



Journal of Social and Political Sciences

Lazuardi, N., Meliala, A. E., & Sulhin, I. (2022). News Trading in Indonesia's Media: A Business in Shaping Public Opinion. *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, 5(4), 35-43.

ISSN 2615-3718

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1991.05.04.376

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

Published by:
The Asian Institute of Research

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News Trading in Indonesia's Media: A Business in Shaping Public Opinion

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Abstract

The news trading phenomenon committed by journalist and media is also found in Indonesia. The news trading all this time has been regarded as one of the violations of journalist ethics. However, the news trading actually is one of the business type performed by Indonesia media. This study is a qualitative research using primary and secondary data. The primary data was obtained from in-depth interviews with the nine resource persons. Meanwhile, the secondary data was taken by conducting literary studies and document studies. The data processing technique in this study utilized Nvivo qualitative data analysis software. The result of the study revealed that there is media and journalist involvement in the news trading because of several factors such as lack of journalist idealism, media owner's interest, and financial needs. Meanwhile, the advantage of journalists doing news trading is a monthly stipend, free services and facilities, political benefits, and incentives eventually.

Keywords: Media Corruption, News Trading, Journalism

1. Introduction

Mass media institutions have a close relationship with the economic and political system (McQuail, 2000) by involving power relations in the production, distribution, and consumption of information (Mosco, 2009). One of the characteristics of political economy of media is that it is oriented on morals, social values and social practices to fight for the public interest. (Mosco, 1996).

emphasized that the study of the political economy of media has concerns on the balance between capitalist efforts and public intervention, which indirectly explains the presence of political economy forces outside the media. These forces include the domination of the elites over society by using the media as a controller tool (Agung, 2008).

The utilization of media by politicians eventually refers to various interests, given the ability of the media to create the preferred effect through news. Media effects (Potter, W., 2012) can affect individuals, the public, and institutions. Academics called media effects including cognitive, affective, and conative effects (Grossberg et al, 1998), effects on knowledge, attitudes, opinions, and behaviour (Lazarsfeld, 1948), attitude, emotional, and physiological effects (Bryant and Zillmann, 2009). The various effects here generated power that later could influence public in general, both in a positive and negative way and the expected and the unexpected one.

Angela Romano (2000) conducted research on the behaviour of journalists in Indonesia who viewed the common phenomenon of giving gifts from resource persons to journalists which later called as envelope culture. The findings of this study have explored the complex issues of social, economic and institutional conditions that preserve the bribery and corruption culture in Indonesia. This study revealed that the envelope culture could lead to the exploitation of resource persons or journalists and even generate a vicious criminal subculture.

The result of Romano's research 13 years later was confirmed by Rafiudina through the publication of his research entitled *Journalists in a Bribery Siege: The Power of Envelopes within the Journalists habitat* (2013). The term "envelope" here referred to a form of bribery that probably affects the content of the news written and according to the Big Indonesian Dictionary is defined as "uang sogok (bribes)" (remotivi, 2016).

Romano and Rafiudina studies are the reality of many Indonesia Journalists, both from small and corporate media, reporter or even senior journalists, the media chairman until the media owner. Pramesti (2013) who studied on this phenomenon ("envelope"), stated that the bribery practices on journalists have already been found in Indonesia since 1950s. Nevertheless, the majority of the bribery practices found in the 1950s dealt with moral support and government protection for the "republican press" in the form of financial aid to buy paper, finance printing, or pay employees salary if needed. This was performed as the media would like to help Indonesia's resistance against the Dutch colonialism. Meanwhile, the bribery practices found nowadays in the current era of media industrialization is profit-oriented (Pramesti, 2013).

Mandes (2013) stated that media and journalists are not immune to corruption. The media is frequently confronted with the combination of factors that create flourishing atmosphere for corruption. For instance, lack of training and technical skills, low professional standards, limited financial resources, unclear ownership, and inadequate and undemocratic laws.

2. Method

The approach used in this research was the qualitative one. This qualitative approach was chosen as it is considered as a naturalistic method in which the research process is implemented in natural setting conditions. The qualitative approach also leads the researcher first to put efforts into capturing all social phenomena and then theorizing them based on what they observe (Maxfield, 2009). Data collection techniques used were literature studies and in-depth interviews. The literature studies were used to collect data via books, international journals, and documents related to the phenomenon under study. Meanwhile, the in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the experience and knowledge of the informants on corruption practices committed by the media or their journalists.

