

Defining Journalistic Professionalism within the Higher Education System

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Abstract: The paper will discuss the results of a qualitative analysis of journalism studies course content at Australian universities. I will argue that a focus on the contribution of tertiary education to the formation of journalistic 'professional identity' must be seen within the much broader context of a socially produced field of expertise and cultural practice. This has particular ramifications for understanding of some of the influences on journalistic self definition, especially in a contemporary era of contestation of journalism culture and authority.

Keywords: Journalism, Professionalism, Higher Education

Introduction

ACADEMIC DEBATE HAS reflected a number of shifts in understanding of the definition, role and authority of professional journalists in recent years. In particular, contemporary discussion has illustrated the connections across different historical, cultural and political institutions and practices as having an impact on the constitution of journalistic professionalism. For example, work by Cauldry (2003), Hallin (2000) and Miller (2008) have all highlighted the importance of particular media systems and institutions to the way in which journalistic professionalism is constituted. But others like Zelizer (1992) have focussed on the importance of journalism as a 'community' of meaning-making, stepping away from the more material practices that constitute journalistic professionalism. This paper will attempt to provide a framework towards how academics might pursue a 'genealogical approach' to tracing the influence of discourses from academia, industry and other social and cultural institutions on journalism. Specifically, I would like to focus on the way in which a genealogical approach might illustrate these heterogeneous influences on the way journalism is taught within higher education.

Following a Foucauldian genealogical approach, I wish to argue that that a focus on the contribution of tertiary education to the formation of journalistic 'professional identity' could be seen within the much broader context of a socially produced field of expertise and cultural practice. I focus on journalism education as a specific site of change, indelibly intertwined with other social, political and economic forces to mobilise discourse of journalistic professionalism and expertise. In identifying discourses around the promotion of journalistic professionalism through tertiary education, this article aims to lay the groundwork for a larger project discussing the affects of socio-political, economic and technological transformations on the definition of journalistic expertise. Within this discussion, I will refer to the promotional materials from five undergraduate journalism courses within Victoria. The analysis will focus on identifying discourses surrounding the identification and definition of journalistic identity and professionalism. In identifying these discourses, this article aims to lay the

groundwork for a larger project discussing the affects of socio-political, economic and technological transformations on the definition of journalistic expertise. While there is not the scope to encompass discussion of all the processes of substantive transformation that have affected redefinition of journalistic expertise and authority, I will suggest here that particular discourse about journalism forwarded by universities has an influence on understanding of journalistic professional self definition. This in turn, has consequences for professional self-definition of journalists in the workplace, especially once graduates apply theoretical and practical knowledge taught within tertiary education systems.

I have identified three commonalities in the description of the role, responsibilities and attributes of the 'professional journalist' and the 'changing' nature of professional journalism industries. These were: (1) the attributes of a professional journalist; (2) the specific methodology of journalistic teaching; and lastly, (3) how the content of the degree would prepare you to be a 'professional' journalist. An agenda of professionalisation emerges from these documents in the way that the documents illustrate how the curriculum is designed to give graduates an understanding of journalism as a professional industry, in opposition to those who pursue journalism-type 'activities' without tertiary qualification. What the course documents suggest is that the pursuit of 'status' as a tertiary-educated journalist allows legitimate practice of journalism in a professional environment.

I have completed this analysis utilising Anderson (2008) and Nolan's (2008) work to discuss how professional self definition of journalism and its particular form of 'authority' is socially produced and materially manifest, and the practical implications for the role it performs in public life (particularly through education). Anderson's analysis of professionalism provides a helpful review of the forms of analysis around the constitution of the role of the journalist, suggesting that: "a number of studies, many of them written under the broad rubric of the sociology of culture, that have analysed journalism as a profession, a form of 'sacred knowledge', and a discursive practice" (Anderson, 2008: 248). Nolan brings a Foucauldian analysis to Anderson's framework for understanding journalistic expertise, suggesting that journalism "as a historically variable cultural technology operates as part of a broader field of governmental practices". Foucault's governmental analysis extends Deuze and Rose's work on journalism as a 'discipline' through which journalistic activities are regularised through the continual maintenance of discourses around journalistic production practices and professional ideals (in Nolan, 2003: 65). Governmentality, as forwarded by Foucault, examines how governmental power seeks to "target, shape and work through, rather than undermine forms of autonomy to reach particular ends" (Nolan, 2008). Thus autonomy does not stand opposed to power, but acts upon subjects' powers of freedom, to exercise their autonomy to attain certain governmental goals. This is important in terms of journalistic authority because it shows how a self-constituting field of journalistic practice seeks to act in relation to its role and forms of authority in the public sphere. But it also seeks to recognise other forms of expertise and influence that have moved to influence, shape or restrict forms of journalistic autonomy and authority. This might come in the forms of public relations that have sought to shape and manipulate the practice of journalistic authority, but even in the forms of journalistic education that serve to create a merchantable curriculum through journalism studies in the academy. Taking from a Foucauldian perspective, this paper does not wish to take a critical stance against forms of journalistic professionalism—or to suggest that journalistic authority is an ideologically meaningless or 'negative'. Rather, taking a genealogical approach, I wish to suggest that this form of authority emerges out of a number

