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**The GSM Boycott: Civil Society, Big Business
and the State in Nigeria**

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CONTENTS

Abstract

On September 19 2003, following weeks of concerted mobilisation, mobile phone subscribers in Nigeria took the unprecedented step of switching off their handsets *en masse*. The consumers took this symbolic step in protest against perceived exploitation by the existing GSM phone companies. Among other things, they were angered by allegedly exorbitant tariffs, poor reception, frequent and unfavourable changes in contract terms, and arbitrary reduction of credits. That action has continued to reverberate across the wider social pool in the country. At issue is a series of critical questions, which the protest helps bring into focus- how useful, or reliable is technology as an instrument of social activism? How is (mobile) technology shaping the democratic momentum in Nigeria, and indeed the rest of the African continent? And significantly, how useful is technology as a mechanism for the socio-economic empowerment of ordinary citizens? Using the boycott and the attendant fallouts as backdrop, this study provides a number of tentative answers. It argues that the boycott ought to be appraised, first, in the context of existing mistrust between customers and transnational big business in Nigeria; and second, against the background of difficult state-society intercourse which has mostly been characterised by the latter's suspicion of the state's connivance with the corporate establishment. Furthermore, we argue that because it gives civil society a combined *cause* and *instrument* of protest, mobile phones in the Nigerian context presage the emergence of a new social *space* of politics and agitation.

Acknowledgements

About the author

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1 Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to illustrate civil society in action in with a view to examining the extent to which the picture that emerges either corroborates or departs from the dominant contentions in the existing literature on the subject[1]. While scholarship on civil society in African formations brims with conjectures and refutations, comparatively little has been done by way of empirical work to substantiate or rebut this rash of claims[2]. In this paper, I attempt partly to redress the situation by examining what might be called *actually existing civil society*, in this case the boycott of mobile telephone services on Friday September 19 2003 by subscribers in Nigeria. Although the boycott went largely unreported in the Western media, it remains, for many reasons, a watershed in the development of oppositional culture in the country.

The first reason is the emergence in Nigeria of the use of modern technology as a tool for democratic activism and consolidation. The September 19 boycott consolidates the democratic opposition's use of radio technology[3] to generally mobilise against military rule and, specifically, protest the annulment of the June 12 presidential election by the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993).

Second, '9/19' (as it was called in the local press) arguably embodies a new imaginary of popular dissent, in particular the potential for the mobile telephone to open new vistas in ordinary citizens' agitation for both economic and political self-determination in the country. What this means is that while the boycott at issue was specifically targeted at the mobile telephone companies, it was at the same time much more than that. In a sense, the boycott itself encapsulates the age-long feud between the citizens-as-customers and business corporations in Nigeria (witness for example the yet unresolved saga in the oil 'producing' Niger Delta), and between the same citizens-as-consumers and the Nigerian state. Indeed, the majority of consumers who took part in the protest saw it as a continuation of the larger project of righting the

wrongs that many believe are integral to the very idea of the Nigerian state. The following statement by the Chairman of the Unofficial Consumers' Protection Agency (UCPA), Ojemaye Otitoka[4] is an excellent illustration of this mentality:

> This is the spirit of this campaign. This is the real force behind its eventual success, the spirit of the Nigerian people who are speaking up for themselves finally. *Now we are crying against exorbitant GSM tariffs. Tomorrow, using the same methods we will complain about other things.*[5] (Emphases added)

Third, the public protest against the perceived corporate failings and excesses of the GSM phone companies signifies the emergence of a new outlet of *voice*[6], and a new modality of engagement by civil society against the state. From the way ordinary subscribers enthused endlessly about the boycott, it was evident that they saw it as nothing less. Still, this is not to idealize the possibilities of (mobile) technology for democratic activism in Nigeria or generally.

The paper begins with a brief exploration of the relevant theoretical literature on the possibilities of technology for democratic activism. This is followed by some background information on the context of telecommunications in the Nigeria, especially how it has been a contested site in the larger struggle between state and society. Thereafter, we outline the boycott itself, focusing on the immediate background, the issues at stake, and the aftermath. The paper concludes with an analysis of the implications of the boycott for the state in Nigeria, civil society, and the GSM companies. It also examines the consequences for conceptual understanding of the use of mobile technology for democratic activism.