This study deployed 9 resource persons that came from various professions but they shared the same experience and knowledge related to mainstream media in Indonesia. Then, the data analysis technique used Nvivo qualitative data processing software. Therefore, the interview results from the informants will be codified based on the code that has been made. The code is then observed to see the relationship and description using the tools provided by the software.

3. Results

3.1. News Trading in Indonesia

News as a journalistic product that is traded directly, packaged in journalistic transactions that diverge from its functions and responsibilities as a transmitter of truth, is a form of abusing professional power as well as betraying public trust. This long-standing practice has been entrenched due to the low commitment of each journalist to enforce the bribery ethics as stipulated in article 6 of the Indonesian Journalistic Code of Ethics: Indonesian journalists shall not abuse their profession and shall not accept bribes. This sentence is interpreted in the following statements (1) abusing the profession is every action aimed to take personal advantage of information obtained from duties before publishing or becoming public issue; and (2) bribes are all gifts in the form of money, objects or facilities from other parties that affect independence (kompas.com, 2021). In addition, several factors led the envelope culture remain exist such as lack of the practice code from the media, lack of supervision from the professional organization, commercial pressure, and lack of social sanction from community.

The reality of the envelope culture or the news trading within the media actually shows that the work of journalism is vulnerable to corruption. Studies by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) on the hierarchy-of-influences model and Andresen et al. (2017) on 'transitional journalism' confirmed it, they stated that the journalism work could be influenced by individual factors, media routines, organizations, extra media, and social systems. The extra media here referred to political, economic, and cultural factors that influenced the independence of journalists (Milojević, & Krstić, 2018).

The practice of buying and selling news in Indonesia that has been established for decades – hereinafter referred to as the news trading – has recently showed a tendency to get stronger due to the political relations between the media and power, especially in local, regional and national political contestations. Many buyers (actors) requested the media to raise certain issues so that it transformed into a public agenda, or attracted attention, or influenced public perception, or even provoked an issue that could move a public action. The news trading practices could also be carried out for the opposite purpose such as conducting counter issues, constructing rival issues to divide public attention on certain issues, or diverting issues, or building media darlings to cover negative aspects.

The results of this study indicated that in general, subscribers conducting the news trading transactions aimed to build public opinion even though the types of services used were various as can be seen in the following table;

Table 1: The purposes of the news trading

Codes	Involvement = Never (n=2)	Involvement = Several times (n=3)	Involvement = Just once (n=1)	Involvement = Always involved (n=3)	Total (n=9)
○ Branding	25%	37,5%	0%	37,5%	100%
○ Counter Issue	20%	20%	0%	60%	100%
○ Hide Issue	16,67%	33,33%	0%	50%	100%
Total (Unique)	25%	37,5%	0%	37,5%	100%

The table revealed that the informants who were always involved in the news trading stated that 60% received orders to counter certain issues that were happening and they were considered harmful to the buyers. In addition, 50% of journalists who were always involved in the news trading received orders to hide issues, meaning that certain issues were drowned out and no longer discussed by the media. Finally, 37.5% received orders to improve branding or enhance the profile of the buyer or certain parties.

The news trading is getting more common these days in Indonesia. This practice does not only cover the understanding of buying and selling news, but also involves transactional aspects of the news itself. In the business world, the CA informant (11/01/2022) shared his experience as an agency in constructing the message of a United States (US) brand by implementing a marketing public relations strategy related to factors beyond marketing that can enhance the product sales performance. At that time (1998-1999) several issues related to local ingredients and culture were vulnerably sensitive, including sentiments against the US as they did many attacks on Palestine.

“Every time the US attack was launched, the demonstrators demonstrated at the US Embassy and at the stores of our clients, especially those in Sarinah, Thamrin. Thus, how did we anticipate these factors? We collaborated with several major media to let them know that we were on the same boat. For example, we... include an outlet where the female employee was required to use hijab. We blew it up... everywhere, even reaching the grass root media.” (interview with CA, 11/01/2022).

