



Press Freedom In Asian Countries (2010-2023): A Systematic Literature Review.

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ABSTRACT

This review article critically discusses empirical studies on journalistic freedom in Asia. We evaluate how the degree of journalistic freedom differs in these countries and the factors responsible for it. Authorities restricting freedom of speech and media for state security, protection of morality or public order is common. Journalistic freedom is impossible in many countries because of fear, threats, bans, surveillance and imprisonments.

Rapid erosion of the business models has created the atmosphere of uncertainty for the journalists and corporatization of the media has deepened a crisis in the freedom of journalists. The watchdog role of journalists regarding the powerful economic and corporate actors is subordinated to the organizational and financial interests of the media house.

Socio-cultural aspects and technological changes also play an essential role in journalistic freedom. The available research indicates that censorship and self-censorship are common practices in Asian countries. The literature suggests an atmosphere of scepticism between mainstream journalists and independent journalists. Studies also show that journalists are treated differently based on minority status or foreign origin, and Western countries are selective while supporting press freedom in Asian Countries. We also propose a research agenda for future studies.

Keywords: Journalism, press freedom, Asia, censorship, Journalistic freedom

1. Introduction:

One of the simplest ways to understand the importance of Asian media is the sheer number of people consuming it. Asia, the largest populated continent, naturally has the world's most significant number of newsreaders, TV viewers, and internet users. However, this is not the only reason to study Asian media in general and journalism in Particular.

Journalists' ability to perform their professional roles depends on two main factors. The freedom news organizations get from the government and their freedom from government control. There are vast differences between both these factors across various countries in Asia. Several Asian countries have experienced autocratic rule for decades. Some have been politically and economically unstable. Some have seen political turmoil recently. Moreover, many countries are war-affected and are marred by terrorist activities.

Governments promoting development communication have endangered freedom of the press in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as they redefine as freedom and democracy (Lent, 1981). On the other hand, not only development of independent journalism is marred in Central Asia, but even development of Western-style media and the democracy it serves is derailed due to political and economic factors (Kenny & Gross, 2008).

Journalists' performance is also affected by profit. Commercial profit is audience driven. Sales, subscriptions, advertising increase if there is more circulation or viewership. Audiences increase if the media outlet reports interesting information. Another form of profit is the gains from collusion with government. It can be direct monetary benefit through the advertisements and indirect benefit is in the form of policy decisions or administrative decisions that benefits a media firm. (Besley & Prat, 2006).

There are some countries where there is little or no government censorship on media. But media cannot escape from market forces and profit considerations. In countries like Indonesia (Tapsell, 2015) and India, (Saeed, 2015) commercial forces pose challenge for independent journalism. Even in countries with strong state control, such as China, commercialization has led news producers to focus on stories that are 'hot' or popular among consumers, regardless of their social import (Chua, 2012).

News media's traditional business model has already weakened and profit margins shrunk. In such situation press follows market signals than acting as a fourth pillar of democracy or working for the principle of social justice.

There are some other challenges as well. Journalists in Asia need help with changing market conditions, increasingly demanding audiences, and growing competition from the internet (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2017). Rising digital authoritarianism in Southeast Asia is creating a hostile online journalism environment. Though there are high risks of the state suppression Southeast Asian news media reports various sensitive issues in politics (Sinpeng & Koh, 2022).

1.1 Journalistic Freedom

The concept of press freedom is a multifaceted. Some look at it from narrow perspective and define it as the degree of freedom enjoyed by the media. But, for others freedom of media consumption is also equally important. Denis McQuail argued that media should 'serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism' and be a 'common carrier of the public expression' (McQuail, 2010). Diversity and not a concentration of media ownership is equally important for McQuail.

Media freedom and role of media can be analysed with reference to four Theories of the Press (Siebert et al., 1963). They deal with Suppression of press, total freedom given to the press, press used as an instrument to convey the message interpreted by the government of Communist party and press working responsibly; objectively. There are also newer and complimentary theories like social change and development theory, mass society theory and, development journalism (McQuail, 2010).

