



# Reporters as Mr. Gates: Exploration of Personal and Institutional Factors Regarding Prospects and Challenges of Environmental Reporting

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## Abstract

*The media plays a vital role in raising awareness, shaping environmental discourse, humanizing ecological issues, and inspiring positive action. Given the global significance and sensitivity of environmental challenges, media professionals—particularly environmental reporters are expected to carry out their responsibilities with greater responsibility, objectivity, and insight. This requires a clear understanding of environmental issues and a strong foundation of knowledge. As advocates for environment, reporters can make more meaningful and impactful contributions when they are well-informed and up to date. In this regard, the role of the parent media organization is crucial in providing the necessary support, training, and resources. Based on the interview method, this study explores the awareness of Climate Change and related issues among Pakistani reporters and its effect on their professional performance as advocates of environmental issues. It also documents the role of institutional support (specifically from government and media organizations) in this regard. Personal interests and concerns were found to play a more significant role in environmental reporting than any other factor. Both the government and parent organizations were reported to be less supportive than the severity of the issue warrants. The participants identified several factors that influence their role as environmental journalists. These included a general lack of awareness about the seriousness of environmental issues, restrictive editorial policies, prevailing media practices, the marginalization of environmental reporting (as it is not treated as a dedicated beat), and the framing of environment-related events and issues.*

**Keywords:** Environmental reporting, Gate keeping, Institutional Support, ecological issues.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid innovations and expansion in new scientific breakthroughs have taken humans into a new age today. While technological developments have been a boon for humanity, it has its devastating effect as well. In such a tantalizing scenario, there is an urgent need to create awareness on environmental issues among the masses.

Journalists are instrumental in forming public perception about climate change because they function as the gatekeepers of scientific knowledge; therefore, they need to have fundamental knowledge on the environment as well as an understanding of climate science (Schäfer and Painter, 2021). Understanding climate change as an issue is crucial in journalism because it enables journalists to accurately cover and educate the public on one of the most critical issues facing the world today. Understanding the science from the climate change phenomenon, its causes, effects, and how it operates enables a journalist to unravel the truth concerning government as well as corporate operations, to fight misinformation, to illustrate dangers, and outline potential solutions. The well informed journalists dealing with climate reporting do not merely create awareness but also catalyze essential public dialogue and action.

Climate change knowledge is essential to journalism because it provides journalists with the tools to communicate complex scientific information in a precise, clear and engaging way. Climate change is not only a scientific issue, but also a social, economic and political one. This makes it a complex topic that requires well informed, nuanced reporting. Journalists who understand the basic science can better identify reliable sources, accurately interpret data, and challenge misleading claims or misinformation. This is particularly important in an era where climate denial and disinformation campaigns continue to influence public opinion. In addition, well informed journalism can illuminate the human dimensions of climate change, such as its impact on vulnerable groups, and share stories of innovation, resilience and policy responses.

Journalists play a key role in translating complex scientific information into understandable narratives to promote public engagement and influence decision making. The understanding of multidimensionality of climate change is, therefore, essential for all sectors of society, especially those shaping public awareness and responding to climate change.

### 1.1 Pakistan and climate change

Pakistan is currently grappling with an escalating climate crisis that requires urgent and comprehensive action. Despite its low greenhouse gas emissions, the country remains particularly vulnerable to the devastating impacts of climate change. The rising temperatures are causing more frequent and intense heatwaves, while erratic rainfall patterns are causing increasingly severe floods and persistent droughts (Aziz, Naseeb, & Rashid, 2024). The accelerated glacier melt and the resulting sea level rise pose serious longterm risks to water sources, agriculture, and coastal communities. EPIplacedPakistan as the 169th ranking country with exponential levels of pollution. The Amnesty International also took note of the

rapid degradation of environmental health in the country. In 2019 its members called out the Government of Pakistan in this regard, declaring the hazardous environment a violation of human rights.

These environmental changes not only threaten Pakistan's ecosystems but also exacerbate social challenges such as poverty, health issues and forced migration. The urgent strategic planning and international cooperation are essential to build resilience and protect vulnerable population from the worsening impacts of climate change.

