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DOI:

[10.5920/idp.2015.1225](https://doi.org/10.5920/idp.2015.1225)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Citation for published version (APA):

Morton, L. J. (2015). Rumour as Information: British Forces, Control, and Communication on the Indian North-West Frontier. *Identity Papers: A Journal of British and Irish Studies*, 1(2), 25-36.
<https://doi.org/10.5920/idp.2015.1225>

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Original Citation

Morton, Liam (2015) Rumour as Information: British Forces, Control, and Communication on the Indian North-West Frontier. *Identity papers: A journal of British and Irish studies*, 1 (2). pp. 25-36. ISSN 2058-6205

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Rumour as Information: British Forces, Control, and Communication on the Indian North-West Frontier

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Abstract

India during the nineteenth century was a rumour rich-society. For the British authorities these rumours were difficult to control and had the ability to weaken their prestige. This point was highlighted during the Frontier 'Uprising' of 1897 when a British official ignored a report he had received because it contradicted his own information. The report of potential trouble proved to be correct. Rumours were also misunderstood with these misunderstandings connected to the authorities' sources of information being inadequate. However, despite the inadequacy of information gathering, rumours were the only sources available for the authorities to make decisions. This illustrates the fragility of rule and the challenges that the officials on the Frontier encountered. The consequence of these shortfalls was that the British had to respond to events reactively and miscalculations were made. The paper will exemplify the importance of rumour on the Frontier through two case studies: The First Afghan War (1838–42) and the 1897 Frontier Uprising. These two examples, by setting original archival documents in their historical context, illustrate the extent to which rumours were free to circulate leading to responsive and ill-prepared actions by the British.

Key words: rumour, North-West Frontier, India, intelligence, information, Afghanistan, 1897

Introduction

The following paper will exemplify the importance of rumour on the Frontier during the nineteenth century for the British authorities. It will start by briefly looking at rumour in a historical context and the problems it caused the authorities it encountered. Next, the question of what a rumour is will be explored and definitions assigned to the term. Then the paper turns to the subject of information gathering on the North-West Frontier of India. This will be a chronological and historiographical account of the information gathering process on the Frontier and its interaction with rumour throughout the nineteenth century. The problems and difficulties the British authorities encountered and their attempts to combat these challenges will be explored. Finally, two case studies will be analysed to illustrate the importance of rumour to the Frontier.

What is a Rumour?

Rumours have caused problems for officials and authorities throughout history. Ancient Rome was so plagued by rumours that the authorities appointed public 'rumour wardens' called *delatores*, whose job was to mingle within large crowds and eavesdrop. They then reported back to the authorities what they had heard in order that a counteroffensive could be launched through 'official' rumours (Allport & Postman, 1947: i). For the British, India was seen as an information- and rumour-rich society of which their authorities never managed to control the source (Bayley, 1996). Ralph Rosnow and Gary Fine argue that rumours are difficult, if not impossible, to control, and that it is frequently easier to start a rumour than to stop it (Rosnow & Fine, 1976: 11). Ben Hopkins argues that the 'rumour's power lay in its ability to erode British prestige' (2008: 42). It is this that made rumour important on the Frontier and offers a way of thinking about the nature and limits of colonial power. The British authorities' sources of information were deficient; they did not trust the local population, resulting in anxiety among officials who acted, as a result, responsively to events.

So what is a rumour? The psychologist Robert Knapp in 1944 defined rumour as 'a proposition for belief of topical reference disseminated without official verification' (1944: 22). He continued to explain that a 'rumor is but a special case of informal social communications, including myth, legend, and current humor. From myth and legend it is distinguished by its emphasis on the topical. Where humor is designed to provoke laughter, rumor begs for belief'. Gordon Allport and Leo Postman, both psychologists, in 1947 defined a rumour as being a 'specific (or typical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present' (ix). They even came up with an equation: $r(umour) = i(mportance) \times a(mbiguity)$. Both definitions given contained two important shared characteristics, the first being that a rumour is a 'proposition for belief', i.e. a statement that expresses a judgement or opinion. The second shared characteristic was the emphasis placed on the fact that rumours were not substantiated. The social and cultural anthropologist Martin Sokefeld defines rumour in the British India context as a multidirectional, uncontrolled form of communication, effectively intervened in the British strategies of power, rendering their colonial informational regime in that area almost impotent (Sokefeld, 2002: 299). Allport and Postman also proposed an interesting question, asking 'is a rumour never true?' (ix). They argued that all rumours contain a kernel of truth and that every rumour starts with something that has been perceived. This quality can be observed on the Indian Frontier where, for example, rumours of British intention to invade Afghanistan or enter a new Frontier region on the whole started from sightings of small troop movements. Russian advances in Central Asia circulated the bazaars as rumours of an impending invasion of India.

