

CHAPTER 10

A Screen Entertainment Propaganda Model

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How useful is Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM) for analysing the entertainment media? I have previously established that the PM is an essential tool for analysing cinema¹ and that the objections raised to such an enterprise are insubstantial.² Both Herman and Chomsky have indicated that they consider the model to be more widely applicable but that the entertainment media is beyond their immediate fields of interest.³ This article applies the PM to both the cinema industry and to network television, as a means by which we can assess the model's utility more widely in contemporary America.

The PM hypothesises that the US media 'mobilise support for the special interests that dominate state and private activity'⁴ and that media representations of the US' role in the world can be explained through five contributory factors or 'filters,' which 'cleanse' information from the real world to leave only the 'residue' which is acceptable to established power systems.⁵ The filters are as follows: 'size, ownership and profit orientation' (first filter); 'the advertising license to do business' (second filter); the need for the media to use power-

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ful organisations in ‘sourcing’ information (third filter); the ability of powerful organisations to issue flak (fourth filter), and a dominant ideology of a superior, benevolent ‘us’ in the West versus a backward ‘them’ overseas (fifth filter).

The residue never goes beyond certain ‘bounds of acceptability’,⁶ including the idea that the US is a ‘terrorist’ state,⁷ ‘rogue’ state,⁸ or ‘failed’ state.⁹ In turn, the US and its media consciously or unconsciously classify all populations as ‘worthy’ (the US and its allies) and ‘unworthy’ (everyone else – the ‘unpeople’ to borrow Mark Curtis’ term¹⁰).¹¹ America’s image of itself, in short, is rendered benevolent and, even, exceptionalist.

10.1 A Screen Entertainment Propaganda Model: Predictive Capabilities

To test their hypothesis, Herman and Chomsky examine the news residue carefully to see if any remaining elements challenge fundamental assumptions about established power systems, particularly the US treatment of ‘official enemies’ overseas. They find very little. What does remain – the ‘residue’ – we can further categorise into five distinct areas:

1. That which has little or no political relevance, and, in terms of the political world, is merely distraction;
2. That which is overtly supportive of establishment goals;
3. That which initially appears to criticise the political system but, on closer reading, provides it with fundamental support;
4. That which does genuinely challenge Western power systems but is explicitly marginalised by the media mechanisms;
5. That which does genuinely break through the filtration system, which invariably occurs for irregular reasons and/ or with serious caveats.

I will now address each of these five elements of the residue and also establish how they relate to a screen PM, specifically how well they can predict output. This is followed by a discussion of the limitations of the model in this context.

(i) That which has little or no political relevance, and, in terms of the political world, is merely distraction.

Herman and Chomsky point to astrology, crossword puzzles, sports, and the ‘funnies’ in newspapers that serve only to entertain the public and provide no relevant information to the real world. As Chomsky explains:

This is an oversimplification, but for the eighty per cent [of the population] or whatever they are, the main thing is to divert them. To get them to watch National Football League. And to worry about ‘Mother with Child with Six Heads,’ or whatever you pick up on the supermarket stands and

so on. Or look at astrology. Or get involved in fundamentalist stuff or something or other. Just get them away. Get them away from things that matter. And for that it's important to reduce their capacity to think.¹²

Similarly, large quantities of film and television relates in little or no way to the US' role in the world. Shows like *X-Factor* and films like *Sharknado* do not tell us much, at least not directly, about American politics, whilst some shows like *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?* may even be construed as actively damaging broader socio-cultural advances such as feminism.

(ii) That which is overtly supportive of establishment goals, particularly the treatment of official enemies.

Herman and Chomsky take it for granted that there is a strong strain of thinking on the right that reflexively supports the core planks of establishment thinking, specifically the benevolence of the US system and its right to utilise force at its sole discretion. This plank of the media is 'crazy' and may be equated to fascism.¹³

Similarly, film and television is replete with products that follow this line. In fact, we know that the CIA, Pentagon and White House explicitly support a long line of political products. My latest research with Tom Secker, drawing on Freedom of Information Act requests, demonstrates that this has consisted of over 800 Hollywood films, over one thousand TV shows along with hundreds more supported by the CIA, NSA, White House, and State Department.¹⁴ We know now that the state is far more involved in entertainment, with scant acknowledgement or open documentation, than scholarship has ever been able to demonstrate previously and its ability to control narratives is similarly remarkable.