2 Technology, the State and Democratic Activism: A Theoretical Sketch

An in-depth theoretical analysis of how technology shapes society and vice versa is outside the purview of this paper[7]. By contrast, the aim in this section is to explore briefly the interface between technology (telecommunications technology in general and mobile technology in particular) and society. While a number of relevant studies have attempted to do this especially in the context of the West[8], the analysis here specifically addresses the utility of (telecommunications) technology for political and social change within the specific context of the geo-political South, even though Nigeria is the main socio-geographic anchor for our analysis.

Giving the preceding, we must begin by admitting the existence of what is frequently described in the literature as a "digital divide"- the gap in technological penetration of society between the global North and South, or more obviously between Western Europe and the United States, and the rest of the world. For Castells, the clearest marker of the difference that exists between the two digitally divided worlds is that while one part may be appropriately described as comprising "informational societies", the other part may not.[9] If this stratification is accepted- and it seems largely valid- then a clear majority of African countries easily fall under the latter rubric.

This conclusion is supported by pertinent statistics. For instance, according to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Technology Achievement Index (TAI) which "aims to capture how well a country is creating and diffusing technology and building a human skill base-reflecting capacity to participate in the technological innovations of the network age'" (UNDP 2001, 46)[10], most African and other developing countries are still at a rudimentary stage when it comes to using technology as a basis for social development.[11]

While many arguments may be advanced to rationalise this unflattering situation, the ugly truth is that the nature of the struggle for political and social resources across the continent has necessitated a situation in which successive African

leaders have regarded telecommunications technology with suspicion at best, and hostility at worst.

Two quick examples from Nigeria will suffice. At the height of the opposition to the regime of General Sani Abacha (1993-1998) in 1996, the regime's National Security Adviser, Alhaji Ismaila Gwarzo, obviously worried by the speed at which knowledge of the Internet was spreading among the youthful segment of the Nigerian society, publicly contemplated banning the Internet or at least restricting popular access to it.[12] Second, one of the issues that has paradoxically put the matter of public access to affordable and reliable telecommunications on the front burner was the same regime's decision to make illegal the many telephone and related Information Technology (IT) centres which had mushroomed in different parts of the country. The General's action was widely interpreted as an attempt to asphyxiate civil society by denying it the critical oxygen of information and communication.

Technology, in particular telecommunications technology, is therefore central to state-society relations in Africa, and plays a crucial role in the perennial struggle for state power. It is therefore hardly coincidental that the introduction of mobile telephony in a country like Nigeria has come with the return to civil rule. The truth is that military regimes, with their pathological obsession with dominating the public space, will never voluntary cede control to contrary social forces, which is what technological liberalisation is believed to be tantamount to.

In essence, and as amply illustrated by the foregoing, the state plays more than a marginal role in technology development in general, whether we are talking about its innovation, policy, or guidelines for its use. Castells has divided the impact of the state in relation to technology into two, what we might call, broadly, that of enhancement and stagnation. According to him, while

> society does not determine technology, it can, *mainly through the state*, suffocate its development. Or alternatively, again *mainly by state intervention*, it can embark on an accelerated process of technological modernization able to change the fate of economies, military power, and social well being in a few years. Indeed, the ability or inability of societies to master technology, and particularly technologies that are strategically decisive in each

historical period, largely shapes their destiny, to the point where we could say that while technology *per se* does not determine historical evolution and social change, technology (or the lack of it) embodies the capacity of societies to transform themselves, as well as the uses to which societies, always in a conflictive process, decide to put their technological potential (2002, 7) (Italics added).

A careful reading of Castells would suggest that the relationship between technology, the state and society is actually a dialectical one. While the state is wont to overdetermine the use of technology by society, society also uses technology to further its own ends, never mind that such may at times be fundamentally incompatible with the 'reason of state'. The result, for instance, is the use of telecommunications technology for various kinds of political agenda, ranging from the progressive, social justice, 'Seattle' type, to the activities of terrorists with one grudge or the other against the modern liberal state.

