

Discourse on the Impact of Hate Speech on Nigeria's Democracy

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Abstract

The study with the aid of documentary research method sought necessary information to investigate the interrelationship between political communication and national security in a digital age, focusing on the impact of hate speech on Nigeria's democracy. The researchers highlighted the dangers of hate speech in the form of political commentary as amplified by new media platforms. It recommended among others, appropriate steps necessary to navigate through difficult political atmosphere created by sophisticated technology and made even worse with the use of harsh political language/tone.

Keywords: National Security, Political Communication, Hate Speech, New Media, EndSARS

Introduction

Political communication is perhaps one of social science areas or sub-field with roots in political science and strong link to mass communication and journalism. It specifically explains how political parties and government make use of the media to garner public support during elections or in the process of advancing a policy or other government business that requires a people's buy-in (Riaz, 2010). Riaz emphasises that political communication dwells on "analysis of the media messages and also the political statements of the leaders of the political parties of the country as well as the prominent world leaders belonging to different countries" (p.162). Political communication as noted by Nwammuo, Edegoh & Asemah (2013) is a process that touches all aspects of society's life and therefore takes place in a communication system that produces messages at the boundary between politics and the media.

Democracies the world over thrive on political communication. It is a tool employed by individuals, group of individuals and democratic institutions to strengthen democratic values. It is usually employed in place of violent attacks on dissenting voices or opposition. Political communication is used for political engagements. In democratic societies, political parties take advantage of political communication as a

tool and take on lobbying, visitations, with far reaching effect on so many areas including electoral matters (Erdoğan, as cited in Daşlı, 2019).

The Nigerian media is known to be at the forefront in promoting democratic values as it was also instrumental to the quest to return democracy to the country in 1999, after decades of military rule. Political class always use the media to advance their ideologies as well as political spread. The traditional media used to be popular in this regard. However, recent happenings show that there is active use of new media technologies for political communication as well.

Again, because political communication involves humans, abuses are inevitable. In Nigeria, hate speech is generating discourse amongst academics. It is common for a political statement from a ruling or opposition party to be viewed as hate speech depending on the side of the equation one belongs and the perspective from which the statement is analysed. Hate speech has been described as a weapon capable of terrorising an individual or group (Downs & Cowan, 2012). Similarly, hate speech has also been described as “any speech, gesture, conduct, writing, or display which could incite people to violence or prejudicial action” (Ezeibe, 2015). In Nigeria, hate speech is viewed with so much disdain to the extent that a bill was recently presented to the National Assembly to criminalise hate speech because according to some citizens, it is capable of inciting people to violence, ethnic clashes, civil disobedience or even war (Jimoh & Opara, 2018). Further, Jimoh & Opara (2018) report that capital punishment was recommended for offenders in the proposed bill. Though the bill has not been passed due to its failure to get the support of the people (Akubo, 2020), it, also, has not been thrown out or withdrawn—a move that raises suspicion that it is still alive in the Senate—one of the arms of the Nigerian legislature (Nwabufo, 2020).

Digital technologies enable new media and associated capabilities that come with them. Increasingly, people are now turning to social media as sources of news (Xenos, Scheufele & Brossard, 2018) or as channels of news distribution (Vásquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal & López-Garcia, 2019). Similarly, political actors are now taking advantage of the possibilities offered by these digital technologies to reach the mass of the people (Omilusi, 2017). New media are channels of communication that are interactive in nature and they use the internet, including podcasts, RSS feeds, social networks, text messaging, blogs, wikis, virtual worlds and more. Digital media are fast and widely growing sources of information, entertainment, news, shopping and social interaction (Asemah & Edegoh, 2012; Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2020). It is generally assumed that within the democratic political system, citizens should have sufficient opportunities to communicate their preferences towards political decision makers (Santas, Asemah & Jumbo, 2019). Thus, new digital technologies such as mobile phones, social media and the other internet-based services are now widely in use and easily accessed by citizens. Consequently, WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, Twitter posts and many more are now used as avenues for political communication and mobilisation. World leaders are known to be active users of social media platforms – examples of a prominent world leader who chose new media over mainstream for

political communication is the 45th president of the United States – President Donald Trump. Back home, Nigerian political leaders also directly or through aides make use of new media technologies for political communication. In most cases, people who are not literate enough to handle more sophisticated gadgets are reached via Short Messaging Services (SMS).

