Events That Matter:  
Specific Incidents, Media Coverage, and  
Agenda-Setting in a Ghanaian Context

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Abstract: Traditional agenda-setting research has convincingly demonstrated that the media’s agenda influences the public’s agenda in a somewhat linear fashion. Following from that, agenda-setting researchers are now investigating the attributes of culturally specific agendas. Their studies provide insight into what appears to be a complex process that may be affected by factors beyond those already documented. This paper similarly examines the intricate connections between media, specific events, and agenda-setting in Ghana. In this context it considers two specific events with significant sociocultural implications—events that were framed by the media to produce agenda-setting effects. The paper argues that the media’s framing of those events provided their audience with certain ready-made patterns of cognition, thereby enhancing the possibility of agenda-setting.

Résumé : La recherche traditionnelle sur la fonction d’agenda (« agenda setting ») a démontré de manière convaincante que les priorités des médias ont une influence sur les priorités du public de manière quelque peu linéaire. Développant leur approche, les chercheurs sur la fonction d’agenda sont en train d’étudier celle-ci par rapport à son impact culturel. Leurs études révèlent ce qui paraît être un processus complexe que peuvent influencer des facteurs peu documentés à ce jour. À l’instar de cette approche culturelle, cet article examine les rapports complexes entre la fonction d’agenda, les médias et des événements particuliers au Ghana. Dans ce contexte, il considère deux événements spécifiques dont les conséquences socioculturelles ont été significatives—des événements présentés par les médias de manière à produire des effets de type « fonction d’agenda ». Cet article soutient que la manière de présenter ces événements, étant congruente avec les manières de percevoir du public, augmente la possibilité que la fonction d’agenda produise un effet dans ces cas-ci.

Keywords: Agenda-setting; Mass media effects; Mass media theory; Media/mass media; Media theory

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Introduction

In 1922 Walter Lippmann laid the intellectual foundations of the agenda-setting hypothesis or model\(^1\) by suggesting that the news media serve as a veritable source of pictures in our heads, through the supply of imitations of the external world that is normally “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 29). Taking a cue from Lippman, Cohen (1963) built upon that foundation by asserting that

> The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people about what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about . . . . The world will look different to people, depending . . . on the map that is drawn for them by the media. (p. 13)

Subsequently, McCombs & Shaw put this idea to the test in the 1968 presidential elections in the United States, publishing their research in 1972 and coining the metaphor of agenda-setting in the process. The nearly three decades since the publication of McCombs & Shaw’s seminal article on agenda-setting have witnessed a flurry of research activities and publications surrounding the agenda-setting hypothesis. In the wake of such intense interest, a research specialty has developed and continues to develop within this area (McCombs & Bell, 1996). The agenda-setting model is even now generating new research problems across a variety of communication settings (McCombs & Shaw, 1993), while still holding its own as a fascinating and enlightening field of communication studies (Robinson, 1998). All of these studies have sought in one way or the other to refine, clarify, expand, replicate, or justify the original study (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2001a), and indeed most of the research into the agenda-setting function of the media has provided fresh insights (Wanta & Hu, 1994).

The bulk of research undertaken in the two decades following the McCombs & Shaw study followed their lead and concentrated on “the agenda of issues found in the news media and among the general public” (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997, p. x). Research along the lines pioneered by the initial McCombs & Shaw study focuses on an agenda of objects and is referred to as the first level of agenda-setting, which also represents the traditional sphere of agenda-setting research (McCombs & Estrada, 1997). Such research suggests a kind of linear relationship between the media agenda and the audience agenda—with the former causing the latter.

Having proved convincingly, through over 200 published articles, that agenda-setting happens at the first level, agenda-setting research is moving away from the linear model where the media agenda directly influences that of the audience. Researchers are “now detailing a second level of effects that examines how media coverage affects both what the public thinks about and how the public thinks about it” (Ghanem, 1997, p. 3), and trying to uncover any complexities involved in the agenda-setting process.

Whereas the bulk of the literature suggests that research at the first level of agenda-setting has taken place mostly in Western societies where media are
widely dispersed and used, there is some evidence to show that such research has been carried out in relatively non-media-saturated societies as well, including Ghana (see, for example, Anokwa & Salwen, 1988; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2001a). However, when it comes to the second level of agenda-setting, the literature is silent on what happens within these settings where media are not as widely dispersed and used. This paper is in part an attempt to bridge that gap. But more importantly, it introduces an interesting dimension into the second level of agenda-setting from a Ghanaian context. This is done by investigating how significant sociocultural symbols are appropriated and framed by the media in pursuit of particular agendas. Research in Ghana, for example, has shown that the process of media agenda-setting is complex and that media coverage and presentation of issues interacts with a host of other societal and cultural factors in a complex web of relationships and interrelationships to produce effects (see, for example, Anokwa & Salween, 1988; Atuobi, 1996; Kwansah-Aidoo, 1999).

In the specific context of this article my contention is that in a country such as Ghana, where media are not as widely dispersed, certain events, due to their sociocultural significance, supply people with “meanings outside the media,” which makes them take notice. This enables the media to appropriate the symbols attached to them to pursue their own particular agendas by directing people on how to think about these issues. The sociocultural context in this regard combines powerfully with media presentation/framing to influence the way the audience feels about the issues and events (Protess & McCombs, 1991) and to ultimately cause agenda-setting. In terms of (the Ghanaian) sociocultural context, I mean the basic forms of sense-making and understanding gained from history, socialization, and social interaction that help people to determine and clarify in their own minds what they make of the world in which they live, and their place within it. By their very nature such basic forms tend to attain, over time, distinctive kinds of applications and a relative permanence.

This paper discusses how the sociocultural significance of two specific events combined with media framing to influence audience agendas. Such a focus, it is hoped, will help provide a clearer picture, in the words of Rogers, Hart, & Dearing (1997, p. 233), “of agenda-setting as a more holistic social process involving information and effort exchanges between a host of spheres” within the Ghanaian setting. In this regard, I make two main propositions, as follows:

1. News media can influence the salience of objects on the public agenda” and “The framing of those objects on the media agenda can also influence the pictures of those objects in our heads” (McCombs & Estrada, 1997, pp. 246-247); and

2. Within the Ghanaian context, the media may appropriate significant sociocultural symbols and frame them in ways that will enhance particular agendas. In other words, specific incidents reported in the media may combine powerfully with media framing to ultimately affect the salience of issues for audience members.
In the end, it is hoped that the approach presented in this paper will spark discussions and comparisons across cultural contexts at the theoretical and methodological levels. Additionally, the paper hopes to contribute to the empirical work on second-level agenda-setting.

