

FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE QUALITIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS*

Şule Yüksel Öztürk**

Abstract

Primary agenda of developing countries has become an economic development. Environmental issues in these countries usually are approached in an economical framing and news about environment is relating an environmental investment of corporations. Environmental issues are not involved in media except life contingency. Turkey's environmental problems are in a non-return path because of industrialization, irregular urbanization and the improving energy needs. Attention to these problems and creating a public opinion about environmental issues is media's role.

Advertisers, agencies, media organizations, news routines, editorial process and qualities of journalists affect to take in place environmental news in media. All this factors are known as news production process. Subject of this study is how journalists can influence the dynamic of news production process. The aim of this study is to make a profile about environment journalist. This research's data will collect the method of in-depth interview with journalists who work as an environment reporter. Collected data will be analyzed in ideological dimension of current agenda that generated by journalism, nature, news routines, organizational structure and advertisers, companies, politicians and NGO's and government.

Key Words: Environmental Journalism, Environment Journalist, Environmental news process

ÇEVRE GAZETECİLERİNİN NİTELİKLERİNİ ETKİLEYEN FAKTÖRLER

Özet

Gelişmekte olan ülkelerin öncelikli konusu ekonomik kalkındır. Çevre konusu da genellikle ekonomik çerçevede ele alınır, çevreye ilişkin şirketlerin yatırımları haber olarak karşımıza gelir. Çevre sorunları ise, hayati bir risk taşımadıkça medyada fazla yer tutmaz. Türkiye'de gelişmekte olan bir ülkedir. Ortadoğu ve Avrupa arasında bir konumda bulunmasından dolayı medya gündemini çoğunlukla AB ile ilişkiler Ortadoğu Sorunu ve Irak işgal etmektedir. BU gündemden geri kalan yerde de ekonomi ağırlıklı haberler yer almaktadır. Hâlbuki sanayileşme, çarpık kentleşme ve artan enerji ihtiyacı dolayısıyla Türkiye'deki çevre sorunları geri dönüşü olmayan bir noktaya gelmiş bulunmaktadır. Bu sorunlara dikkat çekmek ve kamuoyu yaratmak medyanın görevidir. Reklamverenler, şirketleri, medya örgütleri, haber rutinleri, editöryal süreç ve gazetecinin habercilik nitelikleri çevre haberlerinin medyada yer almasını etkilemektedir. Haber üretim sürecini etkileyen faktörler olarak adlandırabileceğimiz bu dinamiklerden çevre haberi yapan gazetecinin nasıl etkilendiği bu araştırmanın konusunu oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmanın amacı bu çerçevede, gelişmekte olan ve Türkiye gibi politik ve ekonomik sorunlarla iç içe geçmiş bir coğrafyadaki çevre habercilerin niteliklerine yönelik bir profil oluşturmaktır. Çalışmanın verileri Türkiye'de gazete ve ajanslarda çevre konusunda haber yapan gazetecilerle derinlemesine görüşme yapılarak toplanacaktır. Toplanan veriler, gazetecilik nitelikleri, haber rutinleri, kurumsal yapı ve reklam veren, şirketler, politikacılar ve mevcut gündem üzerinden ideolojik boyut olarak ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çevre Gazeteciliği, Çevre Gazetecisi, Çevre Haberi Yapım Süreci

*Bu çalışma 9-11 Aralık 2009 tarihleri arasında Malezya Penang'da yapılan "Communication And Environment: Transformation For A Sustainable Tomorrow" konferansında sunulmuştur.

** Arş. Gör., Anadolu Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü

Introduction

The focus of this study is on the role of journalists in the handling of environmental news reports in Turkey, a country defined as the 17th biggest economy of the world and is located on a politically hot point in geopolitical terms.

