

“Such was the status of women . . . that at first *The Australian Women’s Weekly* was hardly taken seriously at all”¹: The humble beginnings of a cultural icon

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Abstract

*In the digital age when one can find information on almost any topic with the click of a mouse, share information across social networking sites or blogs, it is difficult to truly appreciate how few sources of information, advice and entertainment were available to Australian women when *The Australian Women’s Weekly* was launched in 1933. This paper draws on my PhD research and looks at the founding of the magazine and asks why magazine research is still relatively neglected in comparison with newspapers. I argue that given the paucity of other media formats in the research period, 1933–1953, looking into the history of the magazine and the uses and reception of this popular cultural form can provide valuable insights into the social and cultural history of Australian women.*

In today’s often overwhelmingly media-rich environment, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the central role that a magazine such as *The Australian Women’s Weekly* played in the lives of Australian women in its early years. The circumstances of the magazine’s founding clearly provide insights into its purpose and positioning, not least because of its address to a specific gendered demographic. Radio, movies, newspapers, magazines and books were the only media generally available. The roles represented within these formats were not generous in their orientation towards women. “Women’s Hour”, “The Women’s Page”, and “Women’s Magazines” were almost exclusively about home-making. The dominant media discourses across all sectors and formats spoke to and of women in terms of homemakers, wives and mothers—or as inevitably becoming seekers after such positions.

In this limited media world, magazines played a major role in providing entertainment and leisure time reading, particularly for women who often had little time for leisure activities. This was particularly true during the war years when more women were in the paid workforce. The entertainment function of *The Australian Women’s Weekly* was used by the proprietors to argue that morale would suffer if restrictions on paper further reduced the size of the magazine. The Weekly was the most popular magazine both at home and with Australian forces overseas.

Compared with other media forms, magazines have received relatively little research attention, particularly in comparison to other forms of entertainment such as television, film or radio. In work directed to instigating renewed critical attention to magazines, Holmes (2007) compares the hundreds, if not thousands, of different titles available

¹ (O'Brien 1982: 14).

today on every imaginable topic with the much smaller number of newspapers currently available in the average newsagency and notes that the number of research studies into each of these two media formats is the total inverse. Looking back at *The Australian Women's Weekly* as a powerful social text is in one sense "easier", in that there were far fewer magazines and other media products available to counter its messages. On the other hand, it is "harder" to put oneself in the reader/consumer position when looking back over such a long period of time and to realise the power that one magazine thus possessed.

As media studies in general progressed from research into presumed direct effects on readers to an increasing focus on a more complex understanding of audience reception and use, increased focus on magazines was a likely outcome. Women's magazines in particular, often regarded as "light" reading, have however been slow to be recognised as worthy of scholarly interest. Certainly Holmes notes work by Smith, Natunsky-Laden, Stephenson and Sylvester, "who analyse the intersection of political, social and cultural identities as manifest in women's magazines produced in widely different times and places" (2007, p. 518), has made valuable contributions to the field. But much remains to be done, not just in taking the analysis of as yet unexamined areas of once-popular magazines, but in the broader zone of theorisation of the distinctive experience of magazine consumption and use.

Magazine reading remains, even today, a distinctive and quite complex mode of cultural consumption. Acknowledgement of its social and cultural influence has, however, been slower to arise. Newspapers are frequently viewed by readers, and certainly by the organisations that produce them, as providing serious, factual reporting and analysis of important world and/or local events. Their reputation as formative within the expression of public opinion has long been attested to with schools of journalism dedicated to the training of those who produce them, and research into what it is that they produce. Magazines however remain very differently regarded. Although the subject matter of the many hundreds of magazines available in any particular market may vary widely—e.g. celebrity gossip, educational or instructive, politics and business—magazines are far more likely to be seen as leisure, entertainment or light reading. This is perhaps one reason why less scholarly research has been conducted on magazines—even in those scholarly fields opened by the UK Birmingham School's Cultural Studies, with its focus on the culture of everyday life and the consumption and use of popular media.