Pakistan is currently grappling with the very real effects of climate change, which are severely affecting agriculture, infrastructure, public health, and the economy. Catastrophic floods in 2022 vividly demonstrated the country's vulnerability and led to widespread destruction and the displacement of millions of people. According to the World Bank (2022), these floods caused economic losses of more than \$30 billion and a 0.9% decline in the agricultural sector's GDP. The floods also took a heavy toll on human lives: more than 1,700 people died and more than 33 million people were affected (UNICEF, 2022).

## **1.2 Climate change and Pakistan's Media**

The urgency for climate action in Pakistan is great, and the media can play a central role in raising awareness and driving action by providing accurate and timely information about climate change impacts, mitigation measures and adaptation strategies. The media can empower citizens to demand action and make informed decisions. In addition, investigative journalism can expose unsustainable practices and advocate for policies that prioritize climate resilience and environmental protection.

However, research shows that media coverage of climate change, while important, is insufficient and often missing. Pakistani media often prioritizes political issues over environmental ones, resulting in insufficient public awareness of the social impacts of climate change. Journalists face challenges such as organizational constraints and lack of audience engagement, which hinder comprehensive climate coverage. There is an urgent need for the media to adjust priorities and allocate more resources to environmental news to promote public understanding and action (Shahzad & Ahmad, 2025).

Khan & Hanif, (2025) also found media coverage as being insufficient, despite the increasing frequency of climate-related events in Pakistan. They proposed the application of Agenda setting theory to guide public perception and promote informed discussions to improve climate literacy. The study supports the scientist's advocacy of active participation in climate news coverage and encourage collaboration among the media, civil society, and policymakers to effectively address the climate crisis.

The need for climate action in Pakistan is urgent, and the media is crucial in raising awareness and encouraging action. Studies show that while media coverage of climate change is important, it is often inadequate and lacks the depth

(Khan, Idrees, Shakoor, & Khan, 2024). Pakistani media frequently emphasizes isolated events like floods or heat waves, failing to connect these incidents to the larger issue of long-term climate change (Umber, Chaudhary, & Latif, 2023). Additionally, climaterelated reporting often lacks scientific accuracy or thorough analysis due to a shortage of trained environmental journalists and limited institutional backing (Hussain, Agha, & Khan, 2023). Often, media narratives place blame on external factors while overlooking the role of local actors, which diminishes public involvement and advocacy for policy changes (Saeed, Hussain, & Riaz, 2023).

This communication gap highlights the necessity for more proactive, evidence based, and locally relevant climate journalism to enhance public understanding and support effective policy measures.

This study builds upon these foundational theories to investigate reporters as active gatekeepers, examining how their individual judgments, institutional pressures, and socio-political contexts shape the news that ultimately reaches audiences.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Despite increasing climate-related challenges in Pakistan, environmental journalism remains undiscovered and less prioritized within mainstream media. The existing literature points to limited coverage, inconsistent framing, and a general lack of institutional support for climate reporting. Moreover, journalistic practices are often shaped by commercial pressures, audience interests, and political priorities, which tend to marginalize sustained environmental narratives. These gaps in the media's climate engagement highlight the need to investigate the structural, professional, and individual-level factors that shape environmental reporting in Pakistan. Therefore, this study aims to critically examine how climate change is covered within Pakistani media institutions by addressing the following research questions:

1. Do journalists' interest in environmental issues and their educational or professional background in environmental science affect their professional tasks?
2. What is the specific professional, logistical, and structural challenges faced by journalists in Pakistan when pursuing and reporting on environmental issues?
3. What is the nature of organizational support—both editorial and institutional—provided to environmental journalists in Pakistan, and how does its presence or absence influence coverage?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Climate change and associated potential threats have gained attention of stakeholders all over the world and scholarly community is not an exception. Considerable amount of literature on Climate change is available including its effects on entire ecosystem. The studies have highlighted how rapid innovations

in scientific breakthroughs and technological advancements beside leading humankind into a new age, have also caused pressing concerns like environmental degradation (Pegu, 2017a). While environmental issues have the potential to generate significant headlines, current media coverage often fails to reflect the severity of these risks, leading to disconnect between public attention and the resources allocated to tackle them (Graham & Dziuban, 1996). Many people do not give attention to climate issues as their responsibility, often because these concerns are perceived as distant or irrelevant. However, climate change has become a global concern (Craig, 1995). Despite the critical environmental challenges in South Asia, the region has received limited attention from media and environmental scholars (Acharya & Noronha, 2010). Researcher have been interested in exploring how media shaped and affected peoples' attitudes and understanding on environmental issues and the factors that influence media coverage and of environment. One such study examined the role of media in environmental communication and the social construction and interpretation of such news reports, the factors that influence media coverage and promotion of environment (Uttam Kr Peg, 2021).

