

Uplink

December 1994

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

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Uplink update

Many journalists still think of computer-assisted reporting as long-term, tree-eating (at least for newspapers) projects. But this month's *Uplink* highlights how computer-assisted reporting can be used for beat and deadline reporting.

Ralph Frammolino of the *Los Angeles Times* shows how quickly a database manager can help a reporter get the scoop and beat the competition on a story everyone else is covering.

Paul D'Ambrosio writes about the non-stop CAR stories the *Ashbury Park Press* produces, while Bill Dedman of AP and Richard Mullins of NICAR recount the tribulations and triumphs of supplying AP bureaus nationwide with federal campaign finances.

And, for the beat, Gwen Carleton offers a review of some of the year's best CAR crime stories.

See you on the net at nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu or on our listserv located at nicar-l@mizzoul.missouri.edu.

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Newly acquired skills reveal jury profile

CAR & OJ: Perfect together

By Ralph Frammolino

Los Angeles Times

Talk about instant gratification.

The *Los Angeles Times* recently invited NICAR to town to put me and nine other reporters, editors and researchers through a week-long computer-assisted journalism boot camp. The goal: To lighten the load on the paper's overworked in-house computer gurus by introducing at least a few newsroom types to the rudiments of transferring files and analyzing statistics on a spreadsheet or database program.

Our mission—besides trying to complete a game of computer Solitaire during class breaks or when the instructor wasn't looking—was to overcome the fear of ASCII, DOS, ANSI and a handful of other tortured acronyms, and to eventually integrate the powerful tool of computer analysis into daily reporting or projects.

But no sooner had I walked back into the newsroom the next Monday morning, then my (gulp) newly acquired "expertise" was put to the test. And on no less a story than the O.J. Simpson murder trial.

The judge and attorneys on the case were close to making the first cut of the jury pool, and my editor was eager to turn a quick profile of those still in the running to determine the fate of the Hall of Fame running back.

All we had to go on were three pages of responses each member of the jury pool gave on questionnaires about their backgrounds, impressions about the

case, what they had learned from the media and their own experiences with crime.

Under normal circumstances, we'd either eyeball the responses or tally up a few categories—race, sex, educational background—and paint a broad-brush portrait of the panel. But the NICAR training helped us to dig deeper, be more precise and do more extensive comparison.

We set this up by using the Microsoft Access program. After looking at the three-page forms, I decided to create about 30 fields to capture each juror's age, race, sex, educational level and home city, as well as key responses about media exposure, attitudes and personal habits that could be represented by symbols or a simple yes or no.

Thus, I recorded whether each watched the infamous chase of the white Bronco and for how long; heard anything about Nicole Brown Simpson's previous 911 call to police alleging O.J.'s domestic abuse; had met Simpson in person; and had ever seen him play football.

I recorded what their friends said

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Coming Events

January 8-13, 1995

NICAR Seminar
Columbia, Missouri

March 12-17, 1995

NICAR Seminar
Columbia, Missouri

Uplink

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The CAR Lot

CAR's Field of Dreams in NJ

By Paul D'Ambrosio

Asbury Park Press

If you put a gun to my dog's head and forced me to write one of those movie comparison leads, it would probably read something like this: CAR at the *Press* is like "Field of Dreams" — If you build it, they will come.

In the last two years we developed a computer-assisted reporting program that is accessible to everyone. We have open access to NEXIS, CompuServe, Internet and America On-line.

Anyone who wants to get involved with CAR can learn at their own pace. We have held several Internet classes, and this summer, we trained 19 staffers during a week of intensive CAR classes.

We have installed 486/66 computers in each of our six bureaus, and at our sister paper, *The Home News*. The staff has access to FoxPro, Excel and Mosaic. SPSS for Windows and Atlas GIS are currently limited to one system because of software costs.

The *Press*' program is broken into two areas: projects of a state or national interest, and those dealing with local issues.

To understand our computer-assisted reporting program, you have to understand the *Press*' news area. We cover 83 towns in two counties. New Jersey has a strong home rule charter, which means most of the information we need is kept only at the municipal level.