The media context in Ghana

For the purposes of this paper, the term media is used in reference to the collective whole of private and state-owned radio, television, and the print media—mostly newspapers—that operated in Ghana at the time of the research. The various mediums are treated together because within the Ghanaian setting, newspapers, radio, and television are all considered important and play similar roles of informing, educating, and entertaining the audience. Here a brief discussion of the media context in Ghana will help put the discussions in perspective.

At Ghana’s independence in 1957, the media scene was relatively vibrant. There were at that time a number of privately owned newspapers that had been at the forefront of the struggle. Soon after independence the government acquired the most prominent and foreign-owned press house, the Daily Mirror Group, and set up its own news agency (Jones-Quartey, 1974). The private local press was not banned, but was allowed to exist side by side with the state-owned press (Twumasi, 1985). Radio, introduced almost 30 years earlier by the colonial government, was entirely owned and controlled by the state. Television, which was not to be introduced until 1965, nearly a decade after independence (by the first post-independence government), also remained state-owned and controlled (Ansah, 1985). Essentially, the media situation 10 years after independence was that the broadcast media were all state-owned and controlled, while a few private newspapers existed and operated alongside the state-owned press.

This immediate post-independence situation in Ghana persisted until January 1993, when the Fourth Republican Constitution (promulgated in 1992) came into effect. In the period between 1957 and 1991 Ghana had been ruled by an assortment of governments—three democratic and five military—and the fortunes of the private press changed according to each. Control of the state-owned media was usually more stringent under the military regimes than under the democratically elected governments (Rockson, 1990). Nevertheless, due to the lack of alternatives, the state-owned media, particularly the broadcast media, commanded a large audience and continues to do so even now. Ampaw (2001) sums up Ghana’s media situation before 1992 thus:

Until the coming into force of the 1992 Constitution, and the advent of the Fourth republic, Ghanaian society had not experienced a strong and developing media presence since independence. The birth of the Fourth Republic, with its constitutional guarantee of media freedom and independence, brought about a radical change in the media landscape. (p. 30)

The 1992 constitution guaranteed media freedom and established for the first time the legality of private broadcasting (Heath, 2001). Article 21 (1) (a) guarantees “freedom of speech and expression, which shall include freedom of the press and other media.” This led immediately to the establishment of a vibrant private
media that competed with the old and well-established state-owned media for audiences. This was especially so with radio and newspapers. Although in theory the 1992 constitution ushered in a new and democratic government in January 1993, in practice the government was the same. The previous military government (Provisional National Defence Council—PNDC) metamorphosed into the National Democratic Congress (NDC), which won the elections, and the same head of state became president of the Fourth Republic.

The 1992 constitution also stipulated that the state-owned media should be autonomous and was to give equal attention to all political parties. However, not much changed with respect to control of the state-owned media and their history of supporting the government of the day. The government continued to interfere with the operations of the media, sometimes giving directives as to who should or should not be allowed access to the various media, but particularly the airwaves. The private media therefore became the main avenue through which the opposition parties could make their voices heard. They (the private media), with the exception of a few set up by the ruling NDC party, also took to interrogating the policies of the NDC government. Commenting on the independence of the private media, Tettey (2001) notes that “a critical analysis of the content and position of most of them on various issues does not reflect a disinterested political agenda” (p. 6). It would seem, then, that in the period between January 1993 and January 2001, after which a new government was ushered in, the state-owned media supported the government of the day (NDC) while the bulk of the private media lent support to the opposition. In the specific case of coverage of the environment and environmental issues at the time, I have earlier noted that:

[The state media covered environmental issues as part of their developmental role and in such a way as not to offend the government, whereas the private media frequently used environmental issues to interrogate government policy and literally to score points for the opposition. (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2001b, p. 177)]

To a large extent, then, it can be argued that the state of the Ghanaian media and the audiences of the media have varied with changes in the political landscape. In all this, the media have remained very important to the audience. The credibility of the stories carried, however, whether by private or state-owned media, seems to depend on the nature and content of the story rather than the source. This is particularly so for stories that do not have any political undertones.

The agenda-setting hypothesis and agenda-setting research
At a very rudimentary level agenda-setting research is preoccupied with the connection between the mass media, occurrences in the real world, and the ways in which people construct these events in their own minds. The concept of agenda-setting asserts that the audience determines what issues are important from the priorities of the media and attaches similar significance to them within their own personal agendas. The fundamental hypothesis is that “the public learns the relative importance of issues from the mass media” (Wanta & Hu, 1994, p. 92). The
concept’s premise is the assumption that audiences, in addition to learning about public issues through the media, also determine how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the media place upon it (Cohen, 1963; McCombs, 1992; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The hypothesis suggests that agenda-setting is “triggered by the quantity of news coverage accorded particular issues or events” (Iyengar, 1997, p. 214). It also implies that news and information from the mass media reflect the content and order of issue priority. It argues further that this representation of issues exerts an independent effect on the nature of issue content so that the public come to believe in the importance of those issues (McQuail, 1994).

Agenda-setting’s major assertion is that the priority of issues on the media agenda influence the priority of issues on the public agenda (McCombs & Estrada, 1997). Essentially, what the agenda-setting hypothesis suggests is that the mass media have the ability to “influence which issues people think about, although they may not be able to instigate changes into how people think about these issues” (Gooch, 1996, p. 110, italics in original). The implication is that when the media focus on certain issues they can actually convince people into thinking that those issues are important. In other words, audience agenda priorities are influenced by the agenda priorities of the media (McCombs & Estrada, 1997). And indeed, there is convincing research evidence from different countries to prove that the media agenda does influence the audience agenda (see Ghanem, 1997).

