

‘Digital solidarity’ as a third space for school engagement

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Abstract

Since March 2020, we have witnessed a movement of great power: research centres, organisations, publishers, scientific societies, groups and associations have become more engaged, creating networks to promote learning for teachers and schools through digital environments. The contribution tries to think about the digital solidarity initiatives built by Research Centre on Media Education, Innovation and Technologies (CREMIT): a series of webinars for schools, a special free issue of the magazine EaS, the challenge (#distantimaunitiperlasuola). Can we read these initiatives as a third space? The contribution tries to think about these questions, starting from the analysis of some data belonging to communication: the analytics of the social channels (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), analysis of the posts collected in the social channels around to the initiatives promoted and analysis of the questions collected during the 13 webinars delivered.

Keywords: *communication, digital media, teacher training*

1. ‘Ambivalent’ communication as a key element to support third spaces¹

According to Potter and McDougall (2017), the characteristics of third spaces are: peering logic, experiential learning, motivation and the pleasure of ‘doing something together’, absence of merely ‘taught’ learning. In these spaces, medi-ality is experienced in its possibilities, within a socio-materiality that tends to creativity. Third spaces are places where narratives are built; these narratives help the process of identity building and contribute to a perception of self-efficacy. It is thus possible to think of the communicative ecosystem of a cultural centre as oriented towards this attitude, activating communicative ways that support third spaces. Let us keep in mind that we live in a time that Paul Mason (2015) defines as ‘post-capitalist economics’, a logical episode in long wave economic theory, and cites digital technology as a driver.

During the lockdown due to the pandemic, we found three elements: the blurring of labour with free time, the abundance of online information and the proliferation of collaborative, peer production in digital spaces. Potter and McDougall map these against specifically educational shifts: ‘the blurring of formal education with free time (the MOOC Massive Online Open Course, blended learning, inquiry-based informal learning); the endemic use of the Internet for all study in the affluent parts of the connected world and the reconstituted status of teaching from the front/the lecture/the textbook

¹ The authors share the structure of the article. Alessandra Carenzio wrote sections 2, 3 and 4.2; Stefano Pasta wrote sections 1 and 4.4; Sara Lo Jacono wrote Section 4.1 and Irene Mauro wrote Section 4.3. Pier Cesare Rivoltella, head of the Research centre CREMIT, wrote Section 5 and he is the coordinator of all the initiatives the article talks about. CREMIT is a research centre on Media Education, Innovation and Education Technology, based at the Catholic University of Milan.

in this context; the rise of student to student exchanges in the kinds of third spaces that are constructed by academics and researchers and, more commonly, those developed by students' (2017, pp. 93–94).

While wondering when a communicative action supports a building of narratives linked to third spaces, we should refer to two theoretical ideas that Potter and McDougall themselves considered as the basis of their proposal.

The first is the epistemological starting point for implementation of the third space notion of a 'new popular culture' (Potter & McDougall, 2017, p. 94). Related to this way of thinking about the intersections between media education and new (digital) literacy, the status of popular culture is, for Williams (2015), as not only the 'stuff' of texts, but also the continuing energy of people. So, if digital media is a 'new popular culture', then (digital media) literacy education does not only teach about and with popular culture, rather this educational third space is popular culture. Experts in education (teachers, educators, pedagogues, teacher trainers, university professors, sociologists of education, people responsible for non-profit organisations, political decision-makers), then, are transformative intellectuals, in Giroux's terms, 'making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical' (1988, p. 127).

The second is the ambivalent meaning of the communicative act, as suggested by Homi Bhabha (1994), from whom Potter and McDougall took the concept of third space. An 'ambivalent' communication is defined both as the production of meaning and, more importantly perhaps, as a complex act of 'cultural performance'.

