Power and control issues for a digital-by-default society

The Digital Technologies, Power and Control Working Group selected findings

The Open University

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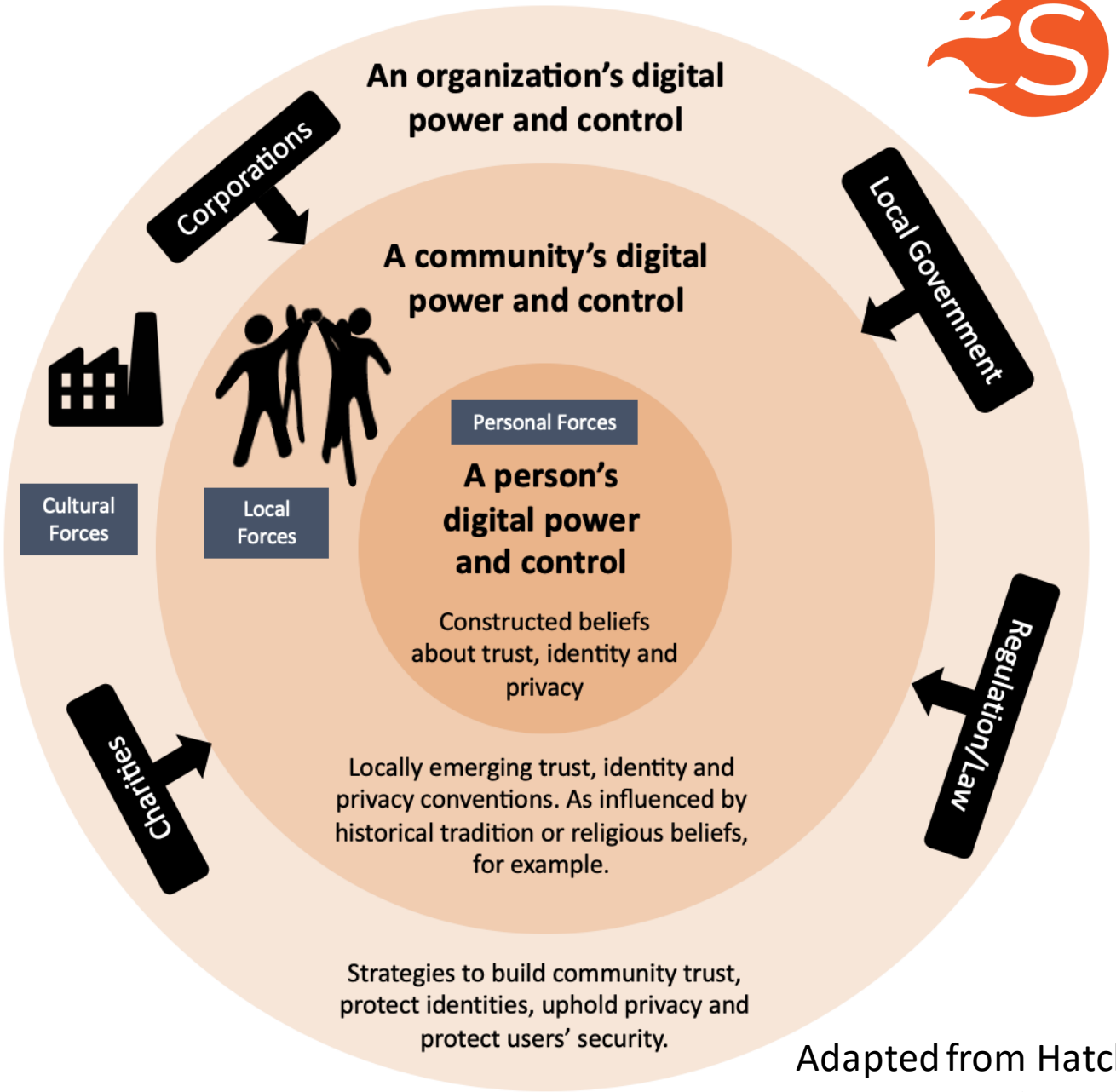
A SPRITE+ funded project to understand how marginalised communities and organisations (corporations and third sector) believe digital technologies are influencing their power and control of societal discourse.