Another psychologist, Frederic Bartlett, in 1932 proposed what makes a good rumour in his work on memory. By combining this and the work by Knapp five key concepts can be identified.

- I. Successful rumours are short and simple.
- II. A successful rumour becomes a 'good story'.
- III. Names, numbers and places are typically the unstable components of any rumour.
- IV. The higher the authoritative source the more prestige a rumour has.
- V. For a successful rumour to thrive it must adapt to the immediate as well as to the traditional circumstances of the group.

Information gathering on the Frontier

As mentioned above, India was seen as an information and rumour rich-society. This links to Sokefeld's argument that British policy toward the Northern Frontier of India was entangled in these rumours instead of (unavailable) reliable information (2002: 299; 311). The British government formally took over India in 1858 as a consequence of the events of the 'Indian Revolt' in 1857. Prior to this, it has been said, the most problematic form of information for the East India Company (the Company) was rumour (Hopkins, 2008: 41). Hopkins writes that this was due to the Mughal rulers exploiting and integrating rumour as a main tool of their governance. The Company's failure to fully integrate rumour into its information order contrasted sharply with the Mughals abilities to exploit rumour. Hopkins continues to explain that, at one extreme, Company officials simply ignored it or refused to act upon it. At the other extreme was a kind of paranoia of the 'dreaded moral effect' of rumour, which the Company often demonstrated. That apprehension fed the talk of the bazaars, thus threatening the Company's rule (Hopkins, 2008: 41). C. A. Bayly has famously used the notion of 'information panic' to describe the inability of the British to effectively gather and interpret information relating to indigenous practices and movements (Wagner, 2010: 24).

For the authorities to be able to administer the Frontier they needed to receive the latest information and intelligence from outside its borders as well as through internal channels. The importance of the Frontier for the authorities was that it acted as a crossroads, a border zone where global forces were in play more than in other places at this time. External influences had the potential to use the Frontier to infiltrate India either directly or indirectly. Geographically, the North-West Frontier of India bordered Afghan territory, and in 1843 the British took over control of Sind. More importantly in territorial terms, the British annexed the Punjab in 1849 and so administered the Frontier using Lahore as its administration centre.

Initially, the Company under-invested in intelligence networks; by 1808–9 they had employed news-writers in Kabul, Kandahar and Herat but by 1832 the number had not increased (Hopkins, 2008: 43). The Company also made use of the indigenous population as agents to support its European personnel. In the early years of the Company's activities, where trade was the most important factor, information on south Asian textiles was particularly valuable and the Company's main informants were Indian merchants and Indian employees of the Company. The information networks of the Mughal could easily be penetrated by those seeking inside knowledge of its inner-workings. When Bengal was transferred to British rule, the previous administration was not entirely destroyed. The Company's large financial resources meant that they could buy their way into these networks. An example of this wealth was that skilled news-writers were paid as much as 300 Rupees per month. A news-writer was also stationed in Kabul and the first, Karamat Ali, was expected to communicate with his superior in India at least once a month (Hanifi, 2011: 63). The process for the news-writers was that their reports were sent to a Political Agent (PA) based in India. The PAs then collated and edited the reports—usually forwarding to Calcutta what they deemed relevant rather than the whole report. However, this system was vulnerable to manipulation as PAs sometimes misquoted, ignored or even included their own views in the reports sent on to Calcutta (Hopkins, 2008: 43).

