

ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN STRENGTHENING SOCIETIES

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Abstract

The tremendous boost of new media technologies has given birth to the phenomenon of Citizen Journalism which has become an integral part of the modern day societies. For people who formerly had no chance of being heard, citizen journalism is a great opportunity of participation for them. Moreover, the common people cannot only comment on stories, they are providing resources and information beyond the scope of the mainstream media. Especially in countries without a free press bloggers, photo and video journalists can give underrepresented and underprivileged segments of society a voice and add to the media diversity. They are making their ways through censorship and enable cross-border dialogue. As in Iran, as in Zimbabwe or in Kenya and even in Pakistan during the last elections, they have made a real difference. This paper presents an overall view of the citizen journalism (CJ) in the world and its effects on traditional media as well as on society at large. The paper also presents the situation of CJ in Pakistan. The paper concludes that the best quality news can be produced with the mutual cooperation of traditional journalism as well as citizen journalism.

Introduction

One of the most important things in this regard is that due to the evolution of Citizen Journalism, the big media organizations have lost their monopoly over news. Whereas earlier citizen journalists were discouraged by professional media, now bloggers, amateur journalists Citizen Journalists are not only invited to provide feedback on articles, but also to take part in the research that goes into them. Newspapers and online magazines publish readers' articles and photographs.

Sometimes, TV channels provide technical support to citizen videographers who provide their reports to them. So big media houses have taken a U-turn and have opened up their doors to the public to share information and views.

But this new phenomenon has raised several questions. These questions are yet to be answered. For example, what are the underlying risks of citizen journalism? Is information gathered through “street reporting” reliable? Is this in fact a new more participatory form of journalism? And how do people participate who have no access to computers and internet? To make this mutual journalism a success it is, therefore, essential to promote media literacy in society and to provide guidance to citizen journalists. These questions and their possible answers will be discussed in this article.

Active Role of Audience

Earlier the audiences were considered as passive receivers of media messages but technological development changed the situation. The invention of internet and its gadgets enabled the public to express their voices publically. Kolodzy (2006) stated that in 1990s, the Web changed the news audiences from passive consumers to interactive consumers¹. Then Briggs (2007) endorsed the concept, as readers are no longer passive receivers of messages. They create, share and comment.² The sense of users’ participation and active role rather than passive in the news process raises the ‘idea’ of citizen journalism.

Kolodzy (2006) stated the definition of citizen journalism as noted Lasica (2003) “A citizen or citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information”(p.220)³. People without proper journalistic experience can use the modern technology like computer, software and internet to share their creations, arguments, criticism and disseminate on available media outlets. According to Allan (2006) “Anyone with something to say and access to the right software can be publisher, a pundit and observer of events great or small”(p.121).⁴

After, the successful launching of Web in 1990s the rapid growth of blogs, ease up the passive audience to switch their role as active participants. Blogs hold a significant part on the realm of journalism, social networking and especially in citizen journalism. Blogs provided the accessible platform to ordinary public to communicate their voices and beside the mainstream media journalism, Lasica (2003) described, that we have the mixture of commentary and analysis from grassroots, as ordinary people find their voices and shared to the media mix⁵. Now, people are uploading their audio & videos clips, reports, pictures on different blogs and forums captured or created through their PCs, mobiles, iPods, and Cam coders. Practically, people are enjoying the blessings of blogs, forums, independent news sites like *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Flickr*, *Twitter*, *AOL*, *Google*, *MSN* & *Yahoo* Messengers etc.

This active participation in news process changed the definition of news consumers into the ‘participatory or citizen journalism’ and according to Gillmor (2003), “enormous new power is devolving into the hands of what has been a mostly passive audience.”⁶ Free, diverse and neutral voices on communication podiums enhance the standards of democracy according to the Bowman & Willis (2003) as summarized by Flew (2008) the intent of this citizen participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, widespread and appropriate information that is required to strengthen the democracy⁷. Now many established news organizations launched their online portals for citizens to assist, guide and comment on news stories and patterns with their self-created contents. One of the most famous media scholars of South Africa Mr. Steven Lang expressed his views about Citizen Journalism (CJ) as under:

“It is journalism produced by non-professionals. It can take various forms including text, images, video and audio. It can make use of a wide range of tools such as cell phones, computers, audio recorders or even just a pen and paper.”⁸

