

Rehearsing a polylocal polyphony in academic knowledge production.

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ensaiaando uma
polifonia polilocal na produção de
conhecimento acadêmico
rehearsing a polylocal polyphony
in academic knowledge
production

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Abstract:

In this article, we reflect on the possibilities and ways of creating alternative formats for both collaborative and participatory academic knowledge production processes, and on their potentialities. In particular, we look into the concept of polylogue, and how we used it to experiment with a format for collective knowledge production, as guest editors of a recent special edition of the *Strategic Design Research Journal (SDRJ)*. We describe the motivations and origins of our polylogue experiment, and we introduce its process and challenges. We conclude by proposing that a polylogue makes public and accessible meta-reflections and conversations by promoting: **communicative polygamy, polyphony of positions and polycardinal forum**. These three situations articulate some of the possibilities and limitations of the format that we should continue exploring and rehearsing.

Keywords: Collaboration, Knowledge production, Journals, Polylogue, Academic writing

1 Introduction

The special issue, *Designing, sensing, thinking through autonomía(s)*, published on August 2018 by the *Strategic Design Research Journal (SDRJ)*, features a special section called **polylogue**. This **polylogue** is, in practical and straightforward terms, a collective multi-authored conversation weaved together, via commenting and collective processing of several individually authored pieces discussing the call for papers (CfP) of the special issue. Its authors participated, by actively contributing in each other's knowledge production; and collaborated, by working together and sharing their contribution toward a common goal, through the CfP process and to its result. Moreover, we chose to make public and visible parts of the thinking

process, and the resources that as individuals and as a collective we deployed, in order to materialize our taking part, in a plural way. The polylogue is the result of an ongoing search for spaces for exchange, co-production, and collaborative growth within academia; specifically, in our case, within the design research community. It is an experimental activity to understand what it takes to produce and foster this kind of participatory spaces for knowledge production, for decision-making, and for everyday design activity.

Our interest in exploring new formats stems from two interlocked issues. On the one hand, as researchers, we have been noticing and experiencing the current lack of space for discussion and for collective knowledge production in many academic and scientific venues. On the other hand, as participatory design (PD) scholars and practitioners, we have been experimenting with ways to open up public spaces where different and diverging voices can express themselves in design processes. We notice that there has been a dissonance between our modes of engagement: academic reporting seemed more lonely and restricted than our design practices. Could participatory practices inform better our knowledge production practices?

The limitations and crisis of current knowledge production and communication processes in academia have been gaining attention in diverse fields. There are many factors involved in it. One of the main key aspects of the crises relates to time. As pointed out by Berg and Seeber (2016), the process of corporatization, through which universities have been going through, has meant that processes are mostly valued in regards to their productivity. Franck Donoghue (as quoted by Berg and Seeber, 2016, p. 8) stresses how "market categories of productivity, efficiency, and competitive achievement, not intelligence or erudition, already drive ... the academic world". As a consequence of this drive, there seems to be a lack of resources for researching as well as for initiating collective processes of knowledge production. Participatory processes of knowledge production require both tangible and intangible resources that take time to develop, and whose return on investment is not immediate. They also demand attitudes that favour collective dimensions instead of individual ones. Such processes need to be nurtured and might not always sit comfortably with narrow productivity metrics.

A second crucial influencing factor is the structure of scientific events. In our own field of Design, we can observe wide offering and proliferation of academic events, which nonetheless mostly serve as venues for dissemination. Only a few of them are designed to foster actual discussion and exchange, since only a few provide enough time for intense and thorough discussion of the presented works. Most of the events make room for presenting as many papers as possible. For instance, it is common to organise many parallel sessions while allocating a short time for paper presentations, and a shorter time for questions. As participants of several of these events, we have also observed that the time for questions is rarely used for constructive debate; instead, people seem to dwell more on asking details. This is a dynamic that, in our opinion, does not constitute an exchange, but rather a process of unilateral giving.

