

# **DIGITAL GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP REPORT:**

**THE SECRET TRUST  
WEAPON ON THE  
ROAD OUT OF  
LOCKDOWN**

**2021  
REPORT**



# INTRODUCTION.

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**Despite continued vaccine rollout globally, the COVID shadow remains large and limiting for all government bodies in Australia.**

Citizen trust and compliance is critical to a fast and safe return to a more normal life, but what damage has the past 18 months done to government perceptions? What political and economic impact will continued distrust cause? And what can government do to tackle these issues head on to access a better future faster?

With federal and state bodies confirming their various roadmaps towards life out of lockdown, the need to cut through COVID fatigue with strong leadership has never been more urgent. Against this backdrop, Propel and Brandwatch have conducted the first **Digital Government Leadership Report** that highlights the crucial online role government leaders themselves play in shielding teams and policies from criticism and misinformation.

Propel and Brandwatch analysed more than three million tweets from and including Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, comparing public sentiment and emotions from January 2019 to June 2021. The analysis reveals how Premier Andrews successfully used Twitter to increase positive community sentiment during his state's darkest period during the 2020 lockdowns. The data behind the Premier's digital leadership reveals an important truth for all – government leaders need to stand up online.

Read the full analysis, findings and practical steps leaders can take in our detailed report. We hope it encourages you to reframe the risks of online participation within the public sector, to rethink how you use social media to engage and influence key audiences, and to take action at a time when we all need our leaders to stand up and be heard.



A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'Roger Christie', with a long, sweeping underline.

**Roger Christie**

Managing Director, Propel  
Founder, Government Social Media  
Leadership Network



# FOR LEADERS AND THEIR DIGITAL BRANDS, **HINDSIGHT WAS 2020.**

In the early stages of COVID, Propel was working with a large public sector organisation to help it manage a record number of customer service queries and complaints via social media.

Our team supported marketing, corporate affairs and service staff through incredibly challenging circumstances, and provided regular data to senior leaders looking for real-time insight to inform decisions and communications.

Through our advanced social listening setup on Brandwatch, we noticed a growing and worrying trend showing mounting public frustration with key leaders. Across both vocal detractor groups and more mainstream media, our reporting dashboards and real-time alerts showed brand content and messaging was falling on deaf ears and failing to protect both the organisation and CEO's reputations.

It wasn't long before that leader was forced to leave their post amid mounting public pressure. Taking a social media-only lens to this scenario, the operational improvements and regular insights provided had no impact on their future, without an established, active digital presence – and network of online advocates – countering the growing online negativity.

Despite extensive credentials and respect offline, these reputational assets were underutilised online. And the lack of digital presence meant there was no right of reply when key battles needed fighting.

This experience left me with one question: does an established digital brand protect leaders and their organisations from reputational risk?

**It's a vital question for all government leaders today in the context of COVID. One we are now able to answer.**

# COVID CHANGED THE RULES FOR GOVERNMENT: DIGITAL LEADERS ARE YOUR STRIKE WEAPON.

Throughout 2020, we saw fantastic examples of leaders using their digital brands to defend their organisations' reputation, engage dispersed staff, and communicate strategy to shareholders and key industry influencers at a time when traditional media channels were jammed.

Public sector leaders such as Amy Brown, Greg Hunt MP, Amanda Yeates and Victor Dominello MP are just a few harnessing the power of their own profiles for purposeful digital communication.

**Amy Brown** • 1st  
Chief Executive Officer at Investment NSW  
3w • 🌐

I found this article an interesting resource to name the indifference creep (or 'blah', to use a technical term) that we might not even know we're experiencing during these challenging times. Encouraging us to find time each day 1 ...see more



There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing

nytimes.com • 2 min read

👍👍👍 292 • 17 comments

**Amanda Yeates** • 1st  
Deputy Director General at Department of Transport and Main Roads  
1d • 🌐

It is almost enough to make me give up hope. Last year only one of the 23 CEO appointments to ASX companies was female. With so much focus on the importance of diversity in traditionally male dominated fields such as ...see more



👍👍👍 243 • 27 comments

**Greg Hunt** @GregHuntMP • Sep 12  
The Australian Government's "First Things First" campaign will air from tonight and encourages Australians to get vaccinated so we can start enjoying the things we are missing or to keep enjoying the things we love.