Background

Citizen Journalism is a new sort of news creation, which has been discussed by various scholars. Citizen journalism has been associated with the development, dissemination, and usability of web publishing software. Flew (2008) described the initial inauguration of the citizen journalism in 1999 after the development of open publishing architecture by Matthew Arnison and other involved in the 'Active Sydney group' and in the same year their adoption of open source models like Independent Media Centers (*Indymedia*), was a milestone to enable the new forms of news production.⁹ Then in 2000, a Korean website *OhmyNews.com* launched by a veteran journalist Oh Yeon-Ho stating the dissatisfaction about Korea's conservative traditional media. Kolodzy (2006) noted the Oh arguments that "journalists aren't some exotic species; they are everyone who has news stories and share them with others."¹⁰ *Ohmynews*, motto is: "Every Citizen's a Reporter". The web service started with 727 citizen reporters and 4 editors and after 5 years, this quantity raised up to 38,000 citizen reporters and about a dozen editors.

In the year 2001, the incident of 9/11 brought substantial worldwide changes in social, political and economic affairs. At the same time, media got broader alterations in news-reporting styles and approaches. Mainstream media and particularly TV was portraying the nonstop news about the incident and then "another kind of reporting emerged during those terrible hours and days. Through emails, mailing lists, chat groups, personal web journals -all nonstandard news sources- we received valuable context that the major American media couldn't, or wouldn't, provide".¹¹

At the occasion of 9/11 citizens accessed the internet to share their exclusively captured material with masses, however then the term citizen journalism was not publically renowned. The two later on incidents first Tsunami devastations in Indonesia on December 26, 2004 and secondly, the suicide bombing in London on July 7, 2005 increased the role of citizens' participation in the news

process. People with cell phones and digital cameras became some of the first citizens on the scene to report on these two terrible events. Citizens reporting on these incidents represent a new stream for journalism, where journalists and their public work together to provide information about what happening in the world.

After 7/7 bombing when BBC was looking forward for the exclusive and significant information about this important incident of the day then Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007) noted the fact as, “the BBC received unprecedented help from London residents. Just after the six hours of this attack, the organization counted more than 1000 photographs, 20 video clips, 4000 text messages and 20,000 emails-all sent in by citizen”(p.245).¹²

Currently, number of independent blogs, networks, forums and websites are working under the usual practice of citizen journalism and beside this expansion; traditional media organizations are sparing their spaces for the citizens to take part in their news process.

CJ's Potential

Unbiased, positive reporting, debates and discussions are real soul of journalism, which enables to build an optimistic and healthy democratic society. Citizen participation in news process exchanged overall attitude of the conventional news media, which considered as the gatekeeper of information. Kolodzy (2006) believed that “participatory journalism takes the act of convergence a step further and requires sharing between producers and consumers; it requires audiences to be part of the team, part of the conversation. And audiences are sometimes deciding to share among themselves, leaving traditional journalism out of the loop”(p.218).¹³ Franklin (2009) stated that it is as “giving a voice to the voiceless”¹⁴. Many segments of the society were unrepresented by the mainstream media. However, all the technological advancement is providing an expansion to possibilities of citizen participation in journalism. Through blogs, citizen journalists have wrecked the stories about political corruption,

police violence and about other concerning issues to local, national and international communities.

Being the part of news process people feel a sense of representation and pride, they share sometime valuable and distinct contents. In the crises like 9/11 and 7/7 it was hard for professional media especially TV reporters to get the access in targeted areas and mostly media men are not allowed getting in with their gadgets and team. In such circumstances, citizens perform journalist's role with their devices like mobiles and camera. They do not angle the incident under the government or organizational policy; they just capture and portray what they see on the site. Citizens' involvement in the news process breaks down the sense of media hegemony. Versatility and freedom of voices is beauty of journalism comprising the basic features of democracy.

A recent example of this freedom is the Iran's presidential election in 2009. During the course of election, journalists were banned for reporting and a blog service "Twitter" played a vital role for press. Goode (2009) added that citizen journalism has the basic characteristic of democracy. Conventional media's reporters play a role of 'gatekeepers' and comes with the makeup news stories along the political, social and advertisers' pressures while, citizen journalists use a radical approach and without any pressure play a role of 'watchdog' over the 'gatekeepers'¹⁵.