The issue of Journalistic freedom is discussed in length all over the world. It is not surprising that the degree of journalistic freedom in most of the Western, developed, and Democratic Countries is always high than that of the rest of the world. However, what is surprising is that even in countries with strong safeguards for journalistic freedom, such as Sweden, journalists still face external pressure and threats. There is intimidation and harassment to silence journalists (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016). Ironically, Sweden has been among the top ten countries for most of the years since 2010, according to World Press Freedom Index.

1.1.2: Journalistic freedom in Asia

It is on this background that studying journalistic freedom in Asia is important. Among the 180 countries studied for press freedom the situation is "very serious" in 31 countries (2023 World Press Freedom Index, 2023). Among the 31 countries with serious situations, 22 fall in the Asian region. and among the top 52 countries with good and satisfactory situations, only three are from Asia.

Since 2007, media freedoms in the Asia-Pacific region have steadily but consistently declined. Vietnam and Cambodia have state-controlled news and information just like China (RSF Index 2018: Hatred of Journalism Threatens Democracies, 2018). North Korea, China, Vietnam, Myanmar represent Asia's one-party regimes and dictatorships where the leaders put control on journalism and tighten their totalitarian stranglehold on the public discourse. In South Asia, five countries having parliamentary governments, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan also face issues related to journalistic freedom. In India mainstream media are now owned by businesspersons close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. (2023 World Press Freedom Index, 2023).

Journalism in the Middle East has issues due to political instability, authoritarian rule, and limitations on freedom of expression. Self-censorship has flourished in Central Asia the region. Without studying the history and culture of the region mission, values, and new business practices of the Western Journalism can be applied blindly. The region's socio-economic and political situations remain in flux from backwardness (Kenny & Gross, 2008).

Covering stories in these countries is hence with many challenges. The first and foremost, there is the issue of survival. Then there are various types of pressures: Political and economic. There is competition from other media platforms as well. On this background, we want to find out the issues related to press freedom and Censorship covered through various research journals.

RQ1: Which theoretical approaches are driving this research?

RQ2: How the research literature compares degree of press freedom with degree of democracy?

RQ3: How gets the press freedom influenced by corporate ownership?

RQ4: What are the other factors influencing press freedom in Asia?

2 Methodology

This review employs a systematic literature review method (Tranfield et al., 2003). It is a transparent and replicable method. It extracts core aspects across a particular field in literature (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015).

Media freedom and media censorship are the two sides of one coin. We started with two sets of keywords while selecting the research papers for this review article. The first set was related to Journalism. Most researchers may have used other words for journalism, like the press or the Fourth Estate. So, we searched keywords using journalism, press, or fourth estate. The second set of words was related to censorship and freedom.

Our search started with selecting an appropriate timeframe. We wanted it not too short and no too long. Hence, we kept it from 2010-2023. Then we shortlisted keywords. First, we scanned Elsevier's Scopus database to access relevant publications for this review. We used specific keyword combinations for the search. They were 'Journalism,' 'Fourth estate,' 'press,' or 'journalists'. We used AND to add the other set of keywords. It included 'freedom,' 'independence,' 'Free,' 'threat,' or 'censorship.' The search was limited to articles in English and qualified to Open Access research papers that were Final. This study focused on reviewing articles published between 2010 and 2023. It gave us a list of 311 research papers. We selected social science and arts and humanities research areas to narrow down further. After getting the 204 research papers, we started the process of omission. The research papers which were not related to Asia were removed. Some research papers irrelevant to the current topic were also removed, and we shortlisted 47 research articles from the Scopus database.

The exact process was followed for the Web of Science. Additionally, we chose Communication as Citation Topics Meso) and Journalism as Citation Topics Micro and Communication from Web of Science Categories. After getting a list of 203 articles, we shortlisted 55 papers relevant to Asia and our topic. After adding the research papers in Scopus and WOS, we had 104 papers. As six research papers were common in both data sets, we finalized 98 papers to review.

This search was conducted on 22nd Nov 2023.

2.1 Phase one of Analysis

First, we read all 98 articles to find out how journalistic freedom was understood or conceptualized, and what was the focus of the research paper. Was it (1) Journalistic freedom or (2) News Censorship?

Figure 1 indicates the number articles related to journalistic Freedom journalism per year. Only 28 articles were published between 2011 and 2016, with the focus on the journalistic freedom. We found that 70 articles were published between 2017 and 2023, which indicates more research is done in this field of research recently.

