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*Nkiruka Favour Nwanta,  
Toyosi Olugbenga & Samson Owolabi*

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# Online Citizen Engagement Platforms, Democratic Consolidation and Good Governance



*Nkiruka Favour NWANTAH,  
Toyosi OLUGBENGA & Samson OWOLABI*



In every democratic setting as it is practiced in Nigeria as well as in other countries of the world, the citizens' quest for socio-economic and political information is always at the peak. This is because information sharing between the citizens and the government influences public attitude and responses towards the government, its policies and programmes. Apart from democratic sustainability, information sharing is also required to guarantee good governance. Aririguzoh (2014) observes that citizen involvement in local decision-making, voting,

volunteering and community activities are significant aspects of a vibrant democracy. The pursuits of sound democratic consolidation and efficient political governance have received more impetus in today's digital environment where everybody appears free to disseminate information as well as access it. The digital environment grows rapidly as the designers of these programs strive to innovate and come up with functionalities that captivate users and encourage the dissemination of content in various forms (Kayode-Adedeji, T., Oyero, & Aririguzoh, 2017).

Why are most African countries, Nigeria in particular, poor in spite of the availability of massive human and natural resources? Contemporary development thinkers have attributed Nigeria's poverty status to a faulty democratic system and bad governance vividly illustrated by poor integration of citizens into the public decision-making processes thus, leading to a lack of openness and accountability between the government and the citizens (Oboh, 2016). Nigeria, despite its abundant resources, has remained poor due to prolonged years of military governance marked by political instability, epidemic public fund theft, and ill-conceived economic policies that have combined to multiply poverty and reverse early post-independence economic and political gains (Igbatayo & Igbinedion, 2008). Since her return to democratic rule in 1999, every successive democratic government has sunk deeper into the cesspit of corruption and other official malfeasances. The supposed elected representatives at the three levels of government (federal, state and local) are observed to be self-serving and cannot be trusted to the point of ensuring good governance that will do the public any good.

The absence of democratic inclusiveness and open governance systems have combined to breathe life into poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, poor healthcare, rising insecurity and political instability, and general lack of sustainable development in every area of our national life. As a way out of the

quagmire, an online citizen engagement platform OCEP (otherwise called dedicated virtual space provided outside the parliament to engage and debate on government policies and programmes that affect the populace) has been proposed as a contemporary powerful tool required to engender good governance and sustained democratic consolidation. This emphasises individuals' active participation in decision-making processes, actions, and affairs that have a direct impact on their lives, communities, and society at large. In other words, it emphasises people' participation in governance, policy-making, public services, and community projects to foster openness, accountability, and mutually beneficial collaboration between government institutions, organisations, and the general public.. For citizen engagement to be fruitful, there are necessary factors that must be in place, including the opportunities offered to individuals “to contribute idea, unfettered access to information, transparency of government and institutions, accountability on the part of government and public officials” (Jain, 2024, p.16,) as well as partnership opportunities with government agencies, citizens organisations and other stakeholders to achieve common goals. It is against this background that this chapter, which is anchored on Participatory democracy and the agenda-setting theories, examines how citizens online engagement shapes public discourse, enhance civic engagement, foster collaborative governance, contribute to inclusive decision-making process and deepen the levels of democratic governance and sustainable development in Nigeria.

### **Understanding OCEPs, good governance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria**

In contemporary world, the advent of Internet technology and its impact in giving birth to the new media and the various social media platforms have reshaped and affected virtually all aspects of human endeavours, including politics and governance (Bello & Kolawole-Ismail, 2017). The political landscape has not only been

widened but the level of participation in the democratic process has assumed high-level sophistication with respect to youths' participation. It has been established among political pundits that citizens participation and engagement are critical elements of contemporary democracy (Oboh 2016). This observation is based on the assumption that inclusive political system that will engender good governance should offer ample opportunities to citizens to communicate their views, opinions and preferences in the political decision-making process. In attempt to achieve true participatory democracy and good governance system, there is the need for citizens' engagement and mobilization so as to participate in the business of governance. With the advent of Internet technology and social media windows, political and communication experts have identified new possibilities and platforms for engaging citizens. This is where citizens online engagement evolved.