Mastery and adept use of telecommunications technology, needless to say, was crucial to the attack on United States targets on 11 September 2001. Indeed, if scholars like Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) are to be believed, a novel form of social organisation (after tribes, hierarchies and, markets) seems to have emerged around networks using sophisticated communication technologies and decentralized organisational structure. These 'smart mobs', to borrow Howard Rheingold's (2003) apt characterisation are "self-regulated through flat governance hierarchies and distributed power." (Ibid, 163).

The 'dialogue' between technology and society seems therefore bound to result in unanticipated consequences. (Telecommunications) technology seems to be a neutral force that forces in society (civil or otherwise) can mobilise for different projects. Certainly, across contemporary Africa, telecommunications technology, most especially mobile technology, continues to establish a huge impact on the social landscape. To cite just two quick examples, mobile technology is believed to be helping Ugandan farmers deal with the vagaries of the market, while Congolese have apparently started talking to one another again after decades of bitter conflict, thanks to the introduction of mobile technology in the Congo Democratic Republic (*BBC Focus Magazine* January-March 2004). It remains a moot point whether the same technology

will not be used to telling effect by combatants if there is a recurrence of conflict in the foreseeable future.

If the impact of technology on some aspects of social life is uncertain, the consequences for politics, especially democratic activism, are contested by scholars. Many remain outright sceptical about the democratic potential of new technologies, particularly media technologies. For Ake (2000), the public sphere brought into being by information technologies has hardly any boundaries, is too fluid, and too amorphous to elicit a sense of sharing in a social entity or to nurture political projects and democratic activism. Kroker and Weinstein (2000) agree, arguing that the new information superhighway "kills human agency and renders economic justice, democratic discourse, social solidarity and creativity obsolete" (quoted in Adebanwi 2001).

Other scholars seem more optimistic, insisting that "communities built inside machines or on air can be used to improve the ones outside of them" (Rheingold, 2003). Pertierra (2002) argues for example that mobile phones, through texting, have provided people with "more freedom to express themselves in a strictly defined cultural environment" (2002, 8). For Finqualievich (2001), new media technologies undergird the emergent concept of electronic democracy, essentially "the increasing use of telecommunications technology to strengthen transparency, intra- and inter-organisational communication and public participation in governance" (see Kuvaja and Mursu, op.cit. p. 18). According to him, electronic democracy transcends merely making information available on the net. Rather, it is about "changing management and organisation structures to enable citizens' participation and access to information" (ibid).

Recently, the optimists' case has been buoyed by the role that new media technologies have played in global political transformations, especially in the developing world, a good example being the 'coup de text', which culminated in the ouster of President Joseph Estrada in the Philippines in January 2001. While scholars fail to agree on the specific impact that "thumb tribes" (see Rheingold 2003) invoking the "power of the text" had on EDSA II,[13] there is no doubt that the more than 100 million texts that Filipinos exchanged daily (Agar 2003, 109) were significant in the

process of mobilisation against the presidency of Erap[14]. Although there are those who point out that EDSA II was ultimately not about people power but in reality a reflection of the middle class's influence and power of manipulation (see for example the brilliant discussion by Vicente Rafael (2003)), it is frequently cited as a crucial milestone in the use of technology for the purposes of social advocacy. More important, it has continued to inspire embattled groups elsewhere.

In the run up to the 19 September 2003 boycott in Nigeria for example, it was common to hear aggrieved subscribers argue that "if it (switching off handsets to force the hands of phone companies) succeeded in Argentina and the Philippines, it will succeed in Nigeria." Although it may be argued that the immediate object of the protest in Nigeria differed in form from that in the Philippines (while one was about using the boycott to force the GSM companies to, among other things, reduce tariffs and provide better services, the other concerned using the mobile phone as a tool for political overhauling), the ends are actually similar to the extent that one locates the protest in Nigeria within the right political context. As advanced earlier, the GSM boycott was not about the GSM companies alone but also about the totality of the rest of society in relation to the Nigerian state and economy.