Confronting with environmental problems took place firstly in 1950s in Turkey. New industrial centers and factories were established in this period and a great immigration began when people wanted to work in these factories. A widespread distorted settlement was resulted since cities were unprepared for this immigration. Industrialization and distorted settlement caused a rapid pollution in environmental values, in water, air and soil. Dealing with the environmental problems in governmental level began in 1970s. The first formal regulation against environmental problems came in 1972 with the forming of a Coalition Council for Environmental Problems during the Ferit Melen Government (Somersan, 1993, 28). Placing of the relating regulations into the law occurred later than that of many other countries since Turkey experienced a late industrialization. Özkaya (2006) acknowledges the Stockholm Summit, where environment problems were politicized in the international arena, as a turning point for Turkey. Turkey participated in and agreed with the final declaration of the Stockholm Summit arranged in 1972. In the declaration, the task of environmental enhancement and protection was assigned to governments and the influence of the subject of environment increased along with this global responsibility. It is observed that at this point the subject of environment was discussed and developed on three points. These are the improvement of environment as a right, institutional organizing against environmental problems and development of environmental policies. The biggest step in the institutional organization about environment made when the subject of environment put into the Constitution in 1982 as a constitutional law. With the environmental law passed in 1983 and the regulations passed based on that law, a legal

challenge was attempted against the environmental problems. In 1991, a ministry relating to environment, the Ministry of Environment, was established for the first time (Talu, 2004).

Environmental consciousness improves steadily in Turkey. In parallel to the increasing urbanization, the initial awareness that began to develop about the collecting of domestic waste has reached to a different dimension now. By the efforts of non-governmental organizations, combating soil erosion, forestation activities, reactions against the opening of forestlands to mining, encouragement of alternative energy sources and reactions against the installment of nuclear power plants, efforts for keeping water sources clean and the protection of water basins and biodiversity have now spread to many areas.

Nature of Media in Turkey

In order to investigate the process by which journalists evaluate the newsworthiness of environmental problems, one must have a look at the media structuring of Turkey since the structural characteristics of media have an impact on the process of news production by journalists. The subject of environment also influences the process of news production in the level of media-politics relations and media-advertiser relations for, by its nature, it has many characteristics that concern both private sector and government. It is for this reason that the media structure of Turkey needs to be analyzed. The media sector in Turkey is dominantly in the power of big capital groups. Doğan Group, Çalık Group, Çukurova Group, Ciner Group, Doğu Group are examples of these capital groups. These groups have investments not only in the field of media but also in other sectors. Doğan Group carries on business in the fields of industry and commerce other than the fields of energy distribution, finance and media (Doğan Holding, 2009). Çalık Holding operates in the fields of construction, energy, textile, finance, telecom and media (Çalık Holding, 2009). The main

business fields of the Çukurova Group are industry, construction, communication and informatics technology, media, transportation services, commerce, financial services and energy (Çukurova Group, 2009). Ciner Group works in the fields of energy and mining, media, commerce, industry and service (Ciner Group, 2009). Doğu Group has business in the fields of banking, finance, media, construction, automotive, tourism and real estate (Doğu Holding, 2009). Within the frame of these ownership structures, the following assignments are made as regards the basic characteristics of the communication environment in Turkey (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2002):

1. Formation of the government-dependent type of journalist as a result of the top-down and state-sanctioned development practice.

2. As gaining speed since 1990s, a horizontal, perpendicular and diagonal monopolization and the resulting support for the status quo which is strengthened with the over-sensitiveness to economic instability and the political fluctuations as a consequence of frequent change of governments.

3. Existence of barriers hindering the freedom of thought and expression and journalists being unable to act independently because of the nonunionization in the sector. This is confirmed by a report published by the Reporters Sans Frontières. According to the report, Turkey's rank for freedom of press between September 2008 and August 2009 decreased 20 steps at once from 103rd to 123rd (Milliyet, 2009).

4. Dependency of political / economic/ governmental centers to media and their increasing desire to control it directly or indirectly as a result of the political and economic instabilities and the proliferation of access to media.

5. The competition in the media sector developing a political identity due to the clarification of interest differentiation among

the economic / political governmental centers.

As a consequence of all, we meet, in Turkey, an interventionist media practice that self-servingly wants to make impacts on the dynamics of economic / political development in the extent that its differentiated economic interests clash with the differentiated political interests (Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2002).

Ministry of Labor and Social Security reports that 15.762 people work in the journalism sector no 27 and that 4.550 of them are Journalist' Union of Turkey (TGS) members. By an unofficial estimate, number of those working in the media sector is nearly 40 thousand, by more than doubling the number of insured workers (Üstün, 2009).