There is no state or county agency that collects tax information or police records for us. In order to provide context for any regional story, we have to negotiate with 83 bureaucrats, all of whom have a different interpretation of the state's vague and anemic Open Public Records Act.

The only way to keep track of all that information is with PCs. In early 1994, we decided to take a look at delinquent property taxpayers in one county. The municipal reporters collected printed tax lists from each town and we had clerks build our own database of deadbeat taxpayer information.

Four months and 50,000 names later, we ran a two-day, eight-part series. We not only outline the damage delinquent taxpay-

ers were doing to the tax base, we also named names: a state judge, two political kingmakers (including the GOP's former national finance chairman) and an assortment of local and county politicians.

Other stories we have done include:

- Finding that the dead were still voting in one county,
- Discovering that the governor's hiring freeze was anything but a freeze.
- Exploring the world of sexual deviancy via the Internet and local bulletin boards. The resulting article ran on our Health page.

— Showing that the state's crime rate hasn't changed in the last 10 years, despite a plethora of mandatory-minimum prison sentence laws and billions of dollars in new prison instruction.

Perhaps the greatest hurdle at the *Press* is not money or management support, but what I call the "15-Minute Syndrome." This is when a reporter, coat in hand, asks you to show him or her how to do CAR in 15 minutes.

Staffers have learned to use NEXIS for quick research, but there is a reluctance by many staffers to get involved with databases and spreadsheets that may take more than a day to examine. I have yet to hit upon a way to get staffers involved with intense CAR on a regular basis.

As a result, many of the above stories were written by Rick Linsk and myself, or in conjunction with other staffers. What I have seen is a generation gap—new staffers who have come to the *Press* in the last year are using the PCs more frequently than staffers who have been at the paper longer.

To remedy this situation, I hope that a series of intensive, week-long training classes next year will close the gap and fulfill our "Field of Dreams"—reporters flocking to personal computers.

—Paul D'Ambrosio is CAR Coordinator at the *Press*. He can be reached by phone at (908)

922-6000, ext. 4261, or via e-mail at

pmd@app.com.

Contribution charts cover all 50 states

AP scores with big FEC project

By Brant Houston
NICAR Managing Director

Its creators may call it "public service agate," but an Associated Press project recently demonstrated how computer-assisted reporting can strongly bolster routine election coverage.

With a lot of toil and ingenuity, Bill Dedman, director of computer-assisted reporting for AP, and Richard Mullins of the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting gave AP bureaus up-to-date contribution data just before the November federal elections.

AP bureaus in every state received 25 or more reports for federal candidates in their area. The charts used different categories to sort contributions from individuals and political action committees.

For example, one chart sorted contributions by city, another by top fundraising days and yet another by special interests. Altogether, Dedman and Mullins analyzed contributions to 1,300 federal candidates. The longest chart alphabetically listed all individuals who gave \$500 or more.

Mullins, an assistant professor at the Missouri School of Journalism and an academic adviser for NICAR, did the slicing and dicing of Federal Election Commission data for AP. The FEC collects and distributes contribution data for candidates.

In an intensive effort that spanned two months, Mullins developed reports on a NICAR Texas Instrument laptop—a 486-50 megahertz machine with a 200 megabyte hard-drive. He used the FoxPro database manager to sort more than 60 megabytes of data that contained 300,000 individual contributions and 128,000 PAC donations.

That was the easy part.

The more difficult challenge was making the reports suitable for conversion to standard AP agate. Mullins used the FoxPro memo field to store the appropriate headers, footnotes, and queries.

He also had to ensure that no report was longer than 130 lines. If it was, he had to split it into multiple "takes" because long files could not be used by the smaller AP members. After a report was ready, Dedman used a modem to call Mullins' computer and

download the report from Missouri to New York City.

(Call Mullins at 314-882-2127 or send e-mail to him at jourram@muccmail.missouri.edu for more technical details.)

"We made available to AP staff about 12,000 tables," Dedman said. "This allowed AP reporters to dive in, wade in or stick their toes in."

Dedman said almost every state AP bureau used the data for stories.

For the project, AP also purchased special interest codes from the Center for Responsive Politics. Those codes identify PACs by economic or political interest because the PAC names generally offer little clue as to the industry or ideology they represent.