Adapted from Hatch and Gardner (2001)

Unpacking the title: Digital-by-default?

- **Digital-by-default**: a term in use by community participants during data collection. Typically quoted when a digital device was the only mode through which a product/service could be accessed.

<u>Supporting literature…</u>

- Digital technology is changing the way people govern; construct their communities; educate themselves; earn their income; access healthcare services; acquire and communicate information; bridge cultural or physical gaps and engage with society when they are elderly (Ronchi 2019).

- The notion of an information society is converging with that of an inclusive society, so that access to and use of digital technology is being seen as the basis for social inclusion (Díaz Andrade and Doolin 2016, p.406)

Unpacking the title: Power and Control

- **Power:**
- …defined as asymmetric (unequal) control over valued resources in social relations. Any differences in resource control result in a state of relative dependence of one or more parties on another (Bornschein et al., 2020).

Unpacking the title: Control (exercising power)

- **Control:**

Control mechanisms play a significant role in the ways power is exerted. (Miele and Tirabeni, 2020).

Controls are defined as any process through which controllers motivate and direct controlees to behave in ways that are aligned with the controllers' objectives (Sihag and Rijsdijk, 2019).

Users can employ controls too: "In this context, privacy means controlling who can know what about us. It means that we, as individuals, can regulate the flow of personal information, whether we are alone, in social settings, engaged in business transactions, or, to a less absolute extent, dealing with the government" (Bennett and Grant, 1999, p.103).

How are we going to better understand these issues? Two research questions:

- **What could prevent future technologies deepening the digital divide, worsening existing power asymmetries, and creating new ones?**

- **How do we create empowered, informed communities with the knowledge and ability to make fair choices about the impact of future technologies?**

Methodology: Accessing ‘marginalised’ communities

- Localised meanings and lived experiences relating to digital technology usage in community settings.
- Four focus groups across the Midlands and Northern regions of the UK. One of these groups was conducted online to better suit localised need.
- Focus group size ranged from between four and nine participants.
- Each focus group lasted for approximately one hour.
- Local gatekeepers assisted with sampling/recruitment. Sampling comprised of any person considered ‘marginalised’ in terms of their access to/skills to use digital technology. Age, socio-economic status, immigrant/refugee status, physical/mental need and digital skill level became prevalent sample dimensions, for instance.
- Enhanced ethical clearance was necessary for conducting in-person research during a global pandemic.

Methodology: Organisations (corporations and third sector)

- A UK-based, qualitative inquiry which emerged from partnerships developed with corporate, third sector organisations.
- Online, semi-structured interviews held with businesses, third sector representatives and technology consultants (seven in total, each of one-hour duration).
- Interviews discussed TIPS : Trust, Identity, Privacy and Security issues in digital technology. They also comment upon Covid-19 implications and digital exclusion challenges.
- Participant organisations included a supermarket, a company developing digital identity tools, a council-backed social enterprise working with digitally excluded young people and an international society interested in internet use.

Methodology: Thematic Analysis

- Themes within and across participants or events were identified.
- These themes expressed meaningful patterns, stances of the participants, or concerns.
- Themes were kept close to the text.

(Benner, 2008, p.463).

- Iterative process (some theoretical ideas first but open to be led by the data).
- Collaborative coding/discussion
- Peer-verification

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Selected Findings (Community)

Concerns around a digital-by-default society (1)

It can be a dangerous for vulnerable people to undertake activities through digital technology

Iris: One person I supported, we were constantly having to help this person because they were creating more and more Facebook accounts. She had 100 odd. I don't know how you can have so many. She was getting targeted. She did banking on her phone and she was giving money out and remained really angry about us trying to help. That's the other thing from her point of view, she was helping someone out there, these were her so called friends.

