NEWS SOURCING OF THE 2011 SOMALI FAMINE:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN *PANAPRESS* AND *REUTERS*

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ABSTRACT

This article uses online news of the 2011 Somali famine, a humanitarian disaster, to investigate the role of alternative transnational news agencies and Western mainstream news agencies in attributing news to sources. The study concludes that *Panapress*, an African news agency, originally positioned to challenge Western mainstream media narratives, is doing the opposite by supplementing *Reuters'* narrative, hence entrenching homogenization of news flow. The study finds that advocacy/ humanitarian groups were the dominant news sources used by both news agencies, indicating resources are at their disposal and that they have the capacity to pool them to mitigate the consequences of the famine. The results also show the use of news sources by *Panapress* was limited to advocacy/ humanitarian organizations and foreign dignitaries/ leaders only, and failed to cover victims and other groups affected by the famine.

Keywords: Africa, news agencies, news sources, advocacy/ humanitarian sources, news flow

INTRODUCTION

News is a report of current happening(s), which may or may not appear in a newspaper, on television, on radio, or on a web site (Danesi 2009, 212). It is an objective account reflecting reality (Allan 2004, 47) that involves the distribution of information affecting people or of interest to its largest audience (Musburger 2007, 93). The preceding definitions of news suggest not everything is news, and news probably involves a process – of selection and exclusion. This process, Westerståhl and Johansson (1994, 71-72) believe, is as important or sometimes more important than the event being reported. They argue further that "news values" and "news ideology" often determine what news becomes; and sometimes, they interplay to reinforce or conflict each other.

While news values are used to determine newsworthy events or the news angle based on values such as immediacy, human interest, prominence, impact and proximity; "news ideology" on the other hand are "permanent combinations comprising perception of society and a set of societal values" (Westerståhl and Johansson 1994, 75). However, Allan (2004, 16) argue that it is important that "facts" of news be separated from "values" of news, suggesting that the represented reality can be diluted with journalistic norms and values of making choices regarding what is important, what is most important, what is for domestic or international audience. Regardless of whether it is meant for local or international audience, news could be (un) pleasant. Regarding this, Musburger (2007, 93) adds that even though people generally welcome good news, bad news is one of the greatest attractions, especially where it serves specific purposes.

The 2011 famine in Somalia attracted global attention and became international news as a human-interest story with colossal magnitude from the tragic losses for Somalia, the entire Horn of Africa and the international community. The 2011 Somali famine was estimated to affect "13 million people in the Horn of Africa" (WFP 2011) including other countries like Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Uganda and parts of Sudan. The declaration led global media to focus on the region due to the plight of almost four million people who risked hunger, starvation, both or death (Gettleman 2011). The famine was caused by persistent drought, conflict, and restricted humanitarian access and rapidly rising global food prices (Maxwell and Fitzpatrick 2012, 5, WFP 2012, 9)

Since Somalia is one of the least developed countries of the world, it is necessary to consider the age-long debate in imbalance coverage of news. Sreberry-Mohammadi et al. (1985, 7) emphasize that the processing and dissemination of news are the two major areas of inequality and dependency of developing countries on developed ones. Accusation of bias and distortion in news coupled with the dominance of Western news agencies are among the shortcomings of news coverage about developing countries on the international stage. This, as Dijk (1988, 36-37) notes, is influenced by constraints of the news media coverage, their dependence on news agencies for content, as well as influence of writers and correspondents.

AGENDA SHAPERS: NEWS AGENCIES AND SOURCES

McPhail (2010) notes that news agencies are sources of news-to-news media. Major western news agencies such as the *Associated Press (AP)*, *Bloomberg*, *Reuters* and *Agence France Presse (AFP)* provide about 90 percent of the entire world's wire service information, and define

the world largely by what and how they cover breaking news (McPhail 2010, 41).The 'ready-made' nature of news agency news can be associated with their purpose of existence as noted by Boyd-Barrett (1998, 19) who defines international (mainstream) news agencies as organizations that gather and sell news throughout the world for the benefit of retail mass media such as newspapers, broadcasters, online-suppliers and other outlets such as business, finance institutions, governments and private individuals. Meanwhile, alternative news agencies according to Giffard (1998, 191), are purveyors of information about developing nations. Their emphasis is to focus on problems and priorities of developing regions in order to make the voices of the developing world heard.