Given the depth and breadth of the penetration of magazines, this ongoing paucity of critical review is clearly problematic. Particularly, as noted above, when compared with the research interest in other forms of entertainment. Much more so than newspapers, magazines are often read by whole groups of people—both when current and perhaps even more when they are out of date, such as those provided to occupy nervous patients in the dentist's waiting room. The many "groupings" of magazine readers could perhaps provide interesting perspectives on the practice of magazine reading: halfway between the quick stimulus and fleeting focus of a newspaper article and the longer, deeper dedication to a book-length text. It is the relative desirability of the magazine, its longer features, its tendency to be available over a longer period of time, its serial publication which accentuate its power of persuasiveness. It is perhaps this which led social critics interested in cultural change, such as feminist scholars, to specialise in magazine study (see especially Ang, 1991; Aronson, 2000; Beetham, 1996; Sheridan, 1995; Sheridan,

1996; Sheridan et al., 2002; Winship, 1987). Yet, as Holmes (2007) points out, this is only one among many possible approaches.

Such work is even more important in eras when few alternatives existed, and when a single magazine title could dominate its market. A magazine, an inherently commercial commodity, offers possibilities and ways of being to its readers catering to desires they perhaps did not even know they had. Ultimately, it is a vehicle for consumerist advertising as, if the readers do not purchase the products advertised within its pages, a magazine cannot survive. The costs of production are rarely, if ever, covered by the cover price. At times there can be a “disguised dissonance” between the personal, close address of a magazine’s texts and the relationship it builds between the reader and the magazine in comparison to the actual commercial relationship set up between consumer and product. The point in the end may be a financial one—to deliver appropriate readers/consumers to advertisers/producers. There is a “deliberate confusion of consumer-as-reader and consumer-as shopper” (Holmes, 2007). This is an impure or “dirty” text in Hartley’s terms (1983); one inevitable outcome of the many disparate sources of any magazine’s production. With material literally “bought in”, produced in advertising agencies, newsrooms, the studios and kitchens and studies of various expert contributors and even in the homes of those readers perennially encouraged to “write in”, magazines are arguably mixed mode texts of modernity.

Fairclough (1995), outlining the ways in which limiting ranges within media discourses shape and are shaped by social orders of discourse, alerts us to the need to examine moments of mis-match—such as the drive to recruit women into industry in the war years which existed alongside an ongoing insistence on their “intrinsic” femininity, and continued references to their “destiny” as wives and mothers, as seen in the *Weekly*. The discrepancy between the intense variability and transformation within women’s social roles in this era, and the discursive maintenance of formulae of category limitation goes unremarked, eclipsed by the discursive work underway to sustain and justify the all-too-apparent illogicality of it all. As the social roles women were expected to carry out changed, women continued to be addressed as ultimately “feminine”, almost as if constrained by some essentially-disposed “inner” self, which would, seemingly inevitably, orient them towards husband, children, and home—no matter the demands or the possibilities of the day.

It is possible that magazines have both driven and reflected such change, despite the current theorisation which reminds us that readers/consumers are by no means “locked in” as passive consumers. The place of magazines within the broader social and cultural landscape is too rarely acknowledged, with only those in the industry aware of the role they play. Ferber former publisher of *Esquire*, wrote in 1979:

Magazines must probe, analyze, and offer background material. They must provide a broader perspective, they must synthesize and define complex issues. A magazine today must stand for something or it represents nothing. (cited in Johnson, 2007, p. 523)

The trade journal, *Magazine Publishers of America* (MPA), has a rather more humble definition of where a magazine might fit into the lives of its readers but nonetheless urged attention to its social significance in the lives of readers:

A magazine is a friend, a tangible and enduring companion and an integral part of a reader’s personal and professional life. (cited in Johnson, 2007, p. 523)

Drawing on these ideas, Johnson argues that magazines work with readers to make sense of their place in the world and, whether reading or researching magazines, “we

have to pay close attention . . . become more thoughtful and critical” (2007, p. 523). At its beginning, *The Australian Women’s Weekly* proposed to fulfil both sets of requirements. Originally, it was to be a women’s newspaper rather than a magazine, with the differing expectations associated with that format—much closer to Ferber’s view of the need for solid information and serious commentary. Instead, the Weekly rapidly became a magazine in the mould suggested by the MPA definition.