The initiatives of Research Centre on Media Education, Innovation and Technologies (CREMIT) on digital solidarity take on the role of metaphoric third space, as they are 'built into the cultural performance of communication, bounded by institutions and social strategies, always contingent and in an ideologically bound context' (Potter & McDougall, 2017, p. 40). From the perspective of anthropology, with the term 'ambivalence', Claude Lévi-Strauss (2011) meant the coexistence of meanings in objects, words, actions and cultures. From a pedagogical point of view, an ambivalent communicative perspective implies some considerations:

Of the relative power, positionality and subjectivity of all the actors involved in educational acts; it requires that we consider the messy realities of everyday life, the spaces, bodies, texts and artifacts. It suggests at least that the certainties of 'direct instruction' are hopelessly adrift from the reality of communicative actions in spaces of learning. If none of the parties in communicative acts admits negotiation or complexity as preconditions of the production of meaning, then there is no room for manoeuvre which produces agency, action, or even, change in an educational setting (Potter and McDougall, 2017, p. 41).

Communication helps to build a third space when it highlights participation and sharing to create a developing society, where experiences, points of view and competences are shared to let everybody develop. This dimension clearly emerges. Rejecting the verticality of learning, which is implied in the concept of third spaces, does not deny a role of intellectual leadership, which is taken on by the research centre's director; on the contrary, this idea underlines the aspect of exploration and participation in communication by adopting an inclusive and open approach that helps sharing knowledge and products, as in the case of the challenge.

To go back to Potter and McDougall's idea, 'Our "after the expert" undermining of the law of knowledge authority in educational third spaces is no more an automatism arising from the mere "affordance" of digital learning contexts. Instead, this new manifestation of popular culture is a site of political struggle for the decommodification of knowledge' (2017, p. 94). It is fundamental to involve a variegated public and bring together different people that participate in different ways (taking part in synchronic events, producing objects, sharing information about some initiatives).

The fact that different social media address a (partly) different public with a different style but a common communicative action, related to the same topics, is of great importance. An article on digital divide becomes the most shared content on Twitter because it is retweeted by one of the most important non-profit organisations in the educational field.

Such an oriented communication requires a considerable effort from the research centre's members. Like Potter and McDougall, we can link CREMIT's choice during digital solidarity, as we will see in the next paragraph, with returning to the legacy of Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. John Clarke (Cannon and McDougall, 2014), reflecting on the extraordinary 'disproportionate effects' of the Centre's impact across disciplines, identified two conditions for this possibility. First, students and teachers – in this case, not only students and academic teachers, but also teacher trainers and school teachers – co-produced material as the orthodoxy, not an exception to celebrate. Second, the Centre always worked across and against disciplines.

2. Digital solidarity: music with different instruments

Since March 2020, we have witnessed a movement of great power: research centres, organisations, publishers and scientific societies have become more engaged, creating new networks to promote learning and to support teachers and schools through digital environments and on digital media as important nodes. This article aims to think about the various digital solidarity initiatives built by CREMIT.

As many other institutions, we deeply felt the great problem schools were facing in the first part of the lockdown due to the pandemic and we tried to contribute and share our knowledge with schools, teachers and educators. Solidarity, in fact, means to express support, to share an agreement of feeling or action in different forms and to show mutual support with a specific group (in this case, with schools and teachers). Why digital, then? There are two brief reasons: first, digital

environments have been the only environments we could adopt, due to sanitary conditions; second, digital represents also the topic and the focus of the initiatives (digital media as tools, as objects of interest, as challenge)².

The focus was on four main initiatives.

First, a series of webinars from April to June (before the formal stop of schools even if run online); the title was quite easy to grasp: 'La scuola a casa' was chosen to support a new way to work from home both for teachers and for students, considering the novelty and also the dramatic situation every family was facing. Not easy, for sure, if we also consider the digital divide in terms of grammar (How can I use digital media?), in terms of competences related to the methodological perspective (How can I use technologies effectively for learning and communicating, designing online teaching materials?), in terms of digital culture and responsibility (How can I manage and take into account all the topics related to security, cyber stupidity and digital wisdom?). The webinars were addressed to schools, teachers, parents (even if not predominantly) and educators on 13 topics³ with theoretical issues, practical ideas and proposals dealing with technology in teaching.

The second is represented by a challenge on teaching, starting from three keywords: *anticipation, practice, reflection*. The challenge, in fact, asked teachers to share their teaching lessons following a format (a grid to guide their work), sharing all the outcomes with the community. The framework, then, was a sort of ideal path, and Padlet was the perfect 'box' to welcome the best products. We collected many proposals and selected the most interesting (55 artefacts: 32 from primary school teachers, 17 from kindergarten, 6 from secondary school teachers). The design of the activities exactly followed the logic of competencies (milestone, dimensions and criteria to build competencies⁴). The challenge was then the occasion to raise participation, to make teachers count and to share ideas in a broad community.

