



MCLUHAN'S THEORIES AND CONVERGENCE OF ONLINE AND PAPER'S NEWSROOMS

La convergencia de redacciones online y de papel desde el pensamiento de McLuhan

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ABSTRACT

The Internet convulsed journalism and created new press models based on budgets radically different from those that traditionally shaped the performance of the profession. Although at first the newspapers created different work structures for paper and web media, the final decision of the journalistic companies was to create a single newsroom for paper and web media. This article investigates if from the theory of Communication, and especially from the works of McLuhan, this decision is or is not justified in a correct way.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Periodismo
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Nativo Digital
Comunicación
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Integración

RESUMEN

Internet convulsionó el periodismo y creó nuevos modelos de prensa basados en presupuestos radicalmente diferentes a los que tradicionalmente configuraban el desempeño de la profesión. Si bien al principio los periódicos crearon estructuras de trabajo distintas para los soportes de papel y web, la decisión final de las empresas periodísticas fue la de crear una sola redacción para los soportes papel y web. Este artículo investiga si desde la teoría de la Comunicación, y en especial desde los trabajos de McLuhan, esta decisión está o no justificada de modo correcto.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of the Internet marked the end of the world as we know it (García, 2017). The changes that our society has experienced progressively and constantly have also been irreversible: we have created a new society. The Web has become a “virtual agora” (Gamonal, 2012). The journalistic profession has not been immune to this revolution. A new journalism has been emerging silently but inexorably and it makes it difficult for us to imagine how we used to get information before the Internet.

Facing the social and technological changes, the media readapted their working methods, conditioning them to the new scenario (Anguí *et al.*, 2019). They were forced to innovate and reinvent themselves regardless of the journalistic sector they were part of (Cristófol *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, the Internet provoked the emergence of a new way of doing journalism: cyberjournalism, thus creating a new journalistic ecosystem in the digital field made up of 2,874 active cybermedia in Spain in the year 2021, of which almost half are digital natives (Salaverría & Martínez-Costa, 2021).

Newspaper companies gradually adapted to the new online reality. Decisions were made that had consequences both in the process of generating the news and in the development of the profession. The editors not only had to learn the handling of a new technology to write their information, but they also learned to incorporate, together with the traditional written text and fixed image, multimedia elements, such as video, audio and to develop websites and blogs with which to report news events.

In Spain, at the end of the 20th century, during the first years of the development of the Internet in the newsrooms of the newspapers, the journalists Mario Tascón and Gumersindo Lafuente understood that the Web was something more than a channel to spread the usual news. According to these two gurus of Spanish journalism, it was necessary to provide the new online journalism with its own newsroom. They sensed that the changes introduced by this new technology went beyond the merely procedural and covered all spheres of the profession, so that journalists could not work for print and the web at the same time.

However, after a few years of separate newsrooms, the newspaper publishing companies in Spain, including those of the aforementioned journalists, decided that, for fundamentally economic reasons, it was necessary to integrate the paper and web newsrooms. This decision lasts to this day, although with the current nuance that now what prevails is the digital version over the paper version. Digitization occurs in all areas of today's society and should not go against it (Caldevilla-Domínguez *et al.*, 2021). According to Cabezuolo-Lorenzo *et al.* (2021), the digitization of communication is a fundamental basis for attracting the user's attention.

In parallel, new newspapers emerged on the Internet that were not linked to paper newspapers. Since 2008, and due to the crisis, thousands of journalists long experienced in the profession were laid off. These professionals constitute the germ of the new online media that in a matter of a few years competed, on equal terms, with the web versions of the traditional paper newspapers, all even though the traditional press had larger budgets and staff. The success, in terms of audience, of the native digital press contributes to questioning the decision of the paper journalistic companies to integrate both newsrooms. The emergence of alternative digital media represents a very important opportunity conducive to the development of journalism (Aparicio, 2020). Authors such as Goikoetxea Bilbao *et al.* (2019); Peinado y Miguel and Rodríguez Barba (2020) and Ruiz Rico (2020), comment that the eminently digital media (largely a consequence of the paper crisis), maintain a complementary relationship.