Jacqueline Duobinis, a researcher at the National Library of Money & Politics, also assisted on the project with advice and tips. (The library is affiliated with the center.)

The effort, as Dedman and Mullins said, was a mass-produced assembly line approach that resulted in the most extensive campaign finance information and detail ever provided for AP bureaus for an election.

"It wasn't fancy, just universal," Dedman said.

Before election week was over, AP followed up the initial project with a quick analysis of the dollars spent by candidates for each vote. That analysis revealed that the most expensive winning and losing campaigns for the U.S. House and Senate.

"Oliver North spent the most money to lose a Senate seat," Dedman said. "He spent \$17 a vote."

Mullins said he hopes the effort might give helpful ideas to newspapers and broadcasters trying to distribute state-wide databases to reporters in their remote bureaus.

For example, some news organizations are considering writing often-used data onto CD-ROMs and giving those CDs to bureaus or reporters who take road trips frequently.

Dedman also said that the real value of this project will not be the work on election eve, but during the next Congress when it will be possible to compare a Congressman's actions with the contributions.

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*For more details,
call Richard Mullins at
(314) 882-2127 or send
e-mail to him at
jourram@muccmail.missouri.edu*

Continued from page one
CAR & OJ

continued: about Simpson (guilty, not guilty, no opinion); what each potential juror thought about Simpson; whether each had experienced domestic abuse, resorted to domestic abuse or thought it should be treated differently than other assaults. I noted how each felt about discrimination against African Americans in Southern California (not serious, somewhat serious, very serious, etc.); whether each had been a victim of crime and the worst type of crime; who owned knives; who enjoyed detective novels or television shows; and who dated people of a different race.

With a data researcher reading them off, it took me hours to type in the responses but we were able to have all 92 files in the Access database by about 4:15 p.m. I kept two files—those who made the cut and those who didn't—and kept adjusting them almost instantly as the judge and attorneys made their decisions.

For the next 45 minutes, it was just a series of frantic Access drills—group by, count, descending order, difference divided by the first number—for each category of interest. By deadline, we could say that 61 percent of the jurors who had not been eliminated were black, 25 percent were white; 19 percent said they experienced domestic violence at home, and many more saw Simpson at his worst during the Bronco chase than ever saw him in his glory playing football.

The effort on that first day enhanced our story and provided fodder for the graphic. Yet the biggest payoff came on Tuesday, when I used the database to perform a different analysis.

Rather than concentrate on the jurors who made the cut, I decided to compare those who

were still in the running with those who were weeded out. At first, I intended to look at characteristics such as race and geography of the two different pools when—thanks to Access—something unexpected jumped right out at us.

Each panelist was asked to express an opinion about the reliability of DNA testing (somewhat reliable, very reliable, etc.), and the numbers showed that 39 percent of those who had been excused were likely to believe in it compared to 10 percent who remained in the pool.

Since the prosecution's case rests overwhelmingly on DNA tests linking Simpson's blood to the crime scene, this seemed to be a significant difference and it became the lead of my front page story the next day. A jury consultant I interviewed underscored the significance further for our readers by saying that the effect was a "plus for the defense because there aren't people who have already made up their minds that it [DNA testing] is irrefutable evidence...."

The story also noted other important differences that seemed to favor the defense in the jury pool. More than 80 percent of the rejected jurors had been crime victims and 31 percent had experienced domestic violence themselves—percentages much greater than those left in the jury pool.

The second-day story was well received and it couldn't have been possible without the NICAR training. While it required far less knowledge and skills than the ambitious computer-assisted investigative projects featured in recent *Uplink* newsletters, it nonetheless shows how far a little computer work can go.

—Ralph Frammolino can be reached by e-mail at frammol@news.latimes.com.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

Social stats on the Net

Interested in degrees of freedom? What about range values? Is multivariate data analysis your cup of tea? Let's be serious: How about a novice's questions about reliabilities?

You can find these topics and hundreds of other statistical bran muffins on an active newsgroup at the following e-mail address:

sci.stat.consult. It's full of serious statisticians as well as us novices who need a helping hand now and then.

