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# Swamped: the tsunami media coverage in Banda Aceh

Scott Downman

## Abstract

*This paper examines the media response to the tsunami disaster that devastated parts of Asia and Africa in late 2004 and early 2005. The research aims to evaluate the role of the media from an international development perspective. This approach serves to highlight ethical considerations that should be considered by media organisations when covering catastrophes such as this. Rather than providing a critique of the media coverage, the paper relies on interviews with international development organisations, foreign correspondents and media executives to assess the media coverage of these events. The tsunami disaster was a natural disaster on an unusual but not unprecedented scale, and it is important for media professionals and organisations to consider best practice for covering disasters of any type in the future.*

## Introduction

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster, which affected more than 20 nations in Asia and East Africa, resulted in a massive loss of life and a global outpouring of grief on a scale rarely seen. Powerful images of enormous waves pounding cities around the Indian Ocean rim were screened across the world by the media, inspiring a global relief campaign on a scale never before seen. For example, in Australia, people raised more than \$350 million for the tsunami appeal.

One aspect of disaster media coverage that is rarely considered is the impact international media crews have on crucial resources immediately after a disaster and, ultimately, on the victims of the event. Although there are research centres such as the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, whose purpose it is to provide advice, research and assistance for news crews working in disaster zones, much of the material produced by these organisations is very “journocentric”. For example, the Dart Centre examines and conducts research on the

symptoms and impact of post-traumatic stress disorder on journalists and news crews after a disaster. Advice on issues such as vaccinations and medications is provided. The centre also highlights examples of news stories that reflect best practice in reporting traumatic or violent events. This paper does not aim to dismiss the importance of this to media professionals who cover disasters, but instead attempts to add to this already well-established research platform. Rather than just looking at the journalists' outcomes – that is, the news stories – this paper aims to look at the news gathering techniques and the logistics involved in reporting a disaster. It examines media coverage from an international development perspective. The research found a substantial gap in the literature with regard to journalists covering natural disasters. The research also revealed that many media organisations do not have clearly defined policies on how to approach these types of media events.

Media professionals, journalists, camera operators, sound crews and fixers have an important role in covering these disasters, but a broader picture must be considered that not only results in the news being published but also considers the victims of natural disasters. For example, when news crews arrive in a disaster zone, it is crucial that media professionals are equipped with adequate resources for basic survival. However, as this paper highlights, some basic questions were not addressed by some media organisations:

- ♦ What will the media crews eat?
- ♦ Where will they sleep?
- ♦ Will the presence of international news crews deprive disaster survivors of vital resources?
- ♦ Will journalistic practice hinder rather than help the rebuilding process?

Researching the ways that media professionals considered these questions during the tsunami coverage was not easy. The difficulty in collecting data for this paper and the regular requests for anonymity by media professionals interviewed suggest this is a sensitive research area. The first part of this paper addresses the significance of the research, a survey of literature, the research question, the methodology used to collect the data and the research context. The second part includes data analysis and the implications of this research.

### **Significance of the research**

Kevin Kawamoto (2005) argues that writing about people's pain and suffering is never easy:

It is not a subject that is typically taught in journalism schools, at least not extensively, even though emotional trauma will probably be an unavoidable component of many journalists' future work. (2005, p. 1)

The stark reality is that most journalists will, at some stage in their careers, have to cover a traumatic event. The massive media coverage that was launched in the wake of the tsunami revealed that covering large-scale international disasters can often fall into the hands of relatively inexperienced reporters, camera crews and photographers. The rush to place media professionals on the ground in the hours and days following a natural disaster not only has important impacts on the media professionals' physical and emotional wellbeing, but also on the survivors of the disaster. The other reality that faces media organisations is that the number and scale of global disasters is increasing. The UK Department for International Development (DID), in its report *Disaster risk reduction: a development concern*, states:

The number and seriousness of disasters is increasing, disproportionately affecting poor countries and poor communities. The recorded number of disasters, the number of people they affect and the property losses they cause, have risen dramatically each decade since reliable records began in 1960. (2005, p. 1)