On the back of this observation, two related questions might be posed: What sort of public sphere do new media technologies give rise to, and how effective are they in contesting hegemony? While these questions cannot be satisfactorily answered here, a tentative statement can be safely made as thus: New technologies of communication, in particular mobile telephones, appear to expand the existing territory of public expression. This expansion is important for African countries and the developing world where decades of autocracy have led to the progressive shrivelling of the public sphere. They (i.e. new technologies) thus energise civil society by critically complementing the raft of issues around which it has usually organised. In this way, they generate a *reason* for as well as a *means* of social democratic activism.

How does this happen? Schmidtke (1998) has advanced four related theses on the relationship of new technologies to collective action and political mobilization. According to him, new technologies reduce costs for collective action, reduce

individuals' costs for engagement and participation, intensify the actors' sense of engagement, and facilitate the formation of collective identity.

While this may indeed be the case, how this plays out rests squarely on the immediate socio-political environment in which technology and society inter-course. As Schmidtke himself has warned, at the end of the day, it is not the medium, but the social and political context that determines the contours of subsequent events.

The aim in the foregoing has been to locate the discussion in this paper in as broad a scholastic spectrum as possible in order to help in grasping the wider ramifications of what is at issue, which is how modern telecommunications technology, in this case mobile telephony, is interfacing with democratic politics and citizen action in Nigeria in significant ways. In what follows, I offer specific background information on telephony and the state in Nigeria.

3 Regimes of Jealousy

The telephone has been central to the projection of state power in Nigeria. Crucially, it has also been a strong element in social stratification as the possession of a telephone was supposed to be an index of where one belonged on the social ladder. According to one newspaper commentator, "in Nigeria, such amenities that have long been taken for granted as essential to modern living were preserved as status symbols. Public monopolies like NITEL (Nigerian Telecommunications Limited) were nursed at tax payers' great expense in furtherance of the trend."[15] This was arguably the mentality behind the remark attributed to Colonel David Mark, minister of communications under the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, to the effect that telephones are not for the poor. Given this situation, the question may be rightly asked as to whether the failure of the Nigerian state to provide efficient telephony services is attributable to its familiar bureaucratic anaemia or, perhaps, a conscious policy to starve civil society of a vital source of energy.

Whether consciously or otherwise however, the reality is that prior to the introduction of GSM technology in the country in 2001, Nigeria was a virtual telecommunications desert. Relevant figures buttress this. Pre-GSM, Nigeria ranked

globally as the third lowest in teledensity (average number of telephones per thousand population) after Afghanistan and Mongolia (Oparah 2003). Although the first telephone call in the country was made in 1901, up till a century later in 2001, Nigeria, with a population of 88 million (according to the disputed 1991 national population census) could only boast of 450,000 lines. A majority of these lines were provided by the state-owned Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) and a handful of private telecommunications operators (PTOs). Nevertheless, services were invariably abysmal, and NITEL joined NEPA[16] in the popular imagination as a spineless bureaucracy.

In addition, the structure of ownership of the existing lines seems to lend credence to the point made earlier about the telephone as a social delineator. The 450,000 odd lines were in the hands of less than 90,000 individuals and corporate organisations, many of which had more than 50 lines on their switch boards (Oparah, op.cit.). Furthermore, as telephones were intimately connected to social standing, new lines were almost impossible to acquire. The waiting time for a new telephone line was somewhere between 8 and 10 years, while the cost (minus installation charges) was about N80, 000 (about $800). This, at a time when the average annual salary was less than N40, 000 (about $400).

Instructively however, the issue of telecommunications, particularly of telephones, never disappeared from public discourse. Indeed, if anything, other developments in the larger society made its continuous debate imperative. One was the quantum leap in the number of citizens who were compelled by the prevailing economic situation to emigrate from the country. As this diaspora swelled, so did its needs, particularly those related to communication. This, among other factors connected to the impact of globalisation on the domestic economy served to put telecommunications issues on the front burner of public debate. As a result, successive governments felt compelled to pay lip service to the idea despite their apparent insincerity. For example, a core component of President Ibrahim Babangida's otherwise garbled strategy of economic deregulation (Olukoshi 1993, Biersteker and Lewis 1996) was a national telecommunications policy.