News is sponsored and shaped by multiple social actors, including politicians, organizations and social movements (Gamson and Modigliani in Carragee and Roefs 2004, 216). Notably, established interests or groups close to a government will usually succeed in shaping the news agendas and interpretive frameworks constructed by journalists because they are positioned at the top of a hierarchy of credibility. Journalists are likely to take their frameworks for understanding events as a starting point for their reports due to their power, legitimacy and credibility as disinterested or objective experts (Manning 2001, 15).

However, news sources' ability to dominate news discourse depends on complex factors, including economic and cultural resources and knowledge of journalism practices, the latter of which resonates from broader political values (Carragee and Roefs 2004, 215-216). It is important at this point, to reiterate that sources make news or function as surrogate observers. They function as conduits of information to the objective journalist. Despite claims to

objectivity, research shows that there are systematic biases in the selection of sources by journalists (Soley 1992, 17).

However, news sources can be primary or secondary. Primary sources define essential aspects of events, issues and situations and tell audiences what these events are about. Secondary sources, on the other hand, consists of ordinary people with typical emotional or moral reaction to an event or situation. Sources enable journalists to frame stories in particular ways (Schneider 2011, 73). In cases where informed views and analysis or interpretations are needed, experts also serve as primary news sources and write opinions. Soley (1992, 2) adds that other news sources include criminals and victims, government officials, candidates for office, military leaders, terrorists and hostages, foreign dignitaries, and leaders of advocacy organizations. They serve as news sources because they clearly represent specific sides within situations of the news.

The focus of this study is on news sources on Somali famine in Southern Bakool and Lower Shabelle declared by United Nations (UN) on July 20, 2011. As gathering, processing and disseminating information to subscribers are the primary responsibilities of news agencies, the issue of homogenization of news contents shaped by news sources is central to the study. To examine this, the study compare news sources' attribution in online news of *Panapress* and *Reuters'* coverage of the 2011 famine in Somalia. *Reuters* is claimed to be the leading, most influential western international news agency (McPhail 2010) that provides a balanced, objective view of the world in its news (Paterson in Clausen 2003, 10) to stabilize between its commercial interests and practical journalism principles, political and ideological inclinations of its global subscribers (Chanan 1988). Meanwhile, *Panapress* is mandated to provide an alternative

narrative against western news agencies' and is statutorily responsible to cover a humanitarian disaster in the African region. However, Martin and Musa (1987, 14) argue that *Panapress* remains linked to *Reuters*, which helped establish it alongside various other alternative news agencies in Asia and the Caribbean. They argue that *Panapress* simply augments, and does not challenge narratives of transnational news agencies. This intersection explains the veracity of a somewhat odd relationship that exists between a transnational news agency and a Western international news agency. *Panapress* was established to challenge and liberate Africa from the imbalanced news flow and portrayal of powerful major Western news agencies (Kumar and Biernatzki n.d.) but remains linked to *Reuters*. Hence, this study questions whether *Panapress* supplements or challenges *Reuters* in the reporting of 2011 Somali Famine by examining their differences in attributing news sources to the news on this major humanitarian issue. Will the alternative news agency play more diversified role in its output than the Western mainstream news agencies?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

News agencies are vital in the global information flow systems. They set the agenda for international news because they are central to the newsworthiness and homogeneous nature of foreign news selection through markers of urgency, length, frequency of coverage and repetition of the same story (Dijk 1988, Paterson 2006, 38). Global and regional news agencies are therefore crucial due to their potentially substantial agenda-setting influence on other media (Paterson 2003, 2).

The existing theory on international news flow has been repeatedly debated. The old imbalance struggle, spearheaded by the New World Communication and Information Order (NWICO) debate of the 1960s, was used to challenge western countries' misuse of their socio-economic, political and technological advantages to dominate developing countries (Pate 2007, 468). This takes into account research findings since the NWICO struggle that showed alternative news agency's outputs are more diverse than mainstream agencies' in terms of number of topics covered, datelines filed, and sources used (Rauch, 2003, 88). This is because the magnitude and newsworthiness ascribed to such prime news can attract global news handlers, which McPhail (2010) has noted to have a profound effect on news institutions and audiences almost everywhere.