An online citizen engagement platform OCEP, according to European Commission (2024), refers to a digital tool or online space where EU citizens converge to reason together and exchange idea, partake in the decision-making process, provide feedback and engage with government agencies, public institutions and community organizations to contribute to making the nations better. The platforms are intended to foster transparency, accountability, inclusiveness and citizens active involvement in ensuring good governance. The engagement platforms can be categorized into three types: government-led, civil society-based and the independent or private citizen-hosted platforms (European Commission 2024). Whether publicly or privately-owned, the purpose remains the same: to enable people of like-mind to share ideas, discuss policy issues, so as to foster participatory governance. According to Obmiyete (2017, p.32), OCEP are characterized by the following elements:

Spaces for discussing policy issues, tools for harvesting citizens opinions and feedback, tools for signing digital petitions for policy change, window for submission of ideas for community project, tools for tracking government projects, windows for reporting civic issues, and access to government data and documents.

In Nigeria, there are many OCEPs where different people of diverse social and ethnic backgrounds are converged to share knowledge and idea of how to make their society better; these include *BudgIT, Tracka, U-report, EiE Nigeria and Open government partnership*

### **Good governance**

OCEP is a democratized virtual political space that is issue-based, people-centred, result-oriented, and accountable to the public while seeking to entrench good governance system. The concept of governance is perceived in diverse ways by different people depending on the goals, the entities involved and the socio-political milieu where the goals are to be achieved. In the opinion of the International Social Security Association (ISSA, 2023), governance is perceived as the method by which a recognizable institution exercises powers to accomplish set objectives, including the power to design, implement and innovate the organisation's policies, rules, systems and processes and to engage and involve its stakeholders. Going by the above definition, good governance implies that the statutory authority is accountable, transparent, predictable, dynamic and participative. Further from above, it also suggests that governance system can be classified as good when power is exercised for the overall public good.

## **Democratic consolidation**

Transitions of regime from non-democratic to democratic, and eventually to consolidated democracy are of major interest to scholars in the field of communication and political science. Democratic consolidation is seen as a type of regime transition whereby new democracies evolve from fledgling regimes to establish democracies, thus making it less likely to slide back into authoritarianism (Bozonebs et al 2023). A nation or country can be perceived as consolidated when the existing system of government is generally recognized and accepted by every component member in other words, no individual or group is trying to act contrary to the constitutional framework on which the government is based. Democratic consolidation, according to Schedler (1998), refers to the challenge of securing new democracy, extending their lifespan, ensuring it is immuned against the threat of authoritarianism and burning the bridge behind to prevent returning to the base level. When a democracy becomes consolidated, it suggests that no matter the siege against it, it will survive. There are factors that depict a consolidated democracy. These include: popular legitimation, diffusion of democratic values, neutralisation of anti-system actors, subordination of the military establishment, elimination of authoritarian enclaves, political party building, organization of functional interests, stabilization of political institutions, routinization of politics, decentralization of state power, introduction direct democracy, judicial reforms, alleviation of poverty, management of social and political conflicts, economic stabilization and equality in the sharing of democratic dividends (Valenzuela, 2024; Schedler, 1998). Putting the primary concepts of OCEP, democratic consolidation and good governance into perspective, we can see from their interactivity that there cannot be polity consolidation without citizens' engagement and active participation in the democratic process, and achieving good governance that will benefit the public good is a mirage.

## **Theoretical framework**

Participatory democracy theory developed by Carole Pateman and Benjamin Barber, emphasizes the importance of citizen participation in decision-making processes. This approach aims to empower citizens to actively participate in governance by promoting inclusivity, discussion, and citizen involvement. Pateman's research on participatory democracy emphasises its ability to transform passive citizens into active participants, whereas Barber's definition of "strong democracy" emphasises the importance of citizen participation in direct decision-making.

The Agenda setting theory, developed by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw, examines how issues are brought to the attention of policymakers. This theory explores how citizens, media, and other stakeholders influence the policy agenda, shaping what issues are prioritized and addressed. McCombs and Shaw's seminal work on agenda setting underlines the major influence of media in affecting public opinion. The incorporation of participatory democracy and agenda setting ideas into this study provides a strong foundation for increasing citizen participation in governance. Governments may develop more participative and responsive systems by emphasising inclusive decision-making alongside an awareness of how issues are brought to the policy agenda. This method can boost citizen trust, improve policy outcomes, and promote a more vibrant democracy.