of relations, discourse institutions and practices. One of these institutional influences has undoubtedly been journalism studies within the academy.

Understanding Influences on Professional self-definition

Understanding of journalistic professionalism has revolved around the acknowledgement of the centrality of news production to contemporary political, social and cultural governance. The articulation of this social and cultural authority through an institutionalised formation of journalism as a ‘profession’ has underlined an attempt to privilege the role and its responsibilities. As Bacon (2000) suggests, professions are historically understood as a “privileged class of occupations,” characterised by discourses that suggest highly trained expertise, selection by merit, and peer surveillance of ethical or rigorous application of that expertise (Bacon, 2000). Traditionally, taking on a profession meant elite status and reward; however, mass university education made professional occupations like medicine, law and much later, journalism, available to the masses. Within contemporary understandings of professionalism, the role of the professional journalist is privileged through differentiation from amateur or citizen journalism. This occurs through discursive processes that present professional journalism as “dominant, authoritative, monopolistic, legalised”. Bacon (2000) suggests that professional journalism debilitates and effectively disables the individual to become “exclusive experts of the public good”. Questions around the professionalisation of journalistic fields are important because it places emphasis on how journalism operates as a form of public and cultural authority. Professionalisation presents a kind of justification for having a role in the governance of society through a claim to represent or act on behalf of the ‘public’. It is only those who claim a professional and elite status who can also claim social, cultural or political authority to speak about the governance of societies. The rights and responsibilities claimed by the ‘professional’ also establish their privilege over those who might do the same activities ‘outside’ of professional status; only the professional can claim the elite status of authority to speak. As professionalism of occupations has spread, they have also come under attack as an elitist protection on knowledge that could no longer be held as ‘exclusive’ (Bacon, 2000). It is ironically mass education offered by universities that challenged this form of exclusive knowledge, and yet in recent years especially, learning the exclusive, interpretive work of professional journalists has been the justification of university education for journalists, to be defined against those who perform journalistic activities without the benefit of tertiary education. This has especially been the case where journalists have had to provide professional self-definition against citizen journalists, bloggers and independent online media ventures that have staked a claim to journalistic ‘status’.

One can thus suggest that journalism education can now be seen a domain that is subject to multiple forms of influence and debate, as well as being a key stakeholder in differing formations of journalistic professionalism (Anderson, 2008). To survey contemporary discussion of the social role and forms of authority afforded to journalism through tertiary education, one must inevitably begin at contemporary discussion of professionalism. These debates provide the framework for the constitution of journalistic professional identity forwarded (and problematised) through education systems. While much scrutiny has revolved around the apparent transformation of journalism in discourses associated with journalism education, much of this discussion has assumed these changes to be occurring within the sphere of a universally understood professional realm. For example, Aldridge and Evetts

suggests that changes in the social background and education of journalists, as well as increased mobilisation of discourses of professionalism by news workers and employers has contributed to public discourses dominated by understandings of the professionalisation of journalistic work. On the other hand, Daniel Hallin's work has been instrumental in suggesting a "decline" in professionalism due to changes in more traditional realms of social, political and cultural authority. This takes into account the broad changes in the western political-economic environment, as well as broader social and cultural belief that have led to changes in the way professional journalism is pursued. Hallin's work with Mancini (2004) suggests that journalism is instead a materially constituted and historically variable form of professional knowledge, subject to neo-liberal machinations. For example, he argues that the undermining of a traditional model of 'objective reporting' within more actively partisan journalism has been a response to forms of organisational and political communication management, as well as a lack of public confidence in public authorities and institutions more generally. News production as the 'common knowledge' of a professional elite reduces the variability of formations of journalistic expertise over time and context, suggesting an idealistic notion of the forms that news may take. Indeed Hallin goes so far as to suggest that professionalisation of journalism may be especially short-lived because it cannot survive the historical and economic shifts in media production currently occurring.