The news trading is getting more popular as in essence the media are on two opposing sides. Apart from being a public institution that accommodates social aspirations and responsibilities, the media is also a business industry that pursues for profit. The tug-of-war between the normative interests and a capitalistic business model often leads the media into a dichotomy of interests. It is not easy for the media industry to provide an equal share in both aspects amidst the growing pressure, politics and economy intervention in Indonesia.

In the last few years, particularly since 2014, almost all media owners have had political and economic resources at the same time. The map of media power and authority has experienced significant changes with the increasing number of political elites and businessman running the media business. The power of the media is increasingly important for them in this era. The media could be used as a tool to control public and simultaneously transform into a pressure group against the authorities in order to get a certain share of power and authority. This was later revealed in this study in which the informant admitted that since 2014, the government's approach (the owner of power) towards the media has changed. For instance, the intervention of the previous authorities reached the editorial structure of the media, starting from reporters to the editor-in-chief. Meanwhile, now the authorities are more interested to intervene the media owners directly. This is not surprising since the majority of media owners in Indonesia are political elites and businessmen or those affiliated with power who certainly have certain interests, both from political and economic aspects.

The current form of intervention by external structures is not only related to the news content, but also to frame policies or an issue as a part of the media politics. This intervention was experienced by almost all media in Indonesia, starting from the reporter to the media owner. Some media managed to package the intervention through implicit content presentation, but some of them showed their alignment publicly with the persons/parties that ordered a particular issue.

Informants mentioned that even influential political elites visited media offices to do media political calculations against the ruling regime. The main discussion on the level of media owners usually talks about business and political interests and it rarely touches or interferes with the news content. Even if it might be found, they will pass on the interests to the editor although there are some rejections. The rejections are given as it is not in accordance with the vision or goals that the media wants to maintain or achieve. *“It means that the government is smart enough... they don't interfere the editors anymore just like the old days. they have already levelled up their target, to the businessman to be specific... In the past, we were phoned by 'Kapuspen' (the chief of police information centre)... Who is not afraid of getting phoned from the army chief?”* (interview with NJ, 8/09/2021)

Meanwhile, on the reporter level perspective stated that an informant from a group that ordered news admitted that he had become an intermediary party. He bridged the interests of political elites with a network of reporters from a number of media. The customers even formed a media network consisting of about 20 media, both print, online and television from Sabang to Merauke. The function of the media network is to control public opinion on certain issues or policies and figures. In order to support the media network, journalists were given facilities in the form of monthly incentives, ranging from Rp. 1 million to Rp. 5 million per person. While, editors or editor-in-chief could earn Rp. 20 million. Wait! This is not the end. If the issues are special and important, the bids can reach hundreds of millions. The partnership lasted for a very long time and reached decades unless other provisions were found.

“...The network that I can handle is from Sabang to Merauke. The news from the media from Jayapura to '0 km Aceh', I can handle all of them... I would like the news talks about A, tomorrow what comes out is from Sabang to Merauke... All A. As long as it is taken from TV, there are still many of them go national, right? so it's easier.” (interview with DD, 6/09/2021).

Gathering dozens of journalists or even meeting media owners is not easy. The confession of several informants summarized by the researcher explained that the news customers approached via friendship relations first in order to convey their interests. It is difficult for them to do the news transactions without using the friendship relations. At the very least, they need to know first the media owners and their structures. The first step of how they work is done by inviting a discussion meeting at a coffee shop or having lunch at a restaurant. They do not directly state their actual intent and purpose of their action at the first meeting. It takes time and a longer process so that both parties are fluid enough discussing issues. Moreover, this approach is carried out on media owners. The flow and process take longer than approaching the editor or reporter. Therefore, a news customer is a reliable marketing communication agent.

After successfully synchronizing perceptions, the next step is to amplify issues in the form of a press release to the media networks. The issues generally are news trends so that they are always published by all the media. The pitch of the issue will be adjusted to the actual political conditions as well as the response to the existing problems. When the issue reaches the community, the news customers will see the response. When the response given is bad, they will prepare a strategy to counter it or they also let the issue roll around until things get better. Then, they release another issues that are considered more positive. Payments releases are usually adjusted to the actual situation. Some will pay immediately when the release is published, but some will pay monthly or for a certain period of time. Sometimes bonus is given to journalists or the media in the form of money, provision of facilities, transportation, accommodation, and other forms of gratification. In some other cases, media affiliated with elites usually receive special services. For example, they are financed by the state to cover overseas cost, such as how the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Susi Pudjiastuti financed dozens of media coverage trips for government events abroad.