The third instrument is a special issue of a monthly journal for teachers, principals and educators dealing with schools, methods and research. The magazine has a subscription, but during the pandemic, we all decided to imagine an open special issue dedicated to COVID-19 for schools⁵.

The fourth is a new TikTok channel⁶ addressed to primary school teachers, educators, students: the aim is to provide ideas for a different use of contemporary languages and to support the spread of a creative digital culture, promoting TikTok not just for fun or profit, but in an educational framework. The videos are related to teaching activities and stories that can easily work at school or in education with a schedule: books, creative products, videos, digital storytelling. The initiative is too novel to be discussed in this paper.

3. Methodology

The question we are trying to answer is: can we consider these initiatives as a third space? In a theoretical way, in fact, it is a 'virtual' space and network of activities that uses the relationship between peers (teachers in this case), favouring the sharing of skills in affinity groups (Gee, 2007), stimulating reflection and the construction of a narrative to support the ability to affect things (and in support of the perception of being effective, especially in a moment when it was easy to fall apart). But most of all, how can an appropriate communication approach and style be supportive in order to feed a third space?

We used three data sets: data from the Facebook page (analytics, number of posts, comments, feedback); data from the Instagram profile (impressions, number of posts and stories) and data from Twitter account. The reason is simple: social media sites – informally – are part of teacher training and played a very important role during these initiatives, especially because they were the only channel to reach teachers, families and schools during the lockdown. No seminar, no meeting, no training could be delivered physically, and information really ran on the web (even more than usual). Beyond this specific situation, social media analytics give detailed and promising feedback to know the public and get in contact with needs and practices (Brooke, Barnett, Cribbin, 2016; Mahrt, Scharkow, 2013). Furthermore, the questions retrieved during the webinars have been processed for qualitative analysis of the events; starting from the analysis of the recurring terms, 11 macro-categories have been created to better understand the feedback from the public.

As for the content analysis, we shared a matrix inspired by the pattern developed to read communication acts (Rivoltella, 2001), detecting four main dimensions (see Table 1): *information* (starting time of the webinars, netiquette, where to find links and videos, etc.); *relation* (personal and general greetings, recognitions); *exploration* (questions related to get more suggestions such as books, articles, links, tools to study after the webinar), revealing the heuristic role of the community; *participation* (experiences shared with the community to suggest practices, tools, points of views to let the community grow).

² To study premises, tensions and contradictions of the connection between solidarity and public policies, see Fassin, D. (2011). *Ragione umanitaria: una storia morale del presente*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. For solidarity during the health emergency: Paglia, V. (2020). *Pandemia e fraternità. La forza dei legami umani riapre il futuro*. Milan: Piemme.

³ URL: <https://www.cremit.it/registrazioni-webinar/>

⁴ The challenge has been delivered and assisted by Elena Valgolio and Maria Cristina Garbui.

⁵ URL: <http://www.morcelliana.net/img/cms/Rivista%20ESSERE%20A%20SCUOLA/Eas%20speciale.pdf>

⁶ URL: https://www.tiktok.com/@cremit_

Table 1. Communication model

Dimension	Core concept	Elements
Information	Transmission/reception	Time issues, netiquette, orientation, certificates
Relation	Relation/interaction	Personal/general greetings, thanks and recognitions
Exploration	De-situation/re-situation	Questions to get suggestions (books, articles, links, tools)
Participation	Representation/belonging	Experiences shared with the community to suggest practices, tools offered by participants

Every post or comment, in fact, can be regulated by one or more of these dimensions that are not exclusive, but for sure predominant, showing a specific footprint and delivering a particular message beyond words themselves. If information is linked to the exchange of data (the basic passage of information is, in fact, a very well-known mechanism of communication since its origin), relation implies ‘an anthropological perspective grasping the primacy of relation in communication, the primacy of opening to the other, the psychodynamic element involved in the encounter’ (Rivoltella, 2001, p. 52).

4. Data analysis

4.1 ‘La scuola a casa’: just webinars?

