

Role of Academic Library in Knowledge Society

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ABSTRACT

Academic libraries play a pivotal role in the knowledge society by serving as dynamic hubs for learning, research, and intellectual exploration. Beyond housing an extensive array of books and resources, they provide access to diverse databases, journals, and digital materials, fostering an environment that encourages critical thinking and scholarship. These libraries are not mere repositories but active facilitators of information literacy, aiding students and scholars in navigating the vast sea of knowledge. In the digital age, academic libraries adapt, offering technological resources and collaborative spaces that bridge disciplines. Ultimately, they serve as integral components in shaping informed, innovative, and intellectually vibrant communities. The emergent knowledge society by means of Information Communication Technologies has revolutionized the academic environment globally. In the present era, it is a major challenge of the academic libraries to handle the huge amount of information as well as to make those available to the relevant users. The advent and main features of knowledge society are briefly discussed. This paper is a study on how academic libraries support their peer communities to become an important part of knowledge society. Proposals are made for the adoption of new roles and skills by library professionals. Finally, an examination of India's present landscape regarding the contribution of academic libraries to the development of knowledge societies has been conducted.

Keywords: Knowledge society, digital divide, academic library, information communication technologies, National Knowledge Commission

A. Introduction

In the domain of Library and Information Science, the term 'Knowledge Society' is a recent concept and within a short period it has attracted a lot of interest of the leaders of the discipline towards it. The fundamental role of academic libraries is to ensure access to information and recorded knowledge in the most comprehensive manner possible to the users of academic field regardless of the media or format. This user group primarily consists of teachers, research scholars and students.

In this digital age, academic libraries have evolved to embrace technology. Apart from the traditional resources, they provide online databases, e-books, and multimedia resources, ensuring that their users have access to information

in various formats. This adaptation also reflects the changing nature of knowledge dissemination and consumption in contemporary society.

Academic libraries play a crucial role in shaping and sustaining a knowledge society. Firstly, they function as storehouses of human knowledge, containing an extensive collection of books, journals, and other valuable resources. This wealth of information becomes a valuable asset for students, researchers, and the society at large. These institutions are also gateways to information literacy. They not only offer access to resources but also assist users navigate and critically evaluate the information they find. The ability to discern reliable information from the vast sea of data is indispensable, and academic libraries act as guides in this process. Furthermore, these libraries foster a culture of research and innovation. By offering spaces for study and collaborative work, they become hubs for intellectual exchange. Librarians often play a key role in supporting research endeavours, helping individuals find the right sources and encouraging a spirit of inquiry. Lastly, academic libraries play a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage. They accommodate antiquarian manuscripts, historical documents, and special collections, by safeguarding the intellectual and cultural legacy for future generations.

That is why it can be rightfully said that, academic libraries are not just storehouses of books. Actually they are dynamic centres that empower individuals with knowledge, nurture critical thinking, and contribute to the intellectual and cultural vibrancy of a knowledge society. The emergent knowledge society by means of Information Communication Technologies has revolutionized the academic environment globally. In this changing scenario, academic libraries are facing much more challenges than ever before to handle the exponential growth of information as well as to disseminate those to the users with the aid of emerging information handling technologies.

B. Objectives of the study

The primary objectives of this research paper are to comprehensively investigate and analyze the pivotal role that academic libraries play in addressing the challenges presented by the emergent knowledge society. By conducting an in-depth examination, the paper aims to identify the specific challenges that libraries encounter in the evolving landscape of knowledge dissemination. Furthermore, it seeks to elucidate the diverse strategies and initiatives implemented by academic libraries to overcome these challenges and fulfil their role as key players in the knowledge society. Through this exploration, the paper aims to contribute valuable insights into the adaptive measures and innovative approaches employed by academic libraries, shedding light on their significance in facilitating the transition to a knowledge-based society.

C. The emergence of the concept of knowledge societies

Every society possesses its distinct reservoirs of knowledge. Historically, these reserves were monopolized by the influential and powerful segments of society. Leveraging their exclusive social, political, and economic standing, these privileged groups wielded absolute authority over knowledge and information. Consequently, a profound disparity emerged, affecting not only the divide between the affluent and the impoverished but also creating a dichotomy between those who had access to information and those who did not. This imbalance had detrimental effects on economies and societal development, as wealth remained concentrated in the hands of a select few (Ukachi, 2012).