Due to the interactive feature of digital media especially social media platforms, people can discuss issues such as political leaning, electoral matters and so much more. Sometimes debates in these virtual communities degenerate into heated arguments. In some cases, people make inciting comments that are considered dangerous to national security and cohesion. In other words, hate speeches abound in virtual environments due to the sensitive nature of issues always discussed. National security is seen as a country's ability to protect things of national importance such as the citizens, economy and various types of institutions (Longley, 2021). According to Longley, national security is so important to every government that they often deploy various tactics – which include economic, political, diplomacy and military to ensure its protection.

Though the tenets of democracies the world over ensures or guarantees free expression, the Department of State Security Services – Nigeria's intelligence security believes certain utterances could pose as threat to national security (*This Day*, 2020). Across, political divides and in virtual spaces, utterances considered offensive to the sensitivity of others are often made by politicians and private citizens. This, according to a report by *This Day*, portends danger to any democracy if not checked. Therefore, this study explores political communication and its impact on national security with special treatment on the dangers posed by hate speech across new media platforms to Nigeria's democracy. The following objectives guided the study:

1. To know the relationship that exists between political, hate speech and democracy in Nigeria.
2. To find out the role of the media in the fight against hate speech and what gains that portends for democracy.
3. To assess political communication in Nigeria and its impact on democracy in a digital era
4. To ascertain the interconnectedness between hate speech, political communication, national security and cohesion in Nigeria.
5. To discover the governance perspective to social media political communication and democracy in Nigeria.
6. To find out the threat posed by the new media to national security of Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on two theories of mass communication; namely the agenda setting theory and technological determinism. As a theoretical foundation in mass communication, the agenda setting can be traced to the 1972 works of Maxwell McComb & Donald Shaw. In their survey of North Carolina voters during the 1968 US presidential election, McComb & Shaw established that what people considered most

important issues were as well reported by the mass media as most critical (Alvernia University, 2018). In contrast to the position as expressed in the foregoing, Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017) argued that though earlier effort did not mention the phrase, “agenda setting,” but actual demonstration of the theory is traceable to the first chapter of Walter Lippmann in his 1922 book, *Public Opinion* (p.73).

Agenda setting has two main or core assumptions (Alvernia University, 2018). The theory’s first core assumption is that the media often embarks on filtering and shaping of what they give to the people rather just present them the way they are – and the second is that issues given prominence in the media are most likely to be seen or considered by the people as important. In other words, the pictures we store in our heads, most of the things we think or worry about, most of the issues we discuss, are based on what we have read, listened to or watched in different mass media (Asemah *et al* 2017). The theory is relevant to this study as it helps put in perspective the role of the media in the fight against hate speech through programming.

Technological determinism theory on the other hand is based on a reductionist doctrine that the kind of technology a society is exposed to at a given point in time shapes or determines its cultural values, history, or social structure (Okunnu, 2014). The theory’s origin can be traced to a scholar of Canadian origin known as Marshal McLuhan who expressed the all-powerful nature of technology to cause changes in social behaviours. The theory holds that technologies have the powers to shape how individuals in a society act, feel, think as well as the pattern of behaviour of a society as it moves from a particular technological age or era unto another (Asemah *et al* 2017).

As revealed by McLuhan, inventions in communication technology come with the power to enforce cultural change, while human life can be greatly influenced by changes in modes of communication– and as human shapes the tools they use, they (those tools) in turn shape man (Okunnu, 2014). This study rest upon the perspective of hard determinist who assumed technology to be a set of powerful forces that act to regulate man’s social activity and the meanings ascribed thereto. The theory applies to this study as it helps broaden the perspective on how new media technologies pose a threat to national security in Nigeria.