This study is theorized based on existing assumptions that news is global and news information is becoming increasingly homogenized due to the influence of international news agencies (Clausen 2003, 9). Paterson (2003, 8) argues that this phenomenon creates heavy public dependence on limited news diet and results in limiting and homogenizing public discourse. This study acknowledges that there is a transnational news culture (Cohen et al. 1990) due to the influence of the Internet as a repository and distributor of information. The convergence of technologies, that are "interacting" and "overlapping" (Baehr and Schaller 2010, 15) in the global information flow, makes possible the emergence of a "global news system" (Swanson in Gerhards and Schäfer 2014, 6). This is more so that online news lifted and posted verbatim from four key international sources: *Reuters*, *AP*, *AFP* or *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)* (Paterson 2006).

Focusing on online news coverage of 2011 Somali Famine, we specifically investigated the ongoing argument on homogenization of news in a comparative study to ascertain whether an alternative transnational news agencies supplement or challenge news attribution of Western mainstream news agencies.

Methods

The study quantitatively analyzed 82 news articles found in online archives of *Panapress* and *Reuters*. The articles were purposively selected from a census of 120 articles that reported on the 2011 Somali famine found in the two news agencies' archives. Only articles with the terms "famine" and "Somalia" published from January 2011 to August 2012 accounting for the period prior to, during and after the declaration of the famine were examined.

The news agencies were selected based on coverage, mandate, capacity to challenge opposing news narratives and ability to generate routine news from difficult terrains like Somalia, which is Africa's deadliest country for media personnel. In Somalia, journalists are targeted for being unwanted witnesses of terrorism – seven were killed in 2013 and no fewer than eighteen were killed in 2012. The threat to press freedom in Mogadishu is so great that some media allow journalists to live at their workplace to avoid dangerous commutes (RWB 2014). However, news agencies' outreach, geographical coverage, financial interests and capability, have formed a "part of an unending feedback loop" (Paterson 1997, 50) for sourcing and circulating news of conflict-ridden and politically unstable entities like Somalia as part of the global news coverage.

The transnational news agency, *Panapress* was established to counter hegemonic narrative and imbalance news flow of African news by the powerful Western news agencies like *Reuters*. It

prides itself as the most complete information portal on Africa, a special interface between Africa and its Diaspora, and a communication and information tool at the service of all policy-makers (http://www.panapress.com/pana-19-lang2-index.html). *Reuters,* the oldest, most influential news agency in the world (McPhail 2010) is privately and commercially oriented but whose ideology seeks balance between commercial interests and practical journalism principles and codes of ethics to satisfy varying political and ideological inclinations of its subscribers (Chanan 1988).

We coded data using mutually exclusive content categories comprising: analysis, features, press release and straight news.[1] News sources on famine victims, Somali government, Al-Shabaab, foreign dignitaries/leaders, advocacy/humanitarian organizations and experts were mutually exclusive in this study[2]. Intercoder reliability tested the coefficient of reliability of coding decisions with 10 per cent of all news coded. Approximately, nine news articles were pre-coded by the researcher and an alternate coder with guidance from a codebook using a random sample. Dichotomous scale where "1" was recorded as presence; and "0" for absence of a news source was used in coding.

Reliability of coding instrument was repeatedly revised between the researcher and the alternate coder using the coding instructions. This procedure was undertaken as a critical component of

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[1]**Analysis** is defined as articles written by editorial staff with background context and interpretations to articulate the various economic, political, social and psychological aspects of the 2011 famine in Somalia. **Features** included essay or narrative written by an editorial staff or stringer; or by an independent writer which discusses the 2011 Somali famine. **Press release** is conceptualized as news item written by an individual, organization, institution or government and sent to the either of the two news agencies investigated; who then publish such items with a disclaimer, thereby transferring responsibility to the source of the news. **Straight news** refers to all news written on the Somali famine in inverted pyramid style, containing and starting from the most to the least important information, and incorporated with news elements comprising most of, or all of the 5Ws and H (who, what, why, when, where and how) of the famine.