The evolution and widespread adoption of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) during the last two decades of the 20th century resulted in a tremendous surge in information and transformative changes in information and knowledge management processes. The proliferation of ICTs has significantly augmented the volume of available information, enhancing both the speed and ease of its dissemination. Information is now increasingly regarded as a tradable commodity, subject to acquisition, ownership, purchase, and sale. This shift paved the way for an information explosion, giving rise to the emergence of the 'Information Society.' The notion of an information society represents the cutting edge of the modern world, wherein the standing of nations—encompassing their power, wealth, and influence—is increasingly contingent on their access to and proficiency in utilizing information (Abdulsalami, Okezie, & Agbo, 2013).

Issa emphasized this aspect when he articulated the concept of an information society as one in which information is regarded as a marketable commodity indispensable for the progress of a nation. At that time it was expected that this new societal era will eradicate the problem of lack of information availability, which was prevalent at that time in the society. But this new form of society created different types of problems and challenges for the global village. The unequal growth of ICTs brought about the problem of digital divide and not everyone has equitable access to information. As a result, a deterioration of socio-economic conditions is happening for many in developing countries (Issa, 2003). Recognizing the imperative of fostering a democratic society that addresses this information gap by promoting unrestricted access to information and knowledge for all, regardless of their status and under equal conditions, UNESCO's summit report advocates for the establishment of 'Knowledge Societies.' (UNESCO, 2005). The postulation of knowledge society came into view almost simultaneously as the allied ideas of 'learning societies' and 'lifelong learning for all'. In this backdrop, the notion of knowledge societies has surfaced as the need of the hour with a democratic setup embedded with openness, equality and freedom. It emphasizes on knowledge and education in all the areas of life (UNESCO, 2005). Whereas the information society emphasizes networks and connectivity facilitated by the technological advancements of ICTs, knowledge societies leverage these tools to ensure universal access and enhance the

utilization of knowledge in various forms for human development. It goes beyond the possession of ICTs, an abundance of information, global access, and networking. Instead, it emphasizes the constructive use of these elements to shape a society that is desirable for all, ultimately aiming to build knowledge societies. (Abdulsalami, Okezie, & Agbo, 2013).

Knowledge societies are those that facilitate the unrestricted circulation of information in diverse formats, promoting the development of individuals irrespective of their age, religion, educational background, political and socio-economic status. Additionally, these societies encourage feedback from individuals, serving as valuable contributions to the collective knowledge pool. As per Dike, knowledge societies are those that establish institutions and organizations fostering unrestricted development of people and information, creating opportunities for the mass production and utilization of various forms of knowledge. In these societies, knowledge is not reserved for the privileged few or specific groups; instead, it is made accessible to all individuals. The hallmark of a knowledge society lies in the belief and acceptance that knowledge, being a common and public good, should be universally accessible under the same conditions for the benefit of all. Within the knowledge society, the most valuable asset is knowledge, transcending mere information. Knowledge encompasses both the tacit understanding within individuals (tacit knowledge) and the tangible manifestations (explicit knowledge) in the physical realm, such as print or human exchanges. The essence of knowledge societies lies in achieving universal access to all knowledge sources, emphasizing the sharing of knowledge as a catalyst for the development and progress of human society. Knowledge assumes a pivotal role in this context, with its mechanisms and organizational structure facilitating the continuous addition of new knowledge to the existing pool. Dike listed five characteristics of knowledge societies as follows (Dike, 2007):

- Knowledge societies are pluralistic and culturally diverse
- Knowledge societies are democratic societies for all and by all
- Knowledge societies are learning societies
- Knowledge societies foster full human development
- Knowledge societies build better future

D. Characteristics and challenges of knowledge societies

The shift towards knowledge societies is closely tied to the broader concept of the knowledge economy, where knowledge and information play a central role in economic activities. In the late 20th century, there was a noticeable transition from industrial economies, based on manufacturing and production, to knowledge-based economies, where the creation with proper application of knowledge became a primary chauffeur of wealth and progress.