This research delves, from the perspective of the Theory of Communication developed by McLuhan, into the suitability of integrating paper and web newsrooms into one. Facing the argument of the integration of newsrooms as a need due to economic reasons, given at the time by the media, we will study whether this process of convergence of newsrooms is justified from cognitive and epistemological assumptions. The horizons of the digital world are unknown to all (Caldevilla-Domínguez *et al.*, 2020).

2. Objectives and methodology

As has already been pointed out, this work tries to point out the possible error of the paper press when joining the paper and web newsrooms. The loss of audience in favor of the native digital press is evidence of the dysfunction in these companies.

Salaverría and Martínez-Costa (2021) define digital native media as “those created on the network itself and that do not derive from printed or audio-visual brands”. In a few years, after their appearance, the audience data shows that there are already several native online newspapers that are in the top ten of unique users, and this despite being smaller companies and having fewer human and financial resources.

We will review how the convergence process of the newsrooms in Spain has been after the appearance of the Internet and what has been the justification for carrying it out. We will appeal to some of the definitions made by academic experts on cyberjournalism to list the adaptations that the traditional press made in order to reach the new online technology.

Next, we will analyze some of the consequences of the 2008 crisis in the profession. We will focus on the emergence of new digital media constituted by journalists laid off because of the crisis. We will analyze the current

state of the question in order to obtain the official audience figures provided in the web versions of the non-native Spanish press (those that also have a paper version) and contrast them with the data of the native press.

After this state of the question, we will expose the theories of the academic of Communication Marshall McLuhan published in his two most representative works, *La galaxia Gutenberg y Comprender los medios de comunicación*, to finally assess whether in the light of these cognitive assumptions the decision of converging the newsrooms of the paper and web press was justified or not.

3. State of the art

3.1. Cyberjournalism and convergence of newsrooms

The arrival of the Internet to the newsrooms of newspapers at the end of the last century marked the beginning of a revolution at all levels:

The effects have been like the crash of a huge iceberg on the placid ocean liner of the press. All the compartments and cabins of the ship have been convulsed. The great ship still floats, but it has leaks that need to be identified and repaired. (Sempere, 2015)

Originally, the web was a complementary platform for the promotion and distribution of traditional media (Salaverría *et al.*, 2021). Among the novelties that emerged, it stands out, a new way of processing and distributing journalistic information that was adjusted to the new emerging technology. This new way of doing journalism was baptized from the beginning as cyberjournalism. Although there are authors, such as Navarro (2011), who point out that cyberjournalism does not derive directly from the Internet but is related to other technological mediations such as fax or DVD, the truth is that with the Internet it assumed relevance within the newsrooms that marked a turning point in the exercise of the journalistic profession.

As indicated by Salaverría (2005), Fontcuberta (2017) and Fontcuberta & Borrat (2006), the academic studies analyzed this new journalistic modality over the time focused on aspects related to language, the composition of the news, the technical tools, the review of journalistic genres, the role of the media and, finally, the journalist's new roles and social tasks.

Over time, what was thought to be just another channel to spread news, requesting a specific digital treatment, became a core element of Journalism carrying changes whose magnitude and scope were only comparable to those changes provoked by the invention of the printing press. In this context, the newspapers chose for the convergence between the paper and web newsrooms (Abad, 2011).

Companies improvised on the fly, as Albornoz (2007) stated around this concept of convergence, whose meaning could vary depending on its specific application and scope. For Salaverría (2005, p. 15) it was a new professional modality of journalism, in general, because it modified the three basic processes on which it was based: research, production and spread. In addition, the new cybernetic users requested from the information professionals immediate and continuous supply of data, something that paper, by its very definition, could not satisfy in the same way as the new digital support.

Other authors such as Jenkins (2008), defined newsroom convergence as the "flow of content across multiple media platforms, cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences." Piñeiro (2006, p. 140) emphasized convergence as multimedia applied to the organization of news companies. Along the same lines, Deuze argues that the convergence had to be considered, in terms of the cooperation and collaboration between newsrooms, different in other times, and other departments of the modern company.