Methodology

The preferred research methodology for this study is documentary research. It involves the analysis of documents that contains information about an area of study or specific data useful to an intended study interest (Bailey, as cited in Ahmed, 2010). The method is unique and “requires a careful and systematic study and analysis of documented sources such as written text, visual and pictorial data” (Agbo, Lenshie &Boye, 2018, p.20). Documentary research has to do with getting the needed information from facts and evidence-based materials by means of a careful search through available documents (Apuke & Omar, 2020; Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekhareafo & Okpnachi, 2012). It is an assessment of a set of relevant documents to gain social or historical value or

in order to put up a wider narrative by studying a number of documents about a specific area (Tight, 2019; Iowa State University, 2022).

In line with the above, the researchers embarked on a search of useful and relevant materials online with the help of Google Scholar. The following keywords were used in the search parameters: *Political communication in Nigeria, National security and political communication, Impact of hate speech on Nigeria's democracy, Consequences of hate speech in Nigeria's political space, uses of digital technology to propagate hate speech, Social and new media fake news effect on Nigeria's democracy, Relationship between political communication, hate speech and digital media in the 21st century Nigeria*. The research did not restrict the search to particular date or year of publication. Results of the search returned 325 useful references to the study with a general outlook. Since documentary research requires a careful synthesis of data, the researchers based their judgement on the main content viz: abstracts, research results or findings and conclusion to arrive at a final data set useful for this present study. A total of 25 papers which include journal articles, online articles and others made the final selection, out of which 9 (36%) delved into themes that discussed *hate speech, political communication and impact on Nigeria's democracy*, 3 (12%) focused on *Nigeria's political communication in a digital era*, 6 (24%) looked at *Hate speech, communication and Nigeria's national security and cohesion*, 4 (16%) dealt with issues surrounding *Social media political communication and Nigeria's democracy: Governance perspective*, while 3 (12%) discussed *New media and the threat to national security of Nigeria*. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, $n = 25$.

Total retrieved publications that match this present study in terms of relevance equals 25 i.e., $n = 25$. The researcher thoroughly read and analysed the content of each publication and then grouped them in line with the objective of this study. Consequently, the papers were arranged along six themes and an additional two sub-themes as presented below:

- Political communication: hate speech and its impact on democracy (sub-themes under this theme include)
 - hate speech and electoral violence in Nigeria
 - hate speech as a problem for the survival of democracy
- Role of the media in the fight against hate speech and gains for democracy
- Nigeria's political communication in digital era,
- Hate speech, communication and Nigeria's national security and cohesion,
- Social media political communication and Nigeria's democracy: Governance perspective,
- New media and the threat to national security

The foregoing themes were arrived at after retrieved documents in journal articles and other related online articles relevant to the area of study were thoroughly sifted and synthesised into meaningful areas and sub-areas. In line with the foregoing, below is the thematic presentation of the themes and sub-themes.

Political Communication: Hate Speech and its Impact on Democracy

Previous research efforts have shown a connection between political party communication, hate speech and democracy (Omilusi, 2017). Omilusi finds that in the quest to woo voters during political campaigns, political advertising takes place and that run up to the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, utterances used in campaigns by major political parties were reckless, inciting and hate-filled and such has negative impact on democratic values. Omilusi (2019), however, advocates true democracy and emphasises the need for tolerance in a democracy. Similarly, Omotoso (2019) traced political communication in Nigeria to colonial era and finds that it has evolved through various forms of government the country has witnessed – military and civilian. According to Omotoso (2019), political communication has been used for dissemination of political views from government standpoint, solicit political support from citizens, present people's grievances to authority and so on. We considered other eight documents or articles and analysed them under the theme: political communication, hate speech impact on Nigeria's democracy and present them hereunder:

Hate Speech and Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Documents of research findings showed that in Nigeria and the rest of Africa, several conflicts have ensued as a result of hate speech especially during electioneering campaigns (Ezeibe, 2015). Ezeibe reveals that in Nigeria, the problem of hate speech is rife amongst members of diverse ethnic groups. Hate speech against an ethnic group can quickly degenerate and could heat up the polity resulting in violence with adverse challenges for democratic institutions. One cannot talk about hate speech without awakening memories of pre- and post-2015 general elections in Nigeria. It initially took on political form and later grew to become ethnicity battle. It is mostly amongst dominant ethnic groups of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Quoting a 2015 report published by Center for Information Technology and Development (CITAD), Ezeibe (2015) observes that Nigerians disseminate hate speech across social media platforms and 70 per cent of the people doing so have visible online identities – meaning they can be traced and they make use of English Language which is understandable to majority of Nigerians. The report states that 65 per cent of participants in the research are males and use identifiable coded language capable of generating violence and harm. In a nutshell, hate speech is directly and indirectly responsible for electoral violence in Nigeria.