👍 292 • 🔄 136 • ❤️ 190 • 📤

**Victor Dominello MP** • 1st  
Minister for Digital, Minister for Customer Service at NSW Government & Me...  
2w • 🌐

Just received my 2nd Astra Zeneca jab at vaccination centre.

Parked at P3 - free parking 🙌 Joined the queue outside at 732am. Sho ...see more



👍👍👍 2,288 • 190 comments

The reason why these leaders have been so effective is the role of human connection in times of crisis.

# BRANDS CAN'T FORM RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST THE WAY PEOPLE CAN,

and social media is ultimately all about person-to-person connection - not mass broadcast as some may believe.

Those leaders who took the opportunity to stand up personally - not hide behind faceless institutions - were those who enjoyed the greatest gains.

Those who committed to consistent, authentic and purposeful online engagement were the ones who built trust with key audiences.

This thinking behind the value of online participation isn't unique, nor are specific leadership examples like these. What has been lacking, however, is hard data to make a case to those yet to take social media seriously.

To address this gap, Propel partnered with Brandwatch to look at the evidence and help any leader or trusted advisor make an objective decision around the investment in their own digital brand.

**Who better to  
analyse than the one  
government leader  
who likely faced the  
greatest amount of  
scrutiny in 2020:**

**Premier Daniel  
Andrews.**



# THE HUMAN CASE STUDY FOR DIGITAL CHANGE: VICTORIAN PREMIER DAN ANDREWS.

Parts of Victoria, Australia's second largest state by population, spent almost half of 2020 in COVID lockdown (175 days in total), with the longest consecutive lockdown being 100+ days.

As this report is released, Victoria is again in lockdown, with these repeat experiences creating immense pressure on top of the existing global economic and social strains.

While all Victorians suffered, very few people would have swapped circumstances for Dan Andrews - Victoria's Premier - who has been

responsible for the state's COVID response from the very beginning. He conducted more than 100 straight days of press conferences during the lockdown stretch, and faced inevitable criticism on and offline for the choices he did and did not make to contain the damage.

Between January 2019 and June 2021, Dan Andrews made 700+ tweets yet was mentioned or tagged in over 3 million tweets. Putting any sort of political views to one side - this article is about the hard data, not partisanship - no one can argue against Premier Andrews being at the very centre of public scrutiny during COVID.

So, what impact did this scrutiny have on him and his Government?



**Did his digital brand have any effect on calming the masses to help usher in complex policy changes?**

# THE FIVE KEY LEARNINGS: LEADERS SHOULD BE YOUR 'DIGITAL SHIELD'.

Using Brandwatch's advanced listening tools, we analysed more than three million tweets between January 2019 and June 2021.

We used this data to assess Dan Andrews' performance and the consumer response against the Victorian Government to see whether his online efforts had any impact on his - and his government's - reputation during COVID.

What we found shocked us. But it also validated a crucial learning:

**Leaders themselves play the most important role in the online reputation battleground.**

Failing to build and harness their digital brand puts any organisation at greater reputational risk.



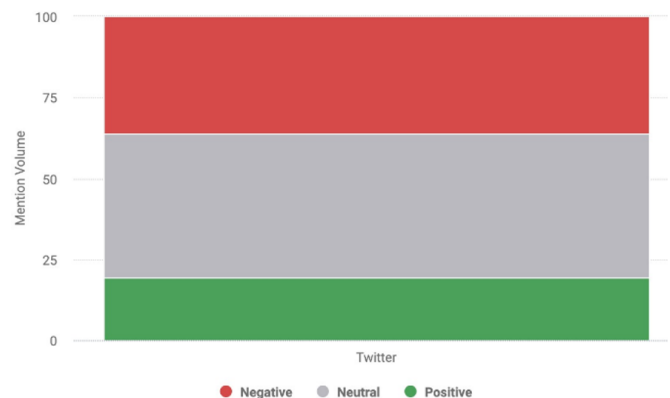
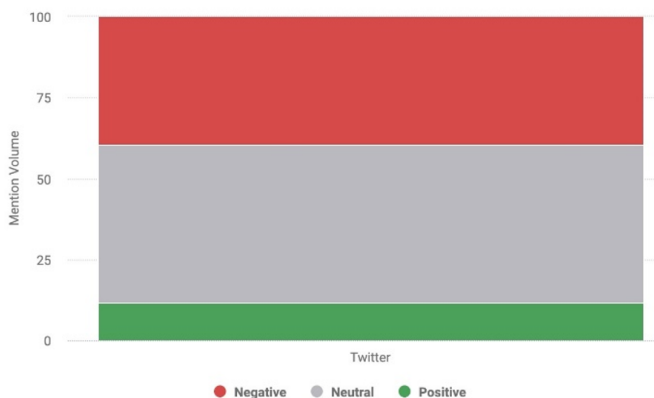
# #1 - EFFECTIVE DIGITAL LEADERSHIP IS A MAGNET FOR POSITIVITY.