Salaverría and Negredo (2008, pp. 153-181) define, among others, the following changes that journalistic companies adopted with the incorporation of this new cybernetic modality of doing journalism:

- There was a complete reconversion of the journalistic company, becoming multimedia. Instead of separating the newsroom according to each type of support, the same editors were the ones who prepared the content that was then channeled through different media (paper or Internet) and in different formats (text, image and video).
- The changes were not focused on the type of support (paper or Internet). The same journalists generated content for both supports and only a small part of the newsroom specialized in each one of them to release the information that came from the entire newsroom.
- A change in the journalistic work process materialized. The traditional news production routines gave way to new work processes in which the management model and hierarchy were changed, both the newsroom and the commercial management were reorganized, the real estate infrastructures were reformed, and the multiplatform content management systems were implemented.

During the 67th General Assembly of the Ibero-American Press Society held in Lima in 2011, Paul Smurl, Vice President of Paid Products of the digital edition of the New York Times, stated that the integrated newsroom

allowed journalists to generate friendly content for any format.

The following definition of convergence in newsrooms includes the different nuances that companies gave to it over time:

Common framework of work created through a structural reorganization, based on the best use of the media, on sharing knowledge and on the elimination of deep-seated prejudices among journalists, and whose objective is to achieve a better information product and a more prepared journalist. (Ramos, 2014, p. 6)

Ramos himself proposes the following classification of the convergence in the newsrooms, based on the actions that the journalistic companies addressed, and his typology presents four profiles ordered from higher to lower intensity:

- *Integration from above.* We refer, to call it in some way, to a merger of commands. Without this merger, no further steps could be taken because everything starts from the fact that the decision-making area, where those responsible are, is unified. Once the people who decide what, how, when and where a story is published reach a unity of criteria such that the editors are not affected in their work just because one or the other is in charge, the newsroom can continue to be integrated. Without this integration none of the following would make sense. (Ramos, 2014)
- *Integration from above + Physical integration.* It is the step immediately after the control merger. It consists of building a single editorial board, in the same room. In many cases, web journalists and print journalists don't even know each other. Now, the editors of the web and those of paper become partners in their corresponding section. Physical fusion is only useful if there is later a true integration when working.
- *Integration from above + Physical integration + cooperation.* After the physical union of the editors, each worker begins to learn the characteristics of the others' work through specific training courses financed by the company. Each department publishes its information on the web and on paper and the corresponding section manager, now with a global vision of the product, is responsible for what its journalists are going to publish in both media. Over time everyone must know how to do everything, or what is the same, be prepared to publish indistinctly and without help both on the web and on paper.
- *Indiscriminate fusion.* Its oversize's the idea of integration to excess. It is undoubtedly the most dangerous for the journalist. The emotion of the integrative movement can degenerate into the idea that a journalist must cover a piece of news throughout the day, constantly updating it on the website and writing a final piece for the printed newspaper, which would considerably increase the journalist's working day. The main arguments against integration, such as dismissals, exploitation of journalists, lack of specialization or the idea that the digital world despises paper come from the application of this fourth level (Ramos 2014). It is true that the digital is always in motion, but this cannot imply a chaining of the journalist to his work (Barrientos-Báez & Caldevilla Domínguez, 2019).

3.2. From convergence to Digital First

Two of the most important Spanish general information newspapers, El País and El Mundo, experienced similar processes in their integration processes. Both began with separate newsrooms and, for different reasons, decided to integrate their newsrooms, giving greater relevance, for the first time in their history, to the web than to paper.

In the case of El País, the web editor, Mario Tascón, was never favorable to the fact that the same journalist works for paper and web at the same time. In his work, *Comparativa sobre la evolución de las especies* quoted by Ramos (2014, p. 8), he explained that both supports had to follow different paths using the simile of cladogenesis; in the Theory of evolution this refers to the process through which a species can give rise to two different ones. However, and arguing economic reasons, after the 2008 crisis, the CEO of El País, Juan Luis Cebrián, decided that it was better to merge both newsrooms into one with one peculiarity: he would give priority to the web and not to paper. In this way, one of the founders of the paper version of that newspaper, dared to state in 2008 that the paper press was already dead and that if he had to re-found the newspaper, he would do so in a web version.