Environmental Journalism in Turkey

In Turkey, the entrance of environmental problems into mass media coverage has taken place in the 1970s and the community has begun to have insights into the issue henceforth. But this awareness has not taken place among all parts of the community but among those living in the metropolises, who are directly exposed to the problems like air pollution, first and foremost, and marine pollution. The public community has developed sensitivity against the problems upon these becoming a fact of daily life. Rather than comprehending the problem as a whole, however, this sensitivity has had a fragmental quality unfolding itself as individual complaints about air pollution, seas unsuitable for swimming, uncollected garbage, and noise. Only in the end of 70s, the middle of 80s and afterwards, the problems of environment have begun to be approached from a more holistic perspective. Although there is a holism in the sense of being aware of all these problems, however, there is no wholeness in the point of comprehending the source of the problems and producing solutions (Özdemir, 1988). To list the characteristics of the approach to environmental news in Turkey;

*Over the years, the number of

environmental news has increased but the space allocated has decreased. Environmental news reports are often single column news. Generally in summer months, these reports are given broader space since the agenda of the press is less dense in summer. Environmental news reports are the primary news of the weekends for the same reason (Karasinir, 1991).

*Environmental news reports have begun to find a place in certain pages. Under the title of green page or green screen, reports of environment have acquired a new dimension. Like economy and foreign news, the issue of environment has gradually become a subject matter and a journalistic branch for its own right (Öztürk, 2009).

*News reports relating to environment are given by tabloidization.

*Actions and the contradictoriness of actions could carry environmental problems to columns. News about young people handcuffing themselves to the ministry of energy and clashing with police, and news in opposition to the order take place in newspaper columns (Koçak, 2006).

*There is no consideration of the relation between environmental pollution and natural balance. News reports have no holistic structure. News relating to environment are given singularly and detached from environmental processes and basic factors giving birth to them. News follow-up is not carried out.

*Authorities in news reports are central government and local administrations. NGOs are given very little place. Number of environmental news has been increased by successful PR studies by NGOs making studies on environment. Number of news relating to TEMA foundation has been increased to 2.638 in 2008 (Güder, 2008).

*In spite of its help in the phase of informing, the press has no contribution in the point of solving problems. They present environmental protests as the work of “hippie

youth.” There is stereotypy in the representation of environmentalist protests. Environmentalist actions are given through tabloidization rather than focusing on the problem (Öztürk, 2009).

*The mass media has done almost nothing to disclose this situation and question the underlying reasons, and in my opinion, it is likely to keep on this attitude until problems intensify or a disaster threatens.

*In recent years, written and visual media have been observed to approach environmental issues with an increasing interest. The mass media now is not unconcerned to the effects of climate change and NGO activities that make environmental problems visible. Between 1998 and 2008, the highest number of Global Warming news has been attained in 2007 and in this particular decade, news of Renewable Energy peaked in 2008 (BETAM, 2008).

In recent years, the subject of environment gradually seems to be dealt as a specific field of journalism like diplomacy, sports or economy. The newspapers Habertürk, Cumhuriyet and Türkiye have special pages for environmental themes.

Research Model

This study aims to reveal the factors that influence environmental reporters when they write environmental news stories. Answers were thus sought for the following questions:

1. Which resources do journalists utilize when they make environmental news reports?
2. How do journalists evaluate the resources they utilize in terms of trustworthiness?
3. Does the environmentalist attitude of environmental reporters make an influence on their work?
4. What is the attitude of environmental reporters as regarding to the environmental advocacy and news objectivity when they make environmental news reports?

5. What do environmental journalists need in order to make good environmental news stories?

6. That limitations do environmental journalists suffer when they make news stories?

The study was done by qualitative research. For data collection, depth interviews were used. In this method, in order to discuss the subject in all its parts, participants are asked open-ended questions that are formed by the investigator to obtain detailed information. Depth interview is a method used for revealing the viewpoints, experiences, feelings and perceptions of people (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006).