"Citizen Journalism" is almost free of charge journalism because non-journalists express their views and share their knowledge online without any financial reward. With the advent of this phenomenon, new communities have found their place in modern societies. It is an expression of the fundamental democratic principle of freedom of speech. More voices in the public arena can add to a more lively democracy. The contribution of citizens who comment on issues of public concern is appreciated all over the world. Especially in countries without freedom of expression, the world wide web plays a crucial role in informing the people. The most important thing is that the digital media are opening up the

sphere to those who previously had no means to make themselves heard.

Media and Good Governance

Free access to media is a key requirement for a diverse civil society. A well-informed and critical civil society is the prerequisite for good governance. Today, Communication is becoming more individual and people's opinions are being shaped less and less by the media. Communication theory explains that there is one information sender, and there are media and information receivers. Nowadays, the recipients themselves have become senders. They have become disseminators of information and, of course, opinions. There is sufficient opportunity in this scenario. However, when scrutinized more critically from the standpoint of what is true, the truth here can be a bit cloudy. It is sometimes difficult to navigate one's way through these vague truths.

Independent media do not only provide information but also critically question and reveal and, in doing so, make governmental action more transparent to the general public. Unprivileged social groups are especially able to express themselves and participate in politics by means of independent media. Freedom of expression is necessary for a free, democratic civil society. The Former German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher once said it quite ominously "The press is the artillery of freedom."¹⁶

New media like the internet or mobile communication provide many new possibilities, quantitatively as well as qualitatively, especially in developing countries. Twitter and YouTube, for example, enable us to express ourselves in public and gain access to information and public opinions. New media open the doors for participatory journalism. They give a voice to those who previously went unheard, those who had to remain in the shadows. This phenomenon has been seen in action in Iran, where individual Iranians published information via Twitter, which the Iranian government could no longer ignore. An audience of more than 20,000 people was reached and the mainstream media used the Twitter news

to report on the situation in Iran at a global level. Twitter created a means for evading censorship. It is especially new media which allow for new forms of civil protest. New media enable global access to information from within dictatorships that would otherwise be inaccessible. New media foster participation, transparency and thus democracy.

However, there are always two sides of a coin. New media have generated a new information overload that for many of us is a strain. We are all confronted with the overwhelming challenge of filtering relevant information out of this overflow of news. People need a lifeline in this flood of information. They need media literacy, something which needs to be promoted.

Transparency and Participation: Two qualities of Citizen Journalism

Transparency and participation in particular are promoted by new media which transmit high quality and reliable content. This makes further education so important. Further education provides users with the journalistic tools and thus the specific quality standards we also need in citizen journalism. In developing countries there is also the question of freedom of information. According to a recent study by the organization "Reporters without Borders," the internet is censored in 60 states worldwide. Last year 120 bloggers were arrested and convicted. This is a distressingly new all time high for something as simple as expressing one's opinion. 120 convicted bloggers and internet dissidents are currently in prison¹⁷. Freedom is a very precious gift that should not be destroyed by censorship.

Barriers of New Media

Access to internet and new media varies heavily in different countries. In South Africa for example a large part of the population has internet access. But according to estimates by the International Telecommunication Union, the situation is very different in Sub-Saharan Africa. About 55 percent of the rural population still does not have access to any

telecommunication media. Another example: a DSL connection in Germany costs about 30 euros per month. In Nigeria a comparable connection costs about 600 euros – this is nearly 900 percent of the per capita income. Thus the poorer of the global population have to pay more for the internet than the richer. This constitutes a barrier for the freedom of the world wide web and for the freedom of internet access. Thus the digital revolution reveals further forms of exclusion.

The majority of the global population is not yet able to participate in the global political debate by means of new media due to their financial situation, social status or geographic position.

Citizen Journalism: a Challenge or Complement to the Mainstream Media

For many people Citizen Journalism (CJ) is a challenge to the mainstream media because the mainstream media have lost their news monopoly. While some scholars and media experts think this phenomenon as a complement to the mainstream media. Both groups have their own arguments.