The description of the news trading is an uninterrupted and repetitive process. The structure of media institutions at various levels starting from the level of reporters, editors, editor-in-chief, allows the owner to play a role in accepting the news customers. After an agreement is reached, the issue will be processed as news in the newsroom. The process of transforming issues into news itself is the construction practices of phenomena and facts according to the interest of the news customer. The types of construction that might be in the form of agenda setting, framing, building, and priming. Sometimes, they also have their own agenda so that journalists just rewrite it. Besides, the news customers could set with whom the interviewee should be interviewed, or what questions and expectations of answers are preferred. This process is very complex, involving multiple layers of media structure within the newsroom organization.

The reality of news trading has illustrated that the media industry is inseparable from the reflection of political economy. It is such an open secret that media owners capitalize on media institutions for their short-term interests without considering the normative aspects. The logic of capitalism makes the media dominated by economic goals that are intertwined with political interests. Waisbord (2019) used the term “the vulnerabilities of journalism” to describe a range of media vulnerabilities against the commercialization of news, the rise of anti-democratic forces, and anti-press violence.

Although the media industry consists of people who know journalistic products, realistically they work based on the capitalism principle. One of the indicators is that many of media employees work for financial reason. That’s why, the possibility of bribery, gratuity, and bribery on preferred position remains exists. “*Well, are there any interventions such as giving bribes, envelopes? Yes, there are, whether it is done publicly or confidentially, known or unknown. Some don't realize it until it's suddenly in their bag or goody bag. That's it.*” (interview with DS, 15/09/2021).

The same situation happened as this case involved Edy Nasution (Clerk of the Central Jakarta District Court) as the defendant in the bribery scandal at the Jakarta Corruption Court in 2016. During the hearing, a witness named Slamet Wibowo admitted that he had bribed a number of mass media so that they would publish positive information about the Lippo Group. These media are considered as the national media that are quite credible. In his statement, Slamet admitted that he has many relationships with journalists and his team can handle the media. Slamet stated that at least Rp. 600 million had been given during the May-July 2016 period to pay for a number

of print media. Meanwhile, during 2010-2015 period the amount of money given reached Rp. 10 billion to Rp. 15 billion. However, some months later, the testimony was denied. After there was a rebuttal, the news on this bribery was no longer discussed.

The secret that Slamet Wibowo revealed was true. According to the reserach informant, they usually build a special exclusive relationship with journalists. The network is well-maintained, including from the aspect of financial needs or journalists' welfare. The Lippo case for example, it was proven that the corporation was held back by the Meikarta case. The national media that have business affiliations with Lippo have never reported the case. It was certainly that there was no news about cases affecting corporations as they were big donors to the media. It was possibly part of a strategy to reduce negative issues regarding the reputation of corporation. The SM informant (28/04/2022) stated that the media received much advertisements from the Lippo Group, the value was around the trillions. The big media have never reported negative issues related to it. *"Finally, the KPK revealed it instead"* (Interview with SM, 28/04/2022).

It has become clearer that the media is a weapon for capitalism and the elites to hide their flaws. Media which is regarded as an instrument of policy checks and balances, justice and social balance have shifted into a capitalist tool to accumulate social capital. This might happen since the media is controlled by capitalists, including the state managers group (Dreier (1982). In that context, the media may look weak and helpless to the capitalists, but at the same time the media has actually transformed into a powerful tool for the capitalists to exploit justice, silence the truth, and violate the professional code of ethics. The strength of economic interests and political power (Barak, 1994) were actually some reasons why the media was eventually difficult to be neutral, honest, fair, objective and open. These political and economic interests that controlled the information contained truth (truth) or false awareness (pseudo-truth), representing facts or twists facts, describing reality or simulating reality (Piliang, 2003). The fact that the news trading has swept the world of Indonesian journalism is in accordance with the Mandes findings (2013) which stated that the media and journalists are not immune to corruption. In developing countries, the media is often confronted with a combination of factors that create flourishing atmosphere for corruption such as lack of training and technical skills, low professional standards, limited financial resources, unclear ownership, and inadequate and undemocratic laws. As the reserach informant said, the nature of journalists' work reflects what is happening in society or the country. In other words, the knowledge system produced by the media is a reflection of the cultural reality that lives in society. Therefore, the culture of corruption that develops in a society will implicitly be reflected within the journalistic products generated by the media industry. *"That's why, the reflection of the media is also a reflection of the people. If the people are sick, the media will also get sick since the media, journalists are born from society. That's how the feedback works."* (Interview with DD, 6/09/2021)