Webinars reached a remarkable number of people: 13 meetings have been attended by 1000 users, 53.8% of whom attended two or more webinars; the events reached 2.338 subscriptions. These numbers are even more impressive if we take into consideration that the subscriptions opened just 5 days prior to the start of the course⁷. They were joined by professionals of education: primary school teachers constituted the biggest part (39.3%), followed by kindergarten teachers (26.3%), then by lower (15.4%) and upper (2.8%) secondary school teachers and then principals (1.5%). Also, 6.9% of the participants were students, most of them from the university.

There were three themes that most marked this cycle of seminars: inclusion, the design of online classes and the involvement of families.

Webinars were designed to last 1 hour: a talk in the first part and questions from the audience in the second half. Due to the high number of participants, every meeting featured two moderators to collect questions via chat. The structure of the webinars, then, created an environment suitable for the exchange of information, stimulating participants to narrate their personal experiences and behaviours: 42 experiences were shared, most of all in three meetings: ‘Reading and reducing the digital divide: from data to proposals’ (n. 6), ‘How to manage an online lesson’ (n. 10) and ‘Activate and accompany the relationship with families’ (n. 5), and 108 questions were asked to the trainers.

The 150 interactions (42 experiences and 108 questions) collected were entered in an Excel file and grouped by type, starting from the recurring terms; similar terms have been placed in the same category, regardless of the level of education they referred to. From the analysis of the recurring words, we created 11 macro-categories to study the main feedback during the interaction with the public (see Graph 1):

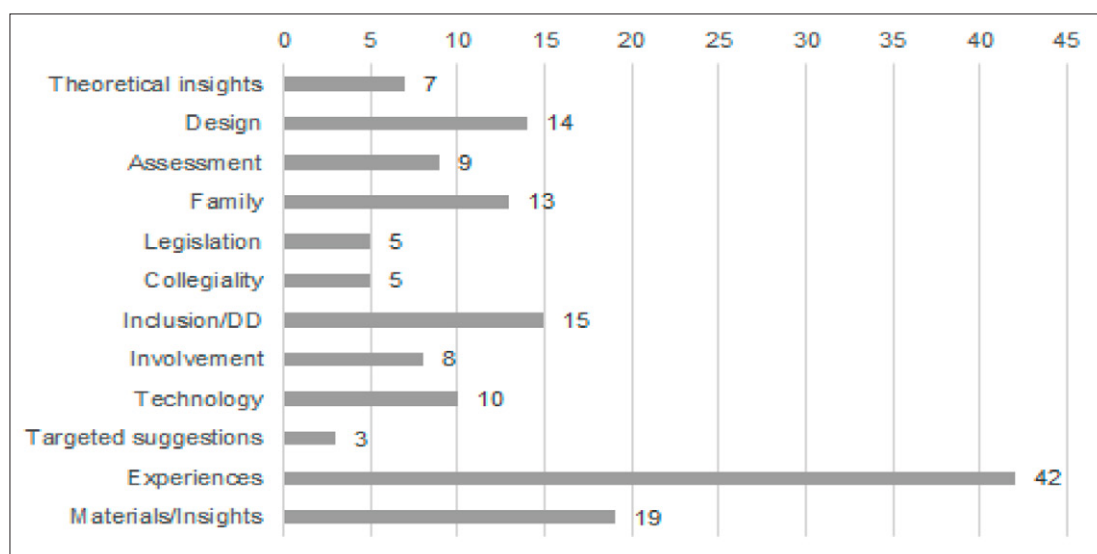


Fig. 1. Number of questions per macro-category

⁷ URL: <https://www.crem.it/registrazioni-webinar/> (10.532 views on YouTube, 4.074 for the first opening video).

4.2 Facebook page: a gathering area with a greeting box⁸

Considering the time span dedicated to the initiatives, Facebook presented 46 posts on digital solidarity: from 15 March to 1 June, these posts supported the events and shared the materials to guarantee a better work for teachers facing such a new situation. Novelty, for many teachers, did not help design, reflection and creativity as the focus on activities was fully demanding (depending on experience, on the ability to deal with technology and on everyone's expertise). On the other hand, the idea was to promote a different view on teaching with/in digital environments and platforms.

Regarding the format, Facebook posts were mainly texts with links (this means a brief comment to introduce a link to videos or to articles), texts with photo content (this means a brief introduction and a photo to tell the story) and texts with status (no links or pictures) as in Table 2.