In addition to the lack of time and the problematic structures existing in face-to-face opportunities, journals and forums, which are quintessential spaces for advancing knowledge and communicating, asynchronously also take the form of barriers. In fact, journals tend to constitute unilateral means for communication. With notable exceptions, journal papers end up being considered as spaces through which certain individuals - the authors - elaborate their findings, express some thoughts about a specific topic, and direct them at someone else - an audience. Of course, the audience can read, learn and might eventually be able to deploy this knowledge. However, in most of the journals in our area there are no spaces for purposeful exchange and collaborative knowledge production among researchers. There is of course exchange happening between reviewers and editors, with prospective authors whose papers are in need of improvement. Suggestions are given to the authors to help them improve the quality of their work, or in some specific cases, a reader may contact the authors privately on his or her own initiative. These types of exchanges are not documented nor included in the original design of a journal's *modus operandi*. A specific situation is constituted by call for papers (CfP) set up based around specific topics. Specific CfPs allow those involved to obtain contributions and information (through papers) about others working with similar issues. However, this is again a very unilateral way of exchanging.

Broadly speaking, even if journals make it possible to communicate research, they also strengthen particular models of argumentation and specific ideas of authorship that are easy to measure. Because of this, they are one of the preferred evaluation metrics of productivity used within scientific fields. In addition to their measurement impact, in the current academic landscape of design research, journals also value specific kinds of knowledge production: knowledge that is codified in written texts and mostly produced in English. On one side, this means that papers should be written according to particular conventions and logics amenable to English language. These types of logics have become a *de-facto* standard for scientific rationality (Visvanathan, 2009) and endanger plurality. The predominance of English brings with it several opportunities, like a common *medium*, and certain shared criteria for assessing the results. At the same time, it also prevents researchers (and design) from embracing the production of knowledge and its communication in more participatory, inclusive, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary, and transdisciplinary ways. This situation also prevents contributions from researchers who do not master the English language, or whose culture and practices do not fit within English and its particular scientific rationality. At least in design research, there is a predominance of certain debates, theories and preoccupations of the global North, with the exclusion or invisibility of lateral and southern voices (see Pérez-Bustos, 2017, for similar questioning). This, in turn, reflects on education and practice, when only certain theories and debates are replicated by teachers and professors in higher education design courses all around the world. Taking into consideration the above points, we posed several questions when working on our special edition. How could academic design research writing

be more inclusive and participatory? How can we foster North-South exchange, and foster participation, collaboration and exchange of knowledge? How can we foster participation and collaboration between people with common interests, but who are unable to meet each other and work together due to infrastructural issues?

Throughout the last few years, we have been working on alternative configurations for research and academic events: for example, by introducing roundtables for discussion at SBDS (*Simpósio de Design Sustentável*) since its 5th edition, and by trying out the fishbowl discussions format at the Participatory Design Conference. This paper aims to present another step in this process: our attempt at turning scientific journals into spaces for participatory and collaborative knowledge production across dispersed design research fields. The experiment that will be presented in this paper seeks to challenge simplistic ideas of authorship, to foster forms of collaboration in academic writing, and participation in other researchers' knowledge production. In order to do this, this paper introduces an experimental process on designing, promoting and implementing collaborative knowledge spaces by means of a "polylogue" (expanding from dialogue) in an academic journal.

2 Polylogue

The word Polylogue is a combination of two Greek concepts: *poly-* that means "much, many", and *-logos* meaning "discourses" or "reasons". In developing this idea, we identified three references which constitute the origins of the term for us. First, we borrow from the French linguist Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004), who uses the term to refer to communicative interactions among multiple participants. In her work, she identifies and questions the deep-seated tendency to assume communicative interactions as something that happens between just two individuals, which leads to the assumption that this form of interaction is the prototype of all interaction forms. However, since she realizes that this assumption is hardly questioned, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004) prefers to use the concept of polylogue, instead of dialogue, to explicitly draw attention to multiplicity.

The second origin can be traced back to the work of the Taiwanese philosopher Hsueh-i Chen (2010). Hsueh-i Chen borrows the concept of polylogue from the contemporary Austrian philosopher Franz Martin Wimmer. In his work, polylogue represents a means to overcome Eurocentrism in philosophical thought for intercultural communication. According to Chen (2010), many (*poly*) words, voices, discourses or reasons (*logos*) intersect in two ways. The first one is a sort of chatty cacophony in which everyone talks (or writes) at the same time and nobody listens (or reads) to anyone, producing a state of non-communication and exchange. The second one is more optimistic (and ideal) and considers the polylogue as a medium to reconcile and articulate reasonably many different ways of thinking. As Chen (2010, p.62) states, "identifying ourselves culturally not only entails remembering what we have already been", but it also implies that we must reinvent ourselves.