Here's several other valuable resources on statistical conundra: 1. CUSSNET, short for Computer Users in the Social Sciences. It's a discussion list devoted to social workers, counselors, human service workers and others interested in computer applications and research. To get on the list, send a

message to LISTSERV@stat.com and in the body of the message type, SUBSCRIBE CUSSNET. To contribute an article, send it to CUSSNET@stat.com.

2. STAT-L is an unlisted mailing list. It appeals to anyone interested in statistics. To subscribe, send e-mail to LISTSERV@MCGILL1.BITNET (or LISTSERV@VM1.MCGILL.CA). Digests of the contributions can be found in the newsgroup sci.stat.consult.

Tech Tips Fun with the *dir* command

By Richard Mullins
University of Missouri

There really is something useful that a DOS command can do for you, even if you use Windows all the time because you hate typing DOS commands.

Computer hard drives can quickly become like attics or neglected closets. They fill up with so much stuff that we forget what's there and waste a lot of space with stuff we don't need any more or files that are duplicated unknown times in subdirectories all over the place.

What if we could inventory all the files on a hard drive into one sorted text file that could be viewed with a text editor or printed?

The DIR command, plus a few options, will do it.

Many DOS users are familiar with the use of /p or /w after a DIR command. These switches, as they're called, pause the output of the DIR list every screenful or arrange the output horizontally. The following disk inventory command will use three options you may not have used before.

Here's the command. Change to the root directory first (cd/), then type:

```
dir /on /s /a-d > disklist.txt
```

It may take a minute to finish, and you won't see anything on your screen while it's working, but that's it.

Here's the explanation:

The first option — /on — orders the directory output by name. Use /oe if you want to

order files by extension, /od by date, /os by size.

The second option — /s — gets the directory output for all subdirectories. That's why you have to do the command from the root directory of the drive.

The third option — /a-d — means show only files, not directory names, which you normally see in a DIR output. We exclude them here because they would be redundant. Every subdirectory in the output will have a full path heading.

To understand this one, remember that DOS considers directories as a special kind of file. Translated more exactly, this option means: include files that don't have the directory attribute. "Slash A" (/a) introduces the attribute option; "Minus d" (-d) means "not directory."

The greater-than sign (>) is the redirect sign. If you leave this part off, you'll see the directory output rush by on the screen without stopping. Redirecting the output from the screen to a file (here called disklist.txt) gives you something a little more permanent you can view or print.

One more tip: If you want a quick reminder on any DOS command, don't fumble for your manual; the answer is already on your computer if you have DOS 5.0 or higher. You can find the short documentation on any DOS command by typing the command word, followed by /?

For example: copy /?

— Richard Mullins can be reached at
(314) 882-2127.

Computer hard drives can quickly become like attics or neglected closets. They fill up with so much stuff that we forget what's there and waste a lot of space with stuff we don't need any more or files that are duplicated unknown times in subdirectories all over the place.

3. EVALTEN, short for Evaluation Center's Topical Evaluation Network on Methodology and Statistics, is another mailing list. This one primarily works with statistics and mental health. To subscribe, send e-mail to Majordomo@world.std.com. In the body of the message, type SUBSCRIBE EVALTEN. To contribute articles, send them to EVALTEN@world.std.com.

I am 95 percent certain that the

average computer-assisted reporter out there will find something useful the online resources mentioned above.

— Dan Browning (70343.2713@compuserv.com).

Milliron joins Gannett

David Milliron has joined Gannett News Services as its Special Projects Editor for Computer-Assisted Reporting.

Milliron — who comes from the Fort

Myers (Fla.) News-Press, where he was police/database reporter — will coordinate database reporting efforts for GNS and assist USA TODAY and Gannett journalists in their computer and data-gathering efforts.

Milliron is available to conduct training at Gannett newspapers, and can be reached at (703) 276-5805. He is a graduate of the University of Florida, Gainesville.

This just in . . .

Crime tops CAR agenda for '94

By Gwen Carleton
NICAR

Judging from the clips we've seen, computer-assisted journalists made a strong showing in 1994. Stories made possible by computer analysis appeared nationwide, tackling a multitude of topics. Not surprisingly in the year of the Brady Bill, the Crime Bill and "Three Strikes, You're Out," crime was an especially popular topic.