Table 2. Posts on Facebook page during the considered time span

Post type	Number	People reached
Text with link	27	39.707
Text with photograph	17	51.229
Text (status)	2	4700

The choice was to balance engagement and delivery of contents both for people who took part in the live events and for people who did not, but could be interested in the content.

Considering posts with links, they lead to an online repository and to the website of the centre, in order to access each video content recorded during our webinar. Regarding the content, in fact, 19 posts referred to the event 'La scuola a casa', 6 to the challenge and 2 to the webinars organised by SIREM Italian Society of Research on Media Education.

Posts with pictures mainly lead to contents created to promote participation.

Communication has been marked by four main hashtags: #lascuolaacasa #webinar, #distantimaunitiperlascuola and #challenge.

Posts with the highest views are referred to the 'reminder' of the first webinar on 20 April (9648 people reached and 1326 interactions) with the first event held by the head of the centre (49 comments) and the launch of the free special issue of the Magazine EaS on 21 March (8000 people reached and 500 interactions). The third position goes to the starting point of the challenge (6000 people reached and 617 interactions).

If we consider the content of the posts from Facebook users, as a direct response to the 47 posts chosen for the analysis, we have comments corresponding to three of the four categories explained (information, relationship, exploration, participation). Exploration is the missing category, as webinars and especially the live chat during these events were the best place to ask for reading suggestions, links to deepen the topic or suggestions for new tools to use in the classroom or in the design phase.

The Facebook page, then, has been used as a sort of orientation centre to gather information and make personal statements in terms of relationship and communication with the research centre; the only comments corresponding to participation were linked to the challenge and were outnumbered.

4.3 Instagram: meeting a target 'on the move'

Over time, CREMIT's Instagram⁹ channel (born in 2017) has begun to grow and has become a reference for teachers, educators and all the professionals in education to stay up to date with research and training. Posts and stories are catalogued by topic, with a strong link between Instagram and the Facebook page.

Instagram allows users to receive fast information, taking the form of posts and 'showing' the topic in a quick time and brief space users dedicate to each single post. The study of the analytics takes into account the period from March to June 2020.

The number of posts published is 48: the most popular one, considering the coverage (489) and the impression (584), as well as the number of interactions on the post is the summary poster of the webinars (see Table 3). The number of stories from that period is 87: they were used to relaunch some posts, answer community questions on curiosities regarding webinars, create polls on the challenge or reshare posts/stories of users tagging CREMIT.

⁸ URL: <https://www.facebook.com/cremitpage/>

⁹ URL: https://www.instagram.com/_cremit_/?hl=it

Table 3. Topics considered by the posts and stories on Instagram

Topic	Number of post	Number of stories
Webinar	21	66
EAS journal	21	4
Challenge	6	17

As for the coverage, or rather the number of unique visitors who viewed one of the posts, we noticed an average of 390 emerges compared to an average of 320 of the other posts, therefore showing an increase of +21.9%.

The impression, which is the parameter that tracks all the times in which users have viewed a content (a post, a video or an Instagram story), increased by +28.2% compared to posts with other content and in other periods. There was also an increase in the average of interactions (+25.0%), going from an average of 20 interactions for posts with other content to an average of 25 interactions for posts that proposed the webinars, or the challenge #xxx or the resumption of other contents related to the proposal designed by xxx for the lockdown period.

The 'likes' also increased by +11.1%, as well as the average clicks on the website (+300%). The average of the views for each published story was around 220 people, compared to the average 165 people for other stories.

We can also highlight a final statistical data, namely, the considerable increase in followers in that period: since 2017, there has been an increase of monthly followers of 1% compared to the total number of followers; instead, in the period taken as a reference, we saw an average growth of 5% in the number of followers, with peaks in April that reached 11% and a growth in followers' age.

4.4 Twitter

While the Facebook page has been described as 'a sort of orientation area', Twitter account¹⁰ played a specific role in showing the centre's position in the cultural debate and in promoting contents and initiatives dedicated to academics, experts and decision-makers in the educational field. Due to the different characteristics of Twitter, followers and interactions are less numerous than those on Facebook, but retweets often involve a selected public: institutional accounts of Catholic University, scientific societies, academic professors of different disciplines, non-profit organisations, journalists, decision-makers, intellectuals, catholic cultural associations.