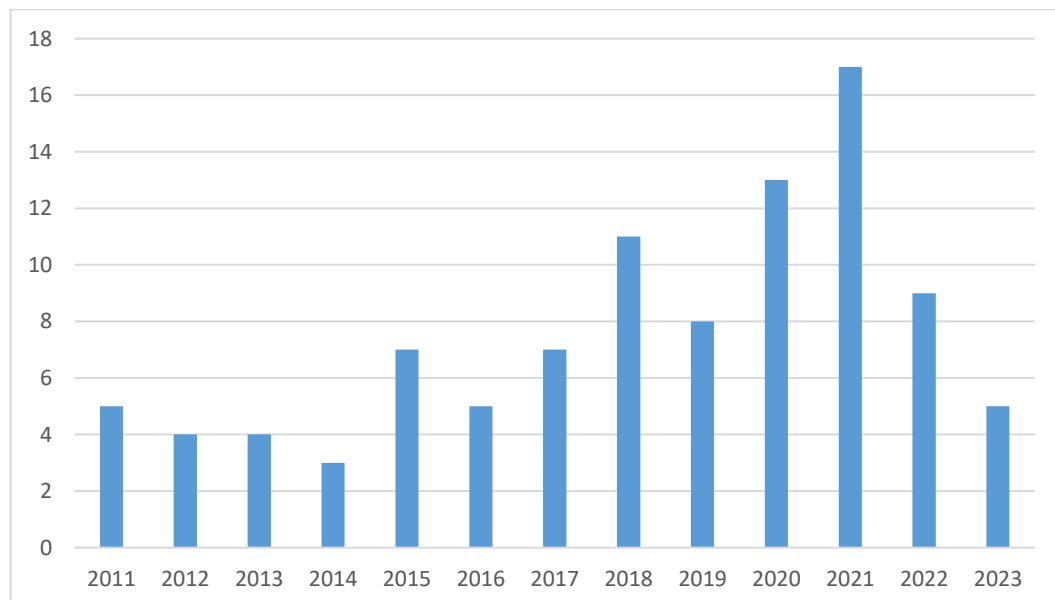


Figure 1: Number of Published articles about journalistic freedom in Asian Countries per year

The majority of the articles were published in PACIFIC JOURNALISM REVIEW (14). followed by *Journalism* (10), *Journalism Practice*, (7) and *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication* (7).

From the 98 research articles we selected, 74 research articles focussed a particular country. Table 1 shows the details about the journals about different parts of Asia. There are 24 articles either which compared journalistic freedom/practices in two or more Asian countries or two or more countries from the world, one from Asia.

Table 1: Regional Focus of Study

	N	%
West Asia	18	18.37
South Asia	14	14.29
East Asia	16	16.33
South East Asia	26	26.53
No clear indication/combination of the above areas	24	24.49

Note: n=98

The complete list of the articles is included in Appendix 1. Table 2 shows the top 10 most cited articles.

Table 2: List of Papers per Citations

No.	Title	Author	Journal	Year	Citation
1	Media and democracy in Turkey: Toward a model of neoliberal media autocracy	Murat Akser, Banu Hawks	Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication	2012	87
2	News Media Trust and News Consumption: Factors Related to Trust in News in 35 Countries	Antonis Kalogeropoulos, Jane Suiter, Linards Udris L, Mark Eisenegger	International Journal for Communication	2019	71
3	Race to the Bottom: Media Marketization and Increasing Negativity Toward the United States in China	Daniela (Danie) Stockmann	Political Communication	2011	44
4	Predicting mobile news use among college students: The role of press freedom in four Asian cities	Ran Wei, Ven hwei Lo, Xiaoge Xu, Yi-Ning Katherine Chen, Guoliang Zhang	New Media and Society	2013	37
5	Soft Power, Hard News: How Journalists at State-Funded Transnational Media Legitimize Their Work	Kate Wright, Martin Scott, Mel Bunce	The International Journal of Press/Politics	2020	25
6	Journalism under pressure in conflict zones: A study of journalists and editors in seven countries	Marte Høiby , Rune Ottosen	Journalism Practice	2017	24
7	Media and civil society in China: Community building and networking among investigative journalists and beyond	Marina Svensson	China Perspectives	2012	22
8	Fact-checkers as entrepreneurs Scalability and sustainability for a new form of watchdog journalism	Jane B Singer	Journalism Practice	2018	24
9	Changing political economy of the Hong Kong Media	Francis L. F. Lee	China Perspectives	2018	22
10	Justice and journalism: Islam and journalistic values in Indonesia and Malaysia	Jenete Steele	Journalism Practice	2011	24