Agenda setting role of media has been a special concern with regards to environmental reporting. The researches highlight how the public, media, and policymakers shape and prioritize issues, with media playing a key role in setting the agenda and driving the environmental debate. (Muathe & Mogambi, 2025; Westerhoff & Juhola, 2012; Vedlitz, et al, 2011; Pralle S.B, 2009).

In order to address the nation's environmental issues, different initiatives at governmental level such as launching the Clean and Green Pakistan movement in 2018(Ministry of Climate Change, 2018) have also been taken. However, despite a consensus on human-driven climate change, there is a great deal of polarization in climate science, with different stakeholders including scientists, business executives, legislators, and non-governmental organizations to influence public opinion (Anderson, 2009). According to Hingorjo and Memon (2019), journalism's function in covering climate change is intimately linked to elite networks, national political agendas, and influential sources. Transnational networks of scientists and activists are calling on journalists to abandon their neutral stance and embrace more cooperative, advocacy-driven strategies as climate change becomes a permanent problem (Eide & Kunelius, 2020). As a result of this change, journalists must work with a variety of stakeholders, develop their climate literacy, and adopt a relational approach to professional authority. Furthermore, cultural, economic, historical, and conflicting interests all play a role in the social construction of environmental issues (Jakku et al. 2009). Despite obstacles like a lack of funding and training, decision-makers and policymakers are keen to learn about climate change adaptation (Liu and associates2016). Sustainability reporting frequently ignores the knowledge of important process participants (Larrinaga and Adams 2007). Curran (2010) contends that there is a crisis in the industrial model of journalism and suggests greater interaction with

non-professional journalists. Berglez (2008) highlights how media logics can reduce the impact of coverage of climate change. Relationship between science and the media is complicated by the changing nature of journalism (Witsen and Takahashi, 2018). Because of long-standing media practices, journalists find it difficult to report on climate change (Graham and Dziuban, 1996). Understanding the impact of mediated communication is essential since the change in environmental communication has changed political power structures (Hansen, 2018). The need to draw attention to the lack of digital literacy among local journalists (Sharif and Medvecky, 2018). While Brüggemann (2017) contends that journalists from a variety of beats are likely to cover climate-related issues. The research on media and climate change in Pakistan is scarce, according to Kim (2011), with few studies concentrating on content analysis (Wurff & J. W. 2012).

The media is crucial in influencing people's awareness of environmental issues, but it's also vital to consider whether it encourages environmental indifference, how it conveys environmental concerns, and the difficulties in reporting on them (Pegu, 2017b). Our study attempts to answer the questions raised. Studies have focused how structural, organizational, and cultural limitations compromise Pakistani environmental journalism, curtailing its credibility and visibility. By showing how prestige hierarchies, resource scarcity, and commercial pressures sideline the environmental beat, the study highlights larger issues of science journalism in the Global South (Qusien & Robbins, 2024).

The role of parent organization should not be undermined while studying a phenomenon like beat reporting. Institutional support has been identified as a key to successful journalistic practice, specifically in crisis like situations. This also includes the catastrophes caused by the climate change. A study on COVID-19 found that poor organizational support increased stress levels among U.S. journalists during the pandemic, and it affected younger and female reporters at disproportionate levels. (Hoak, 2021). These findings emphasize the importance of institutional support during crisis reporting and recommends equating support structures to lower stress and greater commitment.

While most of the literature on environmental reporting has addressed general issues, relatively few studies have examined more focused topics such as solution-centered reporting. This gap is significant because understanding how climate solutions are reported reveals how journalists strive to balance inspirational hope with critical thinking .While reporters aim to empower their audience through performative narratives, their capacity to do so is often constrained by the complex nature of climate solutions, limited resources and systematic weaknesses within the journalism profession. The findings underscore both the transformative promise and the pragmatic challenges of integrating solution-based approaches into climate reporting (Troy, 2025).