Indicative of the scale of the tsunami disaster is the event's casualty toll. In an average year, natural disasters kill more than 60,000 people globally and affect the lives of about a quarter of a billion (DID, 2005, p. 2), but the "Boxing Day Tsunami" killed almost three times the annual figure in just one event. Given this increasing occurrence of natural disasters, it is important clear strategies are in place for reporting these events. Aid worker Deborah Storie, who has worked extensively with TEAR Australia, argues that a sudden influx of foreign journalists and aid workers can be disastrous if it is uncoordinated and unregulated:

Foreign journalists and aid workers consume scarce resources (water, firewood, electricity, accommodation and office space), making the cost of living soar. (2005, p. 6)

This uncoordinated and unregulated approach epitomises the events in the two weeks after the tsunami hit the northern tip of Sumatra. The approaches adopted by some aid organisations and media outlets resulted in widespread criticism from both parties. For example, journalists who reported from the disaster zone criticised the coordination of the United Nations-led relief effort. On the other hand, some aid agencies criticised the media's response to the disaster, with some branding it nothing more than "helicopter journalism". This paper does not aim to get into a slanging match between conflicting parties; however, the research collected supports Storie's concerns. Kawamoto (2005) says the news media have long been criticised for their insensitive coverage of victims of trauma. Although most media organisations in the United States and Europe have clearly defined policies and protocols for reporting natural disasters, the Australian media coverage of the tsunami disaster in Indonesia revealed that a considered, policy-based approach to international disasters is still emerging in Australia.

Alan Nichols, who coordinated the tsunami appeal for 40 aid agencies in Australia in the months after the tsunami, stated that the media coverage of events from Banda Aceh was unlike any disaster with which he had previously been associated. He says the proximity of Sumatra to foreign journalists meant media organisations “got under the radar” of United Nations norms, which usually control the numbers of journalists reporting from a disaster zone:

In the past it has actually been difficult to get international news crews to cover disasters. In Africa, because of the isolation and cost associated with getting foreign journalists to cover a disaster, most usually choose not to bother. But because Banda Aceh was a relatively inexpensive and quick flight for foreign correspondents it received a massive influx of foreign journalists. (2005)

In the months since the tsunami, it has been difficult to obtain details of the logistics involved in reporting the tsunami from Banda Aceh. There have been difficulties in obtaining data that either support or refute Storie’s concerns that journalists consume scarce resources. But some points are clear. Although the Indonesian Government attempted to regulate the numbers of journalists travelling to the affected Aceh province in the immediate tsunami aftermath by requiring all media to obtain a special “blue book” internal permit, very few actually obtained this permit. Journalists flooded into the province. Journalist Annie Tao (2005) says hundreds were travelling across the northern tip of Sumatra in the fortnight after the tsunami. Correspondent Brett McLeod, who covered the tsunami in Banda Aceh for Australia’s Nine Network, estimated there were at least 500 journalists and news crews in the affected zone (2005). ABC Jakarta correspondent Tim Palmer, the first foreign journalist to arrive in Banda Aceh, along with a news crew from Al Jazeera, in the day after the disaster, estimated there were 300-500 journalists in Banda Aceh at the height of the coverage, about 10 days after the disaster (2005). Several journalists said this massive influx of people had an obvious impact on vital resources of food, water, fuel and available electricity, supplied mostly by generators. Most agreed this impacted on the survivors, who were clearly dazed and traumatised by the events.

In addition, the impact of international news stories indirectly affected the survivors of the tsunami disaster. Sensationalised reports of disease outbreaks had to be corrected by accurate reports in the local media, which scrambled to resume publication of Banda Aceh’s *Serambi* newspaper. Although the threat of disease was a major issue, it was often based more on hearsay than on accurate reporting. The Dart Centre’s 19-point plan on reporting disasters clearly warns against this type of practice. Point 14 in its statement on reporting traumatic news events states:

After a disaster or multiple fatality events, stories do not need added sensation – rely on good, solid, factual journalism and a

healthy dose of sensitivity. (*Suggested ways news personnel can minimise further harm when working with victims and survivors*, 2004)

Covering disasters in foreign contexts is an enormous, complex and important undertaking. Although analysing the stories of foreign correspondents is one way of measuring the proficiency of reporters, this paper aims to move beyond this. In 1998, a three-day inter-country workshop on the role of media and health development, hosted by the World Health Organisation in New Delhi, called on the media to review the standards of emergency and natural disaster reporting (1998). The recommendations from the meeting called for the media to “broaden their coverage to include issues of preparedness and post-disaster rehabilitation” (1998). To this end, this paper endeavours to contribute to journalism practice, with regard to international and natural disaster reporting, by examining issues of preparedness.