With research having proved that the media can influence the kinds of issues that are important to people, there has been a spectacular spreading out from the original concerns of the first agenda-setting study in recent years. Some agenda-setting scholars have gone beyond the original contention that the media only tell people what to think about, carrying the agenda-setting function of the media even further. These scholars postulate that beyond merely providing cues about the salience of certain topics and issues, the mass media also tell people how to think about these topics and issues (McCombs, 1992). This is done by way of “framing,” which is referred to as “a second dimension of agenda setting” (Rogers & Dearing, 1997, p. 246). This second level of agenda-setting centres around two major hypotheses as follows:

1. The way an issue or other object is covered in the media (the attributes emphasized in the news) affects the way the public thinks about that object.

2. The way an issue or other object is covered in the media (the attributes emphasized in the news) affects the salience of the object on the public agenda. (Ghanem, 1997, p. 4)

In trying to distinguish between the first and second levels of agenda-setting, researchers such as Iyengar & Simon (1993) have called the attributes “frames.” Indeed, Ghanem (1997) notes that “frames and attributes can be used interchangeably when we are dealing with the second level of agenda-setting” (p. 7). Frames, as Entman (1993) notes, “call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring

other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions” (p. 55). Thus, Iyengar (1997) suggests that the media can influence the importance people attach to issues or events through the subtle means of “framing.” According to Entnam (1993):

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

Framing therefore implies that only a small number of attributes are selected (McCombs & Estrada, 1997) in discussing issues, events, or objects that the media present. As Iyengar (1991) notes: “[F]raming is the subtle selection of certain aspects of an issue by the media to make them more important and thus to emphasize a particular cause of some phenomena” (p. 11). A media frame therefore is “the central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991, p. 3). Following from this, this article examines how the media’s framing of two specific events combined with the sociocultural significance of these events to situate the issues they (the events) represented on the public agenda. It provides an insight into some of the processes by which individuals in Ghanaian society come to attach relative importance to certain issues covered in the media.

Rogers, Hart, & Dearing note that the original agenda-setting paradigm that was brought into being by McCombs & Shaw’s 1972 study has been “dramatically expanded by means of disaggregation, by adding concepts and broader conceptualizations, and by use of different methodologies” (1997, p. 235). They propose that the original research question in the Chapel Hill Study has been expanded to include the following:

1. How is the media agenda set?
2. What are the contributions of theories of social movements and resource mobilization, in which publics are issue centred and very active, to the agenda-setting paradigm?
3. Why do real world indicators play a minor role in the agenda-setting process compared to human tragedies and other triggering events?
4. What role do priming and framing play in the myriad of human decisions that constitute the agenda-setting process? (Rogers et al., 1997, p. 235)

Questions three and four provide the conceptual framework for the discussion in this paper. It needs to be pointed out, however, that priming, which can be described as the media’s ability to influence the audience’s criteria for judging issues (Rogers et al., 1997), is not a concern of this paper. The starting point for this paper is the assumption that cognitive predispositions may be influenced by many different and sometimes varied factors, including the sociocultural and the “frames” presented to individuals by the media. Thus, this paper moves beyond
the media agenda—public agenda linkage by investigating other factors that may influence the agenda-setting process within Ghanaian society.

**Issues, events, and agenda-setting**

Lang & Lang (1981) have noted that “without a clear definition, the concept of agenda-setting becomes so all-embracing as to be rendered practically meaningless” (p. 450). Becker (1991) also points out that it is possible to extend the agenda-setting “metaphor” to such an extent that it loses its essential meaning, leaving only confusion in its trail. It is therefore crucial in any study to have a definition of “agenda” and subsequently to describe very clearly what this agenda consists of.

According to Rogers & Dearing, an agenda is “a list of issues and events that are viewed at a point in time in a ranked hierarchy of importance” (1988, p. 565). An agenda then invariably consists of items in the form of issues and events. The terms “event(s)” and “issue(s)” need to be explained to show their importance in agenda-setting research. Watson & Hill (1997), in *A Dictionary of Communication and Media Studies*, offer the following definitions. *Event*: “The occurrence which gives rise to media coverage [and] would have fulfilled one or more, or an Amalgam of NEWS VALUES” (p. 78; caps in the original). *Issue(s)*: “Those social, cultural, economic or political concerns or ideas which are at any given time considered important, and which are the source of debate, controversy or conflict” (p. 117).

Rogers & Dearing, in distinguishing between issues and events, define *events* as “discrete happenings that are limited by space and time” and *issues* as “involving cumulative news coverage of a series of related events that fit together in a broad category” (1988, p. 566, citing Shaw, 1977). Thus the Nima riots in Accra, Ghana, and the demonstration by traditional chiefs in Tarkwa, also in Ghana (events discussed in another section of this paper), were both specific events that could have helped put specific environmental issues on the public’s environmental agenda—at a micro level, where specific environmental issues are the main concern. At the same time, taken together, these events could have helped situate the issue of general environmental degradation higher on the national agenda—at a macro level, where attention is directed beyond specificities toward a broader assessment regarding the general situation of the environment. Events, then, are specific components of issues, though sometimes the distinction is difficult to make, especially when the mass media fit a news event into a broad category of a larger issue in their attempt to make the event meaningful to their audience (Rogers & Dearing, 1988, p. 566).

In discussing events, Watson & Hill (1997, citing Kepplinger & Habermeir, 1995) note that media coverage of events can stimulate other groups into action and that coverage of key events can “enhance the coverage of similar or related events, and add interest and urgency to events thematically linked” (p. 79). Regarding issues, Watson & Hill (1997), venturing beyond a mere definition of the term, have this to say:
What is an issue for one social GROUP may not be considered such for another . . . . Of vital interest to the student of communication are such questions as: how are issues disseminated? Why do some issues ‘make it’ to the national forum of debate while others fall by the wayside? What are the characteristics of a successful issue? What prolongs an issue? What factors other than the resolution of an issue, are involved in the decline of an issue? And, running through all these questions, what role do the processes of communication play in the definition, shaping and promoting of issues? (p. 117; caps in the original)

Clearly it is essential to distinguish between issues and events, and the priority assigned them by media and by media audiences. It also becomes significant to investigate whether a specific event could of itself serve to put a certain issue before others in both the media agenda and that of the public. Accordingly, this paper investigates the possibility that specific events covered by the media could have helped to put certain issues on the public’s environmental agenda in Ghana.