In contrast other scholars (Gerlis, 2006; Adam, 2001); have argued for the preservation of professional self-definition for journalists both to differentiate from citizen journalism, and to ensure public belief in 'quality' or 'principled' journalism. Other scholars have sought to negate the professional status of journalists altogether; Hartley being the most vocal in suggesting that journalism should be considered a 'human right' than a specialist form of expertise. Barbie Zelizer's work on the other hand, has focussed on the importance of journalism as a 'community' of meaning-making, stepping away from the discussion of the more material practices that constitute journalistic professionalism. What these debates suggest is the effect of multiple social, political and cultural forms of knowledge on the articulation of journalistic work. These debates about professionalism persist because journalistic work has changed according the emergence of historical trends in line with particular social, cultural and political settings. Rather than treat journalism as a unitary and historically stable profession, we may use these debates about professionalism to understand how journalism has emerged historically and the major effects of particular institutions and social settings on the discourses about journalistic authority. Contemporary discussion of journalism has seen connections across different historical, cultural and political institutions and practices as having an impact on the constitution of professionalism. For example, work by Nick Cauldry, Daniel Hallin and Toby Miller have all highlighted the importance of interconnected media systems, cultures and institutions to the way in which journalistic professionalism is constituted. I wish to use these debates to discuss how professional self definition of journalism and it's particular form of 'authority' is socially produced and materially manifest, and the practical implications for the role it performs in public life (particularly through education).

Analysis

While journalism studies have evolved over time and this has impacted on the teaching practices pursued within higher education, the professionalisation 'agenda' has had a pro-

found, and sometimes conflicting, impact on the way journalistic authority has been constituted in the public domain. These tensions manifest within the epistemological frameworks underpinning contemporary teaching practice of journalism studies. While these tensions do reflect the struggles occurring to define journalism within the field of journalism studies itself, they also suggest the tangible influence that education systems have on the 'professionalisation agenda'. Bacon et al (2000) make the important point that universities have a major interest in, and influence on, the development of the knowledge bases and ethical codes that surround professional journalistic practice. At the same time both the news media and universities perpetuate these forms of knowledge, these institutions and their discourses are also impacted by social, economic and political factors on an often global scale. These impacts and tensions surrounding the constitution of the contemporary professional journalist's role were the basis of the analysis of Victorian tertiary education materials associated with journalism studies.

The Attributes of the Professional Journalist

A major theme emerging from the analysis highlights intertwining discourses of professional practice, responsibility and governance within a particular description of the professional journalist. One of the important impacts of higher education journalism study is the contribution to discourses around the professional self identity of a journalist. These discourses have been influenced by both historical and contemporary understanding of the attributes of the professional journalist. Historical images of the western journalist in literature and film have depicted a somewhat anti-professional, working class muckraker. From the 1920s onwards, journalists have been popular as filmic and literary 'characters', whether as the scoundrel or the hero. Saltzman (2010: p.5) describes the attributes of the journalistic 'hero' and 'scoundrel' characters, as perpetuated by popular western film:

Journalist heroes often are self-made persons, independent spirits, people who get angry over injustice and unfairness. They distinguish themselves by their achievements, not their boasts. They are people of good will, unselfish, trusting, decent, and honorable with a sense of fair play, self-confident, resourceful and sometimes too witty for their own good. They work hard, display tenacity and enterprise, are good neighbors, love the simple things, have humility, are brave and honest, and will wield the power of the press, but never abuse it. Journalist heroes use words to help neighbors, to right wrongs, to stop injustice, to do what is fair and right. ... Journalist villains are big-headed parasites who use the news media to serve their own social, economic, political or personal ends. They care nothing about the public and repeatedly abuse its trust and patronage. They usurp the public's right to know by using information to extort and destroy.

