story of the Igorrotes, a group of ‘headhunting, dog-eating savages’ from the Philippines, who were taken to New York in 1905 by the charming, opportunistic doctor-turned-showman Truman K. Hunt. [...] There they appeared as ‘human exhibits’ alongside the freaks and curiosities at Coney Island’s Luna Park. (“The Lost Tribe”)

Prentice’s volume turns that story into an example of how to manipulate reality for a purpose: the Igorrotes were portrayed as primitive and savage (of course, they were not). They became a “national sensation: they were written up in newspaper headlines, portrayed in cartoons, and even featured in advertising jingles” (“The Lost Tribe of Coney Island”). Unsurprisingly, the false accounts and alternative facts elaborated at the expense of the Igorrotes—that is, the fake narrative translating diversity into an inferior civilization—was, in fact, instrumental in the Philippine-American War. It supported the USA’s military colonization of that nation, which was presented as an action needed to *civilize* an area of the world still inhabited by “cruel savages.”

In learning about the old story of *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island*, you could not but agree with Prentice: there is nothing new, and fake news is but a form of storytelling, based on a precise grammar and rhetoric that uses both hyperboles and understatements. It is a form of storytelling that is predominantly unethical and which is used not only to entertain people but also to manipulate their minds. Fake news is a carefully conceived form of storytelling that distracts people while acting on their minds and consciousness in a more pernicious way. As T.S. Eliot would say, they act on you while you are distracted by their content. So much so, that we can venture further than Prentice, and state that, as a form of narrative, fake news is much older than journalism and has been a constant part of human storytelling. It dates back to mythologies, and especially to the mythmaking that consolidates the building of a civilization or that marks the passage from a certain form of *civilization* to the next

one.³ I use the term civilization in a very broad sense, that is, in the manner of media ecology (Strate). In fact, I should use the term *environment*, meaning the complex relation between individuals and their habitats: a combination of natural and artificial components, of natural and cultural elements which includes different technologies of communication.

Myth is an ancient Greek word (*mythos*) that means “word,” “discourse,” or “story.” Mythology is the set of myths that are created and transmitted within a given community to preserve its identity. Myth-making is the conscious act of creating stories that are meant to play a role within a given community, confirming or questioning the identity of that very community. Storytelling is, therefore, something that nurtures myth, mythology, and mythmaking. In turn, the ideas of truth and falsity are in constant dialogue and determine the genre of a specific storytelling: mythology, fiction, chronicles, historiography, journalistic accounts, and so on. The taxonomy is vast, and it is further complicated by the very form of communication (oral, literate, visual, digital, etc.), which also affects the storytelling, because the medium is at once the *message*, the *massage*, as well as the *mess-age* and the *mass-age* (McLuhan and Fiore).

Provocatively, we could say that fake news is a genre within storytelling that originated with the first telling of stories, and which postulates both an ontological and ethical/unethical relationship between the teller (author) and the audience (listener), depending on cultural and technological factors such as the environment in which storytelling takes place. Classical myths underline this. Take for instance the figure of Ulysses. Today, the dominant interpretation is that he is a relatively modern (though chauvinist) hero. He first uses his wit to avoid fighting, he pretends to be crazy, and once he is discovered, he uses his wit to outsmart his enemy. In fact, in both cases he is the author of pristine pieces of fake news that are related by Homer as a witty, if tricky, strategy adopted to achieve a major goal: his unethical communicative ges-

³ As per the School of Toronto, the passage from a certain form of *civilization* to the next one often implies a shift in the form of communication characterizing the making and the dissemination of knowledge within the group. Consistently, the study of these specific myths helps to appreciate the role played by language and communication in the making of the collective storytelling (and therefore mentality).

ture (to tell a lie, to deceive enemies instead of openly facing them, as was more common at the time) is justified by a higher moral aim (avoid war or preserve peace, restore peace or return home). There is a price to be paid, as Ulysses has consciously broken a social pact (tell the truth, respect the rules of battle), and yet, Ulysses will make it home.