Hate Speech as a Problem for the Survival of Democracy

Research findings such as (Pate & Ibrahim, 2019) reveal that hate speech constitute a hindrance to democratic consolidation and survival. Pate and Ibrahim enumerate factors that are closely related to hate speech to include insulting, showing contempt towards, or abusing people based on their religion, ethnicity, linguistic affiliations, places of origin and so on. The scholars stress that speeches with intention to spread

hate are capable of creating chaos in Nigeria and disrupting the peace in the country. Unarguably, such comes with adverse consequences on democratic process and the polity in general. According to a review by Bukar and Ibrahim (2017), the aforementioned position or assertion is shared by several scholars, “(Agbese, 2017; Ansip, 2017; Siapera, 2018)” (p.82).

In Nigeria, hate speech is often fueled by fake news (Wilson & Umar, 2019). Therefore, either by direct or indirect means, fake news increases the hate that already permeates the Nigerian political landscape and in no small measure impact democracy in negative dimensions. Wilson & Umar (2019) further averred that factors such as fake news and hate speech in the Nigerian politics cripple free speech, heats up the already tensed polity, causes public chaos and in a way promotes the idea of media censorship. Similarly, research findings also reveal that readers' comments on online news portends danger to democratic consolidation as commentators “spew hatred, verbally assault, attack and demonise others” (Lucas & Targema, 2018). Lucas and Targema identify the importance of online news platforms as for power, always make use of extreme propaganda, and as a result, hate speech is infused into political communication avenues for healthy political discourse and other matters in the interest of democracy. In other words, same platforms could be used positively.

Adum *et al* based on their research findings further emphasise that hate speech is rife in Nigerian political environment and that politicians choose targets such as people's ethnicity, religion or the personalities directly involved as objects of verbal attacks i.e., hate speech. This they often do either directly or through proxies. According to Adum *et al.*, (2019), “In Nigeria nobody talks Nigeria. Nigerians are first Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Ijaw, Tiv, Efik, Berom, Itsekiri etc; Nigerians are first of all, what they are by way of ethnic nationalities. This breeds suspicion, disharmony and often times hate” (p.50).

Role of the Media in Fight against Hate Speech and gains for Democracy

Hate speech has negative impact on democratic institutions and democracies find it necessary to always stem the tide. In Nigeria, 2015 and 2019 general elections saw a new dimension in the bitter electioneering campaigns, therefore, hate speech became inevitable. Records of a research reveal that media in every society performs its social responsibility and the media at all time embarks on self-censorship to avoid the dissemination of stories, documentaries and so on that propagate hate in any form (Oriola, 2020). Oriola further buttresses that the mainstream media is heavily relied upon for “information and news about politics” (p.15) and must therefore strive (as a concerned institution) to fight hate speech in Nigerian politics. This can be achieved through the conceptualisation of programme idea and creation of same to fight such or through attention given to issues that promote unity instead of division. The foregoing aligns with the agenda setting theory. However, when the media fail to do just that, the debate to overregulate the media would always be in the front burner and those in favour will always gain attention and prominence.

Therefore, the media as the fourth estate of the realm must be actively involved and strive to self-regulate. Additionally, the media of the 21st century can take advantage of the new media platforms to perform their basic function which is to inform, educate, entertain and enlighten their publics who are now drifting from the traditional channels to the more modern. Already, media organisations in Nigeria such as AIT, Channels TV, *Vanguard*, *Daily Trust* and many more as a result of necessity have adopted alternative platforms due to their ubiquity and interactivity. So, care must be taken to prevent abuse because as authentic sources of information, hate speech could easily be amplified without warning through their pages of platforms. The media in their reportage must filter and eliminate hate speech from their reports.