3.2 News Trading Benefits

The news trading practice certainly has motives, goals and targets to be achieved, and surely benefits both socially, politically and economically. *"Yes, let's just take an example from the easiest one such as violation related to 'envelopes'. That's one motive, economic, financial, right? Well, apart from that, there are also political motives, do they appear? Because I'm involved in a political party and so on, have they ever come up?"* (interview with SM, 28/04/2022).

The results of the Nvivo analysis revealed that there were 3 top reasons. For instance, lack of journalist idealism, which is the most mentioned reason by journalists. Then, the social and political interests of media owners, and financial needs.

Table 2: Reasons on the journalist involvement in the news trading

Codes	Involvement = Never (n=2)	Involvement = Several times (n=3)	Involvement = Just once (n=1)	Involvement = Always involved (n=3)	Total (n=9)
○ Financial Needs	31,25%	31,25%	6,25%	31,25%	100%
○ Lack of Journalist Idealism	0%	20%	10%	70%	100%
○ Media Owners Interest	31,58%	15,79%	13,16%	39,47%	100%
○ Political Influence	21,43%	25%	25%	28,57%	100%
Total	25%	21,74%	15,22%	38,04%	100%

These three motives were the most dominant factors in why the news trading practices happened in Indonesia. These three motives were found in all almost media both from the mainstream and the online one based on the information obtained from the research informants. This showed that the media industry in Indonesia has been fully involved in the practice of aberrant journalism and could potentially drag the democracy and press freedom down.

The lack of idealism factor could be observed from several research informants that have been interviewed. Even though there were some media stating that they were independent from any interference, it turned out that there were some flaws found. *“The idealism of the journalists was no longer strong, both big and small media based in my opinion was no longer independent. Some independent media such as Tempo, Kompas ..., is there any chance to interfere their news? Yes, it is as there are some flaws where the journalist could be bribed.”* (interview with DD, 6/09/2021)

In this study, the research informants also talked about the ‘interests’ referred to motives and purposes of the news trading within the media structure. *“I am so sure that there are some motives in all media both from internal factor and the external one. This is related to the interests, even in my opinion there will always be interests found in all media.”* (interview with DS, 15/09/2021).

Meanwhile, the second reason is media owner’s interest, which of course affects all media policies. *“It depends on the owner, dude. If the political direction is right for example, it is clear that there is interference, dude. Even the angle of the news must be controlled.”* (Interview with YI, 3/11/2021). The mainstream media in Indonesia clearly showed their political alignments when broadcasting news. *“Surya Paloh has now entered politics. So the framing is clear, right? To support the government, huh? Then, Hary Tanoë went into politics as well. That's right. Thus, it is clear that the orientation is to use the media as a tool to support political activities.”* (MM interview, 11/03/2022).

In fact, the issue of media bias has also been observed by the Indonesian Press Council, so that several editor-in-chiefs from several media who are considered to create a non-objective report have been summoned and questioned. However, it turned out that the problem could not be solved. *“In the past, metro tv, tv one, and others had already been gathered at the press council, at KPI (Indonesian Broadcasting Commission), but nothing happened, why? their owners are ordered by the owner”* (NJ interview, 8/09/2021).

Every media owner is also a businessman so that he or she needs good relations both with the authorities and the government elites.