Saltzman (2010) argues that while these images have evolved from historical descriptions of media practice, they have had an enduring influence on contemporary social understanding of the 'character' of the journalist. Indeed, this influence is seen in the recent films *Frost Vs Nixon* (2008) and *State of Play* (2009), where the main protagonists are journalist 'heroes', who utilize their innate tenacity and independence to both right injustice and serve the public interest. Interestingly, while *Frost vs Nixon's* journalist characters display the typically masculinised journalistic attributes of bull-headed tenacity to fight injustice, *State of Play* purposely conflicts traditional and contemporary understandings of journalistic practice.

The two main protagonists are journalists with different practices. Cal McAffrey (Russell Crowe) is the typical wise-cracking, anti-professional journalist who originally finds the ‘conspiracy’ that dominates the film. As a traditional print journalist, he uses his tenacity and secret police sources to uncover information. However, the female protagonist Della Frye (Rachel McAdams) baulks at his ‘macho’ style, using new media such as blogs to find and distribute information. In the final scenes, Cal realizes that he must relent his traditional methods and makes room for his female partner to contribute to the story.

State of Play’s overt positioning of the differences between traditional and new journalistic practice reflects the debates and influences occurring about the role and attributes of a professional journalist in an age where traditional media authority is being challenged by ‘amateur’ practice. The contribution of higher education appears to be the relatively new idea that the attributes of a journalist ‘exist’ because of professional training and responsibility. This is partly influenced by the practical desire to promote institutional training of journalists, but also to discursively juxtapose professional journalism to the amateur, online journalistic practice. This juxtaposition is particularly interesting as it has an influence on contemporary discourses around journalistic professional self definition—but this discourse itself also appears to be influenced by the historical descriptions of journalistic character defined above. For example, *RMIT University* suggested that professional training as a journalist was not just about the acquisition of particular competencies, but also the particular personal characteristics:

If you have an avid curiosity about the world, a passionate interest in news and current affairs, read, listen to and watch a wide range of news media, have strong writing skills, can work to a deadline under pressure, and have a burning desire to tell others what you find out, then journalism is for you.

As suggested previously by Saltzman, the attributes are common within contemporary filmic and literary descriptions of the journalistic character and have a long history in western media. Nonetheless, it is not unusual to find such all-encompassing definitions of a journalist’s ‘personality’ as part of their professional self-definition in film or literature. There are no particular descriptions of the ‘personality’ or ‘character’ of a doctor in tertiary curriculum or course guides as a comparison. An enduring aspect of journalistic professional self-identity is the dominance of ‘muckraking’ character of the journalist that overarches the competencies that higher education provides. This is perhaps a result of what Graeme Turner suggested as the ‘fetishisation’ of their professional self identity: “Journalists could acknowledge that their profession systematically produces an insider discourse which privileges certain kinds of information, certain kinds of sources of information, and ultimately produces *their* fetish – the figure of the journalist. More than any of the academic discourses, journalism over-invests in its occupational mythologies” (Turner, 1999: pg. 363). Similarly to Turner’s suggestion, the promotion of university education over-invests in these characterizations of the journalist’s professional identity, based on the suggestion of the unified, elite, interpretive practice of reporting.

What we can thus suggest is the impact of discourse surrounding the emergence of a professional self-identity for a journalist. As Adam (2001) suggests, discourses around the education of a professional journalist often incorporates immersion in the ‘news personality’ of a journalist; practices that involve subjective or interpretive work around news judgement,

evidence gathering and fact assessment, literary and visual method of representation and legal and ethical problem solving. Similarly, these course documents suggest that aspects of news ‘judgement’; are homogenous and universally shared by professional journalists as part of their ‘character’, regardless of organization, medium, cultural or political background.