The twenty years between 1933, which saw the establishment of *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, and 1953, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, heralded by many as a second Anglo renaissance, brought to the lives of Australian women an especially broad range of new, and in many ways unexpected, experiences, demands, responsibilities, and changes. These changes, acting as a set of “book-ends” for the period, encapsulate much of what a magazine actually is. Magazine producers (journalists, columnists, editors, artists and photographers, fiction writers and advertising teams) were each in their way challenged to achieve new representations of a woman’s life—and yet to sustain what were held to be “central feminine values”. Their goal was to capture images and formulae that would help women meet the shifting worlds of domestic responsibility, child and family care, courtship and marriage, consumerism and budgeting, paid and volunteer work, economic collapse and national peril—and, at the same time, build an entertaining product which would reliably return a profit to their proprietors, at a time when many other titles in their media empire appeared to be faltering. In short, fundamental and monumental levels of change in almost every conceivable aspect of women’s lives and to a degree rarely matched elsewhere within less than a single generation—each of these saw *The Australian Women’s Weekly* making key adaptations to its advisory, role-modelling functions—without ever quite risking the feminine values held to be at the core of Australian women’s lives. In other words, the mixed mode of magazine production produced an equally mixed discursive core to its texts—one which may well prove to have “let in” ideas and possibilities which “mainstream” thinking—even within the magazine itself—still thought inconceivable.

At one level this sort of admissibility of the new is already acknowledged within Australian magazine studies. The argument has been made, for instance, that *The Australian Women’s Weekly*

gave Australian women a redefinition of Australianness that included them in it, unlike the very masculine legend that was revived in the 1950s. (Sheridan et al., 2002, p. 4)

In the same way, it can be argued that it re-centred Australian living from an almost exclusively rural focus to a consideration of the “domestic interiors” of family life, and the increasingly dominant suburban and township experiences of those working in the expanding manufacturing, retail, transport and clerical sectors. Yet the new emergent market that this magazine set out to address may have been less of an influence upon its foundation, than the ongoing political wrangles over newspaper proprietorship and political affiliations which bedevil Australian media ownership and enterprise to this day. A review of conditions present at the moment of the Weekly’s launch suggests that it may have been, at least at the beginning, an even more than usually haphazard and bricolaged product, rather than a carefully planned or pre-researched production.

The magazine was launched in the midst of the Depression in June 1933 into an atmosphere of suspicion and conflict concerning questionable financial and political deals on the part of owners, Clyde and Frank Packer, and E.G. Theodore, and George Warnecke, its first editor (Griffen-Foley, 1999; O’Brien, 1982). *The Australian Women’s*

Weekly was deliberately different from the other weekly women's magazines on the market, which "looked staid and matronly compared with the brash newcomer" (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 28). It had the look of a newspaper, being entirely in black and white, except for the red masthead. Its direct competitors were the *Australian Women's Mirror*, *Woman's Budget* and *New Idea*. Their sales at the time were approximately 167,000, 95,000 and 52,000 respectively (O'Brien, 1982), so that, with a contemporary female population of three and a quarter million, there was plenty of space in the market (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). There was also a glossy quarterly, *The Home*, which began publishing in 1920.

Packer senior had first become a newspaper owner in 1921 when J. J. Smith—a former Sydney Lord Mayor—made good on a promise he had made to Clyde Packer and Claude McKay. Packer was then general manager and McKay the editor of *Smith's Weekly*, and Smith had promised both men a financial stake in the company should the paper prove a financial success (Griffen-Foley, 1999). That paper had "sought to build mass circulation by appealing to increasingly literate lower middle classes" (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 5). *The Bulletin* asserted that Clyde Packer

had journalistic gifts of a sort—organising ability, energy, and a keen sense of what readers of the mental age of 15, or less, want in the way of news and stunts. (cited in Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 6)

It was well known in the industry that Packer was the driving force behind the new *Daily Guardian*, launched when Smith's Newspapers became a public company two years later. In the same year, his son Frank began work as a cadet journalist and photographer on the *Daily Guardian*; however, he lacked the flair of his father and did little writing. Packer junior was much more of a business man than a journalist and soon became advertising director and joined the board (Griffen-Foley, 1999).