In 1857, the need for information was crucial to help understand the uprising against the Company's rule that was unfolding; rumour and 1857 are inevitably linked. The first rumour, that the grease on the Enfield cartridges consisted of the fat of pigs and cows, circulated in January 1857, from Dum Dum (Kolkata) (Wagner, 2010: 29). However, this was a pre-emptive rumour as the *sepoys* had never actually seen the cartridges, meaning the finer details of the story were lost. But, the rumours were sufficient for the *sepoys* to object to them, no matter what concessions were made. In the end, the actual nature of the grease and of the paper was immaterial (Wagner, 2010: 51). Other rumours also circulated during 1857 which caused anxiety for the authorities and frustration for the *sepoys*. One in particular predicted an impending attack by British troops. For the *sepoys*, the only way they could respond to this rumour was as they had been trained to do (Wagner, 2010: 135). With all this misinformation circulating different parts of India, the authorities needed to gather all the intelligence they could. The method for gathering intelligence employed by William Muir, the magistrate of Agra, during this time was perhaps typical. His agents were well paid and deployed to observe the rebel lines and to maintain communications between separated columns. He used these reports to create a résumé of facts so understood as to dispel the rumours mentioned above that sapped British morale. His most reliable source was the news-writer for Gwalior, whose reports were passed directly to Agra (Bayly, 1996: 325). On the Frontier, Lieutenant Herbert Bruce, Inspector of Police for the North-West Province, attempted to counter rumours circulating the region during this difficult time for the

authorities. Bruce produced placards announcing British victories secretly posted up around Lucknow by his agents in an attempt to break the morale of the rebels. Colonel Thomas Pierce operating in Rajasthan during 1857 made it standard operational procedure not to act on any information unless it could be verified by at least two sources irrespective of their accuracy.¹ However, misinformation and rumour found their way into official intelligence reports, as there was no solid procedure in place to check incoming information. The only method available was to check rumour against other rumours.

Not only was getting any information at all a problem for the authorities, they also had concerns over its news-writers and informants when they could source information. One in particular was the 'native agent' in Afghanistan, who had been in Kabul for thirty years and, it was widely believed, had gone, in nineteenth-century imperial parlance 'so native as to be useless'. Lord Salisbury in a letter to Prime Minister Disraeli on the subject of the 'native agent' commented that he 'writes exactly what the Ameer tells him'.² Viscount Cranbrook suggested in a speech that the Indian Agent at the court of Kabul 'spoke with the voice of the Amir and not his own'.³ This illustrated the problems of acquiring useful information on the Frontier. Not only were rumours mistrusted, so were the informants in British service. 'Official' information and rumour become harder to distinguish. However, later in the century Amir Abdur Rahman's own news-writer at Kabul, Mirza Muhamed Yusuf Khan, was, in fact, in British pay and received between 12 and 20 *tomans* a month. In the autumn of 1889 he was compromised and so no longer of use for the British.⁴ The British were not solely reliant on just one agent in the Afghan capital. The instructions from Henry Durand, the Foreign Secretary of the Government of India, to Sardar Mohammed Afzal Khan, the British agent in Kabul, were to befriend the Amir and to watch for Russian spies or envoys. However, he was not favourably received and complained of Afghan intrigues against him.⁵

An additional problem for the authorities was the interception of their agents' reports. Major William Hodson described this as being a major difficulty in receiving up-to-date information from the field (Johnson, 2006: 80). However, the interception of hostile reports was a useful source of information for the British. One example illustrating this was when in 1848 a correspondence between the Sikh ruler and Kabul was intercepted. The letter contained a rumour that Queen Victoria had died without issue and that, as a result, 'the English were in confusion' (Johnson, 2006: 89). If this had reached Kabul it would have been a powerful piece of propaganda, because 1848 was the year Britain was at war with the Sikh Empire. Any sign of perceived weakness on the British side could have potentially strengthened the Sikh Afghan alliance. However, the outcome of the Second Anglo-Sikh War was the annexation of the Punjab into British India; this particular rumour did not maintain the propagandist power it promised.