A substantial body of literature on environmental issues has examined the role of

media coverage in raising awareness and shaping public perceptions and attitudes. The researchers such as Peru (2017) have focused on how media contributes to environmental communication, as well as the social construction and interpretation of environmental news. Additional studies have explored the factors that influence media coverage and the promotion of environmental topics (Uttam, 2021). Furthermore, research has highlighted the impact of media in shaping public opinion, influencing policy decisions, and fostering environmental awareness (Gulyan, 2023). Most studies were conducted in Agenda setting and Framing perspective. The systematic studies, specifically on coverage of environmental issues, lack the perspective of journalists/reporters as gatekeepers. To fill this theoretical gap, the present study seeks the self-perceptions of reporters as gatekeepers of environmental issues.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in Gatekeeping Theory, first introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1943. This theory posits that information passes through various checkpoints before reaching the public, with certain individuals or groups—known as gatekeepers—deciding what content is selected, altered, or omitted. In the context of this research, particular attention is given to reporters as key gatekeepers in the news production process. The reporters play a pivotal role in shaping the narratives that reach audiences by choosing which events to cover, how to frame them, and what information to include or exclude. Their decisions significantly influence public perception, making their role central to understanding media dynamics and information flow. Although Kurt Lewin formally introduced the concept of gatekeeping, sociologist Robert Park had already used a related idea in 1922, referring to rejected news as having been “killed.” There is an enormous amount of news ‘killed’ every day”, Robert reported.

Another concept related to gatekeeping had already been introduced by a journalism professor, David Manning White in 1950. He used the term “Mr. Gates” to describe the role of news editors. Mr. Gates, according to White’s study had admitted to preferring political news to other types of news, and there was a strong emphasis on Human Interest Stories (Neuberger, 2023).

Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos, describe gatekeeping as a process of creating limited number of messages from a large amount of information into the limited number of messages, through the process of selection and crafting i.e., deciding the content and nature of the messages. Media performs the role to disseminate this information to people every day (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Therefore, individuals within news organizations function as gatekeepers, allowing certain stories to pass through the system while excluding others. In doing so, they limit, control, and shape the public’s understanding of the broader reality of events (DeFleur & De Fleur, 2022).

Together, these perspectives illustrate that gatekeeping is not merely an abstract theory but a tangible process enacted daily by journalists, particularly reporters. Reporters are often the first point of contact between raw events and the structured narratives presented to the public. Their decisions on what to report, how to frame stories, and which voices to include or exclude play a critical role in constructing social reality through the media.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Reporters assigned to the environment beat—many of whom primarily worked on other beats and were given environmental reporting as an additional responsibility—were interviewed to document their perceptions of their self-assessed climate literacy, the challenges they face in reporting environmental issues, and the professional support they receive from their parent organizations and colleagues. In total 10 reporters were interviewed. To maintain ethical standards, the identities of the reporters were made anonymous by replacing their names with alphabetic letters. The selection of participants was based on convenience and sampling was purposive. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thoroughly reviewed. The researchers identified codes through careful and repeated reading of the transcripts. The fundamental principles of RTA i.e. deep engagement, transparency, and reflexivity were consciously practiced. Themes were generated from the codes and discussed in the theoretical perspective of gate keeping.

### 4. FINDINGS

**Table 1: Theme**

Codes	Themes	Subthemes
Climate change is a serious issue damaging our planet.	Awareness (Climate Literacy)	Importance of environmental issues and their reporting
Journalists, I believe we are aware of the importance of environmental reporting and are willing to cover it.		
I understand the importance of in-depth knowledge for effective reporting.		
I've taken a specialized environmental course from an Australian university and worked with WWF, which solidified my understanding of this vast and fascinating field.		Personal interest /concern in Environmental issues