Nigeria's Political Communication and Democracy in a Digital Era

Findings show that political communication coupled with media performance as well as ownership influence and manipulation are some of the factors responsible for Nigeria's political instability (Olayiwola, 2012). In modern times, computer mediated political communication is said to have significant impact on the voting decision of Nigerians (Joseph *et al* 2019). Digital technologies especially the affordable ones are embraced in Africa. Results of a research reveals that the Nigeria's 2015 elections saw high use of social media platforms to organise campaigns, promote ideologies, voter mobilisation, as well as electioneering crusades (Apuke & Tunca, 2018). Therefore, digital era has made various contributions to democracy in Nigeria.

Hate Speech, Political Communication and Nigeria's National Security and Cohesion

Hate speech appear in Nigeria's political communication with negative impact on national security and cohesion. Several researches have delved into investigating how hate speech especially in political communication affects Nigeria's national security, unity and cohesion. Research shows that Nigerians are fully aware of hate speech and the negative threats it poses to the citizens and the country (Okpara & Chukwu, 2019). Okpara & Chukwu (2019) revealed that 70 per cent of participants in a survey indicated that people use hate speech because of economic hardship, marginalisation and the constant urge to outwit or demean others, and that indeed, hate speech negatively affects national unity and cohesion.

Similarly, Yakubu (2019) observes that hate speech in Nigeria's political terrain cuts across geographical and ethnic divides – North and South – Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba and that it cannot be attached to a particular ethnic group or region of the country as different political scenarios present or determine from whence such could emanate. According to Yakubu, “the digital revolution has given hate speech entrepreneurs an avenue to carry out the nefarious acts of heating the polity and fostering division across the federating units that constitutes Nigeria” (p.293), this, however, does not help cohesion and nation building. Hate speech can be seen as inflammatory and verbal attacks and can incite people to hate and violence as much as

it threatens the national security and unity of Nigeria (Alabi & Ayelaja, 2019). Hate speech during election has been found to be one factor that prevents post election peace-building in the long term and this poses a great threat to cohesion (Isola, 2018). According to Isola, “hate speech is antithetical to peacebuilding, development and peaceful coexistence among diverse groups in democratic societies” (p.1). Hate speech can be used as instrument of discrimination, violence and intimidation and therefore portends great dangers to every citizen, national security, government or a nation, as it is capable of igniting tensions and causing chaos (Aminu, 2020).

Social Media Political Communication and Nigeria's Democracy: Governance Perspective

From the documents sourced and analysed, four of them focused on social media as a tool for political communication and governance. Social media refer to activities, practices and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions, using conversational media. Social media applications are broadly categorised as forums and message boards, review and opinion sites, social networks, blogging and microblogging, bookmarking and media sharing (Asemah, 2014; Asemah, 2015; Asemah, Okpanachi & Edegoh, 2013; Asemah, Illah & Edegoh, 2013). Social media and other modern technologies are useful to a democratic society as government can explore them (Shinkafi, 2016). In the study, Shinkafi (2016) finds that ICT is useful to governance as existing evidences show that technology can be harnessed for political rejuvenation of the polity and to mobilise or engage citizens to participate in governance. That social media which is considered an offshoot of the new media is a modern-day tool used by the polity to address pertinent political matters, is part of the findings of a research conducted by Babaleye, Ibitoye & Odorume (2020). Findings of the study further reveal that in contrast with popular notion, social media platforms are sources of credible information and constitute what could be referred to as “blessing to information management in Nigeria's democratic rule” (p.19). Babaleye *et al* (2020) specifically remark that though users of social media platforms may be seen as hostile towards political actors or leaders, the ultimate goal is to get them to do the right thing which is to provide the dividends of democracy.

Social media seem to have expanded the democratic space by liberalising political participation across platforms as citizens can make contributions and be heard (Jimada, 2019), but then, government always see it as confrontational. According to the study, social media creates “new public sphere channels for people to come together” (p.8) and fight against ills of the society – wasteful spending, corruption or government abuse. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter can host discussions and analysis of pertinent issues with political implications, and can also be used to organise protest as seen in the #EndSARS case, all in a bid to hold government to account and demand better governance.