Far from being a magnet for negativity during lockdown, Dan Andrews actually generated *more* positive responses than he did in the twelve months prior to the pandemic.

Negative sentiment went from 40% of all comments in 2019 to 36% in 2020, and positive sentiment went from 12% to 20% over the same period.

In the heat of the crisis when he faced greatest scrutiny, Dan Andrews' presence and consistency online provided an invaluable 'digital shield' against negative feedback and criticism.

**Negative sentiment went from 40% of all comments in 2019 to 36% in 2020, and positive sentiment went from 12% to 20% over the same period.**

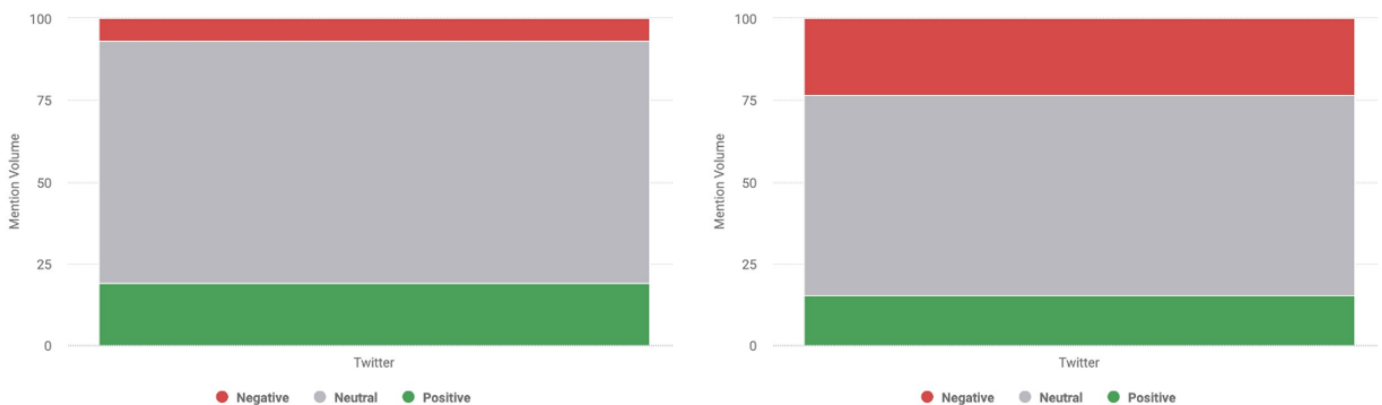


Compared with 2019 performance (chart on the left), mentions of Dan Andrews were 8% more positive and 4% less negative in 2020 (chart on the right), despite being in the depths of lockdown across Victoria. (Source: Brandwatch)



# #2 - INSTITUTIONS WITHOUT A HUMAN FACE RUN THE REAL RISK.

Mentions of the Victorian Government that *did not* reference Dan Andrews in fact attracted far more negativity. Negative sentiment went from 7% in 2019 to 24% in 2020, with positive sentiment shrinking from 19% to 15% in the same period.