My personal interest is in biodiversity, climate change, and environmental issues.		
Climate change is a particular interest of mine.		
Our organization holds annual workshops and trainings on environmental issues.	Organizational Role	Supportive
While we don't organize such trainings ourselves, we provide opportunities for reporters to participate in workshops and trainings offered nationally or internationally by various NGOs.		
While VOA may not directly fund environmental reporting, they do highlight strong stories we produce.		
VOA doesn't hold trainings or workshops on environmental issues.		Non-Supportive
Financial support isn't always from your organization.		
National media organizations don't typically organize workshops or training for journalists on environmental issues.		
While our organization asks for reports, they don't offer any training.		
Environmental reporting in our media is often relegated to an additional beat and seen as unimportant.	Treatment	Environment as a Beat
Environmental issues are not considered a dedicated beat in our media landscape.		
The environment is still not considered a separate beat.		
They mostly focus on current weather or immediate weather effects like heavy rain or floods. Unfortunately, the bigger picture is ignored.		Not considered a separate beat

Environmental issues are treated as weather events. Environmental issues like climate change and the environmental crisis are often relegated to weather reports.		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>During Urban floods, reports on people enjoying weather are made.</li> <li>Narrative on Government decision to ban on plastic bags was built negative. Instead of raising public awareness on plastic's health hazards and environmental damage, the focus is on raids, confiscating bags, and media publicity stunts.</li> </ul>		Framing
Real information and public issues are not discussed on mainstream media.		
Special reports, investigative reporting and in-depth discussions remain limited.		General
Your report might wait for several days for screen time, only to be shown when there's nothing else important to fill the slot.		
English Press gives more coverage to environmental issues as compared to Urdu Press and Electronic Media.		
National media tends to follow trends, focusing on a single issue at a time.	Factors	
The media prioritizes advertising and financial gains, neglecting environmental issues.		
Such coverage may not always align with an organization's priorities.		
Low Climate-literacy among Editors/ Bureau chiefs etc		

Journalists in electronic media face immense pressure as they must cover multiple stories and their own beat daily.		
National Media Policies are unclear.		Government related Reasons
Environmental concerns are often dismissed as conspiracy theories, even by officials in environmental departments. Ministry of Climate, PDMA and NDMA practice reactive approach.		
Facts are kept hidden. Official statements contradict with reality.		
Journalists, I believe, are aware of the importance of environmental reporting and are willing to cover it.	Personal Interest/Concern	Journalists' Interest in Climate Change
Climate change is a particular interest of mine.		
I've taken a specialized environmental course from an Australian university and worked with WWF, which solidified my understanding of this vast and fascinating field.		Reporter's Personal Environmental Background
My personal interest is in biodiversity, climate change, and environmental issues.		
Environmental reporting in our media is often relegated to an additional beat and seen as unimportant.	Environment as a Beat	Marginalization of Environmental Reporting
Environmental issues are not considered a dedicated beat in our media landscape.		
National media tends to follow trends, focusing on a single issue at a time.	Challenges	Following Trends and Sensationalism
They tend to follow trends, where one channel airing a specific story prompts others to do the same.		
We may face limitations or even be denied permission to pursue the story.		Difficulty Pursuing Environmental

		Stories
Journalists are somewhat left to tackle these issues on their own.		
They mostly focus on current weather or immediate weather effects like heavy rain or floods.	Media Priorities	Focus on Current Events and Weather
Financial Considerations Over Environmental Issues		
Such coverage may not always align with an organization's priorities.		

## 5. DISCUSSION

These findings, when viewed through the lens of gatekeeping theory, highlight how both individual agency and institutional structures influence the flow of environmental news. While reporters show awareness and personal commitment to climate issues particularly those with a vested interest, organizational gatekeeping practices often restrict the depth and breadth of environmental reporting. Media institutions frequently fail to establish dedicated environmental beats, but instead delegate coverage to reporters from unrelated domains, a practice shaped by political and economic interests. This structural gatekeeping results in limited institutional support, minimal training, and editorial prioritization that favors sensational, event-based reporting (e.g., floods, heat waves) over long-term, scientifically grounded climate narratives. These findings reinforce the idea that media content is selectively filtered rather than objectively representative, particularly when it comes to complex, systemic issues like climate change.