In the study, categories were designated such as the state the sector is in, activities of the media institutions, freedom of press, personal characteristics of a journalist, news production process, news source, news quality, editorial process, influence of political and economic power, and newsworthiness. Prepared relating to these categories, 12 semi-structured questions were asked to journalists making news stories on the subject of environment. The depth interview technique provides investigators with the opportunity to increase the number of questions and make changes in question structures depending on the flow of interview. This opportunity was utilized in the interviews and some changes were made in the questions asked during the interview. Before interviews, appointments were made, appropriate hours determined and then telephone interviews were made for durations of 30 to 45 minutes. The reason for the interviews to be made on phone was spatial limitations. Since the investigator lives in Eskişehir and the media establishments are in Istanbul, telephone interview was preferred. These interviews were recorded by a recording device, transferred to a computer and deciphered. In data analysis, descriptive analysis was used.

Findings

Journalists have some constraints while they are making news. Yang (2004) has explained the variety of factors about the constraints on environmental newsmaking. These are limited production periods, limited story lengths and limited forces. Production periods divided two categories that long-term constraints which are about economic and occupational and short-term constraints which is about event orientation. Event orientation limits are about news sources and news values (Yang, 2004).

As a consequence of the depth interviews, a classification emerged resembling the classification of Yang. At the end of the interviews, factors that influence environmental journalists in Turkey when they make environmental news reports were defined as news quality and news evaluation process, economic and political pressures and personal characteristics of journalist. These four categories and their sub headings were examined in comparison with the results of the depth interviews and similar studies in the literature.

1. Quality of an environmental news report and process of news evaluation

An environmental news story is not served as hot news unless government or private sector makes a new investment or a product relating to environment and holds a press conference about it. Personal preferences of journalist play a significant role in the selection of environmental news reports. Journalists choose the subjects they will address by their own judgments. They often tend to find and make news of those stories which would attract the interest of most readers (Wakefield & Elliot, 2003). When a news report on environment is being made, the selection of subjects that could attract the interest of the audience emerges as the first criterion in the production of environmental news reports.

Environmental news is an issue which must be approaching in detail because of its

structure.. According to Frome (1998, 18) constructing news about the nature is very difficult, because environmental news touches every aspect of life, from science, economics, history, politics, ethics and religion. Hence, a journalist must be able to ask question and to internalize responses.

An environmental news story, by its nature, involves technical and scientific facts. For investigation of these facts, an extra time is needed that the journalist would work through. Lack of this time during the daily news making practice is one of the major difficulties that journalists face when they write environmental news reports. This time limitation makes an impact not only on the writing of the story, but also on its handling in a newspaper or TV news bulletin. Long news reports in which technical facts are explained are given by simplification because of spatial limitations in newspapers and the time limitation in television broadcasts (Gürbüz, 2009). The biggest factor in the simplification of the story is the process of news evaluation and editors who play an active part in this process. Since editors do not have sufficient knowledge on the subject of environment and do not understand the report, they prefer not to evaluate environmental news reports (Gürbüz, 2009). Most of the time, when editors meet an environmental news story, they consider it significant and they avoid publishing or broadcasting it or they infuse it a sensational, distorted and oversimplified quality (Friedman & Friedman, 1989). The specific media institution provides clues about how the environmental story will be handled. If the establishment has tabloid characteristics, that newspaper will present the story in a more sensational and simplified manner.

It is suggested that environmental news reports being underrepresented in media is because of the abstract quality of the subject. Media does not want to see a problem. Because the subjects like global warming are abstract, they get stuck in the table of editor and find no place in media (Haligua, 2009). Gürbüz (2007) suggests that environmental

news stories are gradually given more importance nowadays but that they are still seen as equivalent of disaster news reports in the process of news evaluation:

I say this for many newspapers in Turkey; a newspaper report means a disaster report and if it also has a photograph, how wonderful! This is especially so at weekends, when the agenda is scant, or on Mondays (Gürbüz, 2007).

According to the Economy Manager of the Hürriyet Newspaper, Vahap Munyar, the reason for making news reports that terrify society on environmental problems is that the Turkish society would not be awakened without being terrified. Stating that the same is also true for media, Munyar says "Media, too, was awakened to the global warming only after it was terrified" (Journalist' Union of Turkey, 2008, 33).

Journalists write their news reports by addressing when they feel that they need to keep the balance (Wakefield & Elliot, 2003). And sometimes, their institutions force them to.

Based on the distorted structuring of the Turkish journalism, it constitutes a problem for a journalist to make an investigation on any subject and write it. Even if you are an expert reporter, they want the facts found by the investigation of the journalist to be confirmed by others and be told from their mouths (Gürbüz, 2009).