Nonetheless, the dominance of discourse around journalistic authority and professionalism continues through journalism education. This can be seen in Skinner et al’s (2001: 333) suggestion that that professional journalism be understood as “a democratic art, the quality of which would determine the quality of democratic life”. Much current debate has followed this turn to the ‘interpretive’ by suggesting that too often journalism is taught uncritically, as a ‘method’, rather than focussing on an “epistemological study of journalism as a specific rhetorical form”. As Adam (2001: 316) suggests: “The co-ordinates of a good journalism education comprise, like the practice of journalism, a fundamental concern with ‘news’ and a corresponding concern with the acquisition of complex methods of knowing, representation and analysis”. However, Deuze and Hallin argue this turn to the interpretive negates the many economic, political and social impacts on the practice of journalism. The representation aspect of journalistic work could be considered the end-product of a number of different strategic decisions and practices that journalistic work encompasses. Defining journalistic authority within an agenda of professional practice has become all the more important both to practitioners and educational institutions given the high economic stakes for both parties. Journalism has become a professionalisation through the institutionalisation of its practice; a way of organising middle class labour in an advanced capitalist economy. Concurrently this has also placed emphasis on the “social context and normative responsibilities and struggles of the intellectual worker” (Bacon, 2000). Much of this debate about journalistic production is reflected in the methodology of training a professional journalist.

The Training of a Professional Journalist

Stemming from a focus on ‘professional practice’, the second emergent theme within the curriculum documents illustrates a particular methodology towards the vocational training of journalists. Once again, the analysis illustrates how journalism training within higher education may have influenced the professional definition of journalists. This occurs through the suggestion that professional practice can only be acquired through the discipline of higher education teaching. Nonetheless, this discourse has been influenced in turn by historical, social, and institutional factors that affect journalistic practice. This is particularly evident in the curriculum documents’ emphasis on a particular ‘methodology’ of journalistic training and practice.

Three of the five universities analysed highlighted the importance of students being taught by industry professionals who contribute a vast, practice based expertise. The importance of staff knowledge of professional practice is emphasised in contrast to the educator’s academic experience, which none of the curriculum documents mentioned. The documents suggest that it is only professional journalists who can teach the particular ‘methodology’ of journalistic practice. Like a craft, journalistic knowledge is passed down through the experiences of elders who possess the somehow ‘sacred’ knowledge of news. This stems from their immersion in an industry and practice universally understood by journalists regardless of social, political or cultural context. This is articulated in the promotional material for the journalism course within the media discipline at Swinburne University:

The course is taught primarily by people who have extensive workplace experience (in publishing, the print media and radio) and who share the belief that the student who is best equipped to face the vagaries of the workplace is the one who has a general and broad overview as well as a specialised appreciation of how it operates.

It is the personal experiences of past professional journalists that are being promoted in the curriculum documents; the personal attributes of a professional journalist can only be passed down through those who have participated in making the news.

While proponents of citizen journalism might argue that anyone can be a journalist, the professional journalist is differentiated in tertiary education. As the description suggests, professional self-definition as a journalist appears to be influenced by experiences as a 'real' journalist working in the field, complete with the 'war stories' to illustrate the attributes of the industry and your own character as a professional journalist. Nolan (2000) suggests this may stem from a refusal of professionalism amongst media practitioners in the past, due to institutionalised methodologies that dominated journalistic practice. This has been illustrated in a particular rigid workplace culture where hiring editors have followed a tradition of merit-based promotion from cadet to graded journalist through practical experience. Professional journalists continue to advise university students to 'do their time' in regional reporting roles to gain the news-gathering experience that will ensure their promotion to metropolitan newsrooms. This traditional refusal of professionalism amongst media practitioners has meant that tertiary institutions have often promoted a practical approach to 'training' journalists, rather than the development of a traditional academic qualification. What this suggests is that a particular discourse around the attributes, the role and the experiences of professional journalist and journalistic practice have influenced the way journalism is presented as subject of study in tertiary education.

Tertiary Preparation for the Responsibilities of a Professional Journalist

The last major theme emerging from the analysis finally juxtaposes the work of the professional journalist to that of the amateur practitioner. This is illustrated by the university curriculum documents that promote their training as a way to foster ethical and legally responsible decision making as a part of gaining a professional identity as a journalist. For example, La Trobe University's Journalism Research subject teaches students to "evaluate the information on the net, sorting the reliable from the unreliable. They will learn about search engines and search strategies, obtain public records and use databases to research and write stories". This subject is contained with a course that "provides a broad understanding of the operation and regulation of the media and its cultural, social, political and economic role in society." Similarly, a subject offered at Monash University suggests that it fosters critical enquiry so as to maintain "a comprehensive knowledge of the networks of power journalists are engaged with". This suggests that a tertiary study prepares the students for the position of public governance that discourses around journalism suggest as differentiation of professional from amateur practice.