The foregoing led us to the third origin that is inspired by the work of designer Fernando Álvarez Romero (2014). Álvarez Romero (2014) draws on the work of the Swiss philosopher and theologian Josef Estermann, who compares the philosophical traditions of the West and the Andean peoples (for more information, see Estermann, 2006, 2008). Based in this comparison, Álvarez Romero (2014) proposes that a polylogue should operate in two directions: first, it mediates between different cultures (through an intercultural approach similar to those already presented); and second, it articulates the knowledge that is produced (in science, empiricism, as applied wisdom, as well as of technologies and techniques of different origins) to transform not a reality, but realities; not a world, but worlds. In this view, those engaged in a polylogue cannot assume that a specific concept can be defined within the parameters of just a certain culture, because otherwise expressions of other cultures that will not satisfy this *a priori* definition could then be easily (de-)qualified as "magic thoughts", or "ethno-philosophy", etc.

Based on the foregoing, the concept of polylogue seems to be relevant for re-designing scientific production and communication by means of subtly introducing a new format in an academic journal. As a format, the Polylogue seeks to support knowledge production in which a multiplicity of voices participate. The starting point can be a concept (*autonomía*, as we will see in our case later), which can be challenged or further understood through the articulation of different perspectives. In this way, concepts can be redefined through the interaction of different voices, producing new knowledge and promoting professional and personal growth for those implicated. If able to support these collective processes, academic journals could become a platform for a transition towards valuing plural ways of understanding reality, knowledge, as well as towards shared and collaborative inside-outside academy knowledge production. These were some of the premises that guided our collective work towards a polylogue, which we describe in the next section.

3 The SDRJ special issue and the polylogue

On January 2017, we started organizing a CfP for the SDRJ on "*Autonomía | Design Strategies for Enabling Design Process*", which could make it possible to map emerging design strategies for enabling autonomous design processes (Botero, Del Gaudio and Gutiérrez Borrero, 2017). The CfP responded to a particular understanding of the concept of *autonomía* developed in Latin America, as a "cultural, ecological and political process that involves autonomous forms of existence and decision making" (Escobar, 2016, p.141). We wondered what this particular conception of *autonomía* could mean from the perspective of design and designing. If, according to Escobar (2016), *autonomía* means supporting conditions for collectives to be able to effect change and to change according to their traditions, allowing "every community [to] practice the design of itself" (Escobar, 2016, p. 16), the concept would challenge several widespread design practices for

community empowerment. It seemed to us that discussing this type of *autonomía* would also require designers to consider other types of designs, including “designs from the South” (see e.g.: Gutiérrez Borrero, 2015; Tunstall, 2016) and a decolonizing of design (Tlostanova, 2017).

The idea of the CfP started as a conversation between just the three of us (Alfredo, Andrea and Chiara). A conversation on (and by) the crossing of cultures, continents, trajectories and aspirations. We are located in/living in/from Colombia, Finland, Italy and Brazil, we lived in and passed through other countries and places throughout the process. The CfP was thus a way for us to provoke our peers to think about a concept we found intriguing and we cared about. We wanted to discuss this particular take, both with scholars who shared our perspective as well as with ones who did not. The idea was to increase our understanding on the topic of *autonomía* polylocally. Organizing a CfP seemed to us to be an interesting way to do that, at the same time as it would allow us to connect with people located in different places from us, working on similar or related ideas.

From October 2016 to December 2017, several scholars around the world joined us in our exchange of ideas. First, we received the paper submissions and had the opportunity to read and to contribute to these authors’ work. Secondly, we also had email exchanges, face-to-face conversations and video conferencing calls with other scholars interested in the CfP who wanted to discuss the topic with us. We started wondering: if several voices are trying to discuss with us outside of the papers, how can we include some of those points of view - and others - in the rich exchange we were witnessing on the topic of the CfP? As previously stated, we were seeking to gather voices and perspectives of design scholars engaged in valuing the contribution of diverse geographical and intellectual areas. If our effort was directed towards promoting richer and more inclusive design discourses - as designing through *autonomía* implied - we could not tolerate not “changing the ways we change” (Escobar, 2016, p.140).