Indeed, the decree regulating the activities of the GSM companies was promulgated as far back as 1992[17]. However, as pointed out before, the policy could not come to fruition partly due to the Manichaean worldview of its initiator. Nor did his immediate successor fare any better. When General Sani Abacha took over, he tried to hijack the benefits of the privatisation and commercialisation, particularly the mobile telephone services. "His own idea was to frustrate other prospective investors out of the market and use his own local and foreign fronts to place his outfit, TELECEL, in the controlling and dominant position" (Nnanna 2003). General Abacha was succeeded by General Abdulsalam Abubakar who also saw telecommunications as an extension of state power and awarded numerous telecommunications licences, ranging from direct tele-access to value added services (Otuya 2003).

Upon being sworn in on May 29 1999, one of the first things the current president, Olusegun Obasanjo, did was to suspend all telecommunications licences issued by the previous regime, especially those meant for mobile access. He then set up a panel under an industry chieftain, Christopher Kolade, to audit and reassess all the licenses, at the end of which nearly all of them were cancelled.

4 The Coming of GSM Telephony

Having wiped the board virtually clean, the president decided to make public the process of issuing of licences to operators. This was in line with the radical *glasnost* that the newly elected regime was trying to promote. At the same time, the new dispensation was clearly trying to get the best from a telecommunications market that had witnessed many profound changes over the previous decade and had in the process become quite competitive.

Cellular telephony was born in the United States,[18] but credit for the simplification of its previously complicated technology is usually given to the Nordic countries from where it spread to the rest of Europe. While a comprehensive history of the mobile phone is outside our immediate attention, one critical point is worth setting out. This is the inevitable insertion of GSM into the specific politics of societies where the technology was either developed or refined. For instance, one reason why mobile

technology diffused with ease throughout continental Europe was because, in the words of Agar (2003),

> the European Commission, the civil service of the European project, had seen in GSM a political tool of immense value: telecommunications- and particularly GSM- would provide the infrastructure of a Europe ready to mount a convincing economic challenge to the US and Japan, and a pan-European telecoms network would encourage organisations to think European" (pp. 60-61).

The inauguration of the technology in December 1982 in Stockholm, Sweden by engineers and administrators from eleven European countries was therefore a profoundly political act. The acronym GSM initially stood for the countries involved (Groupe Special Mobile), but later became the Global Standard for Mobile Communications (Agar, op.cit. p. 56). By 1996, GSM phones could be found in 103 diverse countries, from Australia to Russia, from South Africa to Azerbaijan (ibid). In the same year, 7 million people (10 per cent of the population) in the Philippines owned a mobile phone- almost twice the number with landlines.

Many factors were responsible for this sudden explosion in the number of mobile phone subscribers and the evolution of what we might call a mobile culture. The first was cost. As the knowledge of mobile technology grew and dispersed, so did the price of the average phone fall (Ashurst 2004). Besides, as the prices fell, the "continuous miniaturisation of components" (Agar, p. 8) which had been a feature of electrical technology also ensured that the phones were increasingly lighter and more portable with time. By the year 2002, global subscriptions to cellular phones were reported to have exceeded the one billion mark (Agar, p. 5).

Apart from declining cost (and user-friendliness), other factors made the mobile phone a hit with the consuming public. One of these is symbolic, having to do with the way in which the mobile phone is rooted in the affirmations and processes of the modern self[19]. Perhaps it is more than a coincidence that the mobile phone has

become popular in age which has become obsessed with individuality and assertion of personal freedoms. There is something essentially liberating[20] about owning a mobile phone. For the owner, the mobile phone performs a myriad of 'miracles', central among which are the ability to be multi-locational or trans-locational. As the network connecting communities in the global village become denser, so also does the need for communication increase. One important dimension of this communicative necessity is the capacity to send messages in 'text' form[21]. Indeed, one might argue that this is the main reason behind the global popularity of mobile phones.