Some organisations expect/demand digital only

Layla: When you *have* to have an email address: you *have* to. If you don't, you don't get.

Ben: So, the choice has been removed.

Layla: Sorry I sound angry but I do feel angry.

Concerns around a digital-by-default society (2)

Increases isolation: people need to get out and interact

Eva: For a lot of elderly people, it's about their weekly shop. I've got an elderly brother and sister down the road for whom their weekly shop to Sainsbury's was their opportunity to get out and chat. They were *known* in Sainsbury's and would chat to people. So, when lockdown hit, it was a double whammy because they were terrified for their own health but they were also not getting out and seeing people.

The necessity to use digital technology can create anxiety and anger

Nora: It does make you physically ill. People get so anxious, stressed and frustrated because you can't make yourself understood to an inanimate object and people say 'it's easy' but it's the language. I had exactly the same experience with my employment. You'd do this and it didn't work, the support wasn't there.

It’s challenging to convert every in-person activity to digital-by-default

Some core products do not suit hosting online

Hibo: Sometimes but normally I don’t like shopping online because on the market, where I like to go, I like to go there and watch with my eyes! [Laughs.] Some people like to go online. I know how to do it but normally we don’t do it.

Ola: Yeah, yeah. I use it to buy some batteries or some tools. I don’t use it to buy shirts because I like to *see* the quality.

The controversial use of a patient’s digital camera for medical diagnosis.

April: I think technology good but not all. For medical, they want you to use video camera. This is not good. You must be face-to-face. If you have pain in the head – OK that’s fine but not everything for video! When I fractured my shoulder, I called the GP to make an appointment and they said ‘open camera!’. I say that I have pain and that I can’t move my hand. It must be face-to-face with mask and sanitiser.

Transformative examples of technology usage to enhance personal power

Online video conferencing enables those with physical challenges to be included

Jill: We've got a close friend, he's 90 this year and he's suffered a stroke and all his right side was paralysed. He was a musician and he's gone through the zoom and joined Ukulele bands and he's been practising and going along with the Zoom and it has been his life singing and that. So really for him, it was absolutely wonderful.

Ben: The technology there is almost better than in-person because he didn't have to go out?

Jill: He doesn't have to go out, it is all there for him.

Transformative examples of technology usage to enhance personal power

Keeping in touch with international family and friends

Ola: It is quite good because I remember some years back, I wanted to talk with my mother and we would speak through a recording and send the cassette to Africa. Two, three, four weeks it would take to arrive.

Amara: Just to hear your voice, to get answer?

Ola: Yeah. Now, I can use instant face-to-face.

Amara: That's *so* much better, massive step up.

Transformative examples of technology usage to enhance personal power

Viewing funerals, memorials, weddings or other large events in real-time

Amara: For the sad things which you can't be there for and you don't want to miss it because you feel like you won't get that chance again. With Islam, you have to be buried the next day. So sometimes, you don't get the chance to just go, they get buried the next day. 24 hours. I went to Jamaica to see family and I came back and then I heard one of them had passed. Then I got to watch his funeral on YouTube. I was happy because I didn't miss it. So, that is something I love about computers.