Sir Hugh Denison was a major competitor in Sydney. He had abandoned attempts to set up morning and afternoon papers in Melbourne after his papers had been bought out and closed down by the Herald and Weekly Times Group. His concentration was on the Sydney market, forming Associated Newspapers when he bought the *Daily Telegraph* in 1927. By 1929 *Smith's Weekly* was negotiating the sale of its assets to Denison when, mid-negotiations to enhance the value of the package, *Smith's* was trying to sell, the *Sunday Guardian*, edited by George Warnecke, was launched and the company's capital was increased to £1 million. In a deal involving both shares and £175,000 for goodwill, the papers became part of Associated Newspapers—as did Warnecke and both Packers, although Frank was suspected of "spying" and was not there for long. Part of the deal was that Smith's agreed not to publish a daily or Sunday paper in Sydney for two years. One can see how such deals eliminated competition as well as how publishing groups emerged and grew in such a climate.

Newspaper and magazine owners of the 1930s may not have had multi-national media empires, but nonetheless had many connections in political circles. Labor Papers Limited, which had been formed by the Australian Worker's Union in 1910, published the *Labor Daily*, seen as the mouthpiece of NSW Premier Jack Lang, while the *Daily Guardian* pursued an anti-Lang policy. The Queensland and later federal politician, E.G. (Ted) Theodore had persuaded Labor Papers Ltd to launch *The World* in October 1931, but it was soon in difficulties at least in part because the banks, worried about the impact of the policies it espoused for a government-controlled central bank, had persuaded many advertisers to withdraw their business. Theodore was then

instrumental in the operation that ultimately led to *The Australian Women's Weekly*. The magazine emerged from a complicated operation involving *The World*, Theodore, Warnecke, the Packers and Sir Hugh Denison of Associated Newspapers. *The World* was struggling and its equipment was largely idle but Warnecke had a plan to take over the ailing Labor paper and remake it as an afternoon newsheet, believing he could make money when Associated Newspapers again stepped in to buy out the competition. As Clyde Packer actually worked at Associated Newspapers, son Frank and Theodore were delegated to front the deal and “[t]he war of nerves began in late October 1932” (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 21).

The apocryphal version of events is that Theodore obtained an option for a one-year lease on the newspaper and part of the building from two officials of the Australian Worker's Union. The deal was conducted in a local pub and consisted of Theodore handing over a one-pound note as a deposit and the officials writing a receipt on another pound note (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 21). By November 1932, Denison had agreed to pay £86,500 to the Packer faction not to publish an evening or Sunday paper within three hundred miles of Sydney for the next three years, and only after the deal was agreed did they form a new company—Sydney Newspapers Ltd. Griffen-Foley asserts that Theodore, Warnecke and the Packers had called Denison's bluff. His habitually clumsy strategy of buying up the opposition “had literally paid off” for the Packer family (1999, p. 23).

O'Brien asserts that it is not clear exactly where the idea for *The Australian Women's Weekly* came from but Warnecke, “driven by relentless ambition” (1982, p. 13), began to develop the concept for a women's newspaper. He wanted to break away from the usual small format of English magazines: “Start it Big . . . Give it an unswerving Australian outlook” (Warnecke cited in O'Brien, 1982, p. 14). He envisaged the magazine beginning a re-awakening of the search for progress as Australians, having recently experienced war and depression, began to discard harsh bush ways and build a middle-class society (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 25).

From the very beginning, the Weekly “gave itself a role as a national cultural institution”, and further enhanced this position by establishing offices in other Australian capital cities, and bringing “the rest of the world to its readers through the establishment of a London office, and . . . materials from the United States” (Sheridan et al., 2002, p. 4). *The Australian Women's Weekly* was subsequently considered “an articulate barometer of female sexual identity in Australia” (Clancy, 2004, p. 124). The notion that the magazine should provide a new focus of “Australianness” that included women was a somewhat ironic position for a women's publication which had been entirely planned and published by men

[b]ut, then, such was the status of women . . . that at first *The Australian Women's Weekly* was hardly taken seriously at all. (O'Brien, 1982, p. 14)

It is perhaps reassuring for the analyst to discover that even its originators had no real idea of what “a national cultural institution” *for women* might be, if somewhat surprising that whatever it was it could best be produced in the then low-status format of a *magazine*.