In December 2017 and June 2018, we threw ourselves into experimentation and rehearsal. At this point, the concept of polylogue emerged and started taking form. We wanted to foster a *polylogue* process capable of exploring creative ways of understanding, contributing to each other’s ideas, and writing. Once the research articles were selected, gathered and refined, we decided to amplify them and foster the conversation by including several authors who work with similar topics. To construct the polylogue, we identified three main steps: to share, to exchange and to evolve.

In the “to share” step, we contacted some design scholars who we considered as relevant and rebel voices in rethinking design and who are interested in issues beyond the modern, capitalistic and western civilizational pattern, the perspective underlying our CfP. We invited them to write “pieces of a conversation”. Each piece could be a statement about the CfP (to agree as well as to disagree with aspects of it), or a reflection that the call itself raised. The invitation stated how the piece would be written in more experiential terms than in academic way. Some scholars accepted, some declined, some did not answer our invitation - as it is supposed to be in an open space for knowledge production. In the end, ten people agreed to participate through seven pieces - some of them worked together to produce their “piece of conversation”.

The “to exchange” step started when we received the first version of the contributions: we shared them online amongst all contributors. In this way, they had the possibility, provoked by us, to take a look at each other’s pieces. We asked everybody to react as well as to contribute to them as they preferred (i.e. by commenting on a passage, highlighting something, asking a question, etc.). Some exchanges contributed with ideas and further resources (Figure 1), others planned further collaboration (Figure 2), and others reiterated their ideas and thoughts (Figure 3).

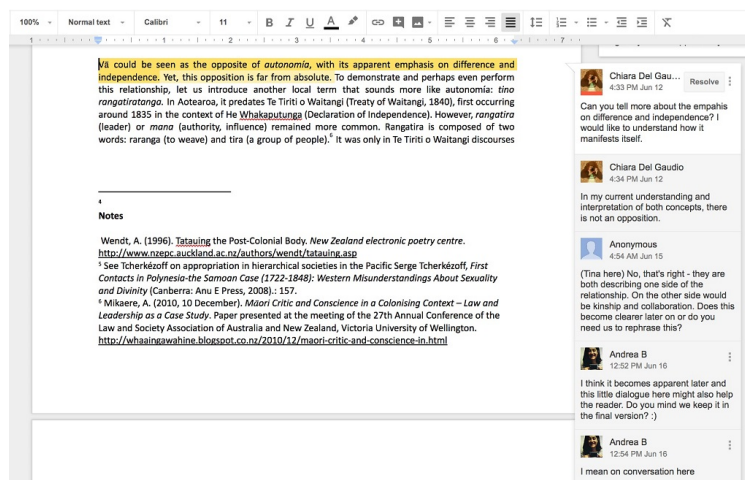


Fig. 1: Screenshots of the polylogue process: linking, expanding, commenting (not final layout). Source: Author, 2018.

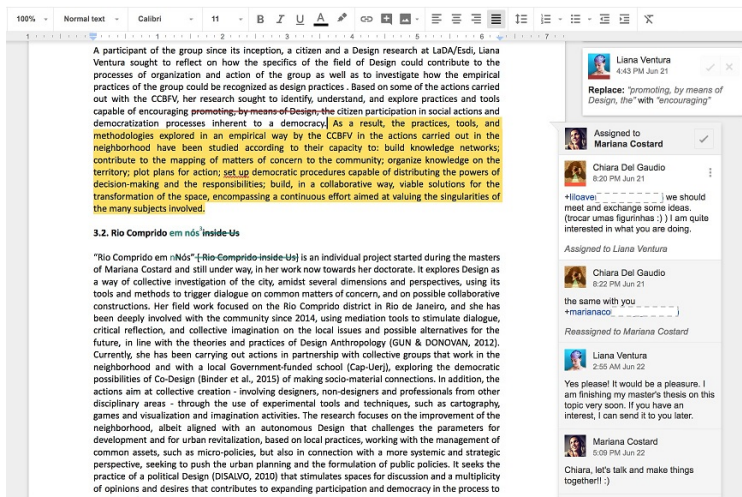


Fig. 2: Screenshots of the polylogue process: linking, expanding, commenting (not final layout). Source: Author, 2018.