Research background and methods
In part, the intention of this study was to determine which environmental issues were emphasized by the Ghanaian media and whether the issues covered heavily are comparable to, or differ from, those nominated by educated city dwellers as the important environmental issues in their country. In other words, one concern of this paper was to find out what the media’s environmental agenda in Ghana was and to compare it with the environmental agenda of educated city dwellers. Data were collected through document analysis, in-depth personal interviews, and focus group discussions.

The document analyzed was the 1997 PACIPE Media Report on the environment. The purpose was to answer the specific question: “What are the environmental issues mostly featured by the mass media in Ghana?” Specifically, a detailed analysis was made of the section of the PACIPE report that dealt mainly with the nature and types of environmental issues covered by the media, and also the section that provided a summary of the frequent environmental themes in the media. The rest of the document was also studied to ensure that information provided in sections from which the list of key environmental issues was drawn was consistent with information in the other sections. This enabled a determination of the key environmental issues noted in the report and showed the extent to which these issues received coverage in the media. These were then compared with the list of important environmental issues mentioned by the environmental journalists for validation. The outcome we have examined in terms of its representation of the Ghanaian media’s environmental agenda.

Personal in-depth interviews were conducted in six suburbs of the city of Accra, the capital of Ghana. The suburbs were selected based on socioeconomic status or residency status, that is, high-income, middle-income, and low-income residencies. Socioeconomic status in this regard is seen largely as a determinant of residency status. In other words, for the purpose of this study, people’s ability to afford to live in a high-income or middle-income or low-income suburb was seen...
to be largely dependent on their income levels. In all, 120 people were inter-
viewed, 20 from each of the six suburbs. Respondents were chosen with the aid of
two assistants chosen from each suburb. These assistants were briefed on the cri-
teria for selecting respondents—educated city dwellers. The mode of measure-
ment was based on the potential respondent's level of formal education, which had
to be a minimum of nine years (basic education), and the ability to read and speak
English, the official language in Ghana. The assistants in each of the suburbs drew
up a list of potential respondents from which a final list of 30 was drawn up. From
this final list, a sample of 20 was chosen at random.

Interviews were also held with 13 environmental journalists. The purpose
was to find out, among other things, the environmental issues that they mostly
emphasized in their work and which were subsequently featured in the media. The
issues they mentioned were cross-checked with those listed in the PACIPE report
as the important environmental issues featured in the media. The outcome com-
prises part of what the study refers to in its findings as the media's environmental
agenda. All interviews and group discussions were conducted in English by this
author. All interviews were recorded on audio tapes and later transcribed for analysis.

It should be pointed out that in determining the media's environmental
agenda, some minor differences between the state-owned media and the private
media had to be acknowledged. The main difference was in the prominence of
coverage given to issues that could be traced to government negligence or inac-
tivity. In this regard, the issue of environmentally destructive degradation caused by
mining activities featured high in the private media, while it received next to no
coverage in the state-owned media. Despite such a disparity, journalists from both
state-owned and private media indicated that mining (with its associated hazards)
was a major environmental issue in Ghana. Indeed, the only difference between
the state-owned media’s agenda and that of the private media was the absence of
mining-related environmental issues on the state-owned media's agenda.

Focus group discussions were held with students at the University of Ghana
at Legon and the School of Medical Laboratory Technicians at Korle-Bu. Both
institutions have on-campus student residency. The University of Ghana has five
halls of residence, and so two group discussions were held in each hall of resi-
dence. In all, discussions were held with 10 groups (five males and five females),
each consisting of six students ranging from first year through to postgraduate
level. Groups were organized with the help of contact persons in each hall of resi-
dence. Two group discussions were also held at the School of Medical Laboratory
Technicians. Each group (male and female) consisted of six people also across the
year groups. Here, too, the services of a contact person were solicited to help
organize people for the group sessions. Altogether, 72 people participated in the
focus group discussions. Focus groups were gendered in conformance with sug-
gestions in the literature that groups should be as homogenous as possible. Gender
issues were not central to the objectives of the study, hence there was no attempt to
gain any special insights in that regard.
A consistent system of analysis was adopted in dealing with interview and focus group data. First, the responses from each data source were searched in order to identify recurring regularities. It was then determined that these regularities represented certain patterns, and the patterns were further sorted into categories. The categories were determined from the number of times different respondents mentioned them as revealed by the transcribed responses. Afterwards, the categories were carefully examined to ensure that the issues within each category were the same and deserved to be grouped together. In the same vein, the categories were carefully examined for differences in issues so as to ascertain that data that had been grouped under the different categories were dissimilar and deserved to be classified under the determined categories. This process ensured that all aspects of the data received the same attention and treatment.

Although the interview questions covered a wide range of issues, the findings reported here are those specifically related to the concerns of this paper. With regard to these specific concerns, the original research was not conceived to find out whether any specific events had contributed to media agenda-setting. This question became a research concern, however, when analysis of responses pointed this out. Initial analysis revealed that many respondents referred to a particular event in describing the environmental issues they considered important and also in asserting that the media had influenced them in determining the environmental issues that were important in the country. Consequently, the decision was taken to ask the following specific question: "Can you remember/cite any specific event(s) covered by the media that helped you realize the seriousness of some environmental problem(s) or issue(s)? Did the media coverage influence you in any way? If yes, how?" The responses were then analyzed to determine the number of events mentioned and the frequency with which they were cited. The importance of events and their salience for analysis was determined by using a particular benchmark — their uniqueness within the Ghanaian sociocultural setting. In other words, for the events to be considered for analysis, they had to be incongruous with the prevailing Ghanaian sociocultural norms, practices, and expectations.

**Research findings**

Analysis of responses from the focus groups and personal interviews indicated that only two specific events were cited by respondents as having especially contributed in bringing to the fore the critical nature of particular environmental issues. These were

1. A demonstration by traditional chiefs in Tarkwa in 1996, cited by 74 out of 120 interview respondents (61.6%) and 39 out of 72 focus group participants (54.1%) and

2. A riot by residents of Nima, a suburb of Accra, in 1997, cited by 28 out of 120 interview respondents (23.3%) and 25 out of 72 focus group participants (34.7%).