Not just environmental journalists, editors also need to be specialized. Rüştü Bozkurt, the General Secretary of the Journalist' Union of Turkey, states that if, in a country, media reporters, editors and writers are specialized, mistakes are reduced there (Journalist' Union of Turkey, 2008, 44).

2. News Source

Sources for environmental news are listed as non-governmental organizations, governmental institutions, business or

industrial world, means of mass communication with thematic publications or broadcasts on environment, universities and scientific journals. As for the journalists' confidence to news sources, universities and scientific journals rank high whereas confidence to special sector is low. A suggestion for the causes of this situation is the propagandist attitude of the state and that the private sector essentially seeks profit and thus is not perceived as sincere (Beharriell, 1992, 71). The problems of environmental reporters are explored by journalist firstly, having adequate resources for research and travel; secondly, having enough time to do stories was next; thirdly, adequate space on newspaper or air time on tv and radio in which to tell stories, and the other problem are about lack of interest by editors and the last one is unbiased sources (Jim Detjen, & etc., 2000).

In the news reports about environment in Turkey, some certain names all the time appear as the news source. The journalists interviewed associate this with two reasons. The first is the reliability of the names in question and the second is the scarcity of people working on environment. Stating that many academicians provide consultancy or work otherwise for companies or government, interview participants thus point to the difficulty of finding independent, trustworthy science people. The small number of academicians who are independent and expert on environment results in the dependence to the certain sources.

The primary complaint of journalists about access to news sources, especially the information to be obtained from the government, is the privileged serving of information to the reporters who are close to the government. Journalists indicate that they could somehow access to the available facts in second or third hand, but they complain of two factors: The first is their inability to access the required information in a timely manner and the second is inexistence of some required information due to the immaturity of the tradition of recording statistical information in Turkey.

Another problem suffered about news sources is the conveying of the subject by the news source in a scientific language and that the journalist, who has a responsibility to write the story in a level which is comprehensible by the public, becomes hesitant about stating the source since there is the probability of making mistakes when simplifying the report. Consequently, the demand by the news source to check the report creates a problem.

3. Economic and Political Pressures

Media institutions are dependent on companies in terms of economy, and on governments in terms of politics. Environmental reports hardly find place in newspapers and TV news bulletins. When depicting environmental problems, journalists criticize either companies or the government. This lowers the possibility of the report to be published or broadcasted. Journalists call this an economic and political pressure and limitation.

Economic pressure or limitation is caused by the fact that media institutions are dependent on advertisement revenues. Executive editor of ATV, Fuat Uğur (2009) states that the largest companies of the world make harm to environment but that they can not report this because of the advertisement pressure, while Habertürk program producer and presenter, Zafer Arapkirli (2009), tells that the environmental conscience is increased but media's hands are tied by the pressure exerted through advertisement.

Journalists have denouncements on media's understanding of reporting in Turkey. Purpose of a journalist for making news is to report problems and show possible solutions. Participants express a critique regarding the effort to install in Turkey an understanding which says "let news reports be made without interrogation and let neither the journalist nor the reader think over solutions. So let's not hurt anyone but fill the pages."

Ownership structure and economic investments of the media institution bring a limitation to the subjects to be addressed by the journalist. If the subject dealt by the journalist conflicts with the investments of the institution, this leaves no chance for that news report to be published. Media institutions in Turkey have investments in many fields other than media and this brings up a handicap for journalists.

It is observed that the impact of political authority on media is high in Turkey. In addition to this impact, because of the legal deficiencies like employment of uninsured personnel and existence of unauthorized buildings in media and recent high tax penalties, the political authority has domination over media and thus, news stories that would annoy the political power could not take place in media. Even if they do, the discourse of the government is used in the report.

In order to surpass these limitations and see their news reports in the newspaper, journalists need to make news in a manner called "Afghanistan Syndrome." That is, they only make news of events taking place in far places. They write ideological writings and criticisms relating to the environmental problems occurring in those regions (Nelkin, 1994, 174). Because of global warming, water sources are drying and granary like plains are becoming deserts in Turkey. When a newspaper addresses these problems as related to wrong government policies and wrong investments by the private sector, the newspaper meets with economic and political pressure. So in Turkish press, global warming news reports are not dealt in the context of Turkey, but in the framework of glacial meltdown and extinction of polar bears.