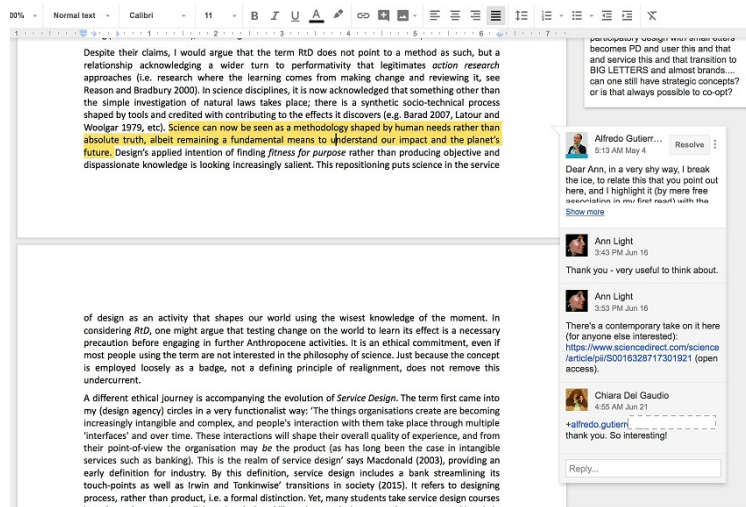


Fig. 3: Screenshots of the polylogue process: linking, expanding, commenting (not final layout). Source: Author, 2018.

In the next step, "to evolve", the authors had the possibility of going back to their original contributions, and evolving them based on the thoughts provoked by the comments. We produced the final version of the polylogue by weaving the last versions of the pieces with fragments of the conversations that took place.

The polylogue consists of 7 pieces: *Autonomous design and the emergent transnational critical design studies field*, by Arturo Escobar; *Ideas of Autonomia: Buzzwords, Borderlands and Research through Design*, by Ann Light; *Design, Development and the Challenge of Autonomy*, by Barbara Szaniecki, Liana Ventura, Mariana Costard; *Autonomy, collaboration and light communities: Lessons learnt from social innovation*, by Ezio Manzini; *Moving forward together*, by Rosan Chow; *Autonomía, the vā, tino rangatiratanga and the design of space*, by Anna-Christina (Tina) Engels-Schwarzpaul and Leali'ifano Albert Refiti; *Design, a 'Philosophy of Liberation' & Ten Considerations*, by Tony Fry (Note of editors: This special SDRJ issue is available at: <<http://revistas.unisinos.br/index.php/sdrj/index>>).

The place, the combination of these pieces, fragments of our comments made public and an introduction written by us (*Towards a polylocal polylogue on designs and autonomías - an intro*) constitute the polylogue.

4 Discussion and final considerations

The previous section outlines the archaeology of our polylocal polylogue by pointing out some crucial moments of its conception and evolution. In regards to what it represented and represents in terms of participatory and collaborative knowledge production within design, the polylogue is both a process and a result. Moreover, it can also be understood as an open-designed and never-ending design activity among several people that experimentally progress on a theoretical and empirical level through a process of sharing and opening up research activities and design projects. Two main features of this process stand out: experimentation and participation. Both should be considered by anyone interested in undertaking inclusive academic knowledge production activities. Approached as experimentation into alternative ways of knowledge production, a polylogue should be more interested in participation than in control. Following Vine Deloria Jr., who wrote that: "experimentation is participation; knowledge is an expansion of our ability to formulate and comprehend our relationships with the kosmos" (2012, p.57), we think that to experiment is to take part, with consciousness of oneself as a whole. In this regard, we see several ways in which the polylogue advanced our mutual knowledge production process.

First, it created a “**communicative polygamy**” that allowed us to establish fruitful communicative relationships (marriages of ideas) between discourses. Texts were open to scrutiny, ideas were highlighted, commented on or questioned, sometimes slowly, and sometimes fast. While not everybody contributed, many did incorporate some reflections in their subsequent versions. Compared to a more traditional peer review, communicative polygamy is a more participatory iterative process and a more reactive one. Since communications are kept short, they leave traces and are identifiable, and a few interesting combinations of thought appear (and potential future collaborations). Through communicative polygamy, a polylogue seems able to foster idea advancement and evolution in a participatory manner: the papers are not there to be assessed but to be accompanied.