These findings show that: (i) not all respondents indicated that specific events covered by the media had influenced them in determining the important...
environmental issues; and (ii) more respondents cited the Tarkwa incident as having influenced them in determining the important environmental issues than they did the Nima incident.

Two reasons can be adduced for this. First, the Tarkwa demonstration had occurred long before the period of data collection, while the Nima incident occurred midway through the fieldwork, by which time approximately half of the personal interviews and focus group discussions had been conducted. Second, the Tarkwa demonstration, in addition to its dramatic nature (see discussion following), was about an issue that was happening further away from the capital—an unobtrusive issue (environmental destruction by mining companies). Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that most people who mentioned the problem highlighted by the Tarkwa demonstration would also remember the incident or event that drew their attention to the problem or issue. The Nima riots, on the other hand, though equally vivid, dealt with an issue that most residents of the city were very much aware of and most likely experienced on a daily basis—an obtrusive issue (waste disposal/management and sanitation). Indeed, some respondents interviewed well before the Nima riots had indicated that waste disposal/management and/or sanitation in Ghanaian cities was the leading environmental problem in the country.

**Event 1—Discussion and significance**

The demonstration by traditional chiefs took place on Tuesday, November 5, 1996, with 42 divisional chiefs who constitute the Wassa Fiase Traditional Council in the western region of Ghana taking to the streets to protest the degradation of their land and water sources as a result of surface mining activities in their traditional area. Adorned in mourning cloth and wearing red armbands around their wrists and necks to show their anger and seriousness, the chiefs paraded through the streets of Tarkwa with placards that read: “No more surface mining”; “Where should we farm?”; “Our future is at risk due to surface mining” (Anane, 1996, p. 42). As noted earlier, over half of all respondents from both focus groups and personal interviews who indicated that mining activities were destroying the environment cited this particular event to convey the seriousness of the situation. Most of these respondents (93 out of 113, or 82.3 %) also mentioned that they found out about the environmental problems in the mining areas from the media, and that they had no other way of finding out about them, since they spent most of their time in the cities. One interview respondent put it thus:

There is also the particular issue of the mining areas, which is very bad. The increase in the mining activities in this country is costing us a lot environmentally. I think in the western region alone more than 200 mining concessions have been given by the government in the last few years, under 10 years or so. And contrary to the mining practices of companies like Ashanti Goldfields Corporation, where they dig deep and a lot of mining actually happens deep underground, now it’s either riverbanks, that is, alluvial dredging, or surface mining. Even though they claim to be taking precautions when you go there, what you see does not show that anybody is taking any precautions so much so that last year, just before the elections, for the first time traditional chiefs in the
Wassa Fiase area wore traditional mourning clothes with red armbands—something they do only when people die—and marched through the streets of Tarkwa, one of the main mining towns in this country, to protest against the destruction of their environment by mining companies. It was so bad that traditional rulers who normally would not care had to take to the streets in protest . . . and but for the private media, there is no way those of us living in the cities or away from these mining areas would have heard about such a thing or other issues relating to the havoc these companies are causing to the environment. (italics added)

The italicized part of the response is especially noteworthy because it establishes a case for the media reports playing a significant role in bringing the issue to the public’s attention and consequently in influencing the public’s agenda. In the same vein it is worth pointing out a slight contrast between the real purpose of the demonstration—how it was framed and reported by the media—and how it was subsequently perceived by respondents (the audience/public). The demonstration was held in response to the threat against the livelihood of residents within those communities as indicated by Anane (1996) and Abissath (1998). Abissath indeed reports that Nana Kwandoh Brempong II of Wassa Fiase “claimed that people were starving as the companies had taken over their best lands, leaving them with none to farm” (1998, p. 1).

However, the media framed and reported the protest in such a way as to encourage the audience to conceive of the story, and the issue it represented, as an environmental one. Specifically, according to some respondents, the private media, in seeking to score political points for the opposition during the run-up to the elections, had reported it as the government’s insensitivity to environmental issues, which was thereby adversely affecting the residents of these communities. As one interview respondent put it:

The private media had a field day with this demonstration by the chiefs. It was getting close to elections, I think about a month or so away. And because most of the private media do not support Rawlings and his NDC government, they just kept harping on it. I think it was in the newspapers for three to four weeks. Every paper wanted to say something about it and the government’s poor environmental record. . . . It was really funny.

The statement by the respondent above bears comment. It indicates self-awareness on the part of at least this member of the audience that the private media were trying to gain political currency for the opposition through their framing and reporting of the incident. It also shows that the audience does not necessarily exist as passive receptors of media coverage and that they are capable of reading between the lines to see what the media are trying to do. Nevertheless, such framing, it can be argued, must have helped to create the impression in the minds of the audience that the issue was an environmental one as opposed to an issue of economic survival, which is one way in which it could have been framed. This then could prepare the ground for the issue of environmental destruction caused by mining companies to be named as a key environmental problem in the
country. It would also put the media in a strong position to influence the environmental agenda of respondents, as they later indicated.

In sociocultural terms, such an occurrence in Ghanaian society will not be taken lightly and is bound to make people notice. Traditional chiefs in Ghana are not associated with demonstrations, nor are they known to stick out in such a manner for environmental protection, though they may do so indirectly. In fact, in traditional Ghanaian society, the spectacle caused by the indecorousness of a chief or chiefs carrying placards and demonstrating on the streets would be enough grounds for destoolment by the elders. They would be deemed to have acted in a manner contrary to the dictates of the high office of chiefship. The chief is supposed to be a symbol of authority and a good example to his people. He should be someone whose authority is respected and who in turn respects his office, his people, and any higher authorities. The fact that their demonstration did not elicit any such negative response from their subjects and the elders is sufficient indication that they represented the wishes of the people. By their willingness to be seen demonstrating, themselves, the chiefs portrayed to their people and the wider Ghanaian society the seriousness of the issues at stake. Anane’s (1996) description of the event as the making of history, as well as the citing of the demonstration by a majority of our study’s respondents, provide ample evidence of the impact the event must have had on most Ghanaians and the society as a whole.