Many more products are commonly accepted as supporting establishment narratives, but without explicit production assistance, from *Rambo* to *Taken*.

(iii) That which initially appears to criticise the political system but, on closer reading, provides it with fundamental support.

The above two categories are relatively uncontroversial. It is widely accepted that the media is 'dumbed down' and even Ben Shapiro, a prominent media researcher who bemoans what he sees as pervasive left-wing messages in entertainment culture, admits that there is a body of right-wing products including the TV series *24*.¹⁵ The remaining three categories are more controversial.

Herman and Chomsky examine examples of where the media is commonly assumed to have challenged the state, as with the coverage of the Watergate break-in or the Vietnam War (2002). As key parts of their critique in these cases, respectively, they point to: the media supporting the Democrat desire to oust President Richard Nixon over comparatively minor domestic crimes, and it ignoring the aggression by the US against South Vietnam.

Similarly, with screen entertainment, we can try to identify output that genuinely challenges established power systems. Here are some prominent examples

of products from the past thirty years that have been labelled as very challenging to Western political structures but which, at their core, are embedded with messages that actually support these narratives. I give two examples here, one from cinema (*Munich*) and one from television (*West Wing*) although to this list we might add *Avatar*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *Three Kings*, *Thirteen Days*, *Amistad*, *Homeland* and *Newsroom*, amongst others, many of which I have discussed in detail elsewhere.¹⁶

Munich (2005) was condemned by various Israeli groups as being opposed to Israeli policy. It was boycotted by the Zionist Organisation of America (ZOA) and mainstream media outlets emphasised its even-handedness. In a single article, uncited elsewhere, director Steven Spielberg said explicitly: 'I agree with [Israeli Prime Minister] Golda Meir's response [to the 1972 terrorist attack at the Munich Olympics].'¹⁷ A year after the release of the film, his foundation, The Righteous Persons Foundation donated \$1m to Israel during the US-backed invasion of Lebanon in 2006.¹⁸ The most celebrated 'anti-war scene'¹⁹ is a two-and-a-half minute exchange between an Arab and an Israeli, but a close textual reading shows that this merely points out that the Palestinian struggle is both futile and immoral.²⁰ The film elsewhere contrasts the emotional struggle felt by the civilised Israelis compared with the callousness of the Arabs. The film is, therefore, an apologia for the state of Israel, the 'worthy' victim, and, by extension, its closest ally, the United States.

The West Wing (1999–2006) was dubbed by right-wing critics as 'The Left Wing'²¹. In fact, the series depicts the White House team as well-meaning, competent, and idealistic. According to one of its stars, Rob Lowe, who spoke to President Bill Clinton in 2000, the White House staff was 'obsessed with the show' and Clinton himself was reported as thinking it was 'renewing people's faith in public service'²². *The West Wing* bromide worked for the Bush administration too – just after 9/11, the series' creator Aaron Sorkin rushed through production a special episode about a massive terrorist threat to America entitled 'Isaac and Ishmael.' 'I'm going to blow them [the Jihadists] off the face of the earth with the fury of God's thunder,' says the President, in rhetoric more audacious than that of even the real-world incumbent, despite it being spoken by Hollywood's leading anti-war liberal, Martin Sheen. In series two, the anti-globalization movement is cut down in a stylish and impassioned speech by a White House official that concludes: '... Free trade stops wars! And we figure out a way to fix the rest. One world, one peace.' The two central theoretical underpinnings of US foreign policy, neoliberalism and neo-conservatism, are thereby endorsed with a flourish.

(iv) That which does genuinely challenge Western power systems but are explicitly marginalised by the media mechanisms.

Herman and Chomsky also find examples of news reports that are buried, barely publicised. For example, the isolated news reports that the Bush administration was deliberately avoiding a diplomatic solution to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.²³ Or Arthur Schlesinger's op-ed on the eve of the Iraq War

that it was the US that today lived in infamy.²⁴ Herman and Chomsky routinely emphasise the rarity of such articles.