The following section discusses the identified themes in the context of literature review and theoretical perspective;

### A. Awareness

Reporters are not only aware of climate-related environmental issues but also recognize the importance of climate literacy in performing their professional duties more efficiently and effectively. However, Climate literacy was notably higher among reporters who had a personal interest in the subject and took the initiative to deepen their understanding of environmental issues.

### ***B. Organizational Support***

Most media organizations do not treat the environment as a distinct and specialized beat. Instead, reporters from other areas such as feature writing, health, or weather are often assigned to cover environmental stories. This suggests that media organizations either fail to recognize the significance and potential threats of environmental issues, or they deliberately avoid focusing on them due to political and economic interests or pressures. The representation of climate issues in media is frequently influenced by political and economic agendas, which further limits coverage of environmental topics (Nazeer et al., 2023).

DW Urdu service was the only organization that was reported to have a department specifically dedicated to the environment and conducts annual workshops and training sessions focused on environmental issues. These events feature international trainers from Germany and other countries. It also provides specialized training for journalists in Pakistan to enhance their understanding and reporting of environmental topics. Others must make personal efforts to attend relevant conferences and seminars organized by international organizations. While these organizations do offer grants to journalists for producing special reports, the competition for such opportunities is intense. This issue was also highlighted in a previous study which reported that climate related reporting often lacks scientific accuracy or thorough analysis due to a shortage of trained environmental journalists and limited institutional backing (Hussain et al., 2023). Other international media organizations like VOA, though do not arrange opportunities for the professional growth of reporters, they, however, support them by giving prominent coverage to their reports on environmental issues. This support was not reported by any participant working in any national media organization. Financial support was also found missing as an organizational support. The media organizations though expect their reporters to work on environmental stories, but do not provide any financial support in this regard.

### ***C. Editorial Treatment***

Media organizations tend to focus primarily on current weather conditions or immediate effects such as heavy rainfall and flooding. Unfortunately, this narrow focus often overlooks the broader environmental context. These findings are consistent with Umber et al. (2023) who reported that Pakistani media frequently emphasizes isolated events like floods or heat waves, failing to connect these incidents to the larger issue of long-term climate change. Driven by advertising and financial interests, media outlets frequently neglect in-depth coverage of critical environmental issues. Environmental issues are framed in ways that not only marginalize the potential threats of climate change but also compromise media's role of surveillance. Javed et al. (2023) also reported that the climate issues are framed in the newspapers in a way that it tends to focus on disasters and

humanitarian crises rather than emphasizing long-term adaptation and mitigation strategies. As in White's (1950) classic study of "Mr. Gates," that reported editorial preference to political news over other important issues and putting a strong emphasis on Human Interest Stories (White, David Manning., 1950).

One of the reported reasons for the marginalization of environmental issues within Pakistani media organizations was the 'bandwagon effect.' Media outlets tend to follow prevailing trends, prioritizing issues already gaining attention, which reflects the agenda-setting function of the media amplifying topics that align with mainstream discourse while sidelining others like environmental concerns. Similarly, News reports on environmental issues are treated as "back up stories", to be used as a filler. Low climate literacy among media personnel, work pressures, unclear national media policies, treatment of environmental concerns as conspiracy theories by the authorities, restricted or no access to environment related facts and contradictory statements by the authorities were other significant hindrances exclusively reported by the participants of our study.

#### ***D. Factors***

According to the participants of study, Institutional priorities—such as a focus on current affairs, political coverage, and financial considerations—shape the nature and visibility of climate-related news content. Previous studies have also identified the factors that cause insufficient coverage of climate change topics. These include, editorial choices, lack of infrastructure, and illiteracy. Scholars also gave certain suggestions in this regard, for instance, media outlets should create specialized programs and devote more time to climate reporting in order to close this gap and raise public awareness (Asif et al., 2024).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The media plays a crucial role in creating awareness, developing environmental discourse, humanizing environmental issues and driving positive actions. Keeping in view, the significance and sensitivity of environmental situation globally, media professionals and specially the environmental reporters are thus expected to perform their official responsibilities in a more responsible, objective and sensible way. This demands clear understanding of the issues among the reporters themselves. The reporters as advocates of environment, can play a lot more positive and fruitful role, if they have the right knowledge and updated information on environment. The role of parent organizations is also very crucial in this regard.

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