In another vein, the choice of clothing—mourning clothes—for the demonstration by the traditional chiefs is significant and would not be lost on the audience. Wearing mourning clothes can be interpreted as mourning the death of the land (environment), which is traditionally a very important part of the Ghanaian’s life, particularly for rural dwellers. In most parts of Ghana, the land (environment) is revered for its life-giving and life-supporting qualities. Many ethnic groups actually ascribe spirituality to the land (environment). Writing about the traditional Ghanaian concept of the environment, Quarm (1995) notes:

Traditional wisdom holds the environment sacred. This sacredness is symbolised artistically by statuettes of a woman of tranquil radiant beauty with a distended abdomen and enormous breasts. She signifies the actual and potential ability of the environment to give birth and sustain human beings adequately if they pay her reciprocal duties of awe and care. She is, after all, pregnant, the bearer of the land’s eternal renewal and commands the reverence and esteem due to her burden of continuously bearing the vital gifts of the earth. (p. 99)

Given such an intrinsic view of the environment and the relationship that should ensue with regard to it, any symbolic suggestion of the death of the environment by artificial, external forces will have a dramatic effect. For Ghanaians, such an issue, associated as it is with “killing” the environment and curtailing its ability to “give birth and sustain human beings adequately” (Quarm, 1995, p. 99), is bound to be an extremely volatile and contentious one.

Moreover, the wearing of red armbands is not something that is taken lightly. The red armband indicates that the wearer is in a serious mood, and if not associated with mourning the dead, further implies that the wearer is in a defiant mood.
and prepared to go to “war” or do battle. An example of the seriousness with which wearing red armbands is taken can be found in the recent history of Ghana. In 1984, the then Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) military government decided to cancel all allowances pertaining to the annual leave of workers in the country. As a sign of protest and readiness for “war,” the Trades Union Congress (TUC) of Ghana issued a statement directing all its members to wear red armbands to work on an appointed day. The workers complied and the government got the message immediately. Barely 24 hours after the workers appeared in red armbands, the government retracted its statement, and Ghanaian workers have continued to enjoy their “leave allowance” till this day.

It bears noting that, according to respondents, this event could have gone unnoticed in many parts of the country despite its significance. This is because it was not reported by any of the state-owned media, which also happen to be the most pervasive. Respondents indicated that this particular event was reported by only the private media, which, being sympathetic to the opposition, emphasized its significance, ostensibly to discredit the government in the run-up to elections. As one respondent put it, “The private media wanted to score political points for the opposition so they just took advantage and harped on it, portraying the NDC as not caring about the environment.” None of the respondents remembered any of the state-owned media reporting the event. This is in spite of the fact that the demonstration ended with the presentation of a resolution to the government’s representative in the area—the district chief executive (Anane, 1996). Many of the respondents indicated that they believed the state-owned media did not report it due to the political undertones the event carried.

Thus, this singular event, reported only by the private media, influenced respondents in deciding that mining activities constituted a major environmental problem in the country. This event, as Anane notes, received a further boost when, barely three weeks after that historic protest march by the chiefs, journalists from the Public Agenda, a Ghanaian privately owned weekly, travelled to Tarkwa on a tip. Here, they reported, they found “‘a village suffering from a deadly cyanide spill from a gold mine that has robbed the community of good health and their farming and fishing livelihood’ … Their regular source of drinking water, the river Angonaben, had been poisoned with cyanide, leaving fish, crabs and other forms of aquatic life dead, with the villagers who drink or bathe in the river sustaining blisters, rashes and other skin diseases” (Anane, 1996, pp. 42-43). The paper also reported that there was a suspected cover-up by the mining company, and that the appropriate government authorities were not taking any action. According to the Public Agenda, the villagers who were seeking compensation were very frustrated by the lack of action on the part of government authorities in the area (Anane, 1996). Mate (1998) also attests to the growing concern about the environmental impact of the activities of mining companies in Ghana, noting that “In 1996, such issues prompted community protests in the mining area of Tarkwa” (p. 2).
Event 2—Discussion and significance

The second event, the Nima riots, took place midway through the period of the field research. On Friday, October 31, 1997, residents in one of the slum areas (Nima) of the capital city caused a traffic jam when they collected rubbish that had piled up there and dumped it in the middle of a very busy highway that passed through their locality. This was a sign of protest that they could no longer live with the rubbish that the city authorities had allowed to accumulate in their immediate environment. It also drew attention to the collapsing state of waste management in the city. In the ensuing struggle between the police, who were trying to restore order, and the desperate people of Nima, a young man lost his life. As might be expected, this incident made the headlines in the electronic media that day and the press the following day.

Many respondents who lived in the city could not comprehend the enormity and seriousness of the problem of sanitation and waste disposal/management. Many knew about the problem within their own locality and along the routes that they normally took. But for the people of Nima to rise up in a demonstration against such a thing meant that the situation, and the issue itself, had reached a critical point. Most respondents interviewed after this incident cited it as a way of buttressing their point about the problem of waste management in all the country’s major cities and the effect media coverage can have on their perception of environmental problems.9 One interview respondent captured the essence of the whole incidence thus:

*When these things become headline news where you can't avoid—mountains of refuse piling up, then you have to watch out. You remember the recent case in Nima where somebody had to die because of decomposing waste in their backyard. They had to block the road as a means of attracting the authorities’ attention to the problem. It degenerated into something else and somebody had to die. Things like that when they appear in the news you get interested because of the extra dimension that it has assumed—somebody dying. For once people who live in Nima of all places—which is synonymous with dirt—deciding that enough is enough, and demonstrating for environment. That shows you how serious the problem has become. So yes, something spectacular like that, covered by the media, helps one to understand that we have a big problem on our hands with regard to the environment.* (italics added)

The highlighted portions of the response again point to the media possibly playing a major role in agenda-setting. As noted, media coverage helped people recognize the seriousness and extent of the problem in the city, which could also have influenced them in stating that waste disposal/management was the leading environmental problem in Ghana.

In terms of framing, it is interesting to note that personal observations and analysis of media reports on the Nima riots revealed that there were striking differences between the way the state-owned media and the private media reported it. The state-owned media, relying on official sources and apparently adopting the official frame, reported it as a riot or unrest. The *Daily Graphic*—the leading daily newspaper in the country at the time and also state-owned—provides a
useful example of how the state-owned media framed the incident. Although the event was featured as the lead story, headlined in very bold characters and in reverse printing (white on black), the headline itself gave no indication that it was an environmental crisis. Following on, the opening paragraphs all gave the impression that it was a riot. This in fact was how those sent in to contain the situation and other officials present (such as the minister of the Interior and the inspector general of police) described it.