A number of comparable cases of screen entertainment products do indeed similarly present genuinely challenging narratives, just like those rare exceptions Herman and Chomsky point to in the news, but which are similarly given remarkably limited distribution, in line with the first and fourth filters of the PM. Of course, in some cases it might simply be that the products did not resonate with the public and therefore had no box office successes. Prominent cases of these include *Canadian Bacon* (1995) (investment \$11m, box office \$178,000, Rotten Tomatoes 14%), *They Live* (1988) (investment \$3m, box office \$13m, Rotten Tomatoes 83%), *Redacted* (2007) (investment \$5m, box office \$782,000, Rotten Tomatoes 43%) and *War, Inc* (2008) (investment \$10m, box office \$1,296,184, Rotten Tomatoes 29%).

In some of cases, we know of targeted campaigns to shut the films down for political reasons. In the cases of NewsCorps' *Bulworth* (1998) and Disney's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the distributors ultimately impeded the release of their own films for political reasons.²⁵

In several cases on television, we know that the hardest hitting material was also either suppressed or edited by its own distributors for political reasons.

Elaine Briere²⁶ struggled to get her film *Bitter Paradise: The Sell-Out of East Timor* (1997) to CBC. This was not for lack of quality or opportunities but rather because the film challenged the interests of CBC. The film had won the prestigious Hot Docs award for best political documentary, which usually results in screenings on CBC. Briere commented:

I offered first window to the CBC but it was tossed around like a hot potato between three of their current documentary programs. It was lawyered, something that rarely happens with the CBC. The CBC wanted several important changes including deleting the part about Pierre Trudeau, our then Prime Minister, meeting with [Indonesian dictator] Suharto several months before the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, taking out the part about Canadian oil and mining companies investing in Indonesia, and at one point even replacing me as a narrator, saying I was too subjective and not journalistic enough. *Bitter Paradise* never at any point claimed to be journalistic, but was a point-of-view documentary, an accepted genre of the day.²⁷

Eventually, Briere saw no alternative but to work with a different distributor – TV Ontario – but she writes about the film's ongoing problems:

Bitter Paradise was screened only once [on TV Ontario] in a strand called *A View from Here* when I got a call from the then head of TVO, Rudy Buttingol. He said that INCO, Canada's giant multinational nickel

mining company based in Sudbury, Ontario, with large mining operations in Sulawesi, Indonesia, wanted the film off the air or they would sue TVO. (there was a short section on INCO's operations in Indonesia in the film.) INCO, at the time, was TVO's second largest corporate donor. Rudy told me not to go to the media and that they would handle it. I heard nothing back from TVO and the film never aired again. Normally it would have had four screenings on *A View from Here*.²⁸

A similar pattern of events affected the cases of *Lumumba* and *Strip Search*.²⁹ Even on *The Daily Show*, seemingly a law unto itself, host Jon Stewart was forced to apologise publicly after calling President Harry Truman a 'war criminal' for dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.³⁰

(v) That which does genuinely break through the filtration system, which invariably occurs for irregular reasons and/ or with serious caveats.

There does remain a small but significant quality of productions that have made it through the filtration system and with a reasonable level of studio backing (over \$10m), without seeming to have been subject to the usual filters, most famously as follows:

JFK (1991); *Malcolm X* (1992); *Heaven and Earth* (1993); *Nixon* (1995); *Wag the Dog* (1997); *Starship Troopers* (1997); *Lord of War* (2005); *Syriana* (2005); *V for Vendetta* (2006); *Rendition* (2007); *Green Zone* (2009); *Fair Game* (2011); *The Bourne Identity* series (2002-); *Kill the Messenger* (2014); *Selma* (2014). In television, the list includes *Roots* (1977) and Oliver Stone's *Untold History of the United States* (2012).