The story of Ulysses has been preserved through a literate form of communication, paralleling the shift into a new form of civilization: from the oral to the written age. According to media ecology, the passage from orality to literacy changes the way human beings perceive themselves and leads to the dominance of the individual (the self) over the group; in time, such a passage favors vertical and hierarchical societies over horizontal and tribal ones (Innis; McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*). In the official narrative, Ulysses becomes a modern leader who triggers change through actions that can be understood as unethical (he cheats) or ethical (he cheats to save his group), depending on the civilization that interprets his story.

Once turned into a *literary artefact*, Homer's oral narrative can no longer be read simply as the account of past episodes. It shifts from being a chronicle (a sort of *avant la lettre* journalism) into an epic, into mythmaking, as it bears witness to a cultural passage (from orality to literacy, from a certain tribal order to a new one) that is clearly historically and technologically situated. From that moment on, we could imagine all later readings of Homer's once oral epic, as literate or post-literate fact-checking that aims to prove or disprove how the original text (or source) relates to a variety of evolving cultural and technological contexts and audiences. In other words, the telling of new stories enlightens different historical realities.

Following a similar reasoning, we could postulate that fake news and fact-checking are two structural elements of all typologies of storytelling, relating to the shifting and challenging dichotomy of true/false accounts of a given situation. Depending on the typology of storytelling, the reader knows where to set the bar and when to protest the story as untrue or unethical, untrue but ethical, or unethical but true. For instance, we know that fairy tales are not true but are possibly ethical, and we know that propaganda (as well as commercials) can be unethical but

nevertheless possibly true, and so on. We also know that, because of a diversity of reasons, it is not always possible for the audience to explicitly protest the unethical rendering of a story. The most obvious one relates to those realities in which free speech is not possible, for instance when censorship conditions all forms of communication, including fictional ones, which is still the case in many countries today. As George Orwell taught us in *Animal Farm*: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (126). This also rings true for societies in which free speech is possible, but where communication takes place within a complex media system affecting—if not numbing—people’s awareness and sensibilities. In fact, this is where most of the Western world stands today, where media and digital interfaces are the environment saturating our consciousness.

Back in the 1920s and ‘30s, Edward Bernays (Freud’s nephew and one of the first Austrian-American spin doctors) studied the conscious and deliberate manipulation of people’s habits and ideas as an important component of democratic societies. Such manipulation is achieved through the democratic use of democratic but pervasive forms of communication, the goal of which is to “create consent without consent,” as Noam Chomsky put it in *Profit over People* (43-62). Storytelling is instrumental to that creation. In short, people believe what they want to believe, and the trick is to give them something they are ready to accept. For instance, this was the case with the Italian electorate and Silvio Berlusconi, who was elected on the basis of fantastic storytelling: “vote for me and I will create one million jobs” or “vote for me and I will make you all as rich as I am.” At the time (1994), there were fact-checkers, but the Italian people clearly favored a mythical narrative. In 2016, the American people too, favored mythmaking over fact-checking, believing mythical slogans—such as “make America great again,” “the manifest destiny,” “the American Dream” or “America first”—and elected Donald Trump as their new President. The Trojans acted in the same way with Ulysses, as they *saw* what they *desired most* and so believed in a fantastic story: the horse they found at the dawn of a new day stood for the enemy signaling their surrender, promising a victory without need for a final battle. It is interesting that today we blame the Trojans and

not Ulysses (who literally shaped an alternative fact) for what happened. In fact *Trojan* is a word translating a malicious computer program, invisible but pervasive; a word that has entered into our collective imagination as a complex system, a symbol evoking a situated experience. The victim of the ancient fake news has become the villain in a new hyper-real but interconnected world habitat.