The people who believe that CJ is a threat or challenge to the traditional media argue that with the passage of time CJ may take over the place of traditional media. Because of a variety of views and unbiased reporting the CJ will be more powerful than the newspapers etc. Especially in countries without freedom of expression, the world wide web plays a crucial role in informing people. These people are worried about the future of the traditional media. On the other hand, many media scholars and journalists believe that CJ is not a rival of the traditional media rather it complements them and extends a big support to them. This is a fact that conventional media reporters are not available on each and every place but citizens are present everywhere. Solana Larsen, (2010) the Editor of the Global Voices stated citizen journalists and conventional media reporters can work together to produce high-quality content. She says that her organization Global Voices was able to complement what the BBC was doing when

they were fast and when they were different. She stated “We were different, for instance, from a straight news story about a women’s bill in India. The BBC story made you feel as though if you were for women’s rights you should be for this bill, because it would bring more women into parliament. Global Voices added depth of perspective through blogger voices that showed why even some feminists were against the idea. Because, that was one of the many arguments we heard, the bill was not making the representation more diverse. It was benefiting women from certain families, wives of former politicians.”¹⁸

Lessons from the Global Voices

Global Voices is a project of the Research Centre of the Harvard University of the USA and it was created to help and encourage people to read one another and to share their reports with one another. Its slogan is: “The World is talking - Are you listening?”

It has a global community of more than 200 bloggers and translators who work with part-time editors. It includes the reports on the activities and the topics that concern bloggers and citizen journalists worldwide, with special emphasis on developing countries and marginalized voices within them. Global Voices also created an advocacy organization that keeps watch of bloggers who have been censored, threatened or arrested. “On the advocacy website we try to keep track of online repression of free speech. We also try to motivate activists to work together to fight censorship. We also created yet another website called Threatened Voices. It is a world map on which we track cases of threats or arrests against bloggers” Solana Larsen stated in the International Media Conference held on March 18, 2010 in Berlin Germany¹⁹.

Global voices conducted training workshops in several countries for the training of the citizen journalists emphasizing how to write a good news story for the blogs. Their trained citizen journalists have written some of the best news reports on their blogs. Solana argues that sometimes, the

CJ reports change the media agenda of the mainstream media. She stated as follows:

“The Global Voices office in Malawi for example has had many of its blog posts republished in local newspapers. There were also bloggers’ stories which made their way into radio broadcast media in France, Taiwan and the United States and even into television in Egypt and Paraguay.”²⁰ The Global Voices believes that citizens and journalists can do a lot of good by working together because journalists are citizens too. With their collaborative efforts, they can produce the best media content.

Some lessons from South Africa

Like other parts of the world, Citizen Journalism is passing through new horizons in Africa, especially in South Africa. Grocott’s Mail is one of the oldest independent newspapers in South

Africa and it is a platform for experimental journalism. It is owned and run by the Journalism Department of the Rhodes University since 2003. The newspaper launched a project of Citizen Journalism called as “Lindaba Ziyafika” which encourages journalism which is produced by nonprofessionals.

Steven Lang and his team at Grocott’s Mail realized that their newspaper profits from citizen journalists’ stories. In South Africa, though, they do not only have to support citizen journalists as such, but see to it that the poorer residents are involved as receivers and contributors to the mass media, as well. They teach their students how to become good CJ reporters and also conduct training workshops and short courses for citizens to prepare themselves to write reports for their newspaper. The citizen journalism project is funded by the US based Knight Foundation. According to the statement of the Chief Editor, Steven Lang, “it is only one of several experimental projects that we conduct at Grocott’s Mail. “Lindaba Ziyafika” means “The news is coming” – is the title of our project that is characterized by two major thrusts:

Firstly, the innovative use of mobile phones and information within the community of Grahamstown. Secondly, we try to equip media producers in the town and – more broadly – in the country, and to a certain extent in the rest of the continent, so that they, the producers, can fully utilize this media. The main objectives of “Lindaba Ziyafika” include the involvement of the poorer residents as receivers and contributors to Grocott’s Mail’s multiple platforms.²¹ Steven Lang further stated that they were developing a body of knowledge about cell phones as media platforms. Their CJ reporters were using cell phones to receive news via text messages and were also using them to produce news, again via text messages and photographs.