Opinions about the media coverage of the December 26, 2004, earthquake and tsunami in Banda Aceh are varied. To document these opinions, this paper relied heavily on internet-based research that included an analysis of weblogs, online newspapers and papers presented to international conferences. Although the research uncovered hundreds of websites devoted to the tsunami disaster, it was clear that an international development approach to reporting large-scale, humanitarian disasters was an emerging concept, with little or no information on this news gathering approach.

## **Methodology**

This paper uses a multi-pronged methodology to address two central research questions: What impact did the presence of international news crews have on crucial aid resources and the victims of the tsunami disaster in Banda Aceh? What logistical support did international news crews use in Banda Aceh? Methods used included:

- ♦ Interviews: Data were collected from 40 interviews with journalists and representatives of aid and development non-government organisations. These extensive interviews provided the basis for addressing the research questions. The interviews were conducted by phone, in person or via the internet. Some journalists who provided information for the interviews requested anonymity, as they feared a possible backlash from the media organisations that employ them. Interviews were conducted with both print and broadcast journalists. Interviews were sought with all major non-government organisation aid providers, including World Vision, Oxfam, Red Cross and Care. In addition, interviews were conducted with “smaller” aid agencies, including a coalition of 40 aid agencies in Australia known as Co-Aid.

- ♦ Blog reviews: Data were collated from a collection of weblogs created by international journalists who reported on the tsunami disaster in Banda Aceh. This facilitated the collection of candid reflections from foreign correspondents. These blogs were posted on websites such as <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu> and included insights from journalists from regional newspapers such as the *South China Morning Post*, *The Jakarta Post*, *Bangkok Post* and *Serambi* and reporters working for international news agencies and newspapers such as Reuters, BBC, CNN, the *Chicago Tribune* and *The Seattle Times*. A content analysis of the information posted on these blogs was used.
- ♦ Newspaper analysis: News reports in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster were analysed. This involved articles from Australian and South-East Asian newspapers including the *Bangkok Post*, *The Jakarta Post* and *South China Morning Post*. A content analysis of these news reports was used.

### Research context

The coverage of natural disasters in foreign, ethnically diverse contexts is difficult and complex. According to Care International's Ron Fosker:

People are touched in many ways by a disaster, but it takes a special kind of person to be moved by the plight of people dying of preventable diseases, malnutrition or sheer neglect in the world's poorest countries. And it takes a special kind of journalist to make a story out of it. (Has disaster reporting reached a turning point?, 2005, p. 3)

Although the term "disaster" is regularly used in the media, it is important to define what the term means. DID defines a disaster as:

A severe disruption to a community's survival and livelihood systems, resulting from people's vulnerability to hazard impacts and involving loss of life and/or property on a scale which overwhelms their capacity to cope unaided. (2005, p. 2)

The devastation in Indonesia and around the Indian Ocean rim graphically fits this definition. Because natural disasters often affect large numbers of people, property and infrastructure, they can be extremely complex events to report. South East Asia Press Alliance (SEAPA) executive director Roby Alampay says despite the complexities and difficulties associated with reporting disasters, the attitude and professionalism of journalists contributes greatly to the effectiveness of overall news reports. Alampay argues that haste, ignorance, laziness, cultural insensitivity and a "formulaic" approach are the main obstacles to effective press coverage of disasters (2005, p. 2). The coverage of high-

profile disaster response operations can also reinforce public misconceptions about poverty and disasters, overwhelm traumatised societies and make sustainable development more difficult (Storie, 2005, p. 6). The coverage of the Banda Aceh natural disaster provides an ideal case study to test how lazy and ignorant journalism can indeed be a hindering factor in disaster coverage.