2.2 Phase Two of Analysis

All the articles were studied based on

1. Use of Theory
2. Methodology
3. Journalistic Freedom

System of Government

Political censorship

Self-Censorship

4. Corporate Censorship

5. Other factors affecting Journalistic freedom

3. Application of Media Theories

Giving the information to the public at large is the responsibility of the press, but provisions of Press laws in Malaysia violate the social responsibility theory of the press, besides infringing on the freedom of the press and

its ethical conduct (Mazumdar & Richard Riffle, 2021). The paper titled 'Media, politics and the Threats to Journalists in Pakistan' also uses the social responsibility theory (Aslam R, 2015).

Normative theory is used to analyze Watchdog journalism in India's English-language (Schwalbe et al., 2019), and coverage of the Arrow missile project in the Israeli press (Frenkel & Nossek, 2022). Gatekeeping theory (News Information Censorship and Changing Gatekeeping Roles: Non-Routine News Coverage and News Routines in the Context of Police Digital Communications in Hong Kong) and propaganda Model and media ownership Theory is used to analyze Media Concentration and Journalistic Independence in Pakistan (Raza et al., 2022).

The Framing theory of Robert Entman is referred in the article on missing Malaysian airline MH370 while arguing that media frames could have an impact attitudes, opinions, or individual Frames (Shiang et al., 2021). News frames serve as schemata in telling people how to interpret specific events/ issues. In times of crisis, frame setting is crucial as it provides

salience to the issue and the way the audience should react and respond to the crisis.

(Peter, 2019) uses Game theory, which originates in economics, and inspired research in the political and social sciences. The actors in an organization never restrict themselves to what is planned by the hierarchy, organizational charts, and standard procedures: The individual or collective players have a margin of freedom that they use strategically in their interactions with others.

To explore the interactions in the relationship between the media and the government fields (climate change in Vietnam), Bourdieusian field theory as a theoretical basis. It clarifies the relationship between the political field and the journalism field. There is a connection between journalists' knowledge level, professional skills to explore the problem and produce reports, and news values and sense." Bourdieusian State Theory is used to explain Journalists' perception of work and output changes if they are working for state funded international news agencies (Wright et al., 2020).

Journalists are likely to perceive more press freedom if the audiences as well as international community support their journalistic work. Philippine journalists' perceptions on press freedom uses Grounded theory. The same theory is used in the research on data journalism practices in the South Korean and US television news (Lim, 2019) and 'How journalists understand the threats and opportunities of new technologies (Tsui & Lee, 2021).

'Freedom of expression and statutory limitations in Libya' uses the safety valve theory (Alashry, 2021). It is a philosophical justification of the protest's utility in the country since 2011.

'The Strategic Bias: How Journalists Respond to Antimedia Populism' follows the Spiral of Silence Theory while; referring to Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence (1974) to find out whether intentional leaning rightward may further narrow the scope of ideas that can be freely expressed in the public sphere (Panievsky, 2022).

4. Government and Journalistic Freedom

In China, journalists cannot create independent organizations; but they have informal networking online and offline. It created a strong sense of community among investigative journalists in particular. They network with other groups in society, including lawyers, public intellectuals, and civil society organizations. With the development of micro-blogging (Weibo), they find new forms of community building, more open expressions of solidarity, and increasing levels of interactivity between different social groups. Journalists report on injustices and the situation of marginalized groups and comment on public events on Weibo. Some journalists are actively involved in charity work and civil society organizations (Svensson, 2012).