The November 1, 1997, Daily Graphic began its story on page one thus: “One person died and two others sustained serious injuries when the police tried to quell a riot by some residents of Nima on Thursday night.” It then went on in the second paragraph to talk about the fact that “it took a combined team of police and military personnel nine hours to bring the situation under control” and subsequently mentioned that 83 people had been charged with “conspiracy, rioting and causing damage.” In fact, the main reason for the riot, “to draw public attention to the unsanitary conditions in the area.” did not appear until paragraph 12 of the report, which also happened to be the shortest paragraph. The rest of the report was devoted to listing the names of political figures present at the scene and recording what they and the police said. Indeed, there was no mention or use of the word “environment” in the entire report.

In contrast, the private media framed the event as an environmental issue, and again, as in the case of the Tarkwa demonstration, pointed to the government’s record of relative insensitivity toward environmental problems. Radio Universe, an FM station in the capital, for example, started its 6:00 p.m. news bulletin on that day this way: “The issue of environmental degradation and particularly waste management in the city of Accra was rudely brought to the fore this morning when residents of Nima blocked the highway running through that suburb with rubbish that has been accumulating in their vicinity for some time.” The report then went on to provide details of the event and to talk about the city council’s duty to manage the waste generated within the city. The report also alluded to the fact that privatization of waste disposal in the city had only served to aggravate an already bad situation.

A radio report is used here for a number of reasons. First, at the time of the research there were no privately owned daily newspapers in the country and so there were no newspaper reports from the private press the next day. The private papers published either weekly or biweekly. Also, in my subsequent searches through the various newspapers in the four weeks following the Nima riots, I found that only one newspaper—Public Agenda—did a follow-up story on the riots. Second, as indicated earlier, within the Ghanaian setting there is no distinction in the roles played by the various media, and that allows for stories emanating from the different media to be grouped together for the purpose of analysis. Third, the various media, though different in organization and presentation, can still be seen as working together to create a collective sense of importance in the minds of the audience. As Edelstein notes, different media often present situations that are unique by their emphasis and various forms of presentation. Through their dif-
different presentations they can “over-ride salience values as a way of creating attention, asserting importance in the minds of audiences, provoking thinking, or even thinking about” (Edelstein, 1993, p. 87).

The Nima incident was also outstanding because, like the demonstration of the traditional chiefs, nobody who knew about Nima would expect the residents of the suburb to demonstrate against such a thing as rubbish piling up in their backyard. As one respondent put it, the suburb is “synonymous with dirt.” The suburb accommodates a largely migrant population from other parts of the country, many of whom have serious problems in trying to eke out a living. Generally, Nima is reputed to be one of the filthiest and most overcrowded suburbs of the city, a reputation that seems to grow by the day and which its residents seem powerless to change. It also has the reputation of being one of the roughest and rowdiest suburbs. Thus, whereas a demonstration by some inhabitants of Nima was nothing new to residents of the city, a demonstration on behalf of the environment was a novelty and very much a contradiction of their knowledge of the suburb. And for its sociocultural significance alone, it added considerable weight to the fact that the issue of waste disposal/management was a major one in the city of Accra and, by extension, other major cities in the country. This revelation consequently influenced the public agenda. Needless to say, it is the media who made the respondents aware of the incident or the event.

By way of comparison, one can argue that in terms of their sociocultural significance, the demonstration by the traditional chiefs may carry more weight than the demonstration by the residents of Nima. However, from a theoretical agenda-setting point of view, though the two events were innately different, they share some similarities. First, they were both unusual instances in that nothing of the sort had happened in Ghana prior to their occurrence. Second, they were both framed and linked to larger (environmental) issues by the media, which then made them media events, as opposed to what they originally set out to be—protests against perceived threats to life. Third, it is media coverage that made people aware of the incidents and also of the seriousness of the issues that the events represented. In both cases the media acted as more than conveyors of information. They (the media) added more impetus to the fact of the occurrence of these events through the frames they adopted and their extensive coverage.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that the path to agenda-setting within Ghanaian society is often fraught with greater complexities than might pertain to other settings. In other parts of the world where the media are much more pervasive, agenda-setting research, especially at the second level, suggests that the media are overly instrumental in shaping people’s opinions and ways of thinking about issues and how important they are. The data presented here and the subsequent discussion largely support the findings in those settings. Consequently, this paper can be seen as adding to the empirical work on the second level of agenda-setting.

This paper shows that, within the Ghanaian setting, though the sociocultural may provide the basis for “meanings outside the media,” media framing is signif-
significant in making issues appear important to the audience. The two incidents reported here were socioculturally significant, but it is how the media appropriated the symbols and significance attached to them in their coverage that ultimately led the audience to make the environmental connections. The media’s role in agenda-setting in this instance can therefore be seen as a direct one. It emanates from their turning the two incidents into media events by way of reporting them to a wider audience who might not have found out about them, and also through their framing, which linked the events to the broader environmental issues that they represented.

The discussion has shown that the specific incidents indicated by respondents had within them the ability to provoke interest in the audiences. Their sociocultural significance made them unforgettable. But apart from that, it has also been established that the way the media framed these issues led to their being seen as environmental issues rather than economic, in the case of the Tarkwa demonstration, or law and order, in the case of the Nima incident. Gitlin (1980) notes that “Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely handle discourse” (p. 7). It is evident from the discussion that the media’s selection, interpretation, and presentation of the two events introduced patterns of cognition to the audience which more than likely made them see those events as representing the environmental issues that they noted. And by turning them into media events, the media provided “a society-wide forum where values, norms, and social structures were scrutinized, challenged, and celebrated” (Hunt, 1997, p. 410), in the name of the environment.

It has been established that news and general media coverage of events and issues have a significant impact on public opinion. The two events discussed in this paper were very heavily mediated issues “par excellence” (Iyengar & Simon, 1997, p. 256), and the discussion shows that the mediation combined with the sociocultural significance of the symbols accompanying the events to leave a lasting imprint on the minds of people. As Breen (1997, citing Brody, 1991) observes, “media coverage can set an agenda and can also alter public perceptions of the players in the process depending on the type of coverage” (p. 348).