[2]**Famine victims** represented Somalis affected by the 2011 famine desolately resident in their homes, in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps who were malnourished as a result of the famine and therefore risked hunger, starvation or death. **Somali government** were defined as representative(s) or official(s) of the Somali government. **Al-Shabaab** signified Islamic insurgents/militants who openly declared their membership of the group, take up arms in revolt against the Somali state, and people. **Foreign dignitaries/ leaders** mean representatives of foreign countries who in one way or the other empathizes with the people and government of Somalia on the famine. **Advocacy/humanitarian organizations** are relief/aid agencies, their representatives or workers working in the various internally displaced persons' (IDPs) camps and other related sectors in Somalia and neighbouring countries to offer humanitarian aid in view of the 2011 famine. **Experts** are professionals with competences in geography, political science, horn of Africa, international affairs, economy, famine, nutrition science, policies and media communications. **Other news sources** include sources apart from the ones classified in any of the above.

content analysis without which findings are deemed unreliable (See Lombard, Synder-Duch, and Bracken 2002). Krippendorff's alpha (α) reliability analysis was selected from many others due to its appropriateness (See Lombard, Synder-Duch, and Bracken 2004). The actual coding was conducted entirely by the researcher. The intercoder reliability analysis for Krippendorff's alpha (α) results was .78, a figure greater than the minimum acceptable intercoder reliability index (α = .70). This alpha value, therefore, validates the findings since the acceptable coefficient reliability index is >.70. The data were organized using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) tested violation of normality assumptions; where significance was >.05. All values for both Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk for news sources violated normality assumptions with values <.05. This violation informed the decision to use a non-parametric statistical test, Kruskal-Wallis to test for differences in using news sources.

RESULTS

Extent of news coverage

This study found significant differences in the extent of coverage of the 2011 Somali famine between *Panapress* and *Reuters*. The coverage of *Reuters* almost doubled *Panapress'* with 65.85 percent compared to 34.1 percent respectively. The data, in Table 1 appeared in four news content categories but 77 articles, which is 93.90 percent of all coverage, appeared as straight news. All articles published by *Panapress* and majority of *Reuters'* appeared as straight news but the latter also published one analysis, one press release and three feature stories.

	Panapress	**Reuters**	**Total**
Analysis	0	1	**1 (1.22%)**
Features	0	3	**3 (3.66%)**
Press release	0	1	**1 (1.22%)**
Straight news	28	49	**77 (93.90%)**
Total	**28 (34.14%)**	**54 (65.85%)**	**82 (100%)**

Table 1: Distribution of news acrosscategories

Differences in the use of news sources

Advocacy/humanitarian organizations were the most used news source for both *Panapress* and

Reuters as shown in Table 2. Notably, *Panapress* use of multiple sources was limited to only

three out of seven sources. In some stories, *Panapress* only attributed its news to only one

source. This contrasts significantly with *Reuters*, which attributed its news to all sources, in most

cases to multiple sources. Both agencies also used other unconventional sources. The *Panapress*

used an opinion-editorial (op-ed) written by the UN Secretary-General in one story published in

the *Los-Angeles Times*. *Reuters* attributed eight stories to *AlertNet,* a humanitarian news site.

There was evidence of significant differences in using news sources as indicated in Table 3

showing the Kruskal-Wallis test. The evidence of significant differences were in using famine

victims (x^2 = 5.833, *df* = 1, *p* = .016) and Somali government officials (x^2 = 4.541, *df* = 1, *p* =

.033) only.

	Panapress	**Reuters**
Famine victims	0	10
Somali government officials	0	8
Insurgents/militants (Al-Shabaab)	0	2
Foreign dignitaries/ leaders	8	17
Advocacy/humanitarian organizations	21	39
Expert	0	3
Other news sources	1	8