## **Importance of OCEPs on democracy and governance**

Two inalienable rights of every citizen include the rights to freedom of speech and to participate in the decisions that obviously affect the public welfare. As there are no monopolists of knowledge, collaborative governance approaches can promote trust, cooperation, sense of ownership and new ideas in confronting intricate public challenges that border on health, transportation, education and economic sustainability. According to Jain (2024), citizens' participation and engagement in

democracy and governance system can be seen in the following key areas. First is in policy development where citizens input, feedback through public consultations, town hall meetings and online forums are sought to ensure policies are informed by the needs and concerns of the people. Second, citizens engagement can be valuable in the decision-making process through advisory panels, participatory budgeting and resources allocation based on priority. Third, service delivery and improvement can be improved through feedback, complains and suggestions from citizens. This will enable the government to identify the areas begging for improvement, quality enhancement and accessibility of service. Fourth, citizens engagement fosters transparency and accountability governance by availing citizens with access to public information concerning income and expenditure, contract award papers, government activities and decisions and other public documents with which people can hold government accountable. Fifth, citizens participation in the electoral process by exercising their voting rights, and having a say in who governs are fundamental to democratic consolidation and good governance. Sixth, citizens' engagement and participation in democracy and governance system fosters effective collaboration between the government and the public; this in turn will produce meaningful dialogue that will position the government in a better position to be responsive to the needs and priorities of society.

### **Functionality and usage of online platforms**

One of the most powerful tools at the disposal of government to engage with the citizens is its ability to dialogue with and engage the people it represents. Creating this two-way consultative relationship, according Jain (2024), can take place in a face-to-face and one-on-one basis, but these days, most interactions have migrated to the virtual space driven by internet technology. This new revolution called internet technology has continued to redefine the online platform globally. One of its foremost

influences is the way it has democratized the flow of information that was once done on face-to-face basis through physical meetings, rallies and protests.

The democratized engagement provided by the internet has also removed all barriers and lowered the information sharing cost to the participants in each platform. Another feature of online engagement is the incredible speed of light at which information travels between the sender and receiver breaking local and international boundaries. According to Ajikanle-Nurudeen and Owolabi (2020), a greater degree of dynamism can be exercised in online engagement platform such as in interactivity, content creation, content sharing and affordability of the platform. Dueze (2013, p.42) identified three dominant features that are fundamental to the functionality and usage of online platform for citizens engagement. First is "interactivity", which is the ability of participants in the online engagement platforms to share information, ideas and opinions among members of the group. Each member can as well respond by providing additional information or provide new perspectives to the issue being discussed. It is a forum for citizens to ask questions, report concerns and engage in respectful dialogue with representatives and government by influencing policy decisions. The second feature is "multimediality", which is the technical capability for relevant contents to be delivered in multiple formats such as text, video, audio and animated graphics. Every participant in the platform can provide and create valuable contents in form of texts, such as letters, data, invoice receipt, and other evidential documents to validate conversation. Video clips of on-going projects and their levels of completion, different government-abandoned projects on sites, so also pictures and animated graphics of government wastages and representatives' profligate lifestyle can be shared with other citizens in the platform. The audio recording of interviews and comments of other members of the community who are non-participants in the online platform

can be shared in the process of dialogue to corroborate arguments. The third feature that defines the uniqueness of online citizens engagement platform is “hypertextuality”, which Deuze (2013) describes as the ability to link the contents of one platform to another. It is possible to use hyperlink to connect participants in one online platform to related materials (text, video, audio and photographs) in the same or another platform. All these are meant, according to Olomiyete (2017), to enrich discussion of issues by educating and informing citizens and compel the government to be transparent and accountable to the needs of the populace. By these also, democracy can become more participatory, inclusive and responsive to citizens' needs consequently stimulating better implementation of policies and good governance.