In knowledge societies, there is a focus on education, research, innovation, and information and communication technologies. The idea is to harness the power

of knowledge to address societal challenges, foster economic growth, and enhance the overall well-being of the common folk. The advent of the internet and digital technologies has further accelerated the transformation towards knowledge societies by facilitating the rapid exchange of information and fostering global connectivity. This interconnectedness allows for collaboration and the sharing of knowledge on a global scale. Overall, the postulation of knowledge societies underscores the significance of knowledge as a transformative force and recognizes its pivotal role in forming the trajectory of societies in the 21st century.

The idea of knowledge societies revolves around the notion that knowledge has become a key operator of social, economic, and cultural development. Some of the major elements behind the advent of the same are as follows:

- **Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs):** The extensive adoption of ICTs, including the internet, played a crucial factor in the emergence of knowledge societies. It facilitated the rapid exchange and dissemination of information on a global scale.
- **Education and Learning:** Knowledge societies emphasize the importance of education and continuous learning. The acquisition of knowledge and skills is seen as essential for individuals to thrive in a quickly evolving environment.
- **Innovation and Research:** The emphasis on knowledge is closely linked to the promotion of innovation and research. Knowledge societies encourage investment in scientific research, technological development, and creative endeavours to drive progress.
- **Open Access to Information:** A key aspect of knowledge societies is the idea of open access to information. This involves reducing barriers to information, promoting transparency, and ensuring that knowledge is accessible to a broader segment of the population.
- **Collaboration and Networking:** Knowledge societies thrive on collaboration and networking. The exchange of ideas and information among individuals, organizations, and nations is seen as a catalyst for innovation and development.

The inception of knowledge societies has also thrown various challenges towards not only to academic libraries but also to the society as a whole. Few among them are as follows:

- **Digital Divide:** Unequal access to information and communication technologies creates a digital divide among individuals. This gap in access can exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities.

- **Information Overload:**The sheer volume of information can result in an information overload, making it difficult for individuals to sift through and prioritize pertinent knowledge.
- **Privacy Concerns:** The interconnected nature of knowledge societies raises concerns about privacy and data security. Balancing the benefits of information sharing with the need to protect individuals' privacy is an ongoing challenge.

Knowledge societies represent a shift towards an economy and culture where knowledge is the primary resource. The concept underscores the importance of education, innovation, and open access to information in fostering societal development.

E. Academic Libraries and their Role in building Knowledge Societies

The academic library, traditionally and historically the guardian of knowledge and information, has experienced a shift from conventional information handling methods to technological platforms.. Nowadays, an academic library is more than just a storage space for documents or a study area. It can also serve as a collaborator in research and teaching. Academic institutions that do not fully leverage this asset may face increased challenges in competing in the future. Academic library remains at the core of every academic institution, fulfilling its crucial role, notwithstanding the trend of moving towards electronic resources from print resources. The collection and services of the library directly contribute to the academic mission of the institution, equipping users with the expertise and mastery necessary for academic success and enhancing their employability. (Nuut, 2004).

It is widely acknowledged that academic libraries play a crucial role in the pursuit of knowledge societies. Serving as potent instruments, they contribute significantly to the realization of knowledge societies, an integral part of our contemporary civilization and development. Throughout the centuries, libraries have not only been reliable and esteemed custodians of written words and recorded knowledge but also indispensable and dynamic facilitators in the transmission of knowledge, ensuring access to a wide array of knowledge sources. (Nuut, 2004).

The inherent social role of libraries as communication hubs has consistently been, and continues to be, ensuring the broadest possible access to information and recorded knowledge, regardless of the medium or format. This acknowledgment is reflected in the declaration adopted during the World Information Summit held in Tunis in October 2005. The declaration asserts that libraries are pivotal contributors to the realization of knowledge societies, emphasizing that ensuring access and fostering contribution to information, ideas, and knowledge are essential determinants of both the information society and the knowledge society. Indeed, libraries play vital roles in

addressing information inequality within information societies, countering the threats posed by the expanding information gap and the digital divide, both of which pose challenges to the development of knowledge societies. (Ukachi, 2012). Such roles involve:

- **Knowledge creation:** Information constitutes processed data, serving as the fundamental material for generating knowledge. It is important to note that information can exist without being synonymous with knowledge. A significant portion of the information available on the Internet, for instance, may be incorrect or fallacious. However, the transformation of information into knowledge necessitates skill, reflective judgment, and mastery of cognitive, critical, and theoretical skills—qualities that librarians have been specifically trained to exercise. Therefore, it falls within the purview of librarians, as information experts, to responsibly select the right type of information and exposing them to the users which will impact their lives and societies positively.
- **Knowledge transmission:** Libraries must guarantee that created knowledge is accessible and disseminated to both current and potential users. Additionally, they have the responsibility to ensure that information and knowledge, whether acquired or created, are effectively utilized by users.
- **Information literacy education:** Libraries are essential participants in information literacy education. Information literacy involves understanding one's information concerns and needs, as well as the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize, and proficiently create, use, and communicate information to address issues or problems. It serves as a fundamental requirement for active and effective participation in knowledge societies. Information competency is a key factor in lifelong learning. Facilitating the development of knowledge societies becomes more achievable when individuals are instilled with this skill.
- **Information repackaging:** This is another important job of the academic librarians as an information service provider. Information repackaging is reorganising the products and services to the specific needs of users and presenting in a manner suitable for the user. It involves presenting information in formats that are more comprehensible, readable, acceptable, and usable. Repackaging aims to improve the acceptance and utilization of information products, as well as the assimilation and recall of their contents. This process may include reformatting and synthesizing raw information through abstracting, indexing, translation services, and generating different types of report by using various types of mediums.
- **Digitisation:** This process involves preserving, making more freely available, and internationalizing access to documents with the eventual goal of expanding and enhancing their usability through digitization. But libraries always should remain within the periphery of intellectual property or copyright laws.

Thus, academic libraries assume a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining knowledge societies. These institutions serve as dynamic hubs that provide to the intellectual and cultural enhancement of individuals and communities. A few key aspects highlighting their significance are discussed below:

- **Access to Information:** Academic libraries provide a vast repository of resources, including books, journals, and digital materials. They facilitate access to a diverse range of information, fostering an environment where knowledge is easily accessible to students, researchers, and the public.
- **Promotion of Lifelong Learning:** By offering a multitude of educational resources, academic libraries support lifelong learning. They empower individuals to continually acquire new skills, adapt to changing environments, and stay informed about advancements in various fields.
- **Facilitation of Research:** Academic libraries are essential for researchers conducting in-depth studies and investigations. They house an extensive collection of scholarly works, enabling academics to explore existing literature and build upon the knowledge base in their respective disciplines.
- **Technological Integration:** In the digital age, academic libraries are at the forefront of technological advancements. They provide online databases, e-books, and multimedia resources, adapting to the evolving needs of users and promoting the integration of technology in the learning process.
- **Community Engagement:** Beyond the academic community, these libraries often serve as community hubs, hosting events, lectures, and workshops. This engagement fosters a sense of intellectual curiosity and promotes a culture of shared knowledge within the broader society.
- **Preservation of Cultural Heritage:** Academic libraries play a role in safeguarding cultural heritage by archiving antique manuscripts, timehonoured documents, and unique materials. They play a crucial role in safeguarding the collective memory of societies for future generations.
- **Information Literacy:** Academic libraries play a crucial role in fostering the development of information literacy skills in their users. They teach individuals how to critically evaluate sources, discern reliable information from misinformation, and navigate the complex landscape of knowledge.

In essence, academic libraries are indispensable in building and nurturing knowledge societies. They serve as the backbone of intellectual development, ensuring that information is not only accessible but also curated and disseminated in a way that promotes learning, research, and the overall advancement of society.

F. Challenges to overcome by the Academic Libraries

While academic libraries play a crucial role in knowledge societies, they face several challenges that must be addressed to ensure their continued effectiveness and relevance. Here are some key challenges:

- **Digital Divide:** Access to digital resources is not uniform for everyone. The digital divide can create disparities in information access, disadvantaging those who lack the necessary technology or internet connectivity. Academic libraries must find ways to bridge this gap and ensure inclusivity.
- **Rapid Technological Changes:** The fast-paced evolution of technology poses challenges for academic libraries in terms of staying updated with the latest tools and platforms. Adapting to technological changes requires constant investment, training, and strategic planning.
- **Information Overload:** The plethora of information available online has the potential to cause information overload. Academic libraries need to help users navigate through vast databases, teaching them information literacy skills to critically evaluate and select relevant resources.
- **Financial Constraints:** Many academic libraries operate under budget constraints, limiting their ability to acquire new materials, update technology, and maintain infrastructure. Securing sustainable funding is crucial for these institutions to fulfil their mission effectively.
- **Copyright and Licensing Issues:** Strict copyright regulations and licensing agreements can restrict the availability of digital resources. Academic libraries must navigate these legal complexities to ensure that users can avail themselves of an extensive array of materials for research and learning..
- **Changing Educational Models:** The shift towards online and remote learning challenges the traditional role of physical libraries. Academic libraries must adapt their services to cater to diverse learning styles and evolving educational models, including hybrid and online learning.
- **Preservation of Print Collections:** While digital resources are on the rise, the preservation of print collections remains a concern. Ensuring the longevity and accessibility of physical materials, particularly rare and historical documents, requires careful conservation efforts.
- **Data Security and Privacy:** The digitization of resources and the collection of user data for library services raise concerns about data security and privacy. Academic libraries must implement robust cybersecurity measures and transparent privacy policies to safeguard user information.
- **Global Collaboration:** With the increasing globalization of knowledge, academic libraries are challenged to collaborate on an international scale. This involves overcoming barriers related to different information systems,

languages, and cultural contexts to ensure seamless access to global knowledge.

- **Changing User Expectations:** Users, especially students, often have high expectations for user-friendly interfaces, instant access, and personalized services. Meeting these expectations requires ongoing efforts to enhance the user experience and align library services with evolving needs.

Overcoming these challenges necessitates a blend of strategic planning and investments in technology and infrastructure, advocacy for adequate funding, and a commitment to continuous adaptation. Academic libraries that successfully navigate these challenges can continue to take part in a key role in knowledge societies.

It is clear that drastic change is gathering momentum in higher education. All forms of academic activities are increasingly occurring within the emerging educational environment shaped by both local and global information and communications networks. The profound influence of electronic media on scholarly production, communication, teaching, and learning is becoming more apparent, extending its impact to library systems and services (Fowell & Levy, 1995). The advent of electronic and digital libraries, along with the widespread accessibility of electronic information, presents numerous opportunities to amplify the role of librarians in aiding teaching and research. It is evident that the spread of training and awareness-increasing programmes for library staff in digital information domain is very much essential to cope up with the paradigm shift (Follett, 1993). In this background, academic librarians actively contribute to the support of teaching, learning, and course development, and other activities as follows (Fowell & Levy, 1995):

- **Assistance in crafting and delivering curricula**
 - making alliance and giving suggestions to academic authority on the information resource components of curriculum design
 - advising on the technical prerequisites linked to delivering courses
 - providing networked learning support within course delivery
 - providing support for open learning
- **User education**
 - assisting educators in comprehending both physical and electronic resources, and offering guidance on teaching and learning methodologies to the optimum utilization of these resources
 - producing open learning materials
 - providing information skills training to users across all categories
 - delivering information and communication resource training (Loomis & Fink, 1993)
- **Information publishing skills training**

- offering guidance on advancements in scholarly communication and opportunities for publishing related to the electronic medium
- Reference enquiry work
 - online support to users for searching bibliographic and other resources, especially the real-time mediation
 - online enquiry desk services, through email and other social media (Billings, Carver, Drew Racine, & Tongate, 1994)
 - Technical advisory work
 - real-time problem-solving in the integrated environment

To perform the above mentioned activities successfully, library professionals must stand up and face the challenges before them. Few of them have to overcome the inability to acquire and put-in the core competencies of their field. Some professionals have to be triumphed over the hesitation to familiarize oneself with the operations of new ICTs that have redefined the functioning of library. They should not ease up on their responsibility to stay pertinent to the profession as a whole. Library professionals need to acknowledge the increasing complexity of the challenges ahead of them and the diverse set of skills demanded. It is crucial to address and act upon these challenges promptly to ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of library professionals. To achieve these goals following steps are recommended (Abdulsalami, Okezie, & Agbo, 2013):