During the first lockdown, number of visitors increased: 29.000 views in January 2020 became 36.500 in February, 36.400 in March, 35.200 in April and 43.300 in May. From 15 March to 1 June, 107.400 views were registered (the daily average was 1.360), with an interaction rate of 4.13%.

All in all, 109 tweets have been posted in these 79 days (1,38 a day), most of which are composed of a short text, an image and a link to find out more. Tweets have been classified according to their content: tweets related to the webinar 'La scuola a casa' (meetings, relevant quotations, links to the videos); original contents on CREMIT's website (articles, further training); shared articles by other websites; retweets of contents produced by partners; a special edition of EaS and news about the challenge ##distantimaunitiperlasuola (see Table 4).

Table 4. Tweets on Twitter page during the considered time span

Tweet type	Number	People reached	Interactions	Rate of interactions
Webinar	31	29.059	1.060	3.65
Seminar contributions	24	24.082	881	3.66
CREMIT's contents	16	13.404	604	4.51
Shared articles	12	9.929	384	3.82
Articles about CREMIT	10	11.767	423	3,6
Retweet/shared content from partners	7	6.221	178	2.86
Journal	4	5.408	263	4.86
Challenge	4	3.911	204	5.22

¹⁰ URL: <https://twitter.com/cremittw>

Considering data about single tweets, we can generally assume that they reached a homogeneous number of people. Even though no particular peak was reached, some tweets have been viewed more than others during the considered time span, particularly an article on digital divide written by a junior collaborator (17/05/2020, 3.426), a notification about a series of webinars called 'La scuola a casa' (15/04/2020, 2.339), a tribute to a collaborator who died for COVID-19 (21/03/2020, 2.235) and an article by the author on distant learning published in the national newspaper *Avvenire* (17/03/2020, 2.150).

5. Mission, vision, management

The last considerations about the 'political' function of a research centre allow us to underline some aspects as a sort of conclusion of our conceptual trip. Our inspiration is the book of a trainer, Massimo Folador (2006), who dialogues with the rule of St. Benedict by adopting the monastery as a model of a perfect organisation. The three keywords are also the entry keys to understanding how the initiatives of the research centre during the COVID-19 emergency can be taken as an example of how research can become a service by carrying out a political function. These three keywords are: mission, vision and management.

The mission is the purpose, the vocation of an organisation, the deep reasons that motivate its existence and action. It is a process rather than something given, a task to be carried out. CREMIT's mission, the reasons behind its foundation in 2006, is organised around some other keywords: *growth*, as we chose to be a business incubator, a space to grow as professionals (supporting the scouting of junior resources in the challenge and webinars during the emergency); *service*, because the centre must work as an interface device with the different partners in the territory to intercept their needs (this is exactly what happened during the lockdown with teachers and educators); *research*, because the centre is a space where research is built, carried out, imagined and a place of experimentation open to the new (as the opening of a TikTok channel and the use of social networks show).

The idea is that vision indicates the programme, the strategy of an organisation, the philosophy. What does CREMIT's vision focus on? What are its key elements? They can be identified on two levels. The first is an intra-organisational level: the distinctive elements are *horizontality* (the role of peer-to-peer practices), *informality* (simple and direct relationship, not hierarchical) and *co-responsibility* (the centre is everyone's home). These characteristics define a social space, which also works as a third space because, although institutional, it is informal in practice. The second level is extra-organisational. Here, the logic is that of partnership: a hub-centre imagined as an open crossing place and not as a rigidly delimited space defined in terms of identity.

The final keyword is the management. The Latin word that defines it, 'gubernare', indicates the act of holding the rudder (gubernetès in Greek is the helmsman), that is, steering the ship at sea. In organisations, management concerns at least three aspects: self-governance, which means caring for one's vocation, knowing how to manage professional growth, identifying weaknesses in order to overcome them; the governance of other people, which means knowing how to manage responsibilities, relationships with others, organisations; the governance in relation to other people – and here, the Benedictine teachings return – this means *obedience* (knowing how to listen), *silence* (giving value to communication), *humility* (sense of limit, willingness to grow).

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