The first edition of the Weekly was planned as a print run of only 50,000 copies, but early on the first day newsagents were already calling to order more, as they rapidly sold out. The ensuing print run went on for 36 hours and the Weekly sold 121,162 copies in its first week. Its very success was almost the cause of its closure. Bill Dowsett,

the advertising manager, had set a very low rate of five shillings per column inch and by 1st May—more than a month before the launch—all advertising space in the first four issues had been sold. The low advertising rate combined with the unexpectedly large print runs meant that the Weekly was costing more to produce than it was making. Nor was the suddenly revealed consumer base it had identified immediately understood. O'Brien notes that the male-dominated boardrooms of Sydney's publishing world paid little attention to the new magazine, believing "that it would run out of steam and money and expire" (1982, p. 20). In fact, within a year it was Australia's best-selling magazine and has consistently remained so in a market which is second only to New Zealand in the number of magazine readers (Bonner, 2005; Clancy, 2004). It had achieved a circulation of 600,000 by 1945, when the Australian population was only 7.5 million (Bonney & Wilson, 1983). The figures for the year ended September 2009 show the Weekly still on top with a readership of 2,141,000, compared with *Woman's Day* with 2,047,000 and *New Idea* at 1,971,000 and later entrants to the market such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire* at around 500,000 plus (Roy Morgan, 2009).

Apart from financial problems another major difficulty for the magazine was its attempt to be all things to all women. From the beginning it had promised to "cover . . . every field of work, play or interest for women . . . to be of interest to all women" (Australian Women's Weekly, 1933, p. 10):

Like earlier Packer titles, the magazine believed it had a role to play in setting the agenda: the first edition declared that it aimed not merely to cover, but to *create*, interests for women. (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 33, emphasis in the original)

In the social circumstances of the 1930s and 40s, with women forced first by economic necessity and then wartime productivity demands into ever broader social roles, that meant dealing with the changing definitions of women's social role. Although Warnecke argued later that the magazine had raised the status of women (O'Brien, 1982), it was primarily focused in these earlier years on women in the home, not in the paid workforce or the wider world. The growth of technology—the modern; the new; all of the machines which had promised to "liberate" women from domestic labour—in fact, "saw women's magazines intensify their preoccupation with a domestic role for women" (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 33). Even today, when the magazine market has become increasingly fragmented, very similar issues were and are addressed across the array of women's magazines but not in men's magazines. For women, content still revolves largely around the home, family and children, fashion and beauty, and coverage of celebrities, with advertisements tied into these areas—all dealing "with the self and the private personal world" (Bonner, 2005, p. 200). Increasingly, even coverage of celebrities deals with their private lives rather than their careers or public contributions.

In contrast, magazines aimed at men are divided into far more specialised areas—e.g. business, cars, fishing or men's health—as if there were many types of man, each type having distinctive fields of specialised interest. While clearly the women's magazine market also addresses a range of interests, I would argue that the market is still heavily slanted towards areas that might be described as "traditional" areas of interest—crafts, parenting, cookery and so on. The whole magazine market is becoming even more segmented along demographic lines with gender forming the major division, followed by age, and then income. Bonner argues there is a

trajectory through which the magazine-reading woman passes . . . [and] at each stage in the progress from a child to a mature woman an appropriate title is available to give advice, principally on matters of consumption. (2005, p. 202)

A sign of its modernist “mass address” industrial conception, *The Australian Women’s Weekly* was intended initially to be a women’s newspaper rather than a magazine and undertook to address the entire demographic. So how far did it succeed in such an ambition?