Each film is at least loosely based on true stories about American systems of domination and sympathetically highlights 'unworthy' victims. Their existence points to a still flickering flame of permissible oppositional discourse. It is important, however, not to overstate the importance of these products in terms of the challenge they present to the PM. This is where Herman agrees that the model only offers 'a broad framework of analysis that requires modification depending on many local and special factors, and may be entirely inapplicable in some cases.' In line with the model, some of the films reflect dissensus amongst the elites, as with *Rendition* (rendition and torture) and *Malcolm X* and *Selma* (minority rights). In the case of *Heaven and Earth* (the Vietnam War), *Green Zone* and *Fair Game* (the Iraq War), in particular, it is worth bearing in mind that these products came many years too late to influence the political debates with which they are primarily concerned. Other films on the list might be better placed in the second category, in that although they may be critical of some aspects of the US system, they are very supportive of it in other ways – the clearest cases being *JFK* and *Nixon*, which assault the system but glorify a bygone era dominated by the Kennedy family.

10.2 Analytical Limitations

There are four limitations to the screen PM: (i) the relative difficulty in measuring results; (ii) the non-specificity of the filter metaphor; (iii) the vagueness of the fifth filter, (iv) the apparent weakness of the first four filters.

I shall explain each in turn.

(i) The relative difficulty in measuring results.

Reading entertainment products using Herman and Chomsky's theoretical framework does not sit well in cultural studies, and with some justification. Herman and Chomsky are particularly interested in the representation of victims, perpetrators, heroes and villains but if we are to identify these quite limited representations in cinema, we would miss many subtle differences between films. For example, we would be unable to distinguish between a macho militaristic action-thriller like *Executive Decision* (1996), and a macho militaristic action-comedy like *True Lies* (1994). Both these films had very similar plots (Islamic terrorists threaten the US government with nuclear weapons) but they are very different products in terms of what they offer audiences, in respect of genre, but also in terms of gender, race, imagery, and so on. Because the PM does not accommodate such perspectives, its reading of any cultural product is liable to be caustic and lacking in subtlety. The point is well summarised by a review of this author's book *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* (2010) that sympathetically applied the PM to cinema: '[it] renders much that film studies has tried to do over the last fifty years ... as effectively wasted effort.'³¹

In defence of the model, Chomsky himself points to some 'paired examples' in cinema, in some very unusual forays into the field. He notes that in the early 1950s the establishment heaped extensive praise onto *On the Waterfront* (1954) whilst *Salt of the Earth* (1954) was subjected to the most extraordinary attacks by the FBI and other official organisations. Both films are now regarded as classics but their differing experiences at the time appear to come down to the fact that the former was anti-Union and the latter was pro-Union.³² Chomsky drew a similar comparison between the box office record-breaker *American Sniper* (2014), with the civil rights drama *Selma* (2014).³³ For his part, Herman stresses that a focus on micro-issues of language, text interpreting and gender and ethnic identity is 'politically safe and holds forth the possibility of endless deconstruction of small points in a growing framework of jargon,³⁴ which implies that being overly concerned with genre, gender, race, and imagery is a distraction from the fundamentals.

However, neither Herman nor Chomsky can refute the limitation entirely. Stuart Hall³⁵ contends that textual meaning cannot be finally 'fixed' because the same image can carry several different meanings and, in the words of Philip Davies and Brian Neve 'a reading' is precisely what the word implies – 'not a

revealed truth.³⁶ Of course, certain aspects of an entertainment product can be observed with very broad, if not an absolute, consensus. For example, we can usually agree on the general phenotypes for each character – ‘good guy,’ ‘bad guy,’ hero, villain, victim, and so on. Nevertheless, whilst Herman and Chomsky can readily demonstrate bias in the US news media by examining quantity of coverage in paired examples, for example when they contrast the shocking lack of coverage on the Indonesian invasion of East Timor with coverage of Pol Pot’s killing fields in Cambodia,³⁷ comparably elegant results are not as easy to establish in screen entertainment.

As Robert Kolker argues, the formal conventions of Hollywood film tend to ‘downplay or deny the ways in which it supports, reinforces and even sometimes subverts the major cultural, political and social attitudes that surround and penetrate it.’³⁸ In contrast, news media convey their messages in more straightforward terms. For example, Robert Ray (1985) argues that ‘problem pictures critique large social issues but ultimately have happy endings that resolve those problems.’³⁹ Richard Dyer concurs and illustrates with a popular example: in the second and third *Rambo* movies (1985 and 1987), the protagonist John Rambo is ‘doing the job... that the United States government should be doing. Thus, he repeatedly upholds basic American values against the actuality of America.’⁴⁰

Decoding screen entertainment becomes even less accurate when we consider the value of wholly metaphorical readings. For example, Alan Nadal (1997) claims that the Disney cartoon *Aladdin* (1992) is a ‘metaphor for American culture,’ ‘a critique of the Muslim Middle east,’ and ‘asserts the immense destructive potential of a nuclear armed Middle East.’⁴¹ Whilst there is a case to be made for such a reading, there are, of course, no direct references within *Aladdin* to nuclear weapons, US power, or contemporary Middle Eastern politics and so the case remains mired in the ambiguities of a post-Structuralist reading.