For its part, El Mundo began its journey in the digital world with a newsroom separated from the paper one and directed by Gumersindo Lafuente. The success of elmundo.es was such that it became the most visited Spanish newspaper in the world. However, in 2007 the divergences around the Madrid attacks of 11M provoked a fierce confrontation between Lafuente and Pedro J. Ramírez, director of the paper version, resulting in the departure of Lafuente and the subsequent integration of both newsrooms into one. The official reason that the publishing company argued for integrating both newsrooms was that it was necessary to increase the synergies between the Internet edition and the informative content of the paper edition. The truth is that from that moment on, the audience progressively abandoned the news portal and elmundo.es lost the leadership that it held for so many years.

The trajectory of ABC, in the sense given in this work about the integration of newsrooms, was completely different from that of the other two general newspapers mentioned above. The newspaper founded by Torcuato Luca de Tena did not create a parallel or different newsroom with the arrival of the Internet. In the redesign of the page header between 2009 and 2010, it was decided that the same newsroom would work for the web and for the paper. In order to achieve that, each section would initially have an editor especially commissioned of the web version of its own section. Over time, this responsibility fell on each one of the editors, with the consequent protest for the duplication of work that this entailed. The arrival of a new director in 2020, Fernando Quirós, strengthened the foundations of a single newsroom for paper and web but with a nuance: the web would have priority and not the paper.

3.3. Emergence of digital native journals

The 2008 work crisis brought with it a considerable number of dismissals in the editorial offices of Spanish newspapers. According to data from *Asociación de la Prensa*, between 2008 and 2013 almost 10,000 professionals in the sector lost their jobs (APM, 2013). Many senior journalists launched themselves into the creation of web-only journalistic companies overnight. In this way, the native digital press was born in Spain (Berganza *et al.*, 2016).

The success, measured in terms of audience or unique visitors, that these newspapers had placed them at the top of the online press and in direct competition with the traditional paper media also available in a web version. This fact, reflected in the table below, is surprising, since it concerns very small media compared to traditional paper companies. They have a smaller staff, a lower availability of capital and, in addition, they do not have experience in dealing with advertising companies.

This data will be kept in mind in this research, since the native digital press, by its very nature, develops a kind of journalism outside the needs of traditional newspapers and focuses only on spreading news online, both on the media's own platform and on social networks.

Table 1. Domain ranking of Spanish newspapers (in millions of unique visitors)

Domain ranking (including mobile traffic)	Millions of unique visitors
lavanguardia.com	22.748
elmundo.es	22.708
elspanol.com	21.222
elpais.com	20.175
20minutos.es	19.323
elconfidencial.com	17.430
okdiario.com	14.135
larazon.es	12.918
elperiodico.com	12.851
abc.es	11.575

Source: Comscore, October 2021.

4. McLuhan's Theory of Communication

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a professor of literature and communication theory at several North American universities. His two best-known works, *La galaxia Gutenberg* (1962) and *Comprendiendo los medios de comunicación* (1964), reflect his worldview of History as linked to the media, identifying the latter with any type of socially spread technology.

McLuhan linked each new technological invention as an extension of some of the five senses or some organ of our body. For example, a spear was the extension of the arms, the wheel was an extension of the legs or the telescope an extension of the vision.

Throughout the pages of the two aforementioned works, he recounted the history of the Western world based on a detailed description of the technological inventions that decisively shaped the world as it has been and as we know it today.

At the core of McLuhanian thought is the fact that every new technology that spreads has both individual and social consequences. Each technological innovation introduces a new scale in the mental field and in our

social relationships. This change in scale is much more important than the content of the technological invention itself. McLuhan gave continuous examples to convince us of this theory. He stated, for example, that the change in individual and social scale that the emergence of the railway produced (in this specific case in the demography and configuration of cities) was much more relevant than the content the train wagons could transport. And the same could be said of airplanes, cars, bicycles, or money, photography and cinema.

McLuhan, used to aphorisms, focused on the relevance of technology itself. Hence his famous quote “the medium is the message”, to indicate that the existence and use of a technology is more important than what is transmitted with it or its content. He even compared the habitual fixation that we have on the contents with the steak with which the thief distracts the dog of our mind, that is, by focusing only on the contents we distract ourselves and overlook much more important aspects.