- Academic libraries should acquire and maintain contemporary information technology resources, and librarians should proficiently master the art and science of their profession within their work environment.
- Libraries should evolve in tandem with information technology, which has transformed the role of libraries into facilitating access to information and knowledge regardless of its global location through the virtual nature of technology.
- Library professionals should not, out of complacency, render themselves irrelevant in their provision of information to the communities they serve.
- Library should offer extensive and well-rounded information resources that are pertinent to the activities of its parent organization.
- Acknowledging the rising speed and nature of information, libraries should receive sufficient funding to enable them to establish the necessary infrastructure for knowledge acquisition and the provision of services.
- Library should regularly arrange student orientation programs, addresses, conventions, seminars, and conferences to make this place a free mixing zone for academicians, research scholars and students.

G. Indian Scenario

In order for India to achieve global competitiveness in the 21st century, a crucial element lies in our capacity to tap into our reservoir of knowledge. To optimally leverage its growing potential, the nation requires a paradigm centred around knowledge and a dedicated emphasis on enhancing capacity and quality in the field of education. Keeping this scenario in mind, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC), constituted on 2005, has proposed a detailed plan for reform of our knowledge related organizations and infrastructure which will enable India to meet the challenges of the future. The overarching aim of NKC is to transform India into a vibrant knowledgebased society (National Knowledge Commission, 2008). Among various recommendations NKC has made, there are some valuable ones also made for enhancing the overall condition of library field in India. Some of the suggestions prepared by NKC are as follows (National Knowledge Commission, 2007):

- Set up a National Mission on Libraries
- Prepare a National Census of all libraries
- Revamp Library and Information Sciences education, training, and research
- Re-assess staffing of libraries
- Set up a Central Library Fund
- Promote Information Communication Technology applications in all libraries
- Facilitate donation and maintenance of private collections
- Encourage Public Private Partnerships in LIS development
- Modernize library management
- Encourage greater community participation in library management

Although the National Knowledge Commission was been discontinued by then newly elected Government of India in 2014, several recommendations from the NKC are already in the process of implementation by various government ministries. India has been making significant strides in the knowledge sector, with a growing emphasis on education, technology, and innovation. Here are some key points:

- **Education and Research:** India has a vast and diverse education system, with numerous universities, research institutions and globally recognized premier institutes like the IITs and IIMs. The country has been investing in research and development across various disciplines. There has been a push towards online learning and the use of technology in classrooms. The ‘National Education Policy 2020’ also accentuates the incorporation of technology in education to make teaching-learning process more accessible and flexible.

- Information Technology (IT) and Software: India has established itself as a global IT hub, with a strong presence in software development, IT services, and business process outsourcing.
- Start-up Ecosystem: India has witnessed a surge in the start-up ecosystem, with a focus on technology-driven innovation and research. The government has been promoting start-up culture and entrepreneurship through programs like 'Start-up India'. Many cities have become hotspots for start-ups in various sectors, including fintech, health tech, and edtech.
- Digital Transformation: The country has been focusing on digital literacy and technology adoption to bridge the digital divide. The government has been promoting digital initiatives to transform various sectors, including healthcare, education, and governance. Initiatives like 'Digital India' aim to transform the nation into a digitally empowered society by increasing internet connectivity, promoting digital literacy, and enhancing online service delivery.
- Skills Development: There is a growing emphasis on skill development to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving job market. Programs like 'Skill India' aim to enhance the employability of the workforce through skill training and up-skilling.
- Open Science and Collaboration: Efforts are being made to foster a culture of open science and collaboration. Institutions are increasingly engaging in international collaborations, and there is a push for open-access research to promote the sharing of knowledge.

But despite such progresses, the country still has some challenges such as uneven access to quality education, the need for infrastructure development, and addressing issues related to digital literacy and inclusivity.

H. Conclusion

To achieve this purpose in the present, it is essential to reassess the role of academic libraries, with particular attention to the challenges posed by the knowledge society. This endeavour aims to elucidate the concepts of knowledge societies and delineate the role of academic libraries in their development. Consequently, academic libraries, and libraries in general, should endeavour to provide efficient and effective services despite emerging threats and challenges, as they play a pivotal role in realizing knowledge societies. In summary, the responsibilities of libraries are continually expanding, as any effort to educate an individual inherently contributes to the education and empowerment of society.

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