### **Online Platforms and citizen participation in governance**

The Internet has progressed from a simple and hyperlinked collection of read-only and static information resources to a network of social websites where individuals interact, exchange, and continuously update huge amounts of decentralised information (Rdouan, Afia, & Chiheb, 2013). Previously, the web was only a one-way information transfer mechanism, with material produced mostly by specialists who disseminated true information and had the ability to design web pages. Users could only view websites; they could not edit, alter, or add any material. The web has evolved into an interactive and participatory "read-write" worldwide channel, allowing users to create and consume digital content in real time via a web browser. According to Katzef, Vumazonke, Chigona, Tuyeni, and Mtegha (2022), citizen engagement is vital to democratic administration since it involves the people in decision-making. Online platforms have transformed citizen participation in governance, allowing citizens to engage in a variety of ways such as providing feedback on government policies and programs, contributing to budget allocation decisions, participating in virtual policy discussions,

and signing and promoting petitions online (Technology Innovators, n.d). These platforms provide spaces for people to discuss, particularly the youth population, through numerous online groups, sites, and accounts. Bimber and Copeland (2011) emphasise the importance of new media in providing a forum for political involvement and transforming political efficacy. New media users participate in politics and political discourse (Schulz's, 2005).

OCEPs have increased most users' interest in politics and governance, as well as their political efficacy in both online and offline political engagements (Oluseyi Adegbola, Sherice Gearhart, and Bingbing Zhang, 2022). Examining the influence of the Internet on online and offline political participation, Jiang (2016) claims that there is an increase in political activity among Internet users. This submission is in agreement with that of Taufiq, Alvi and Ittefaq (n.d) who contend that the Internet has become the primary platform for political efficacy and involvement, creating consciousness about vote casting and campaigning. They also point out that new media promotes voter turnout during elections. It creates a plan for voting and contributions to political campaigns (Larson, 2004).

Examining the intersection between the youth, new media, and the emergence of participatory politics, Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen (2014) reveal that new media have provided a platform for content dissemination among a large number of people and also the ability to be part of political activities. Many studies (Eva, 2009; Arthur, 2012) have noted that the adoption of this new platform may result in a more democratic functioning of society. According to Fuchs (2014), as the Internet grows in popularity and significance, it will play an increasingly crucial role in modern political communication, campaigns, and elections. In light of this, many political parties, institutions, and organisations are increasingly investing a significant amount of time and money

not just to be present but also to be active participants in virtual political forums. It suffices to say that the increased adoption of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has had a significant impact on current political communication and mobilisation strategies in Nigeria and elsewhere (Semiu Bello & Bolanle Kolawole-Ismail, 2017).

Online platforms enable people to interact, discuss, and openly share information, emphasizing citizens' ability as well as the authority to contribute in politics.. Arthur (2012) observes that social media plays an important role in establishing interactive relationships between citizens and political officials. These channels enable citizens to engage with their political leaders at the local, state and national levels (Arthur, 2012). The extent of two-way communication between political party leaders and social media users is still debatable, but nonetheless, numerous political bodies use these media to communicate with and send information to citizens. Interaction is a defining feature and the bedrock of many online platforms.

Oyebode (2011) writes that the new media in Nigeria since the new millennium has encouraged political engagement through access to information, particularly among young people. Youths can develop principled and innovative skills as well as share information about their community. He notes that the new media has introduced an element of entertainment into political communication, as candidates customise their ideas to be more engaging to viewers by using various artistic forms. Graffiti, for example, is increasingly utilized on websites and social networks. Graffiti artists can build their artwork forms on communicating optimistic messages, challenging policies, social systems that foster inequalities and power concentration, marking territory, or encouraging violence against others (Eyek & Fisher, 2012). Whenever a netizen get an interesting content, he can elect to reply to them and possibly share them with others via any kinds

of online media.

### **OCEPs and transparency/accountability in governance**

The collapse of authoritarian regimes and the growth of democracy in Nigeria and other areas of the world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has highlighted the rising desire for transparency and accountability in administration (Oyebode, 2011). It is crucial to highlight that since the inception of modern democracies, freedom of expression and press independence have been perceived as critical and necessary requirements for the smooth functioning of the society. Online citizen engagement tools have been shown to improve transparency and accountability in governance. These platforms give citizens access to information and allow them to get involved in decision-making processes, resulting in increased transparency and accountability.