In turn, this ambiguity about interpretation opens up the debate about the PM’s evasion of audience effects. Herman and Chomsky rightly insist that the model is one of ‘performance’ not ‘effects’⁴² and Klaehn neatly states that ‘[t]o criticise the model for failing to scrutinise that which it was not designed to explore, investigate or assess is perhaps analogous to condemning a book for failing to provide surround sound.’⁴³ However, in light of the difficulties in agreeing how to read an entertainment product, it is arguably more important to establish which products need to be read. If *Aladdin* has a significant political impact on audiences (which we do not know, since audience studies of cinematic effects are scarce), this suggests it should be analysed. If we do not know whether it did or did not, then it makes deciding on a sample for analysis much harder and more subjective.

(ii) The non-specificity of the filter metaphor.

John Corner argues that the notion of a filtration model is ‘ambitious,’ considering that the PM is ‘in essence a broad checklist of downflow tendencies.’⁴⁴ Chomsky essentially agreed when he told me there’s no algorithm for judging relative importance [of each filter] abstractly. It varies from case to case. Simi-

larly, Oliver Boyd-Barrett accepts the premises of the PM but complains that it does not ‘identify methodologies for determining the relative weight of independent filters in different contexts.’⁴⁵ This somewhat detracts from the beauty of the metaphor and, so, understandably, Corner concludes that he is more comfortable with Herman’s later description of the PM as a ‘first approximation.’⁴⁶

Klaehn contests this by posing a rhetorical question: ‘How vague are the concepts of “alienation” and “reification” (conflict theory) or “systems” and “collective conscience” (structural functionalism)?’ Arguably very. Should the PM be held to a higher standard than other models within the social sciences? If yes, why? Is it because it challenges power and can be understood and utilised without the need for intermediaries? The answers to Klaehn’s questions are obvious but it is nevertheless important to identify the extent to which the PM can predict and explain, rather than just settling on it as being eminently serviceable, as Thompson (2009) also opines when he applies the PM to financial media reporting.⁴⁷

Oliver Boyd-Barrett argues that the PM privileges structural factors and ‘eschews or marginalizes intentionality.’⁴⁸ He recommends greater attention to journalistic departures from, rather than routine conformity with, the preferences of official sources, and further study of journalistic fears of flak from editors, the right-wing media, and government officials. Boyd-Barrett also suggests a sixth filter: the ‘buying out’ of individual journalists or their media by intelligence agencies, other government bodies and/or special interest groups. Disputing Chomsky’s stance on ‘conspiracy theory,’ Boyd-Barrett points to the 1970s US Senate investigations and the ‘irrefutable evidence of wide-scale, covert CIA penetration of media – by definition, an illustration of conspiracy’ at work.⁴⁹ As such, it might be more appropriate to have some of the purifying work of the filters assisted by needles injecting additional fluids to generate that resultant residue. Klaehn⁵⁰ responds that the PM does not ‘make predictions concerning agency and/or subjectivity’ but rather ‘highlights the fact that awareness, perception and understandings are typically constrained and informed by structures of discourse.’⁵¹ Again, Klaehn is right to defend the integrity of the model but nevertheless I maintain it is important to highlight where its limits lie.

(iii) The vagueness of the fifth filter.