Back in London, many in the Indian Office were skeptical about the reports coming in from India. They reckoned that such news about Afghanistan and Russian

intentions was 'derived from the tales of native merchants and travellers, whose stories, magnified in the bazaars of the different cities through which they pass, reach India and Persia in a most distorted state, and gave rise to rumours utterly devoid of foundation' (Beaver, 2012: 49). When one set of the 'Cabul Diaries' (diaries that the Agent in Kabul compiled based on reports he received) arrived in bulk in the India Office, an official wrote on the bundle: 'These are copies of the latest Cabul Diaries: Implicit reliance cannot be placed upon them'.⁶ Salisbury also commented on these diaries, that 'doubts have been thrown on their fidelity'.⁷ Salisbury strongly believed secret intelligence was essential for the formation and execution of external policy because of the unreliability of information from India. During the 1870s Britain collected intelligence in an ad hoc and amateur fashion.⁸ When Salisbury became Secretary of State for India in 1874, he immediately lobbied Viceroy Northbrook to improve intelligence in India. This pressure resulted in Northbrook taking more effective steps to collect intelligence beyond India's frontier than virtually any other viceroy in history (Farris, 2005: 20). Salisbury ordered Northbrook to appoint native agents at Herat and Kandahar and a British agent at Kabul to gather information as 'it is not to be expected that a Native Agent would be either able or willing to collect for your government' (Beaver, 2012: 53).

With Salisbury's push, the Indian Army, with the support of Lord Roberts, eventually created an Intelligence Branch in 1878.⁹ One new development within the Branch was the use of war-gaming on paper as a tool for staff training. German general staff had first used war-gaming (*Kriegspielen*) on paper to test scenarios and the British soon followed suit (Beaver, 2012: 50). This was an important skill for testing reports and rumours. War-gaming allowed the Intelligence Department to analyse the types and sizes of units rumoured to be involved and apply to each 'the amount of time it would take a military force of known composition to travel over a given distance of known terrain and weather patterns and arrive at a selected point in a battle-ready state' (War Office, 1872). If the analysis indicated that the right units were not in the right place at the right time, the rumour remained a rumour (Beaver, 2012: 50). Despite all these measures being put in place and an increase in reports flooding in, it was still a difficult task to accurately interpret the information correctly. However, what this does say about the authorities' approach to rumour is that they took them seriously enough to analyse what they received. This shows the process of how rumour became information for the British on the Frontier.

Despite the attempted improvements instigated by Salisbury during the 1870s, problems still existed in the 1880s and 1890s. Major-General Henry Brackenbury, future Director of Military Intelligence, was informed of the inadequacies of intelligence gathering by Major-General Edward Chapman, who stated that, 'our means of communications, through newspapers reporting to our agents in Persia, and in Peshawar and Quetta, is an old and worn-out arrangement'.¹⁰ Brackenbury agreed and informed the Viceroy, the Marquis of Lansdowne, that 'the reports of our news-writers are the cause of much unnecessary

alarm in this country ... When I was at the War Office, I had repeatedly to call attention to the reckless way in which they accepted the news-writers' reports as Gospel'.¹¹ For the Frontier, accepting or dismissing reports could have serious repercussions. A rumour stating potential trouble could have set in motion a move forward into new territory by the authorities. The consequence of these moves was to be the employment of an unplanned pacification approach in the region. So, if a rumour is believed and found to be true, it becomes information. If it is believed and found to be false, this credence is reckless. If it is disbelieved and found to be true this is also reckless. It seems as if rumour hangs constantly in the balance, threatening the person who receives it.

Occasionally there were more useful pieces of counter-intelligence being recorded. For example, Peshawar reported that the Amir had a spy, Mustan Shah, at Simla in August 1888, and he was consequently put under close observation.¹² In 1891, the Herati news-writer, Khan Bahadur Mirza Yakub Ali Khan, recorded that a letter from General Kuropatkin, Russian governor of the Transcaspian Region and author of *Schemes for the Invasion of India* in 1888, had been intercepted. However, Brackenbury continued to be exasperated by methods of intelligence gathering in India. He had been particularly concerned by the absence of filtering of the information and the failures of verification, which tended to foster war (Johnson, 2006: 215). Major Cecil East, the Intelligence Department's Executive Officer, on the same subject commented in 1880: 'If we were kept accurately informed of the state of affairs in those regions the Government would be at once able to dispel the discreditable state of alarm into which this country is periodically thrown by rumours of Russian expeditions against Herat or Northern Afghanistan'.¹³