In the days immediately after the tsunami disaster, organisations such as the International News Safety Institute (INSI) issued statements regarding minimum provision requirements for journalists travelling to tsunami-affected areas. INSI issued five main warnings including:

- ♦ Be self-sufficient in health matters to avoid adding to the problem;
  - ♦ Immediate disease risks will arise from contaminated food and water;
  - ♦ The risks from insect-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever will increase;
  - ♦ The above disease risks are present in the region even under ideal circumstances;
  - ♦ Do not be distracted from basic precautions such as road safety.
- (2005)

INSI highlighted self-sufficiency as the number one priority for all foreign correspondents. Its official statement says:

Medical resources in the affected regions are already overwhelmed. It is vital to be well-prepared and fully supplied with basic medicines and personal protective measures, to avoid diverting essential local services from the enormous task in hand. (2005)

The minimum standards promoted by INSI include a call for all media professionals to have a complete range of vaccinations before travelling to affected areas; to have a complete medical kit with sterile needles, insect repellents, mosquito nets, water purifying tablets, antiseptic hand wipes, gastro preventative tablets, painkillers and basic antibiotics; to have a supply of canned and packaged food with a supply of water and a supply of clean cutlery and a multi-purpose tool such as a pocket knife (2005). The preliminary research conducted in this paper has revealed that few journalists met these minimum standards. In fact, some journalists interviewed said several media crews arrived in Banda Aceh with nothing more than a credit card that was useless in the conditions.

### **Research findings**

The data collected revealed three clear shortfalls in reporting from the Banda Aceh disaster zone. These can be summarised as ill-prepared disaster journalism, immature and ignorant disaster journalism and ill-considered disas-



ter journalism. According to Nichols, it was as if some of the journalists and media organisations had “gone mad”:

I think it was a combination of factors. It is traditionally a quiet time of the year in terms of the news and then all of sudden we had this huge story and no one was certain just how big it was going to be. The editors and news directors in Australia knew it was close to Australia so they threw all their resources at it without really taking much time to think about the logistics. They wanted to get there and get the story but I don't think they took the time to think about their journalists, let alone the survivors. (2005)

Reuters journalist Mark Jones supports Nichols' observation about the timing of the disaster.

It filled the Christmas news void and caught the public and news executives at their most charitable. Its focus – a tidal wave of epic proportions – and its location – not some unfamiliar African state but the beaches of South-East Asia known to millions of holiday-makers – helped catch the public imagination. (Jones, 2005)

Although the tsunami disaster was described by most media organisations as logistically the toughest event they had ever covered, there were clearly several issues in the news-gathering strategies used on the ground.

### **Ill-prepared disaster journalism**

Tony Ritchie, who was Australia's Seven Network's news director at the time of the tsunami, confirmed that journalists from the network were “in a race” to get the first pictures from Banda Aceh:

It was a race to get to Banda Aceh because it was believed it had borne the brunt of the disaster. In some cases the news crews actually arrived in Banda Aceh before the NGOs and the international aid effort. If they weren't there before, they were arriving at the same time. (2005)

Ritchie says the disaster occurred on the Sunday and the first group of journalists and camera crews was despatched from Adelaide by Tuesday and on the ground at Medan, Sumatra, by Wednesday.

Some (of the journalists and camera crews) had undergone “terror training” but most were unaware of the significance of what they were actually flying into. (2005)

Ritchie's summary of the process by which the Seven Network journalists and camera crews were despatched does not demonstrate a considered or well-

planned strategy. It indicates one in which haste and ignorance played a large part. Ritchie said only two of the 16 journalists and camera crew sent by the network had experience in covering large-scale disasters. This type of response, characterised by haste, ignorance and cultural naivete, is the type of media coverage to be avoided. One journalist said some print journalists arrived in Banda Aceh alone, with no Indonesian language skills, no translator, no money, no laptop computer, no satellite phone and no supplies of clean food and water.

Despite the ill-prepared approach adopted by some media organisations, there were also some fine examples of considered news gathering and reporting. Reuters did not send any of its correspondents to Banda Aceh without first putting them through extensive survival training (2005, p. 5). Reuter's Asia managing editor, Chaitanya Kalbag (2005), says the news agency has a comprehensive disaster preparedness strategy for journalists, including Hostile Environment Training Courses:

They prepare Reuters journalists for covering conflict situations and include training in how to identify different firearms, cope with abductors and provide first aid. The basic rule for Reuters' journalists is "no story is worth your life". (Kalbag, 2005)