As we reported in September's *Uplink*, the *Wisconsin State Journal* continued its award-winning "City of Hope" series into 1994. The series, which focuses on urban problems in Madison, looked at several aspects of crime this year: where the most crimes occur, how shortages in affordable housing aggravate the problems and the connection between unemployment and crime.

Staff reporters did their analyses with the help of one personal computer running some inexpensive local police records through Excel, FoxPro and SPSS software. Yet, they have become such authorities on crime statistics that the police now refer some inquiries to the *State Journal*.

Meanwhile in Southern California, Rebecca Fairley Raney took a close look at youth violence in her three-day *San Bernardino Sun* series, "Too violent, too young." The series described how a system designed to reform truants is straining to keep juvenile murderers off the street.

Raney analyzed thousands of San Bernardino arrest records. She found that, although the number of teens arrested remained level between 1982 and 1992, the severity of their crimes changed dramatically. Car theft, robbery and assault with a deadly weapon made the top ten list of juvenile crimes, displacing relatively minor offenses such as truancy and curfew violation. The numbers portray an increasing number of youths unfettered by discipline and desperate for respect, and a legal system that only can deal with the worst among them.

USA Today reporters Laura Frank and Sam Vincent Meddis looked at federal prosecutors across the nation in their special report, "Unequal justice." They found that, although the number of U.S. attorneys nearly

doubled during the last decade, convictions fell. The reporters compared different cities according to the number of prosecutors, the number of cases prosecuted and convictions per million. They discovered wide disparities.

According to the *USA Today* analysis, different crime rates drain resources at different rates, and an avalanche of federal laws promote selective enforcement. As a result, neighboring districts can differ dramatically with regard to who they prosecute and how harshly they punish. The article also cites legislative efforts to increase oversight, at least one of them provoked by the newspaper's investigation.

Another analysis, this one by Jon Schmid and Joseph Neff of the *Raleigh News & Observer*, examined the probable impact of the celebrated "Three Strikes, You're Out" proposal in North Carolina.

The story, which appeared as the state legislature weighed a "Three Strikes" bill, found the law would do little for the state. Only one criminal in 2,000 current would have been affected, according to Schmid and Neff's analysis of FBI data (Figure 1) and North Carolina Corrections Department data.

Of the 177,505 people entering state prisons between 1972 and 1992, only 91 committed three violent crimes — and more than half of those criminals remain in prison. Schmid and Neff showed that only a tiny proportion of crimes might have been prevented by a "Three Strikes" law. Just five criminals are currently in jail for committing four violent crimes.

The reporters used charts and graphs to illustrate the age of most violent offenders, as well as the crimes third-time offenders committed. They also talked to politicians, criminologists and convicted felons concerning the crime bill's likely impact on the state.

Elsewhere, other papers went beyond police, FBI and prison statistics to look at more unconventional types of crime. Paul D'Ambrosio of the *Asbury Park Press* compared the Social Security Administration's Master Death List (Figure 2) with voter records to see just how many of New Jersey's dead are showing on voting lists.

Staff reporters did their analyses with the help of one personal computer running some inexpensive local police records through Excel, FoxPro and SPSS software. Yet, they have become such authorities on crime statistics that the police now refer some inquiries to the *State Journal*.

D'Ambrosio found 370 dead people registered to vote in the area he examined; one even changed party posthumously.

An examination of local death records showed some of those listed as deceased by the election board actually are alive and well. D'Ambrosio found other instances where the election board probably passed a dead person's registration on to another voter with a similar name. However, scores of other posthumous votes remained a mystery.

D'Ambrosio pointed out the Motor Voter law, which will go into effect Jan. 1, will make it more difficult to remove questionable voters from the rolls.

Reporters from the (Greensburg, Pa.) *Tribune-Review* examined crime in another specialty area — the rent-to-own industry. Reporters Sharon Santus and David Josar discovered rent-to-own stores in their area typically charge customers more than 200

percent interest for items such as TVs, furniture and refrigerators. Moreover, the stores use bullying repossession tactics when customers fall behind on their inflated bills.