According to Ifukor (2010), current democratic ideals require that citizens participate in governance, particularly on issues that affect them personally. This aligns with view of Oni, Oni, Ibietan, Deinde-Adedeji, and Amoo, (2020) as they posit that citizens' participation in policy planning and decision improves the quality of policy outcomes and contributes to public trust in democratic institutions. Democracy thrives on citizen participation. While engagement can be demonstrated through participation in policy development and implementation. Citizens can also participate in free societies through less traditional forms of political engagement such as signing petitions, organising protests, and engaging in other forms of bold action to express dissatisfaction. These forms of political activity are fiercely banned in Nigeria, and the government frequently used violent techniques to oppose them, such as imprisoning activists and utilising the military (Uwazuruike, 2020).

The significant benefits of e-government in a developing country are increased efficiency, more openness and accountability of government processes, convenient and open access to government services, greater democracy, and cheaper administrative expenses. To accomplish economic transformation and potential growth in Nigeria, significant focus should be placed on efficient spending, public involvement, transparency, and open governance. Some state governments encourage citizen participation in government operations using mobile apps, social media, radio programs, and conventional techniques such as town hall meetings.

The Kaduna State Government in April 2017 launched "Eyes and Ears project", a budget monitoring initiative to improve public funds management and promote citizens participation in government projects. The initiative equips paid staff with a smartphone app to take photos and submit comments on infrastructure projects with GPS coordinates. To facilitate citizens' participation, CitiFeeds was created, allowing anyone to hold Kaduna state accountable for spending and project implementation. Proper utilization of this app can help accelerate the implementation of development plans (Abdulahi, 2018).

Over the last two decades, public institutions have increasingly used ICTs as new tools to involve citizens in politics (Oni et al, 2016). ICTs are currently being utilised to solicit input, and ideas from citizens and/or key players (e-consultation), resulting in a comprehensive and enduring framework for making informed decisions (Citation, 2015; Schulz & Newig, 2015). E-consultation has altered people' relationships with the political system by facilitating access to information, creating new avenue for information sharing, and giving tools for organising social movements (Albrecht, 2012).

## **Challenges and limitations**

The relevance of online citizen interaction platforms in fostering good governance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria has sparked renewed interest in recent years. However, despite their potential, these platforms suffer a number of obstacles and constraints. One of the main concerns is Nigeria's low Internet penetration and digital divide, which limits residents' capacity to access and participate in online engagement platforms. According to Adeyemo (2011), the primary problem of e-government deployment in any developing country is ensuring that the desired goal of reaching residents is met. He emphasises that e-government should engage all people in need of government services, notwithstanding their location, age, status, ethnicity, or Internet connection.

Furthermore, even those with Internet access, digital literacy and computer skills are frequently poor, providing a considerable barrier to successful involvement. The digital gap, which is defined by discrepancies in access and usage of technology, poses a substantial impediment to e-government deployment. Numerous studies advocate that citizens adopt e-government services (Alshawi and Alalwany, 2009; Gasova and Stofkova, 2017; Ochara and Mawela, 2015). Some researches have highlighted difficulties to its implementation (Lallmahomed et al, 2017; Rehman et al, 2016). The digital gap in a country's remote or rural parts creates disparities due to inadequate Information and Communication Technology literacy, limited digital connectivity and insufficient knowledge. As a result, these issues influence the quest for e-government services. Mobile devices are an important tool for effectively delivering messages in emerging and impoverished countries. The perceived low budget of creating and sustaining mutual relationships with citizens via mobile technology has resulted in numerous novel concepts (Maredia et al, 2018) that can be applied to e-government ICT training programs. Citizens in marginalised groups must receive

training as a top priority (Chetty et al, 2018).

The drawbacks of digital governance in Nigeria may be comparable to those found in other underdeveloped countries worldwide. Many experts agree that the primary barrier to e-governance deployment in Nigeria is inefficient internet and telecommunications infrastructure. Fatile (2012) accurately summarises the issue when he states that the enabling technology frameworks of e-governance, such as telecommunications infrastructures, are currently inappropriate. Coleman (2005) on the other hand, cites three significant challenges that African countries such as Nigeria must avoid or overcome in order to successfully implement e-governance. The adoption of technologies in Nigeria faces challenges such as lack of human skills, centralization of technology use, and failure to connect better governance to inclusive democracy. Obstacles include low ICT literacy rates, inadequate infrastructure, corruption, lack of leadership, and bureaucratic bottlenecks (Omeire and Omeire, 2014).