Results of a research by Ufuophu-Biri (2020) indicate that social media serve as medium of political communication and Nigerians are highly exposed to messages

therein. Further, the study reveals that Nigerians are active across social media and therefore participated actively in the 2019 general elections more than they did the previous ones by engaging one another in discourses that border on politics across platforms. This translates to the point made earlier that with social media, citizens feel they can participate better in the democratic process as they can be heard due to the liberal environment created by the platforms. Obviously, democracy is better for it.

New Media and the Threat to National Security of Nigeria

Documents of available research abound on the threat faced by national security with sophistication in technology, especially new media. Asogwa (2020) in a study reveals that internet-based media play critical role in issues of national security and likens platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Yahoo mail to guns in the hands of the users because with them they can wreak havoc on the national security of a country. On the negative impact or if you like, threat of new media to national security, Asogwa (2020) observes that platforms could be used to recruit, finance, train and radicalise agents of destabilisation, as well as cause various degrees of incitement. However, Asogwa (2020) further hints that same new platforms could be used for national security threat awareness purposes. This is in consonance with the technological determinism theory on the impact of technology on society – because people’s attitude can be shaped by virtue of their exposure to certain contents on new media platforms.

In a similar study, Chukwuere & Onyebukwa (2018) find that new media platform – specifically social media has indeed been used by terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram and proscribed groups such as Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) to spread propaganda, fake news and also incite. Recall that social media is not as regulated as the conventional media in Nigeria. Therefore, this portends great threat to national security of Nigeria as more are exposed to inciting statements and could carry out acts of reprisals (in the case of statements against ethnicity or religion) which would be chaotic in most instances. In a related study by Ogbette, Enwemeka & Okoh (2019), it was revealed that new media is used in Nigeria to direct hate-filled messages towards other Nigerians and the interactivity, ubiquity and anonymity provided by platforms makes abuse unavoidable. This according to Ogbette *et al* (2019) is largely due to the fact that there exist no gatekeepers on social media platforms who could regulate comments and posts, at least in most instances.

Conclusion

The researchers were able to establish the importance of political communication in the pursuit of sustainable democratic system. Additionally, based on the analysis of existing literature, we can establish that hate speech exists in the political communication by Nigerians and that such constitute a threat to Nigeria’s corporate existence – as it greatly and negatively impacts national security and cohesion. It was established based on the reviewed documents that political communication can

conveniently take place across new media platforms. The implications of these findings are presented as recommendations below:

1. The people must be made to realise through constant education and dialogue that the project to keep Nigeria as one under a tranquil atmosphere is a collective effort of all and, therefore, must be championed by all and sundry. This can be done through re-orientation by government agencies and other stakeholders – consequently citizens must be made aware of the need to build bridges, rather than break existing ones.
2. Important personalities and stakeholders in the Nigeria project such as religious leaders, politicians, traditional rulers and heads of ethnic associations and groups must vocalise and show their disdain towards hate speech, not just when it is from the other group but when such speeches are made by one of their own. That way, people will begin to realise the threat of place hate speech and permanently discard as it is a tool for destabilisation.
3. Political leaders and leaders of thought who are known for divisive utterances can equally be encouraged to channel their efforts into using same tools – that is political communication to bring people together in a bid to build a united country. It will be done to also disabuse themselves of any form of malicious utterances capable of escalating already tensile stress the country always finds itself almost on a daily basis –in matters relating to governance, ethnicity, religion and so on.
4. Media organisations also have a role to play. The media must self-censor to avoid being used as channels of distributing hate speech.
5. Government and social media users must see the freedom derived there from as a privilege and therefore use it for positive things – as much as users can post in ignorance, government can also quickly issue notes to always counter erroneous stand/viewpoint in a bid to improve national security and cohesion.
6. The legislature must be actively involved in the dialogue to rid the nation of speeches capable of inciting people to violence. While doing this, care must be taken not to infringe on human rights of free expression. It is possible to clearly outline boundaries and put in place mechanisms to isolate extreme commentaries that are capable of literarily setting Nigeria on fire and punish offenders. Care must also be taken not to give too much power to the president or governor to unilaterally take decisions on such matters to prevent abuse and vendetta-seeking against perceived political enemies or genuine dissenting voices.

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