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation demonstrated a well-planned approach to reporting the tsunami disaster from Banda Aceh. Its Jakarta correspondent, who arrived in Banda Aceh the day after the tsunami, was equipped with a medical kit, a DV camera, two laptops, an ISDN satellite phone, 12-volt rechargeable batteries, antibiotics, food and water supplies, water purification tablets and fuel (Palmer, 2005). By the end of the first week of reporting from Aceh, the ABC had ferried a convoy of three trucks to Banda Aceh containing satellite dishes, foodstuffs, medical kits, water, diesel, fuel and a Swedish SAS officer. An ABC reporter said they were completely "self-sufficient" and were respected by survivors and, as a consequence, by the locals:

The conditions were appalling but we did it very well. At the height we had 14 journalists and camera crews, with about six to seven supporting us. It was tough but we did as best we could. A lot of the international crews were envious. (Palmer, 2005)

Melbourne-based journalist Brett McLeod says the Nine Network also trialled the use of a health/security consultant to assist with the network's coverage of the disaster from Banda Aceh:

For the first time I'm aware of, Nine sent over a health/security consultant to stay with us. He was an ex-SAS medic – carrying a full kit of medicines. It's a luxury we don't normally have – and he was a saving grace in preventing illness; making sure we took our tablets and used antiseptic on our hands before eat-

ing. Ultimately Nine had a total of 20 people go through while I was there and no one had anything worse than diahorrea. (McLeod, 2005)

McLeod, who arrived in Banda Aceh on December 29, 2004, says logistics was a major component of the Nine Network preparation. It is important to note that both the Nine Network and the ABC are members of the International News Safety Institute and that they paid heed to the warnings and guidelines issued by INSI.

### **Immature disaster journalism**

McLeod claims that because of the massive build-up of international media in Banda Aceh in the week after the tsunami and the varied knowledge media crews had about disease prevention and hygiene in a disaster zone, things quickly became unsafe:

As the Governor's hall filled up with international media, we had to find alternative accommodation, as it was literally unhealthy to stay there. We rented a nearby house, effectively moving in with the family. They cooked for us and washed our clothes. (McLeod, 2005)

McLeod's reflections were supported by other journalists who arrived in Banda Aceh. Some were surprised that completely inexperienced journalists had been sent to a massive disaster with no training. One journalist, who did not want to be named, said it was alarming how many journalists and news crews arrived from Australia and elsewhere with a complete lack of knowledge about basic hygiene and survival skills. He said:

We were among the first on the scene in Banda Aceh and set up base at the Governor's mansion. It had become the emergency control centre for the region and it was where a lot of the NGOs were based. In the first few days it wasn't too bad, but there were lots of bodies out the front. But by the end of the first week it was clearly not a safe place to be. (Unnamed journalist, 2005)

He said as hundreds of media crews arrived, many became focused on getting the story and meeting deadlines, rather than looking after their own, or their colleagues', personal health.

The place became a real health risk. There were bodies everywhere and journalists would go out to cover a story and come back to the mansion and not even take their shoes off before coming inside. We were sleeping on the floor and they were walking on sewage, bodies and then coming back inside with the same shoes on. You could imagine how risky it was. When

I asked them what they were doing and if they'd had any training in this type of thing a lot of them said they hadn't and this was their first overseas gig. I couldn't believe it. (Unnamed journalist, 2005)

This lack of training, experience and disaster understanding is the kind of news gathering approach that can inhibit effective press coverage of disasters. Save The Children's Laura Conrad, who was involved in the Banda Aceh relief operation, said her main criticism of the media coverage from Indonesia was "ignorant" journalism. She says this immature approach to reporting disasters resulted in journalists requesting stereotypical stories.

... Unless a child was orphaned, they (the media) weren't really interested. Being orphaned in the tsunami is clearly very traumatic; losing a parent and living through the tsunami is also very traumatic. But for some ... unless you were a child who had lost both parents and your house and you didn't know where any of your relatives were any more, then you weren't really valid material for the media. (*Covering the tsunami*, 2005, p. 14).