Some scholars regard the Chinese Government's media policy regarding media as the safety valve strategy. It relieves public discontent through temporary measures that allow critical voices to be heard in the media and through activist movements. This strategy does not change the authoritarian nature of the state, but it instead functions as a powerful tool for it to control discontent better and maintain its power (Ribeiro & Simões, 2021). When imposing restrictions on freedom of speech and media, the authorities in Myanmar give the reasons for law and order, state security and protection of morality, or public order, are, in fact, afraid of criticism and possible public actions against the current authorities (Ochwat, 2020). Although journalists from alternative newspapers can provide a more critical news report in Malaysia, they are labeled antagonists and are usually barred from entering the Prime Minister's Office and UMNO headquarter (Shiang et al., 2021).

Fake news laws have chilling effects on journalism and free speech in Indonesia and Singapore. The same has have given rise to the culture of self-censorship. Freelancers have fewer legal resources than large news organizations, and feel particularly vulnerable to prosecutions (Carson & Gibbons, 2023).

Censorship always prevailed in India in one form or the other. Not to forget the emergency declared in India from 1975 to 1977 by then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. But even before and after that Indian National Congress built a loyal coterie of journalists and editors, who reinforced self-censorship of the media. When self-censorship by the media was inadequate, politicians started using coercive pressures. After Facing several corruption scandals and popular anger, the decades of Censorship around the Gandhi family began to unravel (Maheshwari & Sparks, 2021).

Presently, there are various degrees of Censorship in India during the same regime, and so is the degree of threat. The second tenure of Narendra Modi as a Prime Minister since 2019 is extremely unsafe for journalists in Kashmir. Uncertainty and insecurity imbibed self-censorship among the journalists. There is no need to

impose censorship externally. Enforced self-censorship by journalists is now authoritarian tactics and many times it results into disinformation and vanishing dissent (Majeed, 2022).

The Indian Government uses impunity as a tool to constrain independent journalism and to make self-censorship necessary, especially when they report on corruption, communal fights, religious issues, conflicts such as those in the Naxal area or Kashmir (Harrison & Pukallus, 2021). Government does not actively engage in protecting the journalists if there are stories involving prominent figures or of activities of the mafia or the police. News organisations reporting unfavourable stories are targeted by stopping advertisements.

In Pakistan, government is among the top three cross-media owners having control of PTV, PBC, and FM stations in the country. Political transitions and stumbling economies have affected the media market, disrupted funding-related control, and changed it to other means of influence, including regulatory coercion and Censorship (Raza et al., 2022).

The Pakistani Government either withdraws advertisements for six to nine months or conducts sudden 'tax audits,' which puts media houses' financial viability at risk. If a story is too dangerous to report, it is often not reported out of safety. The war on terror, militancy, political power, government corruption, scandals about the judiciary, security agencies, and the mafia are dangerous topics to report. There is a lack of willpower by media organizations and the Government, making it impossible for those attacked to seek legal redress. Even attacks on journalists are not reported due to government sanctions on such reporting (Aslam, 2015).

Authoritarian and hostile environment, such as Turkey, is potentially dangerous for freelance journalists. Journalists obviously practice self-censorship while choosing stories to report on or framing the stories. In Turkey, foreign journalists are considered a "threat to national security" because of their reportage. They are always under the fear of being surveilled by the Government or its followers (Davis, 2022).

3.2 Media Ownership

The powerful economic and corporate actors represented by business conglomerates have been mainly subordinated to the papers' organizational and economic interests (Hussain, 2017).

Major media owners have clarified their employees that they need to be submissive to the new political elite while reporting. There are many examples of journalists losing their jobs who refuse to comply.

The Chinese Communist Party has Censorship over all media in China. Journalists' actions and declarations indicate that they believed in the possibility of a *modus vivendi* with the authorities that corresponded to both the principles of socialist information and their professional aspirations. There are limitations placed on journalists' right to inform the public. Journalists hope that little by little, they could enlarge their editorial space and tackle truths that were still taboo. However, this is an illusion, even more under the mandate of Xi Jinping, who reminded journalists that "the media's name is the Communist Party" (Peter, 2019).

In Myanmar, a new government was formed in 2016. Still there are many obstacles in the way of free media. On the one hand, journalists face challenges like self-censorship, and on the other hand, issues like tabloidization, which is a product of liberalization (Burrett, 2017).