This paper, apart from showing that the process of agenda-setting may be more complex than the linear model suggests, has also shown how significant sociocultural symbols are appropriated and framed by the media in pursuit of particular agendas in the Ghanaian setting. The nature of the dynamics between the sociocultural import of the two events, media coverage, and agenda-setting is one that is worth investigating and unpacking. Ultimately, such an exercise has provided a better understanding of agenda-setting in Ghana. It has shown agenda-setting to be a social process involving interactions between different and sometimes competing spheres that are open to both media and non-media influences.

As agenda-setting research continues to spread its tentacles and to delve into issues that go beyond the confines of the original McCombs & Shaw study, it is hoped that events (including their sociocultural significance) and the way they are
framed by the media will become “one of the exciting set of maps for explicating new levels of agenda-setting theory” (McCombs & Estrada, 1997, p. ix). In the case of Ghana, the discussion has shown how the sociocultural significance attached to symbols accompanying an event can be appropriated by the media for framing that event and thereby contribute to agenda-setting. This has provided a more holistic picture of the agenda-setting process and shown that the process might be much more complex than some research in other settings suggests. What has been called the second level of agenda-setting theory presents a fascinating field of research within the agenda-setting fraternity, but more importantly, it offers considerable potential for understanding and clarifying theoretical concerns about agenda-setting. It also promises to shed more light on the media’s role in the day-to-day affairs of societies and their citizens.

In a society such as Ghana, complex variables are at work that intervene in the processes of the media sending out messages on the environment, people’s reception of these messages, and how they perceive these messages (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2001c). This line of research can therefore make a contribution to understanding the mass media’s role in highlighting the environment as a problem for public and political concern. Such a research agenda can also help unearth the media’s potential in helping to uphold certain environmentally sound traditional beliefs such as safe-guarding the “sanctity” and “sacredness” of the environment. In terms of the media-environment relationship, such studies can contribute immensely to an understanding of “the dynamics between coverage and what people make of the environmental issues that media present to them on one hand, and how this coverage interacts with societal factors to produce effects” (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2001c, p. 364). Ultimately, the knowledge gained can provide theoretical grounding for further empirical research in the area, while providing a culturally appropriate and sensitive way of examining an aspect of environmental communication through the media.

Notes
1. Kosicki (1993) notes that agenda-setting has been described “as a hypothesis, empirical generalisation, concept, metaphor, or even a fully-fledged theory” but argues that it is best to refer to agenda-setting as a model of media effects. Drawing on McQuail & Windahl’s (1981) definition of the term model, he notes that model “is a more modest and limited term than theory,” yet it does capture the fundamental characteristics of the agenda-setting perspective (Kosicki, 1993, p. 102).

2. An example of such blatant interference is given by Professor George Ayittey, a vehement critic of the (P)NDC regimes. In an e-mail discussion on one of the Ghanaian Internet discussion groups (ATT) he writes: “In 1995, they even issued a directive from the Castle to GBC to the effect that the ‘views of THAT George Ayittey should NEVER be carried on Ghana Television and Radio’” (July 25, 2002; caps in the original). Since the NDC government could not directly control the private media in the post-1993 period, it resorted to other means, such as dumping human feces in the offices of opposition newspapers, jailing journalists/editors, and suing editors and journalists under Ghana’s Criminal Libel laws (Ellison, 2002; Free Press, 1997). Ellison (2002, n.p.) comments on the criminal libel laws thus: “When all dastardly acts proved inefficient to silence Ghana’s brave journalists, Rawlings then resorted to hitting them in their pockets. The instrument he employed was ‘Libel Law’. Under this sweeping law, it became almost impossible, and rather costly to even publish that Rawlings or any of his henchmen sang out of tune.” Because of such
blatant misuse of the law, the National Patriotic Party (NPP), which was the main opposition party, promised in its campaign for the 2000 elections to repeal the Criminal Libel sections of Ghana’s criminal code, and it did that in August 2001 (see Government of Ghana Gazette, August 2001).

3. In the broader study, 87.75% of respondents indicated that the media were their major sources of information on environmental issues and that most of their information came from the state-owned media (see Kwansah-Aidoo, 1999).

4. This group consisted of civil servants, business people, university students, mid- and top-level workers outside the civil service, the unemployed but educated person, and all others with a minimum of nine years’ formal education.

5. PACIPE is a regional technical assistance program for awareness and information on the protection of the environment. The program is aimed at protecting the environment in six West African countries—Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, and Togo. PACIPE’s strategies are primarily intended to increase environmental awareness among target groups in each country. The program is funded by the European Development Fund (EDF). As part of their operations, PACIPE Ghana monitors all the major media in Ghana for the environmental issues that they feature. This is done on a daily basis and at the end of the year, an annual report is compiled.

6. This categorization of suburbs is not absolute. In many instances it is possible to find people living in one suburb category but falling within a different income group. It is especially common for people with high incomes to be found in low-income or middle-income suburbs. Another problem with this kind of categorization is that sometimes it is extremely difficult to determine which income group a resident falls into. Consequently, the categories were used mainly for the purpose of bringing some structure to the process of obtaining respondents for the interviews and had nothing to do with the objectives of the study. They were therefore not taken into consideration in the analysis of the data obtained.

7. This event is also reported by Anane (1996), and specific details such as the exact day, the number of chiefs involved in the demonstration, and the statements on the placards are cited from that source. While most respondents vividly remembered the event, they indicated that could not provide some of the specific details as cited by Anane (1996) because the event took place almost a year prior to the fieldwork.

8. This might be done through upholding some customary practice, as, for example, preventing people from entering and engaging in any form of activities in sections of the bush or forest designated as abodes of the ancestors of the clan or ethnic group. These are known as sacred groves.

9. This was especially so in the personal interviews, but was also cited a number of times in the focus group discussions.

10. As part of my research I was monitoring the media for anything they featured on the environment. On this particular day, I was especially vigilant because I personally witnessed the event, as I happened to drive on the said route at the time of the demonstration and got caught up in the ensuing traffic jam.

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