What makes the 'text' so important and popular? For one, it seems mutually economically beneficial to both mobile phone subscribers and operators. As Rafael (2003) has noted, "unlike voice messages, text messages take up less bandwidth and require far less time to convert into digitized packets available for transmission. It thus makes economic sense for service providers to encourage the use of text messaging in order to reserve greater bandwidth space for more expensive-and profitable- voice message" (p. 404). Second, texting provides subscribers "with a way out of their surroundings. Thanks to the cell phone, they need not be present to others around them." (Rafael, Pp. 405-6).

Which is not to say that texting does not have its own social drawbacks. Much has been said for example about its perceived tendency to "disrupt protocols of recognition and accountability" (ibid, p. 408). The point however is that it is in fact due to these and other personal and social possibilities (both negative and positive) that the mobile phone/texting has acquired its existing global popularity. Arguably the potential to bypass, negate, subvert, undermine, antagonise, or even complement the state, as the case may be, is encoded into the very ontology of the mobile phone.

This was the global state of affairs when Nigeria began the journey to license GSM operators in 2001. True to its earlier promise, the federal government threw open the auctioning process for four mobile licences in January 2001. At the end of the day, each licence was auctioned for a whopping $285m[22], and by August 2001, three of the GSM operators had begun operations. These were the Zimbabwean-owned Econet

Wireless Nigeria Limited[23], the South-African-owned MTN Limited, and the state-owned NITEL. So popular did mobile technology become that within a few months, the companies had exceeded their highest expectations. Initially, they had been sceptical about investing in the Nigerian economy because of its perceived volatility and the country's history of political instability. At the same time, they were unsure about the purchasing power of potential customers.

These fears were to give way to boundless optimism after a few months. For example, by September 30 2003, MTN could boast in excess of 1.3 million subscribers while its rival Econet had more than 850,000. Within the same period, both companies combined had spread their coverage to more than 1,500 villages and communities and over 100 cities (Aragba-Akpore 2003, Otuya 2003). In total, both MTN and Econet have a total of more than 3 million lines out of which 2.8 million is fully subscribed (Eke 2003). Overall, within 24 months, with new investments put at $3.8 billion (about N600 billion) and a teledensity of 2.6 telephone lines to 100 inhabitants, Nigeria's telecommunications sector was rated by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) as the fastest growing in Africa (ibid).[24]

The unexpectedly high number of users naturally translated into profits for the companies. In its first year of operation, MTN declared a pre-tax profit of N11 billion (*Daily Times* 11 August 2003, p. 10). Naturally too, with these profits came certain expectations, especially regarding the quality of services rendered by the GSM companies. Many consumers believed that the companies were simply not doing enough, preferring to cash in on an unsuspecting public to the detriment of good service. The companies disagreed, insisting that they were doing enough within the specific limitations of the Nigerian environment. These contrasting arguments are examined in the following section.

Subscribers versus GSM Companies: Between Service and Profit

> *Laye Obasanjo, eni to o kawe nlo phone* (In the Obasanjo era, even the unlettered use phones) (*The Guardian* February 29 2004).

> "It is true that what works elsewhere doesn't necessarily work in Nigeria. Elsewhere in the world, GSM services are not burdened by the kind of poor quality that afflicts Nigerian subscribers. Elsewhere in the world, GSM calls are made with one dial whether GSM to GSM; GSM to landline; or landline to GSM. The question of network overload nonsense does not arise" (Kingsley Osadolor 2003, *The Guardian* 23 September 2003).

These two statements capture the range of emotions provoked by the introduction of GSM telephony in Nigeria. While the first speaks to the popular elation, the second reflects public disappointment with the quality of services provided by the mobile telephone companies. There was a clear division between those who specifically blame the phone companies, and those who think that it was the vaguely defined, yet ubiquitous, 'Nigerian factor' that was making its mark felt yet again.

The disenchantment in question must be seen against the background of common expectations following Nigeria's return to civil rule after sixteen years of military rule. Among many anticipated 'dividends' of democracy, the coming of mobile telephony was expected to signal a radical improvement in the common lot. At the very least, mobile telecommunication was expected to accomplish some of the 'miracles' associated with its introduction in other parts of the world, for instance, 'abolishing' distance by facilitating the conduct of business and interpersonal relations. Behind this, arguably, was the 'telecommunicative fantasy' (Rafael 2003) of using the mobile telephone as a means of asserting a new collective identity, remodelling the terms of engagement with the state, and, above all, seeking and achieving social parity with the ruling class which had jealously monopolised communications technology for so long.