A computerized mapping system at the University of Pennsylvania's library revealed nearly two-thirds of the stores were located in areas with large minority populations and large percentages living below the federal poverty level. The computer analysis showed what consumer advocates had been trying to prove: that rent-to-own store operators target minority and poor sections of the community. The Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office intends to use the research to help negotiate a settlement with several rent-to-own operators in the state.

These stories are just a sample of the quality work we've seen throughout 1994. Thanks to all of you for your submissions — be sure to stay in touch in the new year.

Crime Data available at NICAR

NICAR now has 1994 FBI records, available either for the whole nation or individual states. The database is divided into five tables: Return A, listing numbers of crimes committed in a number of categories; Supplement to Return A, listing more details about the crimes (especially types and dollar amounts of property crimes); Supplemental Homicide Report, listing the victims and offenders in homicides (this also includes victim/offender data on other crimes); Police, listing assaults and homicides of police officers; and Arson, listing reported and proven instances of arson.

NICAR also has Federal Death records from the Social Security Administration and data from the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. SSA Death Records comprise almost 50 million deaths dating from 1937. The SSA collected the records from Social Security rolls, states, funeral homes and other sources. Data included are SSN, name, dates of birth and death, state code and zip code.

The ATF database contains the business and mailing addresses of firearms dealers across the United States. Please contact NICAR for more information and prices.

Department of Justice Data

The National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) recently announced its new online service. The new gopher provides users with an overview of the NCJRS and Office of Justice agencies including: The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; the Office of Victims of Crime; the Bureau of Justice Statistics Clearinghouse; and the Drugs and Crime Data Center Clearinghouse. The URL is: <gopher://ncjrs.aspensys.com:71>

Front-ends broaden computer use

Sharing CAR with the masses

By Alan Levin

The Hartford Courant

As computer-assisted programs in newsrooms mature, there's an

inevitable problem: How to distribute the wealth of computer resources to the masses of reporters who have little or no high-tech training.

At *The Hartford Courant*, where I began work earlier this year, we were bursting with information, but could not always easily pass it on to those who needed it.

As one of the first papers to aggressively use computers in news gathering, the *Courant* had filled several large hard drives and nine-track tape racks with data of all descriptions.

Literally hundreds of databases had been stored away as a resource during Brant Houston's tenure at the paper (which ended January 1994 when he became managing director at NICAR).

The data files were available for inspection on the old computer-assisted war horse, XDB, an SQL database program. But those files were inaccessible to many reporters and editors without a computer-trained guide. Though more than 30 reporters and editors had received training, the training did not stick unless they continued to work on computer-assisted stories.

The solution we chose was to create a customized application program in FoxPro for Windows that took advantage of the searching power of SQL, but allowed any reporter who could use a mouse and a pull-down menu the opportunity to search through dozens of files.

Without going into details of FoxPro pro-

gramming language, a user enters the system by clicking on a special icon in the Windows Program Manager.

Once it starts, the program allows users to choose a database from a Windows-style, pull-down menu. After the database is selected, a simple search screen appears prompting a reporter to type in a name or some other search criteria. Clicking the mouse on a box starts the search. All the SQL language is embedded in the program and activated without any work by the searcher.

The menus also give access to a simple help file designed to guide a reporter through a search and include text files describing each of the databases.

The system is by no means perfect. Any real programmer who examined my crude code would probably drop dead of fright. Though most people who use it seem to navigate the system without problems, it could be further simplified.

We are also working to expand the types of data on the system with an eye toward adding to its functionality.

Our next hurdle is to figure out a way to give reporters located in our extensive bureau system access to such a program without lugging hundreds of floppies out to each bureau (not to mention the cost of buying all those copies of FoxPro).

But what we found was that almost anyone with a spare computer and a little knowledge of FoxPro programming language (or a willingness to beg and cajole the wonderful technical support staff at Microsoft) can put together a similar system.

Our customized application program in FoxPro for Windows grants access to selected criminal records, professional listings of lawyers and accountants, a simple state payroll, an ever-growing list of contributors to several gubernatorial candidates, some basic census information, a listing of all persons registered to own handguns in the state and a Hartford voters' list — among other files.

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