The Red Cross's Maude Froberg (*Acehkita*, 2005) supports Conrad's claims that the media adopted a victim-oriented approach. Local Banda Aceh photographer Bedu Saini, who captured dramatic images of the tsunami, was an example of how local people were "hunted down" by foreign media. Saini, who lost his mother and two of his children in the disaster, said:

Everybody was asking about my picture (listing CNN, BBC and others). They were looking for me, asking about my family, but I was still so traumatised. (Koch, 2005a)

### Ill-considered disaster journalism

Criticism of the media coverage in Banda Aceh goes beyond the types of stories journalists were seeking to cover. Nichols argues that journalists who do not take adequate provisions of food, medication and water to disasters ultimately impact on the effectiveness of aid organisations and the survivors.

Normally in a disaster situation the numbers of journalists coming to the disaster zone are limited. The United Nations controls the flow. But in Banda Aceh it took more than two weeks for the UN to set up road blocks controlling the people coming in and out of Aceh. This created an unusual situation where literally hundreds of journalists flooded in. (Nichols, 2005)

Storie argues that such chaotic situations create new risks the survivors have never had to encounter, including distorted local economies and dependence on

outsiders. The result was that many news crews “freeloaded” off aid agencies or anyone they could for food and equipment. Perhaps one of the more alarming consequences was that ill-prepared media crews sought to scrounge resources from the devastated offices of the *Serambi* newspaper, which lost 51 of its staff in the disaster (Simon, 2005). The newspaper was scrambling to resume publication in an effort to correct misreporting and sensationalism by foreign media. *Serambi* journalist Nurdin Hasan says the paper was published just four days after the tsunami to prevent cycles of misinformation from causing panic among the survivors. He says that as a consequence of news reports from outsiders, many people fled Aceh, fearing they would die from cholera or the area would be hit by another tsunami. Hasan adds:

The paper attacked the issues and published reports with accurate information to help readers find strength in the midst of so much chaos and fear. We interviewed experts with UN agencies and the people came back. (Koch, 2005b)

The editorial secretary of *Serambi* said:

There were many rumours buzzing, many even caused anxiety, like a second tsunami or an outbreak of disease. We felt like we had to immediately be available again for the Acehnese as we were the only daily here and we had to keep the people calm as none of the rumours were facts. (Hotland, 2005)

The pressure placed on local newspaper staff by foreign media eager to use their facilities was a further burden to these survivors, many of whom were suffering post-traumatic stress disorder.

Though their resources were incredibly limited, the staff also offered logistical support to the influx of foreign journalists arriving to cover the horrific tragedy. (Koch, 2005b)

This hindered the capacity of *Serambi* to produce its daily newspaper, with the operations of the newspaper based in a temporary office and run by petrol-fuelled generators. One of the paper’s photographers said:

There was a long line of reporters queuing up to file. The paper used a generator to run its operations but, at the time, lines for scarce gasoline supplies wrapped around the block. (Koch, 2005)

If foreign media crews had been equipped with basic resources, the emotional and physical stress on the local journalists, themselves survivors, could have been substantially reduced. The pressure from foreign journalists was not limited to the local Acehnese journalists. One reporter says foreign media who did not bring food to the disaster zone bought large quantities of available food, fruit and vegetables at inflated prices. He said:

Even if the locals had wanted to buy some of the food available they wouldn't have been able to afford it because sellers were targeting the foreign media who were paying high prices. This had to have an impact on the victims and the survivors. We saw a lot of the survivors scrounging for food wherever they could while the foreign journalists who didn't bring any supplies with them tried to grab all available food. It was everyone for themselves.

This type of ill-considered disaster reporting clearly supports Storie's argument concerning the impact a massive influx of foreign media can have on the supply of resources and the survivors in the aftermath of a disaster. It also emphasises the need for media organisations to consider the survivors before the desire for an "exclusive" when news of a disaster breaks.

### **Conclusion**

Media professionals and organisations displayed different approaches to news gathering from the disaster zone of Banda Aceh. While some news crews displayed understanding and care in their reporting of events, others displayed a complete lack of understanding of the complexities of reporting disasters. This paper has highlighted that in disaster reporting there is more to consider than just the news story. The victims of disasters and the logistical support journalists use are crucial in minimising harm to the victims of disasters, and media organisations need to implement policies and behave in a way to prevent "help not being helpful". More research is needed to ensure the irresponsible and insensitive aspects of media coverage evident in Banda Aceh are identified and eliminated in future disaster reporting.

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