Secondly, throughout the polylogue activity period, the pieces worked as a platform for a “**polyphony of positions**” and dispositions. We laid down different points of view towards the idea of design and *autonomía*. This was done in conceptual terms but also in spatial and temporal terms, since those of us who participated are located in different countries. We also speak and write in “international English” seasoned with different idiomatic flavours and sounds (Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Samoan and German). All these positions were kept alive by the timestamps of our comments, the notifications in our emails, and the bits in the screen. The polyphony, however, was perhaps more audible for those of us who participated in real time, than to the future readers of the journal, who will not be able to register the entire spectrum.

Thirdly, in describing this “final” configuration, or this “cosmopolitan” encounter of people from different places, the polylogue also articulated for a some time a **polycardinal forum** of design practitioners who were sometimes far apart and sometimes polylocated. Reading, writing and rewriting kept some of the geographical orientations alive, but we also ventured to propose that after this exercise we would be better positioned beyond North, West, East and South positions.

Therefore, for us, the whole special edition and the polylogue work through an intercultural approach, as well as a kind of intercultural design (Gutiérrez Borrero, 2014), which spans across levels of knowledge and reality (based on the understanding of our worlds, on the producing on knowledge, on exploring how to act and to act within them). A live simulation of a multiple conversation that we aspire to continue expanding both in frequency and number of interlocutors.

As a format and process, our current polylogue also features limitations and constraints that should be acknowledged. In line with production deadlines and with the fact that the process started only in the middle of the special issue editorial process, there were many entanglements with other processes outside of our control. As in any inter-institutional project (Dille and Söderlund, 2011), time keeps lingering as a variant that is difficult to escape from. The different organizational environments of each contributor and their own specific temporalities led to a temporal misfit that is common in this type of project. This situation means participatory processes must be fully developed, and can even hinder them (Del Gaudio, Franzato and Oliveira, 2017). In this regard, not only could we have had devoted more time to participation, commenting and highlighting, but also, with more time, we could have designed and experimented on a process capable of fitting better within our different temporalities.

For some participants, the openness of the polylogue to any kind of contribution about the topic of the special issue acted as a limitation. Some of them, as they reported to us, found it difficult to contribute with reflections on issues addressed by other participants that they felt to be far from their own. In other words, they could not (or were not comfortable with) dislocate their own focus or perspective on the topic and open it up to different ones. As a direct result of some participants not commenting, some contributors received less feedback and suggestions on their work than others.

Even though cross pollination of ideas occurred based on the contributions received, the authorial nature of the knowledge produced was still predominant. The process was more collaborative than participatory. We decided on publishing the pieces of conversation as individual contributions, although at the beginning of the process we kept the final output format open. In the end, it felt truer to the spirit of the process to leave the attributions clear and traces and snippets of our parallel conversations alive in the final versions. In this way, we wanted to show how voices intertwined and produced polyphony albeit that one may have been more audible for ourselves. Our partial compromise to address the challenge of multiple authors also had to deal with (and face) the limited possibilities of two-dimensional means (the page), a space that is not necessarily conducive to hosting and representing polylocal polyphonic multidimensional process.

In the future, we hope to continue experimenting and rehearsing with new formats and processes and new polylogues. The first steps will include exploring how to open up the polylogue to more people, extending reach and depth. We should also investigate and rehearse how the polylogue might support better open discussion and dissent of controversial topics with conflicting perspectives. Continuing rehearsal is particularly appropriate to describing what needs to happen next. We felt and thought that while we worked in English (not the mother tongue of many of those involved in the process), we stumbled, we made holes and we did not understand each others always, but perhaps we will one day; and this will echo in other scenarios and audiences. Finally, we designed and worked on the polylogue with the aspiration to encourage other similar processes; some other rehearsals may already be in progress. Therefore, we consider this paper as just another step on the path of rehearsing a polylocal polyphony in academic knowledge production and, hopefully,

beyond. These final considerations could be understood more as an invitation than a closing argument: we are open to further explore the polylogue possibilities with everyone caring and seeking to let the polycardinal design chorus grow!

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