Why do people believe what they want to believe? Why do millions of people across diverse realities prefer an illusory narrative to a narrative showing them where they truly are? Escapism is a possibility, but that would be too simple an answer. To win consent without consent is a better explanation. But nothing is new in that explanation, either. However, what is new is the pervasiveness of the digital, which is not only a way to translate old narratives into new ones, nor simply a form used to conceptualize new literary and artistic discourses. The digital is much more than a technology: it is our present and it is *environmental*.

IV. Polluting Awareness

The novel we inhabit today is shaped through and by the digital, and the writer must try to create counter-environments within a situation that is oversaturated and technologically imploded—an idea originally introduced by McLuhan’s image of “the global village” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*). Even Ballard’s statement sounds obsolete these days because it is difficult for a writer to invent reality in a world that has invented and delivered the concept of *augmented realities*. Because there is no outside, writers and critics must play *from within*: they act to preserve the individual’s free will and consciousness, counterbalancing all attempts to induce cultural homologation and passive citizenship. This, too, is nothing new: we have seen it conceptualized and happening. Perhaps, this literary déjà vu is part of the problem, if not *the* problem.

The world we see today or the world we are encouraged to see, comes from fictional models *for the real*, subconsciously turning us into ironic characters, into unconsciously passive spectators of déjà vu stories, the narratology of which is part of our shared cultural memories. The digitally saturated environment is therefore a cognitively polluted

habitat within which mythmaking 2.0 is instrumental to the preservation of that pollution. Fake news is instrumental in keeping our minds in “the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting” (McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* v). We contribute to the plot of a world narrative that casts us as characters. We are encouraged to become either fact-checkers or trolls, either heroes or villains. We both inhabit and contribute to the consolidation of mythmaking 2.0, playing a role in the accelerated writing of stories and counter-stories that become obsolete from dusk to dawn. What matters, in fact, is no longer the specificity of the story, but the process of making and unmaking stories: fake news leads to fact-checking that leads to fake news that leads to fact-checking, and so on and so forth. We are stuck in a loop, like hamsters in a wheel.

As a literary critic, I regret to say that part of the cognitive pollution that makes us passive producers of these forms of hyper-accelerated, unethical pseudo-communication is reinforced through the more or less conscious recycling of established literary jargons. Because our technologically interdependent societies come after fiction, fiction risks being no longer useful for the exploration of change; it risks being consciously employed to comfort us. In fact, if we perceive our new, digitally saturated environment through the rearview mirror of fiction, we cannot but see *what we want to see*: we cannot but believe *what we want to believe*. We inhabit a fictional déjà vu that comforts us even when the plot looks uncanny, simply because we already know and share the narratology of the given genre.

Think about it. To outline our world today, critics and journalists alike tend to borrow a taxonomy from the very popular literary genre of science fiction, as well as from all its ontological variables (like fantasy, dystopia or utopia). In many accounts of today, we have become posthumans living in cyberspace and smart cities, surrounded by robots and intelligent machines, including intelligent bombs. Not by chance, most of the uncanny fake news that travels transnationally has a narrative tied to science fiction plots: the Earth is flat, vaccines trigger uncanny psycho-pathologies, alien settlements have appeared on the moon (photographs provided). Fake news itself is, for many, science fiction. Of course, we can blame the Russians and their will to invade and con-

trol Western societies, through a pervasive malware digitelling shaped through fake news. However, what if, instead, we make some attempts as critics to shift the focus from ideologically guided moral indignation to a rationally guided investigation of what is happening? Or, as McLuhan wrote, as early as 1951: “Why not assist the public to observe consciously the drama which is intended to operate upon us unconsciously?” (*The Mechanical Bride*, v). In short: instead of following the given plot, why do we not reverse or reconsider it?