Compared with 2019 performance (chart on the left), mentions of the Victorian Government were 4% less positive and 17% more negative in 2020 (chart on the right). (Source: Brandwatch)



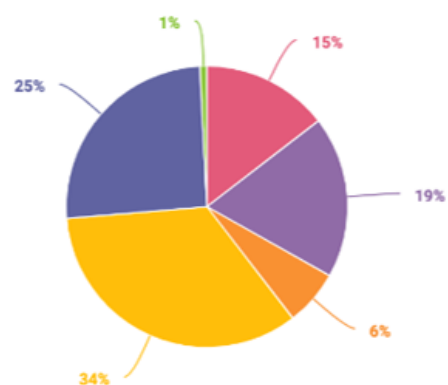
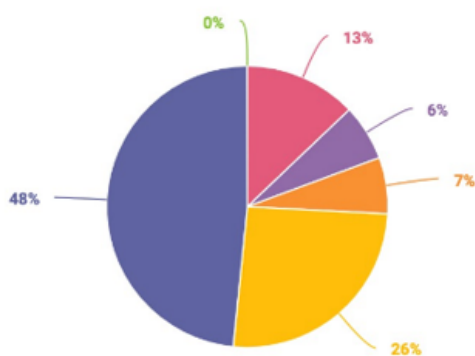
**Negative sentiment went from 7% in 2019 to 24% in 2020, with positive sentiment shrinking from 19% to 15% in the same period.**

# #3 - LEADERS CAN CONNECT, REASSURE AND ENERGISE BETTER THAN ANY INSTITUTION.

Looking at sentiment another way, Brandwatch's proprietary emotion analysis tool showed Dan Andrews' presence in online discussions increased joy from 26% in 2019 to a remarkable 34% in 2020 while also reducing fear by 1% in the same period.

Anger levels only increased by 2% over the same period – a minor uplift in the circumstances.

**Dan Andrews' presence in online discussions increased joy from 26% in 2019 to a remarkable 34% in 2020.**



● Anger ● Disgust ● Fear ● Joy ● Sadness ● Surprise

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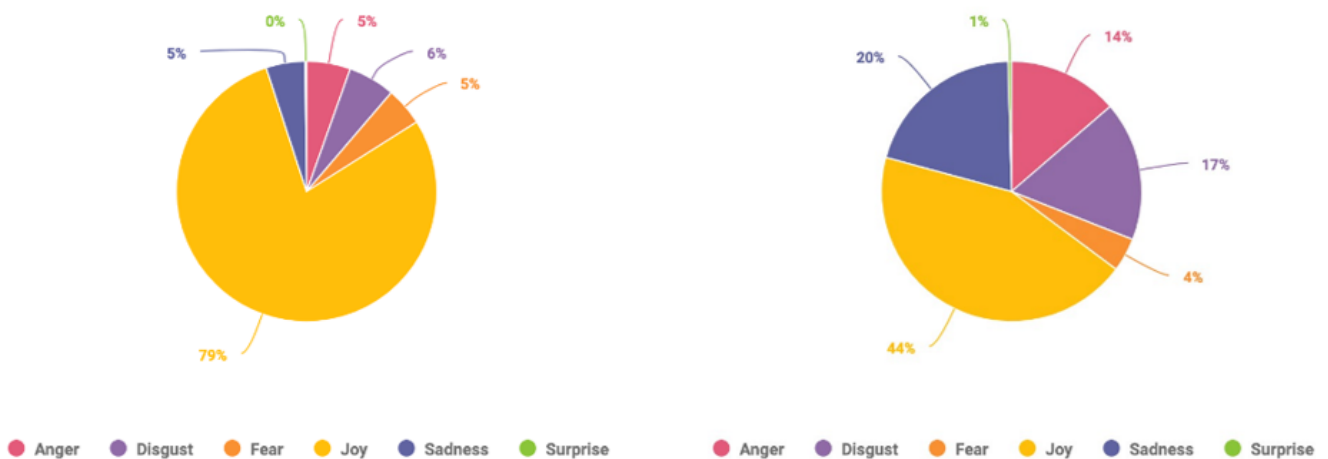
Compared with 2019 performance (chart on the left), mentions of Dan Andrews were 8% more joyous and 1% less negative in 2020 (chart on the right). (Source: Brandwatch)

# #4 - CITIZENS ARE FAR MORE LIKELY TO RAGE AT INSTITUTIONS.

In contrast, the Victorian Government saw comments including a predominant emotion of joy reduce starkly from 79% to 44% in the analysis period.