These intertwining discourses of ethical and critical enquiry, legality, and governance dominate understanding of journalism's professional claim to authority as fostered through journalism tertiary education. Much of the analysis of the curriculum documents illustrated that current educational discourses highlight particular impacts on journalistic practice,

particularly within legalistic frameworks. These appeared to be part of efforts to determine what Bacon (2000) suggests is a more accountable method of professional practice; theoretical aspects of journalistic educations offered students an opportunity to question the basic assumptions of journalistic practice, its intentions and its outcomes. Some universities also offered critical examination of the context in which journalistic practice occurs, both political and within legal frameworks (Bacon, 2000). For example, at La Trobe University, a subject entitled “Dilemmas in Journalism: Legal and Ethical Issues” explores “how privacy, freedom of information, professional liability, conflict of interest, copyright and fair dealing, defamation, and confidentiality are dealt with by the law, through journalist codes of practice, and by media institutions. In this unit we will draw on the expertise of legal experts and media professionals”. All of the journalism courses at the five universities surveyed offer a subject about institutional ethics.

Monash University offers two subjects; one ‘media ethics’ subject that appears to be a largely theoretical subject. Nonetheless the university has chosen to frame it around professional principles that would guide journalistic work in industry by focusing on the “areas of professional ethics that govern journalism in Australia and in other countries. Topics include fairness and accuracy, media bias, invasion of privacy, conflict of interest, media stereotypes, self-regulation, and reporting on minorities.” This theme of professional accountability is continued in the Media Law subject which:

covers the areas of law that affect journalists in their everyday work, including defamation, contempt of court, confidentiality, copyright and freedom of information legislation. Students learn the extent of legal freedoms and constraints on the publishing industry and the ways some points of professional ethics and the law might come into conflict”.

This subject is framed by discourses around “the principle of freedom of expression” which reflects the westernized, liberal democratic theoretical principles that often articulate the roles and responsibilities of professional journalists. Professional journalists are thus seen to have rights and responsibilities that are not maintained or understood by those who have not gained professional status. Just as artisan professionals gain elite status through their distinct knowledge of their craft, professional journalists have a unique knowledge of the responsibilities that come with reporting for the public interest. This understanding of journalistic professionalism has been influenced by the promotion of tertiary qualifications by higher education institutions in the historic development of journalistic professional self-identity. Within this discourse, professional journalists are seen as maintaining and engaging with the networks of power that provide governance of the ‘good life’ of the society within which it is situated. This occurs by learning to do the ‘interpretive work’ of a journalist; tertiary education is situated as giving professional attributes to do the practical, ethical and interpretive work that amateur or citizen journalists do not have the knowledge or authority to do.

Conclusion

The analysis of curriculum materials at Victorian universities illustrates that journalism studies very much reflect the discourses of professionalisation that have permeated the

journalism industry. Conversely, the professionalisation agenda so debated within journalism studies can be seen to be influenced by dominant discourse around the attributes, roles and responsibilities that constitute a professional journalist as forwarded by discourses promoting tertiary education as the process of becoming a professional journalist. Journalistic education, with its own influences and agendas, can be seen to shape the way journalism's role and authority is constituted within curriculum and journalism studies. In particular: "Universities as competitors for traffic in merchantable instruction, recognising the importance of the 'industrial arts'" (Miller quoting Veblen, 2008: 221). While this is shown as an aspect of the 'marketing' of a particular version of journalistic identity and practice within curriculum documents, there are also reflections of debates within journalism study around the identity and authority of the journalist in the public sphere. Thus the sphere of influences and myriad changes occurring in the field are reflected by the practice of journalism itself, as well as the institutions and relations that seek, through their own agendas, to have an influence of journalistic professionalism. More broadly the analysis illustrates that further consideration of the internal and external relations through which journalism is socially constituted is called for. The implications of these relations with other institutions and their own discursive agendas actually have a regimenting influence on the constitution of journalistic practice and authority in the public sphere. Furthermore one might suggest, rather than the more generalised discussion of journalism's contribution to public life, the ways in which the actual constitution of journalistic authority itself plays a role in framing and mediating 'public issues' could be focussed on as a method of tracing these influences.

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