One of the main objectives of “Lindaba Ziyafika” project was to teach people, mainly residents from the underprivileged sections of the community, how to become citizen journalists. The management has focused on initial training for the young people, high school pupils, because many of them already use cell phones for texting and other social media. It is believed that the younger generation will be far more willing to new ways of using technology. The newspaper management believes that it is important to maintain close contact with the community. Citizen journalism and innovative use of new media technology are helping what was essentially for an old media organization to achieve this goal. Steven further states that “By developing citizen journalism in our newspaper, we are strengthening our relationship with our readers. This is good for the community, and that really is good for us, the newspaper, as well.”²²

These were some useful lessons from South Africa which can be replicated in other parts of the world, especially in the developing countries.

Challenges to Citizen Journalism

Citizen Journalism is passing through its evolutionary stage in different parts of the world and is facing a lot of problems, pressures and criticism. In CJ we listen more and more voices but more voices in the public arena do not

necessarily add to a more lively democracy. The decisive question is: how do people or companies best serve the common good? If bloggers express their anger or offer their personal views rather than facts striving for the most possible objectivity, then the common good is not well served. The same is true if the extremists promulgate their own convictions and try to prevail over those interested in objective problem solving. This is why readers should always ask the one but essential question: is the text opinion-based or is it fact-based reporting?

Moreover, citizen journalism does not necessarily extend to the masses. There are a lot of marginalized people in poor countries. The illiterate people can hardly make use of the web. The goal therefore must be to establish civic liberties throughout society, and not only in the world wide web. Illiteracy, poverty and non-availability of the internet and other new technology is yet a big hurdle in the development of Citizen Journalism. CJ does not represent all of the citizens rather it represents only a limited class of citizens.

A market economy depends on professional business journalists. Individual statements by shareholders and various stakeholders are no substitute for company profiles delivered by independent professional journalists. Healthcare reform is another example. It is such a complex issue. Citizens who make the effort to express themselves might be angry about the costs they must bear, be it in form of insurance premiums, taxes or other healthcare costs. Only professional journalists can perform their duties with a sense of responsibility and credibility.

The credibility of the CJ reporters has always a big challenge worldwide. Many people believe that this kind of 'street reporting' is not reliable. They argue that CJ reports are most of the time exaggerated and biased and the facts presented are not trustable. Sometimes, these reports are based on opinions. Lasica (2003) narrates that many newspapers and TV stations had passed many years to establish the trust of their audiences. However, participatory

news sites, with their obvious and more cherished nature, are attracting citizen journalists that contribute and collaborate with one another and most of the times, their content is not reliable.²³ Therefore, citizen journalism needs potential to develop a more reliable relationship with their audiences.

Moreover, citizen journalists usually don't obey any code of ethics which is a requirement for the mainstream media. Itule & Douglas (2000) described the code of ethics and responsibility for journalists, as the issue was highly concerning since 1970s. They noted, "A code of ethics hanging on the wall is meaningless; a code of ethics internalized within the journalist and guiding his actions is what is meaningful. Ethical values are acquired all thorough life from a number of sources, such as Church, family and friends. Reporters can't separate the ethics of journalism from the values they hold as individuals" (p.201).²⁴

Considering the ethical boundaries in practical journalism citizens' involvement in news process sometimes produce ambiguity with their shared contents. During 2009, a mobile video clip on national TV channels in Pakistan, portrayed the brutality of the "Taliban" (religious extremists) by beating a women captured by the others was launched abruptly and then discussed internationally without checking the authenticity about video. Later on investigations proved the fakeness of video but until the negative intuition of the nation and the religion stretched worldwide. Many other reports of the citizen journalists are against the media ethics and the basic norms of the society.

Lack of proper training is yet another problem of the Citizen Journalism and that's why their reports don't fulfill the basic journalistic requirements. There should be some proper arrangement of the training of the citizen journalists. If they are trained properly, they can produce better reports.

CJ in Pakistan

Although citizen journalism is passing through evolutionary phase in Pakistan, yet its role is highly

appreciated. Regarding print media, almost all of the major Urdu and English newspapers provide opportunity to their readers to express their views in the section called as “Letters to editors”.