The fifth filter is egregious because it does not specify a powerful entity like advertisers, the government or corporations that filter material. Rather, it is just what Herman and Chomsky call a ‘cultural milieu,’⁵² which is hard to reconcile within the filtration system. Klaehn disagrees, saying that:

Analytically, the fifth filter is extremely useful and applicable to a range of case studies. It may play out in different ways at different times, contingent upon specific time/place contexts, and is extremely broad (as are many other concepts within the social sciences, such as hegemony and/or patriarchy, for instance). That the fifth filter is so generalised makes it

relatable to a range of social phenomenon, and creates space for the PM to be utilised in a variety of social scientific research.⁵³

A less charitable term for 'generalised' though is 'vague.' If, indeed, it is necessary, it seems at least to warrant being given a single, fixed and neutral phrase such as 'tribe mentality,' since the present formulations provided by Herman and Chomsky emphasise a range of a priori leftist bug-bears: dominant ideology, anti-Other, anti-communism, and pro-free market.

(iv) The apparent relative weakness of the first four filters.

As the videogames industry shows, even if we quite dramatically reduce the concentration of US ownership, output remains comparably de-radicalised. Whereas the Hollywood majors own at least three quarters of the movie market, US gaming companies own just a third of the videogame market and are very much challenged by Japan and Europe in an industry that has global successes from numerous countries. Yet there remains a substantial contingent of gaming products that are highly militaristic and nationalistic, and very little could be described as opposing US exceptionalism.⁵⁴

The importance – or otherwise – of advertising can also be identified by examining the output of Home Box Office (HBO), which relies on subscription rather than any advertising revenue. HBO has produced shows that appeal more to anti-authoritarian sensibilities, such as *The Daily Show* (1996-), *South Park* (1997-), and *Game of Thrones* (2011-). Yet none of these productions could be identified as agitating for radical political change.

David Edwards of Media Lens, argues that the attempt to isolate the filters is essentially an impossible task:

HBO might be protected from the impact of direct advertising but it's immersed in a media, cultural, political and economic system that isn't protected. Its workers, managers, stars, viewers and critics are all products of that advertiser-dependent culture, so that culture impacts HBO indirectly that way. Everyone is responding to HBO from inside an advert-drenched and conditioned culture.⁵⁵

The point is well made but it only adds to the case that the filtration metaphor in any Screen Entertainment PM must be non-specific and that the first and second filters do not function with the efficiency Herman and Chomsky imply, even whilst they do contribute to the 'strong tendency' for narratives that support US power.

None of this is to say that the PM is inaccurate – each filter applies to the screen entertainment industry overall. It just means that it is not good at measuring or predicting when each filter applies with regards to screen media beyond the news. These are the 'special factors ... that will modify its applicability'⁵⁶ to which Herman refers, that add to the overall sense that a Screen

Entertainment Propaganda Model is of less direct use than the original formulation for news and that even the original PM cannot be defended uncritically.

10.3 Conclusions

The PM rightly characterises elite news media as keeping political debate within tightly controlled boundaries and therefore as ranging between not challenging established power systems to directly supporting them. When we apply the PM across screen media, in predictive terms it suffers from the same limitations as with news and is also harder to test because theorists are understandably more liable to disagree about interpretations of entertainment texts. Its explanatory capabilities are also weaker, since although each filter can be important, screen products so infrequently challenge organised power that the fourth filter is rarely activated, although some evidence suggests it does become important in exceptional cases when the other filters fail. The second filter – advertising, is significant, but even when its role is significantly reduced, as with HBO, the impact on the ideology of output is not decisive. The first filter – ownership, is important but shows like *TV Nation* indicate that the system is prepared to allow some forms of dissent and the greater reduction in US ownership in video-gaming points to the limits of its importance. Recent evidence has suggested that the third filter, sourcing, is considerably more important than scholarship has hitherto accepted, with government entities directly affecting the politics of many thousands of entertainment products, although even here it is typically hard to say exactly how much influence such forces are actually able to exert, or the extent to which similar or identical products would be made regardless.

Of course, if all existing forms of media ownership, funding and sources were revolutionised, the outputs would be very different, akin to a ‘PBS-plus’ model, but for this to have a decisive impact on the way it represents the interplay between heroes, villains and victims, rather than just tonal changes – the kind of differences exhibited between HBO and Fox, or the BBC and Disney – these kinds of changes would need to be total rather than incremental. We are left with a model that remains a clear framework for predicting and highlighting the ideological constraints and regressive characteristics of wider cultural output but one which relies on a loose ‘catch-all’ final filter to account for the unmeasurable impacts of the first four factors.

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