Negative emotions of anger, sadness and disgust all increased by 3-4x their 2019 levels.

**Joy reduced starkly from 79% to 44% [while] anger, sadness and disgust all increased by 3-4x their 2019 levels.**



Compared with 2019 performance (chart on the left), mentions of the Victorian Government were 35% less joyous and dramatically more angry, sad and disgusted in 2020 (chart on the right). (Source: Brandwatch)

# #5 - A KNOWN, ESTABLISHED DIGITAL BRAND IS AN INVALUABLE CRISIS ASSET.

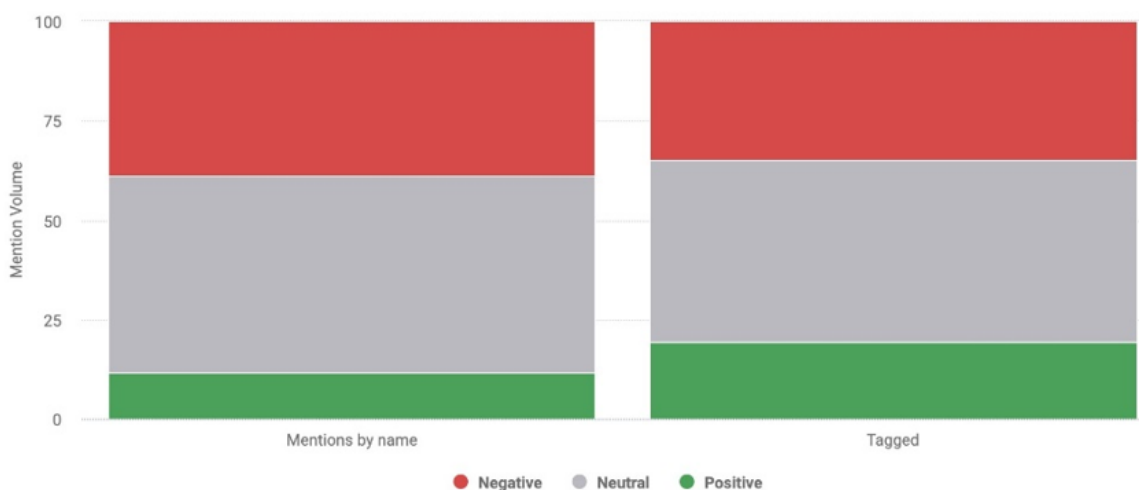
Finally, if we dig a little deeper on sentiment, we see a fascinating insight on the importance of building and harnessing a purposeful digital brand.

Tweets tagging (e.g. including @) Dan Andrews generated far greater positive sentiment and slightly lower negative sentiment when compared with tweets that simply mentioned his name.

Why is this powerful?

Those leaders who build a strong digital brand and human connection - even among detractors and in times of crisis - will fare better than those who do not.

**Citizen tweets that tagged Dan Andrews' profile were 8% more positive and 3% less negative than those just mentioning his name.**



Throughout 2020, tweets mentioning Dan Andrews (chart on the left) were 8% less positive and 3% more negative than those '@' tagging him (chart on the right), highlighting the value of having a known, established digital brand. (Source: Brandwatch)



# WHAT IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT MESSAGE LEADERS SHOULD TAKE FROM THIS ANALYSIS?

As human beings, leaders who have an authentic, accessible, consistent and purposeful digital brand will always be harder to criticise than those who are missing in action. And it is far easier to berate a faceless organisation than it is a human being who has a face, personality, emotions and backstory.

Leaders represent the single greatest digital opportunity for effective reputation management, and yet they are often advised to avoid online participation for fear of risk.

Our data debunks this myth.