One technique is to trace the published responses of readers of the day—those who contributed letters to the editor, anecdotes and experiences to favourite columns, sent in requests for help to the Agony Aunts or medical experts, or submitted original fiction to short-story competitions. The magazine’s direct address to the “private” world of women provided plenty of opportunities for feedback—and Australian women readers were no slower than their international sisters in responding. Whether such contributions were truly genuine—and that is a matter of perennial debate among magazine readers—is not important, for they

were presented [as such] . . . an important element in the Weekly’s drive to consolidate an audience, project an image of a community of interest and bolster its authoritativeness. (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 35)

In other words, if such feedback-texts were in fact produced from within the magazine, then they become even more representative of the imagined readership: the perfect characterisation of the publication’s profiling of the “Australian woman” of the era. In fact, so keen were they to reflect the interests and concerns of their readers, local editions were produced in Victoria (September 1933), Queensland (October 1933) and South Australia (April 1934), with the other states and New Zealand following by 1937. The diversification and localisation suggests recognition of the sort of “style-tribes” typified by late-century communities of identity (Lury, 1996), but once again the anachronistic basis of such an analysis conflicts with the ongoing project of the magazine’s address of a “woman” dedicated so very largely to the pursuit of the feminine and the domestic. Was this at core a new social institution attempting to dictate the outlines of the Australian woman’s life, or a cynically commercial industrial project, prepared to take whatever steps necessary to track that Australian woman to her lair?

One answer lies in the many “outreach” activities the magazine undertook, which even if designed to foster readership concretised a rather more direct, and directive, relation between producer and consumer. By 1934 the magazine was using radio spots and reader excursions to further boost circulation, which rose in that year from 210,424 to 307,160. Other offshoots followed such as the Travel Bureau in 1935 and, during World War II, when there were many more single women living independently, a women’s club was established in the David Jones department store building in Sydney. As well as accommodation, classes in deportment, cookery, interior design and household management were provided—an interesting example of the degree to which the disruption of war work and service saw new institutions such as the Weekly stepping forward to replace the instruction in feminisation which Mother would have formerly provided, had the war not taken her daughters untimely from their homes. At the time, the Women’s Land Army organisation praised the club and hoped there would be more similar clubs after the war. Yet a post-war Weekly would have had trouble supporting such a venture, since by then the women’s club was held to have “fostered female

camaraderie and independence”, no longer the magazine’s focus once peace had come (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 119).

The overall theme pursued by the Weekly during the difficult years of World War II was summed up in the seventh birthday edition of June 1940, which held staunchly to the view that the magazine “had a duty to help preserve the ordinary ways of home life” (Griffen-Foley, 1999, p. 98), thus setting the stage for peacetime, and confirming that the changes in women’s lives brought about by wartime conditions were “only for the duration”. An unabashed attempt to boost morale for both Australian men, assured that life would return to “normal” once the emergency ceased, and Australian women, lamenting the loss of personal and domestic commodities and comforts denied by wartime exigencies, this new focus on the everyday saw the Weekly work hard to assert domestic normality in the heart of disruption and deprivation. Once again, the balance was between heralding change, social flexibility and cultural innovation and calls on the continuity and the assertion of unchanging core values.

However, as noted above, the post-war world envisioned by the Weekly was a world of women returning to their “traditional” roles. In spite of the amply demonstrated abilities of thousands of women who had performed successfully in a myriad of jobs, the magazine was comfortable in asserting in July 1947, in relation to the Occupying Forces in Japan, that

much of the work is of an administrative or governmental type involving detail and routine work of the kind that women do so well. (Howard, 1947, p. 8)

Griffen-Foley notes with irony that the Weekly lavished praise on the winner of a £3,000 cookery contest in 1948 who

had abandoned her promising career as a scientist to fulfil her duties as a doctor’s wife and the mother of three children. (1999, p. 164)

The mixed messages—a simultaneous expansion and contraction in the possible selves the Weekly readers could imagine and take up, continued to be reflected in the compositional techniques of the text.

The format of the magazine—its different departments, features, fiction, letters, advertisements and advice, its very “miscellany”—could handle conflicting ideas, promoting modernity, while at the same time ameliorating its most difficult aspects; partly progressive, but still confining. Simultaneously introducing new urban values while still promoting The Bush as the Australian heartland, it featured women who had achieved distinction in any number of social or cultural fields, but always questioned them on their ultimate role as mother, housekeeper, wife. Griffen-Foley (1999) has argued that these conflicting/competing values meant that there really was something for every woman—just as was promised in the first editorial in 1933. At the same time, pressures were exerted throughout for those women to be an essential “everywoman”: an idealised, feminised, domestic presence, held—again, as the title promised—to be at the core of Australian culture.

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