First Afghan War (1838–42)

It could be argued that the British authorities in commencing military actions against Afghanistan did so as a result of rumour. By the mid-1830s it was believed among British authorities that their empire would be endangered by Russia without a vigorous assertion of British power and influence in Asia. Lord Palmerston, Foreign Secretary, began his campaign against this Russian 'threat' by energetically contesting Russian influence throughout western and central Asia and in the capitals of Europe. Palmerston and Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India (1836–42), agreed that it was too dangerous to rely on the uncertain friendship of either a Sikh or an Afghan empire. This became a major concern when a rumour began circulating that an envoy of Ranjit Singh had reached St Petersburg to begin discussions with the Czar. If true, it would have been a huge blow to security on the Frontier as at this time the relationship between the Sikh Empire and Britain was fraught. It was decided that the best policy to follow was that each prince in the region should be

made to feel that his security depended on British support, so that the British could rely on closer ties with the Panjab, Sind and a soon-to-be united Afghanistan.

It was decided in 1837 that William Burns should be sent to the court of Dost Muhammad Khan to secure an alliance against Russia. Dost Muhammad agreed in principle, but with the disclaimer that Britain should help the Afghans regain control of Peshawar from the Sikhs. However, with the British trying to follow the policy of friendly relations with Ranjit Singh it was not a state the British were willing to alienate. Consequently, the negotiations with Dost Muhammad stalled and it was decided that the next step was to replace him as ruler. Shah Shuja had previously ruled Afghanistan from 1803 to 1809, before being deposed by Dost Muhammad. The suggestion now was that he should be reinstalled on the Afghan throne. He would, to all intents and purposes, sit as the puppet ruler of an Anglo-friendly buffer zone. With the British rebuff, Dost Muhammad turned to Russia for assistance. At the same time as Burns, a rumour circulated causing anxiety among the British authorities that a Russian envoy had arrived at court in Kabul.

The envoy was allegedly a Russian soldier, who was believed to be carrying an unsigned letter supposedly from the Czar to start up commercial relations with Afghanistan. It was rumoured that Dost Muhammad started negotiations with him; however, once St Petersburg became aware of these negotiations, he was recalled. However, the Indian Office did not trust this information and Sir Henry Montgomery wrote: 'I should like to know through what medium the Cabul news is received. The Intelligence I have seen for the last two years is the utmost rubbish ... manufactured from bazaar gossip ... in Peshawar'.¹⁴ I would suggest that due to the constant flow of rumours received by the authorities, reports like this one were routinely ignored. However, by October 1838, authorities in India were convinced that the Russians intended to advance on India through Afghanistan. The uncertainty over the information it received was enough to increase the fear levels in London and Calcutta. The British invaded in December 1838 and after a succession of British-led victories, Shah Shuja entered Kabul in August 1839. The invasion was enacted as a result of ignoring rumours and the authorities solely relying on their own information sources.

1897 Uprising

1897 was a challenging year for the British authorities in administering the Frontier. There was a significant 'uprising' that caused the British authorities to respond in numerous regions along the Frontier. Furthermore, rumours circulated that complicated matters. In early 1897, officials in Swat and Dir received information that rumours were circulating the bazaars that trouble was on the horizon for the authorities. Major Harold Deane, Political Agent of the Malakand, believed that such rumours were somewhat exaggerated. He, like many officials, perceived Frontier

rumours as merely fictitious and preferred his own limited information sources. One such source championed by Deane dispelled the troubles in Swat as part of a widespread outbreak of unrest.¹⁵ By early July, the political agent commented that the hostile conditions had broken up and the horizon seemed clear. Furthermore, British officials had been reporting to their seniors improved relations in the Swat Valley. On 26 July, British officers from Malakand and Chakdara met at Khar to play polo (Swinson, 1967: 234). It was only after dark that it became apparent to the officers that the rumours were, in fact, true. Mullah Saidullah and his supporters numbering around 5,000 had attacked the British forts at Chakdara and Malakand (Tripodi, 2011: 87). The British authorities were unprepared. The Viceroy wrote to the Secretary of State for India the following day, that 'the news from the Malakand this morning came as an entire surprise.' Elgin continued, 'we had been in communication with Major Deane lately ... I believe a report is actually on its way telling of their friendly character'.¹⁶