In addition to these infrastructure difficulties, there exist concerns about data privacy and security with many citizens hesitating to reveal personal information or engage in online platforms for fear of data breaches or spying. Furthermore, institutional capacity to respond to online public involvement is frequently limited, resulting in a lack of meaningful connection between citizens and government officials. There is growing concern over social media privacy; in 2018, the Breach Level Index a database that monitors global data breaches, reported that data breaches were getting more common and broader in scale. Identity theft was the leading cause of data breaches. It accounted for about 83% of all accounts hacked in the first half of 2018, representing a staggering 757% increase over the previous year. Social media was responsible for the bulk of data breaches in 2018 (56.2%), compared to only 1.5% in 2017. According to a

Pew research survey, 64% of Americans have personally encountered a big data breach and have lost trust in important institutions particularly the federal government and social media sites to safeguard privacy (Arli & Dietrich, 2017).

Cultural and linguistic boundaries also pose substantial challenges, with many residents preferring to communicate in their native languages rather than English, which is frequently the main language used on online platforms. Tangella, Enabnit, and Warren (2023) state that language limitations can result in limited access to information, miscommunication, social isolation, and a lack of trust and confidence in interpersonal and professional contacts. Many people feel more comfortable and engaged when they use their native language, which can make it difficult to participate on platforms that mostly use English. Furthermore, a lack of political will to undertake online citizen engagement projects, as well as inadequate proof of impact on policy decisions and outcomes, undermine the usefulness of these platforms.

Finally, the danger of online manipulation and misinformation jeopardises the credibility of online citizen interaction, leaving many citizens susceptible to fake news and propaganda. According to Guess and Lyons (2020), the rise of social media initially sparked optimism about its potential to improve access to economic and political opportunities, enabling collective action and new forms of expression. However, following political upheavals and elections, the outlook has shifted, with Facebook and Twitter (X) frequently viewed as tools for propaganda rather than empowerment. These obstacles and limits emphasise the importance of careful analysis and strategic planning when using online platforms to promote openness and accountability in Nigeria.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This chapter looks at the prospects and limitations of online citizen interaction platforms as instrument of promoting good governance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The findings reveal that there are many OCEPs where different people of diverse social and ethnic backgrounds are converged to share knowledge and idea of how to make their society better; these include *BudGIT*, *Tracka*, *U-report*, *EiE Nigeria* and *Open government partnership*. Drawing from the assumption of the Participatory democracy and the Agenda setting theory, we believe that allowing citizens to propose and prioritize issues, these platforms can serve as catalyst for consolidated democracy.

Also revealed are major physical, institutional, and cultural impediments to the successful use of these platforms which ought to be addressed in order to fully realise the potential of these platforms. They include investment in digital infrastructure, digital literacy initiatives, institutional capacity building, cultural sensitivity, and data security legislation. Furthermore, guaranteeing political will and reducing the risk of online manipulation and disinformation are critical to the successful adoption and deployment of online citizen engagement platforms in Nigeria. The chapter has important implications for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars striving to improve democratic governance and citizen involvement in Nigeria and other contexts.

The chapter suggests increased Internet penetration and access to digital technology, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Implementation of training programs to improve digital literacy and computer skills among citizens, particularly among marginalised communities. Improve institutional ability to respond to online citizen participation, including training for government officials and public servants, development of online platforms catering to varied linguistic needs and cultural

preferences, implement strong data protection policies to preserve the security and privacy of citizens' personal information. There is the need to create measures to combat online manipulation and deception, encouraging factual information and critical thinking as well as platforms that are accessible and inclusive to all citizens, including those with disabilities. We should regularly evaluate and update online citizen interaction platforms to ensure their effectiveness and responsiveness to citizens' needs. We therefore conclude that by implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can harness the potential of online citizen engagement platforms to enhance democratic government, public participation, and inclusive decision-making processes.

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