“he (the government) must build friendship with any businessman in charge, otherwise he will lose. That's why the government is quite smart to take advantage of it, the intervention is to the current owner, the owner pressures us, we can be fired, the owner can do whatever they want if we don't obey, right? then you can continue with your work. For me, when I worked at tvone, i had this principle: if it is related to us, related to tvone or the owner of tvone, it will be better if we do not report it.” (NJ interview, 8/09/2021)

Meanwhile, the third reason is the financial needs of the journalists. Many journalists are consciously involved in the practice of news trading as their welfare is still relatively low. A journalist who works in the capital city of Jakarta with a salary of Rp. 4 million per month has to pay for the needs of his wife and children.

The low wages of journalists have not been improved for a long time. It was seen from the survey results of the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) since 2000 and the Press Council survey in 2008 which also provided a more or less similar figure (Manan, 2012). The majority (about 75%) of journalists earn less than Rp. 750 thousand per month. Only 13.8% earn more than Rp. 1 million (Manan, 2012). Meanwhile, research by Thomas Hanitzsch found that most of journalists' salaries (86%) ranging from Rp. 1 million to Rp. 3 million. However, there are also some journalists (3.5%) who are paid for less than Rp. 500 thousand. Because of that, 77 percent of journalists stated that they were satisfied, and 22.6 percent stated that they were very satisfied (Manan, 2012).

Furthermore, a research conducted by AJI and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in 2005 deploying journalist respondents from 17 cities in Indonesia found that 1.5% of journalists earned less than Rp. 200 thousand. The number of journalists who earned less than Rp. 599 thousand was also quite high, 22.5%. In fact, when the survey was conducted, the highest provincial minimum wage at that time was DKI Jakarta with Rp. 711,843 thousand and the lowest minimum wage was Central Java, Rp. 390 thousand. Journalists who earned less than Rp. 200 thousand were in Papua (5%) and the largest was in Palu, Central Sulawesi (25%). Even in Jakarta, most (55%) journalists earned less than Rp. 1 million, and only 5% of journalists earned Rp 3.8 million to Rp. 4.1 million. (Manan, 2012).

Thus, journalists that were involved on the news trading obtained several financial benefits and facilities for free.

Table 3: The benefits of the news trading for Journalists

Codes	Involvement = Never (n=2)	Involvement = Several times (n=3)	Involvement = Just once (n=1)	Involvement = Always involved (n=3)	Total (n=9)
○ Incentive Eventual	18,75%	31,25%	6,25%	43,75%	100%
○ Monthly Stipend	0%	16,67%	0%	83,33%	100%
○ Political Benefits	29,17%	16,67%	8,33%	45,83%	100%
○ Services & Facilities	0%	30,77%	0%	69,23%	100%
Total	16,95%	23,73%	5,08%	54,24%	100%

The above table revealed that 83.3% of journalists who were always involved on the news trading obtained monthly stipends from clients and it was considered the top one. Furthermore, they got services and facilities and it was in the second position with a percentage of 69.23%. The services and facilities here referred to free airline tickets and free hotels accommodation from clients. The third position was the political benefits with a percentage of 45.83% and the last position was the eventual incentive of 43.75%. The political benefits might be seen later when some of several former journalists served as commissioners or other important positions. *"I am going to help you but promise me, you're going to help me later, you know that I always really want to be this or that commissioner. Don't worry, I'm going to give you a better position later."* (DS interview, 15/09/2021). Meanwhile, the last was incentives that were given occasionally, for example during Eid al-Fitr, Christmas, and New Year's or whenever they needed a certain amount of money.

4. Conclusion

The news trading business has been performed for a long time in Indonesia. The reason why journalists are involved in this kind of practice is due to lack of journalist idealism, media owner's interest, and financial needs. The charm of the media to shape and influence public opinion makes the news consumers in Indonesia attracted to do the transaction. Meanwhile, journalists gain financial, political, and service benefits as well as facilities. *"Even if a friend for example owns the corporation, and then it has much money, the business principle is still applied. For me, it's not right or wrong, this is purely a business process between supply and demand. I have the resource and you don't have it, I am going to increase my price as it is reasonable. This is a business process and I don't think this is a crime, right? The journalists here are doing what is called as a business process between supply and demand. So, it's normal if for example we are hired by a supplier as we have the goods and maybe we will also increase the price, huh?"* (CA interview 11/01/2022)

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