A few days later, on the 4 August 1897, Richard Udny, Commissioner of Peshawar, had received a report from the deputy commissioner in Kohat that a section of the Orakzais and Afridis tribes were being persuaded to raise a *lashkar* against the British in the region (Elliott, 1968: 195). As this conflicted with his own information, he decided to ignore it and subsequently sent a communiqué to the Government of India that 'everything quiet. Reliable sources indicate that Afridis are unaffected'. However, the following day, news had reached him that a *lashkar* had in fact left Tirah the previous day. It was reported that Mulla Sayed Akbar and 1,500 mullahs plus 10,000 Afridis had set off. On their advance through Tirah country it was recorded that both the Orakzais and Southern Afridi tribes, numbering up to 40,000 to 50,000 men, had joined them (Allen, 2006: 228). Their target was the 'forward fortification' of the Khyber posts held by the Khyber Rifles, and on the 23 August, these were soon taken.

Conclusion

In summary, the authorities' responses in 1897 perfectly illustrate how rumours were not controlled and that their sources of information were inadequate to administer the global and geopolitical Frontier effectively. However, despite the inadequacy of information gathering, rumours were the only sources available for the authorities to make decisions. This illustrates the fragility of rule and the challenges that the officials on the Frontier encountered. The consequence of these shortfalls was that the British had to respond to events reactively and miscalculations were made. A major reason as to why this was the case is down to the constant flow of rumours received by the authorities. With the officials being inundated with these rumours, many of the reports produced were routinely ignored with some favouring their own information sources.

Notes

1. BL/Add. MSS. 42,500, *Colonel Thomas Pierce Papers*, (1857) pp. 46, 48 and 67.
2. Salisbury to Disraeli, 2 January 1875, cited in Lady Gwendolen Cecil, *Life of Robert, Marquis of Salisbury* (1921), II, p. 3.
3. Afghanistan (Expenses of Military Operations), Hansard, House of Lords Debate, 9 December 1878, vol. 243, cc234-35.
4. IOR/L/P&S/3/297, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library.
5. IOR/L/P&S/7/63/1039, Durand to Afzal Khan, 14 July 1891, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library.
6. NA/FO/96/174, Memorandum (Morier) on cover of Kabul Diaries; vide also notes on Pollock's despatches, 117-733, 18 May 1870. National Archives.
7. NAI/Secret, No. 2, dated 22 January 1875, August 1875, No. 89. National Archives.
8. T165/49, memorandum, '1922-23, Secret Service'. The Secret Service Fund (money paid primarily for the collection of intelligence abroad) during this decade was averaging £23,000 to £25,000 per year. National Archives.
9. Rudyard Kipling's conversation with Lord Roberts was critical in shaping the novel, *Kim*; deeply troubled by the potential of another popular uprising, Roberts believed that the Russian threat to India was the most important of his career. He produced no fewer than twenty reports on the Defence of India between 1877 and 1893, and he championed the creation and development of an Indian Intelligence Branch. Kipling's Asian agents are all portrayed as directly linked to the British intelligence systems in India.
10. NA/WO 106/16, Major General E. Chapman to Brackenbury, September 1892. National Archives.
11. IOR/MS 113, *Brackenbury Papers*, Brackenbury to Lansdowne, 19 October 1892. India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library.
12. IOR/L/P&S/7/55/175, Government of India to Indian Office, 29 August 1888. India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library.
13. C-2811. *Military Parliamentary Papers*. C. J. East. Memorandum on our Future Policy in Afghanistan. No. 7. August 1880.
14. IOR/L/P&S/3/25 (1878). India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library.
15. IOR/L/PS/18/A131, Letter from the Government of India to Lord George Hamilton, 1 Sep 1897. Deane reported that in Swat, in his opinion, the danger of further trouble was removed.
16. IOR/MSS EUR/F123, *Hamilton Papers*, Elgin to Hamilton, 27 July 1897. British Library.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5920/idp.2015.1225>

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