4. Personal characteristics and quality of journalist

When the general nature of Turkish environmental journalists is examined, it appears that the basic reason for them to choose the topic of environment is because of the personal interest they take in environment. In the interviews made, it emerged that journalists

had received no education on environment. It was seen that environmental journalists were activist people in the past that worked in the name of environmentalist groups and thus specialized in these subjects through time following their participation in these organizations. They get information on environment by their personal interest and curiosity. Necessity of the journalist to have technical knowledge regarding environment comes forth as a consensus for all participants. Since the subject of environment is a large field, they specialize in different areas like energy, tourism, health etc. They especially highlight the importance of specialization. With respect to this, Gürbüz (2009) says:

The government or companies may give you much inaccurate information. They may cover-up any environmental problem but if you know the subject, if you are specialized, you uncover it (Gürbüz, 2009).

Most environmental journalists spend working hours to make news on many other topics. A study made in the USA showed that one third of environmental journalists makes news stories on other fields as well. Journalists indicate that when they come to work, they are given whatever is on the agenda of that day and that if there is a story relevant to environment, then they are primarily directed to produce that news report (Sachsman, & etc., 2006). In terms of their news selection, journalists tend to make news reports on subjects they like (Nelkin, 1994).

Journalists have different views on the subject of objectivity. Some of them claim they need to be evaluated just like any other journalist, while others suggest that they need to act in an environmentalist attitude and adopt an attitude siding with environmentalist groups (Sachsman & etc., 2006: 110). Environmentalist journalists adopt the principle that the thing to be primarily paid regard is "to make news in favor of the world" (Brown, 2007). Gürbüz, among journalists interviewed, however, lay emphasis on the fairness of the journalist, not impartiality. The necessity for the environmental journalist to act in an

environmental attitude is one of the common agreements among journalists. In spite of this common agreement, it is emphasized that there is a necessity to ask the opinion of people or institutions on the opposite side for the sake of fairness.

It appears that one of the most significant characteristics that environmental journalists need to have is to act in a determined attitude against the limitations by the institute they work for, born out of the political and economic pressures. The participant Gürbüz (2009) expresses this with the following words:

The environmental journalist must instill this fear where he or she works: 'Even if you do not publish this news report, it will be heard anyways since a news report which is unpublished or ignored by the journalists may cost the lives of many beings. To me, it is not a censored news story but a news story which will cost the lives of many' For this reason, a journalist must take any risk when necessary.

A journalist knows what kind of news reports an editor would allow into the newspaper or the TV news bulletin and writes the story accordingly, or knows which stories would not be published or broadcasted and does not make those reports. This attitude of the journalist causes a self-censor on the reports to be produced. Gürbüz (2009) suggests that this one of the most dangerous situations in terms of the profession of journalism.

If you yourself censor a news report and prevent it from passing to the editorial office, that report would not have a chance to appear. Though once in a blue moon, news stories come out that we assume would not. This may be related to the conjuncture but sometimes these reports come out because the editorial office does not comprehend it because of the technical facts included. When you self-censor, however, it comes to mean that you are the one who prevents the environmental problems to be published or broadcasted.

If the media organ that a journalist works for is a newspaper that makes daily light news, it is obliged to lighten its stories or simplify the language (Gürbüz, 2009).

Suggestions

In Turkey, one of the topics expected to be addressed in 2010 in the European Union membership process is environment. In this framework, environmental problems will frequently be brought to agenda in the media both in their political and economic contexts. Consequently, importance of expert environmental reporters will increase. It is one of the investigation findings that environmental journalists gather information on environment just by their personal interest. Organizing courses and seminars to educate environmental journalists on the subject of environment is of importance. It is evident that the same education is also needed for editorial offices that have significant roles in the process of news report evaluation. Through these educations, it will be possible to make progress towards conveying of accurate information to public by increasing the awareness of those taking role in the news making process. This will open a way for enabling more space for the subject of environment as news reports, for solving environmental problems and for preventing the limitations imposed on journalists caused by the ownership structures of the institutions that journalists work for and by the relations of the institutions with advertisers and the government.

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