4.1. Oral culture and visual culture

For McLuhan civilizations are divided into oral and visual. Peoples with an oral culture are those in which the sense of hearing predominated over the rest, with the peculiarity that its prevalence does not disturb the balance between all the other senses (Fernández Ruiz, 2020). Oral civilizations are defined by this crucial fact. Thus, just as the ear does not discriminate sounds but rather, relate us to our entire environment as a whole; oral cultures do not fragment concepts nor objects separating them from each other but rather, develop a holistic sense of human existence and nature.

In civilizations with a visual culture, on the other hand, the vision exercises a dominant power over the rest of the senses. And here, it happens, the eye breaks the sensory balance by establishing itself as the main and almost only sense. Just as the eye fixates on an object in space each time and gives it greater relevance than the rest, a people with a visual culture focuses on specific aspects and discriminates reality by hierarchizing its components, so that the fragmentation of man, and his environment, appears.

McLuhan points out how all human cultures were oral until the emergence of a technology that changed everything: the alphabet. This Phoenician invention that allowed to trade with neighboring peoples who had complex writing methods mean the beginning of Western culture, visual and not oral. With the alphabet we learned to fragment the sound language into discrete visual units devoid of meaning and reference. This painful and slow process, whose dangers the Greeks had already warned, created a mental pattern that projected fragmentation and division in everything that was previously unfragmentable: nature, which was divided into species of plants and animals; knowledge, which was divided into the various disciplines that we know today; the human body, whose medicine began to contemplate the body in a fragmented and specialized way; work, with specialization; and so on.

4.2. Mechanical age and electronic era

McLuhan called the age that began after the diffusion of the phonetic alphabet “the mechanical age”, since it brought together, three characteristics derived from the substitution of hearing for vision and the establishment of the phonetic alphabet: sequentiality (as sequential is the arrangement of the letters of the alphabet when writing them), causality (by establishing a relationship between facts or objects separated from each other by space or time) and uniformity (as uniform are the alphabetic phonemes).

The technological inventions that appeared in the mechanical age established mental and social processes based on these characteristics in such a way that our phonetically literate society applied sequentiality, causality and uniformity to all its facets.

The mechanical age’s apogee occurred at the time of the invention of the printing press, which culminated the process started with the phonetic alphabet by accelerating its effects. As McLuhan himself stated in his book *Comprendiendo los medios de comunicación*, “the typographic explosion ended, mentally and socially, with the village mentality and tribalism [oral culture], and both in space and in time”.

However, McLuhan points out that there was an invention that substantially altered the assumptions of the mechanical age: electricity. The hybridization of this new organic technology with the rest of existing technologies provided new and unknown possibilities to our mechanical civilization. In the face of fragmentation, union and instantaneity appeared, in the face of division, centralization. Specialization was opposed by integration. Facing the fragmentary explosion of the mechanical age, electricity brought a unifying implosion that extended not a specific sense but the entire nervous system of the human being, encompassing everything.

Thus, from the loudspeaker we passed to the microphone and from there to the radio. From photography we passed to cinema and from there to television and video. From letters we passed to the telegraph. Electric light changed man’s living spaces, working hours and production systems. The telephone emerged, as well as the new military weaponry and what McLuhan called “the automation” of computers based on binary code.

4.3. The Internet prophecy

The new electronic era represented the overcoming of the barriers imposed by the hegemony of the vision and the fragmentation as a mental and social pattern derived from the alphabet and the printing press. A new oral age, different from the first oral or tribal age, which leaves behind the mechanical age based on the vision.

McLuhan died in 1980, before the Internet was a globally diffused technology. Even so, some statements from his writings seem to anticipate what was about to happen decades later:

After three thousand years of explosion, through mechanical and fragmentary technologies, the Western world has entered into implosion. In the mechanical ages we extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than half a century of electrical technology, we have extended our central nervous system to encompass the entire globe, abolishing time and space, at least as far as this planet is concerned. We are fast approaching the final phase of man's extensions: the technological simulation of awareness, by which the creative processes of knowledge will extend, collectively and corporately, to the whole of human society, in much the same way as we have already extended our senses and nerves through the different existing media (McLuhan, 1964).