Table 2: Use of news sources in news articles

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis test for differences in use of news sources

	x^2	df	P	News agencies	n	Mean Rank
Famine victims	5.833	1	.016*	Panapress	28	36.50
				Reuters	54	44.09
Somali government officials	4.541	1	.033*	Panapress	28	37.50
				Reuters	54	43.57
Insurgents/militants (Al-Shabaab)	1.050	1	.306	Panapress	28	40.50
				Reuters	54	42.02
Foreign dignitaries/ leaders	.073	1	.787	Panapress	28	40.71
				Reuters	54	41.91
Advocacy/humanitarian organizations	.072	1	.789	Panapress	28	42.25
				Reuters	54	41.11
Experts	1.595	1	.207	Panapress	28	40.00
				Reuters	54	42.28
Other news sources	2.356	1	.125	Panapress	28	38.46
				Reuters	54	43.07

Where, x^2 = chi-square, df = degree of freedom, p= significance [< .05]

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings show that the news sources used included famine victims, Somali government, Al-Shabaab, foreign dignitaries/ leaders, advocacy/ humanitarian organizations, experts, and other sources. The news categories were analysis, features, press releases and straight news. The most used news source was advocacy/ organizations, contrary to another finding by Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2007), where government and military officials were the most used sources. It has to be emphasized here that the subject of that study was conflict while the current study's subject is humanitarian disaster.

Interestingly, only *Reuters* made the news reports on famine victims and Somali government officials but not *Panapress*. This shows that *Panapress* failed to reach out to the most affected population. In addition, both *Panapress* and *Reuters* were found to have used unconventional news sources: *Panapress* used an op-ed published in the *Los Angeles Times*, while *Reuters* used *AlertNet* and www.imgonnabeyourfriend.org. Using an opinion-editorial (op-ed) published in the

Los Angeles Times as a news source by *Panapress* is questionable considering its establishment as a regional news agency was to challenge dominant news narratives of Africa and African interests by western countries' news agencies. *Panapress* purpose of existence is to source for and sell news to news media and not the other way round. It could have sourced its own news directly from the UN headquarters in New York instead of "lifting" a story from the website of an American daily newspaper. The use of a single news source was also found to be a common practice by the *Panapress*.

It is also imperative to establish the overbearing dependence of *Panapress* on the U.N. and its agencies. The evidence is also signposted with the strategic spotting of U.N. agencies' emblems on *Panapress* homepage as "Partners". To buttress these over-dependence 15 news stories, representing 53.57 percent out of the 28 news articles reported by *Panapress* were sourced from the U.N. and its agencies; nine were from African governments, other advocacy organizations and the AU; and the remaining four were from foreign governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The *Panapress* is domiciled in and is the voice of Africa. It can use its proximity to access multiple local sources. Specifically, the *Panapress* did not attribute any of its news to key sources like the famine victims, Somali government, Al-Shabaab or expert. Instead, despite being a news agency, established to source for and sell news from direct sources, *Panapress* used an opinion-editorial (op-ed) in a western nation's media as the sole source in that entire news. Use of a single news source was also found to be a common practice by the *Panapress* and this

suggests lack of investigative journalism, lack of objectivity and fairness to other people, groups or institutions affected by the famine.

The use of *AlertNet* as news sources by *Reuters* could mean that while Reuters was seeking to expand its dominance of news, it created a platform to carve a niche for itself in specifically sourcing and disseminating news of humanitarian interest. The news site *AlertNet* is a Thompson Reuters Foundation, a subsidiary of Thompson Reuters, the parent company of *Reuters* news agency. *AlertNet* news site specifically states on its website that it was established to cover the world's under-reported stories and promote the highest standards of journalism around the world (See: http://www.trust.org/?show=alertnethumanitarian).

At this point, it would suffice to highlight some implications of news source preference in the coverage of the 2011 Somali famine by the two news agencies. First, if the resentments by developing countries of information flow imbalance and biased news narratives of western transnational news agencies was what led to the alliance of African member-states and subsequent emergence of *Panapress* (Kumar and Biernatzki n.d.); then this long established problem in international news flow continue to exist because of *Panapress'* over-reliance on advocacy/humanitarian organizations, especially U.N. agencies, as news sources, and also its failure to attribute any of its news on the 2011 Somali famine to key news sources such as famine victims, Somali government officials, insurgents/ militants and experts. It neglects the culture of investigative journalism, objectivity and fairness to all parties. This portends the ability to make *Panapress'* news lack diversity, perceived as unreliable, and not objective. Considering that *Panapress* is a news agency, its capacity to gain confidence of subscribers,

especially institutions would be unlikely. This also means they cannot generate the much needed revenue to favourably compete with other wholesalers in the business of wire services. Using a single source, also found to be common practice by *Panapress,* suggests lack of investigative journalism, objectivity and fairness to people, group and institutions involved as affected entities in the 2011 famine in Somalia.