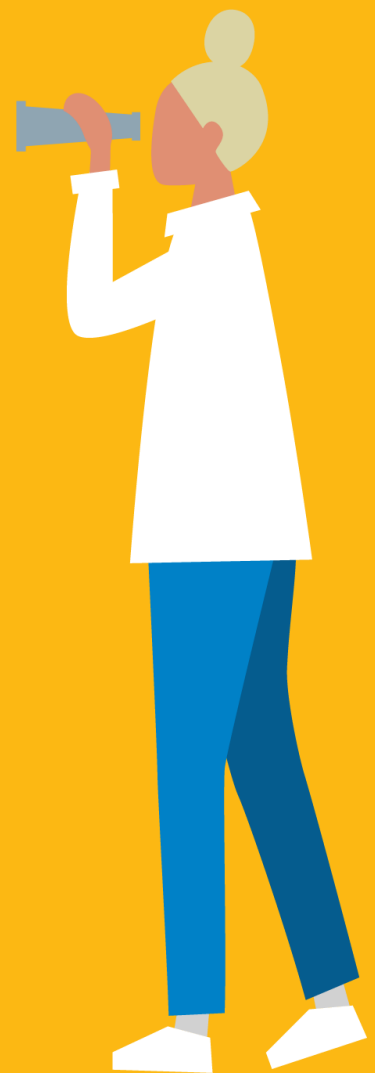
**Avoidance – not participation – is the real reputational risk.**

Leaders are the ones who can help any organisation navigate through crises online, as they already do offline.

# FIVE REQUIREMENTS TO PROTECT YOUR REPUTATION ONLINE.

What should you and your organisation take from these findings? There are five important learnings - even requirements - from Dan Andrews' example:

- 1 Know your current online perceptions**
- 2 Identify + monitor key online sources**
- 3 Understand risks + opportunities**
- 4 Review policies + guidelines**
- 5 Empower leaders to take action**



# #1 - KNOW YOUR CURRENT ONLINE PERCEPTIONS.

Do you know what people are saying about your organisation and leaders online? Can you see how those conversations may be influencing media or shareholder audiences?

Conduct an in-depth social listening exercise to surface any areas of concern - or opportunities - and develop an action plan to address them.

(Note: a surface level analysis conducted via desktop research or using a free tool will leave gaps - use a comprehensive tool and a carefully crafted search query to ensure you find all potential risks.

A small investment up front saves reputations and careers down the track.)

# #2 - IDENTIFY AND CONTINUOUSLY MONITOR KEY ONLINE SOURCES.

Do you often only learn about issues once they've hit the mainstream press?

Media monitoring is great to highlight what's already happened, but social media listening - particularly AI-powered alerts - provide a vital early warning system.

Using the listening exercise, create relevant alerts that distribute information to the right people in a timely manner to take actions as needed.

Even an hour's head start in a crisis is invaluable preparation time for leaders - Brandwatch's Signals and Alerts tools provide a powerful and comprehensive online reputation management solution.

# #3 - ENSURE LEADERS UNDERSTAND THE RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES.

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How well informed are you and your leadership team of the potential risks and opportunities online?

Or are younger, digital natives solely responsible for any social media strategy, analysis and reporting?

Make time today to detail your key strategic priorities and where social media can play a role, while also mapping key stakeholder activities online to learn how online conversations are influencing your brand and reputation.

# #4 - REVIEW CURRENT POLICIES AND GUIDELINES.

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Does your current social media policy encourage or discourage use among staff, including leaders?

Most organisations have an 'avoidance' approach to social media, but the data shows participation is a much more effective strategy.

Review your policies and ensure guidelines and adequate training are in place to help people take the right steps online.

If you opt out of social media at any level, you opt out of the opportunity to respond.



# #5 - EMPOWER LEADERS TO TAKE ACTION.

Does any leader today have the capacity to learn how to build and harness their own digital brand from scratch?

Instead of avoiding this vital conversation, reduce the burden by doing the initial research and providing valuable context to start a constructive conversation on your leaders' priorities, goals and aspirations to design a purposeful digital brand.

Surround them with the specialist resources required to properly leverage their digital profile, listening, activity and network - all key components of an effective digital brand.



# YOUR NEXT STEP - **SETTING** **LEADERS UP** **FOR SUCCESS.**

Whether your leader or leadership team is already active online or not, the opportunity to build and execute an effective digital brand strategy should not be missed.

Want to know how technology and insights can give you a clearer understanding of the online environment surrounding your leaders and brand?

**Book a meeting with the Brandwatch team.**

Want to learn more about the research and how you can set your leaders up for success online?

**Contact Roger Christie,**  
**Managing Director at**  
**Propel.**