As Sempere (2015) states, in these lines McLuhan senses globality and spherical space, connected intelligences and the knowledge society. In 1969, he released several prophecies in *The Dew Line Newsletter* (1969-71):

Among his predictions are listed the computer database as the dissolution of private life, the end of the visual organization of knowledge and experience, the end of history because of the computer, the end of the division between business and culture, the loss of writing and speech, the NASA as an obsolete program, the end of the Stock Exchange as a physical place provoked by the computer and, again, the computer, as a metaphorical LSD of the Western world. (Severe, 2015, p. 131)

4.4. Cognitive and sensory differences between two universes: paper and the web

Based on McLuhan's postulates, the following differences can be established for the cognitive, mental and social implications experienced at the mechanical age, whose greatest exponent is the book, and, on the other hand, at the post-electronic age characterized by the Internet:

Table 2. Epistemological differences between paper and Internet supports

Paper	Internet
Mechanical age	Internet
Visual	Post-electronic age
Deferred	Touch
No ubiquitous	Instant
Asynchronous	Ubiquitous
Delayed recipient reaction	Synchronous
No recipient involvement	Immediate reaction of the recipient
Sequential	Recipient involvement
Uniformity	No sequential
Causality	Heterogeneity
Continuity	No causality
Fragmentation	Discontinuity
	Integration

Source: own elaboration, 2022.

The attributions on the left column correspond to the sense of sight. In this area can be included the paper press, since, as McLuhan himself states (1964), it is the mosaic successor of the book, and its magnitudes are also relevant to paper newspapers.

On the other hand, the right column summarizes the typical attributions of the electronic age, defined by McLuhan, and post-electronic, in clear reference to the emergence of the Internet. The online press would be included in this group, since it brings together all the characteristics derived from the dominance produced by the electricity of our nervous system over the rest of the organs and senses when this organic technology is combined with the rest of the existing technologies.

Each of these columns has different cognitive attributions. The mental patterns they activate differ in fundamental epistemological aspects that condition not only the individual's own mental construction of reality but also his relationship with the environment. In the words of McLuhan (1964) each new technology supposes a

change of scale in a double sense: individual and social.

On a psychological or individual level, the advances of technology provoke a new rebalancing of the senses due to the impact that each new invention has on each one of them. In turn, social relations experience a change of scale that, depending on its dimensions, may cause radical changes in individuals. For example, the Internet allows an interaction with the audience that is completely unknown on paper. This point would be enough to understand the magnitude of the difference between paper and the web.

5. Conclusions

The question that arose among the first editors of paper journals, those who experienced the irruption of the Internet in their profession, was whether the Internet was just a broadcast channel of news without major consequences on journalists' daily performance of their profession. The affirmative answer that still today, they continue to give to this question would constitute, from the postulates of McLuhan exposed in this work, an error since cognitively, epistemologically and functionally, the paper and the web are two different entities with quite different models of knowledge and apprehension of reality. Both supports have a different impact on our senses and articulate a different mental scheme. Working simultaneously for paper journals and web media would be like working for television and for paper journals at the same time, thinking that the same piece of news can be used for both formats with slight formal adjustments, when the reality is that if a journalist works for television, he builds the news with a story, generally speaking, completely different from the one he would elaborate for the paper journal. The complaint of the integrated newsrooms about the excess of work would find its justification here: it is not enough to change something in a news item intended for paper journals and then publish it on the web. Reporting on the web requires a new language, the use of social networks, an interaction with the reader that does not occur on paper, etc.

In line with the initial assumptions of journalist such as Mario Tascón or Gumersindo Lafuente, the medium does transform not only the message but also its elaboration, since it conditions the elaboration of the news content from all points of view. Both professionals understood the different nature of both media and they created an online newsroom separate from the paper newsroom, which also included different managers, that is, total autonomy. Proof of the success of this strategy was that elmundo.es became, before the convergence of its newsrooms, the leader as a news website in Spanish. As of the integration, the audience gradually abandoned the news portal and elmundo.es lost the leadership that it held for so many years.

On the other hand, despite having less human and financial resources than traditional paper journals, native journals' success come hot on the heels of paper journals in terms of audience and unique users. This success would find an answer in their choice, forced, of not making their staff work for two media simultaneously but focused solely on the web.

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