Journalists who 'offend' power holders with their reporting face threats via phone calls or Facebook. There are several instances of abuse and threatening affecting psychological well-being of the journalists. The killing of journalists is not treated as significant in a way different from any other murder or killing (Harrison & Pukallus, 2021).

In peaceful democracy, the journalists' freedom to seek and speak without fear or threat is taken for granted. However, if there is anarchy or disorder upholding the journalistic principles of truth and justice is very hard (Aslam, 2015).

Pakistani journalists felt most threatened by the Government, terrorists, and militants. For every story published about a political institution or a powerful politician, the journalist takes risk. Media organizations are concerned about their rating and not about their journalists' lives and safety. That is the reason why many journalists have started carrying guns for their safety (Harrison & Pukallus, 2021).

Despite the abolition of official Censorship in Myanmar in 2012, the state retained effective legal means to coerce the media. It led to a culture of self-censorship. Domestic and international journalists have limited access to trouble spots due to travel restrictions in those areas. A culture of suppression and secrecy prevails within state institutions despite reforms. (Burrett, 2017). In India, Internet is used as a weapon to target journalists who are abused, trolled and threatened online (Harrison & Pukallus, 2021).

4 Conclusion

It is imperative to look at the history and culture of the Asia to study journalistic practices and freedom in this region. Then we can impart a complete understanding of Western journalism's mission, values, roles, and sound news business practices.

The degree of media freedom depends on the degree of freedom of speech in that country. Naturally, any country with deep democratic roots should have media freedom. However, there are many exceptions. India, the largest democracy in the world, is consistently going to the lower ranks of the press freedom index. Authorities restrict freedom of speech and media for reasons of state security, protection of morality, or public order. They are, in fact, afraid of criticism and possible public actions against the current authorities.

In most of the Asian countries, journalists are always under fear or pressure. There is fear of surveillance intimidation, threats, bans, imprisonments. There are different yardsticks for using government control and taking punitive action. The journalist from the minority community is easily stamped as anti-government. Foreign correspondents are looked at with scepticism in countries like Myanmar and Malaysia.

Another pressure on journalism is from the corporatization of the media. Big corporates are aligning with the government and not allowing reporters to report freely. The rapid erosion of the business models of the legacy media has deepened a crisis in the journalistic freedom worldwide. Asian countries are not exception to that. News media is expected to perform Watchdog role in relation to the powerful economic and corporate actors has largely been subordinated to the organizational and economic interests of the media house. Media owners have challenged the editorial independence of journalists in countries like India, South Korea and Japan. Self-censorship that journalists impose on themselves is not only worrisome and against the principle of the right to information.

One ray of hope is Journalists experiencing autocratic rule are finding ways to cope with the situation. In a country like China, journalists try to unite to highlight social and economic issues, if not political ones.

In the Philippines, foreign media institutions have been selective in their open support for press freedom. There is a need for foreign support for the whole media industry; and not only one or two media outlets. Otherwise, it is divisive (Khan, 2022). The same is applicable to many countries in Asia.

Alternative media has challenged the capitalist values and practices of dominant media. Most of the journalists in alternative media having the background of legacy media incorporate the Journalistic practices of legacy media in content creation and distribution. In some countries, the regional media has the potential to play a role as alternative media. However, there is another challenge. Rise of independent media has created the issue of trust between the two types of journalists. The one who are from mainstream media and the other, who work independently, have reservations about each other. The governments also treat them differently. Independent journalism that favours public interest over political, commercial, or factional agendas are in great danger.

If there is no urgent action by governments, civil society, and private companies, trustworthy journalism will remain under threat in Asia. Without media and information literacy and internet transparency, humanity may be diverted from addressing sustainable development's real problems and securing human rights more broadly. The global response to these challenges in the coming years will be decisive for journalistic freedom and survival of a democracy.

5. Scope for Research

There is a scope to do research on the relation between mainstream journalism and alternative journalism. In addition, it would be interesting to find out how independent journalists are getting connected with each other across Asian Countries. There is a greater scope for digital journalism and the new growing technology like AI offering new opportunities for journalism in the Asia Continent. It will be interesting to see how this technological development alters the power relation and conventional model of journalism (Rashedi & Winckel, 2019).

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