For instance, literary critics could easily show the obsolescence of the language used to frame the *new* within our societies. The science fiction taxonomy used to explain our world today had already gone out of fashion within the genre itself well before the twentieth century was over. Future locations, robots, and other amenities belong to what has been defined as the “golden age” of science fiction (in the first half of the twentieth century). From the late 1960s onwards, new versions of science fiction were more interested in exploring the inner space of individuals inhabiting an increasingly interdependent planet Earth. This new science fiction triggered an awareness of environmental change, through narratives which focused on uncanny social rebellions often translated as new psychopathologies. Today’s paradox is that science fiction has gone beyond literature to provide a shared semantic explanation (meaning *confirmation*), a mainstream (meaning *given*) perception of reality, that no longer explores change for real. So conceived, science fiction jargon is also fake news, as it contributes to the pervasive semantic of *media as environment*, to preserve a saturated whole field of attention.

As media ecology teaches us, we become what we behold and, most importantly, we shape our tools and vice versa. We have started to shape the world through language; we saw, heard, and felt our realities in fictional modes, we constructed narratives to navigate change, but now we have reached a point when the clarity of diction creates a comfort zone that contributes to us giving *consent without consent*. According to media ecology, each medium pushed to its extreme flips into its reverse: literature explores the present but can also frame it, when, for instance, it shifts from avant-garde to mannerism. Today, literary clichés are used to frame us, to induce cognitive pollution, and to prevent us from see-

ing the present. Society has reversed the teaching of the Toronto School and turned literature from function back to subject again.

Recycling is good for the environment, but language recycling is not necessarily good for free will when the environment is changing. Language recycling, enacted through the transmedia repetition of popular literary clichés, contributes to cognitive pollution, and numbs our integral awareness. Today, we tend to live in stories, but miss history. Instead, we should use stories to understand and navigate history, because to look at reality through the rearview mirror of fiction flips creativity into numbness, and spreads what McLuhan calls the “Narcissus Narcosis”:

The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended repeated image. [...] He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system. (*Understanding Media* 63)

We are the new Narcissus, and our digital environment is the pond extending our own self-referential reflections. Fake news, as well as literary clichés are the updated versions of the Trojan horse. They are but the reflection of digitally framed—and digitally imploded—narratives that comfort and numb us, turning us into servomechanisms of closed systems that, ironically, rely on open-source technologies and transmedia storytelling.

Fake news has always been part of human storytelling. It is not just the byproduct of journalism, nor of new media. However, today’s excessive focus on it is just this. This is why I call fake news mythmaking 2.0, as it is inscribed in an evolving complex media environment, where information has become a connective thread that we tend to overlook—like Narcissus overlooked the pond. Fake news (and therefore fact-checking) is part of today’s mythmaking, consciously creating stories that are meant to play a role within our communities: as the new spin doctors would say, they distract the watchdogs of our minds. By doing so, true

and false stories make history, as they condition our interconnected lives in very visible ways: Brexit, the American presidential election and post-election, populist political movements in Europe, as well as the perception and representations of various wars and refugee crises that we all know too well. How to break the loop and overcome what looks like a collective mediate hypnosis remains a challenge.

At present, I have not envisaged a clear-cut way out of the information loop that continues to preserve what Lewis Mumford once called the Pentagon of Power: politics, power—meaning energy —productivity, profit, and publicity (*Technics and Human Development; The Pentagon of Power*). However, I have hopes, perhaps ephemeral ones, but still hopes that media ecology (itself a legacy of the Toronto School of Communication) can help to find new meanings in literary studies as it can help us to deconstruct not only the stories but their *poetics* (that is, the operative project and its form). If the world comes from fictional models, we have all become “ironic spectators,” to borrow a crucial definition by Lilie Chouliaraki: we need to learn how to read better, or, how to read ironically. I believe that the fertile marriage of media ecology and literary studies can help us to rethink the very essence of storytelling as a powerful tool to navigate deep cultural change. That marriage will help us to consciously counterbalance our ironic voyeurism, our vicarious participation in hyperreal situations. It will take *us* to see through them, in spite of all spin doctors, Ulysses, or enchanting sirens. It is a difficult challenge, but to remain compassionate and awakened human beings we must confront it.

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Biography

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