In Pakistan, citizen journalism is a relatively new phenomenon. Social networking and blogging tools such as WordPress, Blogspot, Flickr, Orkut, Facebook and Twitter have been used as platform for freedom of speech and expression. But even then Pakistani portals specifically designed for citizen journalism are few and far between. Yet, citizen journalism websites are beginning to gain popularity within the country — primarily in Pakistan’s urban areas by literate and semi-literate Pakistanis who understand the technological usage of mobiles, computers and the Internet. On a macro scale, it is only over the past two to three years that local media organizations have really woken up to the importance of getting ordinary citizens to be an active part of the news, rather than just consumers. For example, local dailies such as DAWN and The Express Tribune now have separate blog sections for their websites that encourage submissions from Pakistanis who need not necessarily be journalists.

Private television channels are highly encouraging citizen journalism offering citizens to become journalists and send them their reports etc. Until 2002, there was only one state-owned Pakistan television channel (PTV). By now there are 83 private television channels licensed by the government, although some of them are not working. But those which are working encourage citizen journalism. It is the same with radio. Until 2002, there was only the state-owned Radio Pakistan. Now there are 124 private radio stations, there are dozens of newspapers which meet international standards, in English as well as in Urdu. The problem is that all media are working under strict control of the government. But private TV channels are encouraging citizen journalism reports. However, different channels have different policies. Some TV channels require that the citizen journalists identify themselves if they send reports via email. This delays the

process for several days. For example, Dawn News requires the proof of identification of the citizen journalist who submits some report to them. There are certain other TV channels who accept the CJ-reports, screening a disclaimer saying “this TV channel is not responsible for the facts of the CJ-report.” The most popular television channel in the country, GEO-TV, has a program which is called “GEO Dost,” meaning “friends of GEO.” They require the citizen journalists to send their reports to their local bureaus. The local bureau journalists verify the facts of the report and, after verification, send the CJ-report to their central office, after which it is displayed on the television channel.

Although citizen journalism is in its initial stage in the country, it is already playing a big role in promoting and conveying the problems of the society to the government. It has played a great role in combating terrorism, because the country has been badly affected by the wave of terrorism. Moreover, citizen journalism is playing a very important role in fighting corruption. But the most important area is the range of social problems of common people, including the energy crisis, the food crisis, air pollution, water pollution or contamination of drinking water. There are the pathetic conditions of roads, unemployment, inflation, and so on and so forth. Citizen journalists are conveying these issues and highlighting them. A big corruption scandal was detected in July 2009 in Lahore, the second largest city of Pakistan only because of citizen journalism report. Ms. Shamaila Rana, a politician and member provincial assembly tried to buy jewelry with a stolen credit card which was detected and the whole act was recorded in the film of the close circuit TV camera. The film was released to GEO TV and it gone on-air. The lady had to resign from the seat of Punjab Assembly after her alleged involvement in credit card scandal. After the release of the video showing Shumaila Rana shopping with allegedly stolen credit card, her political party Pakistan Muslim League-N demanded her resignation. Hence citizen journalists are playing their role in eradication of corruption from the society.

Conclusion

Citizen Journalism has become an integral part of the modern-day society because it has given voice to the voiceless people in the society. This newly emerged phenomenon has really played its role in strengthening the civil societies in different parts of the world. Citizen journalists are doing the things which were beyond the control of traditional media because citizen journalists are everywhere while traditional media journalists are unable to be everywhere. Traditional media have lost their news monopoly. Social media like blogs, Twitter or simply SMS have passed the power to publicize news to citizens with internet access or mobile phones. All of a sudden, everybody can publish stories and be a citizen journalist. But citizen journalists are rarely trained. Most of them do not even know about the ethical standards which are important values of traditional media houses. In spite of all of its strengths, CJ has certain limitations. There are valid questions on the credibility and reliability of CJ reports. The lack of professional training is also a big deficiency of the CJ reporters. The problem can be solved by gathering the potentials of citizen journalism and traditional media. The mutual cooperation and collaboration of the two types of journalism can produce the best results. Both should not be taken as rival rather they should complement each other. Traditional media should encourage and train the citizen journalists who can be an asset for them. Their reporters cannot be available everywhere. This deficiency can be overcome by encouraging and engaging citizen journalists. They can complement the traditional media organizations in obtaining the best quality news stories.

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Notes

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