In addition, if journalism involves the distribution of information affecting people or of interest to its largest audience (Musburger 2007, 93), then under-utilizing the famine victims and the Somali government as news sources, by both *Panapress* and *Reuters*, both of which are surprisingly purveyors of news, is unethical. It is, therefore, imperative to highlight that advocacy/ humanitarian organizations were the most used news sources because news sources' ability to dominate news depends on economic and cultural resources and knowledge of journalism practices (Carragee and Roefs 2004). The preceding argument strategically positions humanitarian organizations, mostly the U.N. and associates, based in and around Somalia, have access to networks of donor agencies and UN member countries whose financial, technical, human and other resources are required to mitigate the impact from the famine. Therefore, as argued by Manning (2001), there is a struggle to control news flow by news sources, the dominance of advocacy/ humanitarian organizations was a struggle to use their capacity to pool resources and ensure their judicious utilization.

CONCLUSIONS

The study focuses on the notion of homogenization of news contents in the global news system. One of the tenets is the use of news sources as devices of assigning salience to issues in order to

produce patterns of meanings and organization of experiences through routine selection, exclusion, inclusion and repetition to (re)present reality. This study establishes a pattern of news sourcing in the construction of a humanitarian disaster news between an alternative news agency and a Western international news agency.

The study found that *Panapress*, an alternative news agency, did not use journalistic strategic rituals, whereby one party's version of reality is balanced by a competing account within the news text to defend the objectivity of the report. It failed to make their voices heard. On the contrary, *Reuters* used accounts of reality from diverse sources to balance its news, thereby acknowledging that each news source clearly represent specific sides within the complexities of the 2011 famine in Somalia. Meanwhile, only *Reuters* attributed news to victims of the famine and Somali government or its officials. Ninety percent of total news from the reportage of the 2011 Somali famine by *Panapress* and *Reuters* appeared as straight news. It establishes that news agency news was written in the inverted pyramid format, from the most important to the least important using most of, or some of the 5Ws and H (who, what, why, when, where and how) to give subscribers crucial information regarding the famine and to provide secondary users of news agency news access to hard-to-get information from difficult terrains like Somalia.

Nonetheless, *Reuters'* publication of analysis, a press release and three features is a shift away from traditional news agency news formats and leans towards interpretative and analytical contents. This allows *Reuters* to disclaim the ideas therein, but also gives the opportunity for experts with competencies to critique the famine and proffer solutions. The findings that transnational and Western mainstream news agencies rely mostly on advocacy/ humanitarian

organizations as news sources when covering a humanitarian disaster further corroborates existence of systematic biases in the selection of sources by journalists as found by Soley (1992).

Overall, it can be concluded that a transnational news culture exists because *Panapress*, which was established as an alternative to Western mainstream news agencies' narratives, is actually supplementing news of the latter. It depends on and replicates *Reuters'* ideological and editorial values acquired from the establishment. Therefore, *Panapress* does not challenge Western mainstream news agencies since significant evidence suggests there are not many differences in using news sources between the two. According to Westerståhl and Johansson (1994), news values and news ideology are sometimes more important than the event being reported and, therefore, often determine what becomes news in an interplay to reinforce or conflict one another.

What makes news is indeed a complex process. Many scholars (eg: Soley 1992; Schneider 2011) agree on the important role of news sources in enabling journalists to frame – or make – the news. Looking at this scenario in a bigger context, this study establishes that the power of news agencies stem from their defining roles as news sources. This probably explains their dominance in the world news business and probably, explains their obtrusive and influential roles in the international news flow culture of the mass media; all of which denotes the theoretical arguments on which the current study is anchored. Through the credibility achieved over the years with extensive repetitive global coverage, the international news agencies such as *Reuters* have been regarded as authorities, at times, defining and becoming the news.

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