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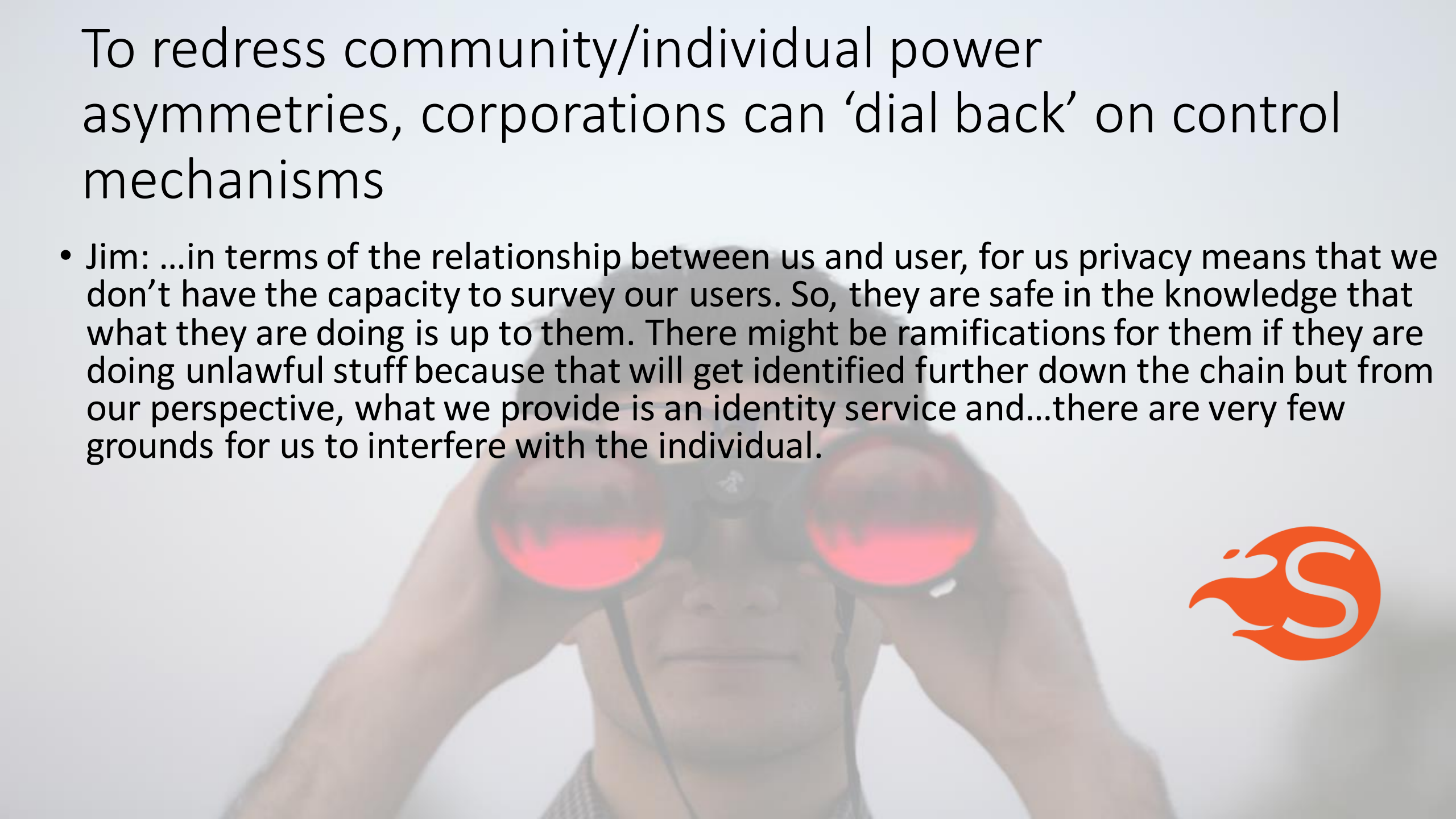
Selected Findings (Organisations)

To redress community/individual power asymmetries, corporations can ‘dial back’ on control mechanisms

- Jim: …in terms of the relationship between us and user, for us privacy means that we don’t have the capacity to survey our users. So, they are safe in the knowledge that what they are doing is up to them. There might be ramifications for them if they are doing unlawful stuff because that will get identified further down the chain but from our perspective, what we provide is an identity service and…there are very few grounds for us to interfere with the individual.



Digital technology making ever more decisions *for* individuals (by tracking online traffic) and this threatens their personal power

- James: Facebook have got algorithms now which will read posts, looking for signs of suicidal thoughts, or maybe depression. You'll get to the point in the future, where you'll have a suicide prevention officer with a different perspective on somebody as compared to the algorithm and they will trust the algorithm.

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