As such, it was apparently the felt inability of mobile technology to accomplish these tasks, or at least to begin to address them on an immediate basis, that fuelled the social anger which culminated in the boycott of 19 September 2003. Allied to this was the perceived failure of the state or the state-established National Communications

Commission to call the telephone companies to order and impose sanctions as and when necessary. Apparently, it was even felt in some cases that the companies operated in cahoots with the federal authorities, a factor which made them largely impervious to the agitation of the larger public. Indeed, many people were eager to draw parallels between the activities of the phone companies and those of oil companies in the oil 'producing' areas which were similarly notorious for conniving with the state to undermine the interests of the Nigerian public (Frynas 1998).

The subscribers' case can be categorised in terms of complaints and demands. The basic complaints centred on the following: arbitrary reduction of credits, uncompleted calls, poor signals (otherwise known as "no network coverage" or "network busy"), service breakage, constant changes in contract terms, "usurious" tariffs (believed to be among the highest, if not the highest, in the world), misleading advertisements on new services, oversubscribed networks, problem of interconnectivity among networks, unsolicited diversion of calls, text message failures, artificial scarcity of recharge cards, and surcharging of undelivered text messages.

To ameliorate this situation, the subscribers advocated the reduction of call tariff to N20 (as opposed to N50) per call per minute across board, reduction of SIM pack to N5,000 across aboard, immediate implementation of the per second-billing system (as opposed to per minute-billing) by all operators, free SMS service by all operators, free calls during weekends and off-peak periods, zero payment for all terminated and dropped calls, indefinite access (as opposed to limited but renewable access period) to the GSM network for all subscribers, immediate interconnection by all GSM operators, private telecommunication operators and NITEL, and cancellation of compulsory expiry dates for recharge cards.

Initially, these complaints and proposals circulated among subscribers and the wider public through mere word-of-mouth, text messages, phone calls and letters and articles in the print media. Beyond this, the fist concrete initiative was the decision by Dr. Deolu Ogunbanjo and Prince Bayo Omotubora to instigate legal action against the two then operating companies, MTN and Econet. This was on March 8 2002, a date that, in retrospect, becomes symbolic for the formation of arguably the pioneer organisation to champion the cause of mobile phone subscribers in Nigeria- National Association of Telecommunications Subscribers (NATCOMS). In the words of Dr.

Ogunbanjo himself, "It started when we sued MTN and ECONET last year…it was after the first hearing that we knew how much suffering Nigerian GSM users were going through. When we got out of the court so many people just surrounded us. It was a large crowd and that was where NATCOMS was formed" (see *The Guardian* 12 November 2003).

As the campaign against the GSM companies gathered steam, similar pro-customer organisations sprang up, particularly in the run up to the September 19 protest. Notably, nearly all of such organisations were formed for the specific aim of mobilising for the protest, as opposed to developing long-term strategies to combat the perceived excesses of the phone companies. As such, many of them have since fallen quiet after the protest, leaving the media as the only continuous vehicle of agitation. Examples of the many organisations which mushroomed and have since disappeared from the public view are: the GSM Subscribers Association of Nigeria, led by Ebun-Olu Adegboruwa, Unofficial Consumer Protection Agency (UCPA), Nationwide Action Against Corruption (NAAC), Concerned GSM Subscribers in Nigeria, National Association of Mobile Phone Subscribers, led by a university Professor, Bunmi Ayoade, Probity in Nigeria (PIN), and Telecommunications Subscribers Rights Agenda (TSRA).

While NATCOMS took the legal route, these associations spearheaded a popular campaign to prosecute and defeat the phone companies in the court of public opinion. To complement the strategies listed earlier, they also distributed posters and leaflets and made a representation to the National Assembly where they could count on many sympathetic ears (see Osuagwu 2003).

But it was the role of the media in the articulation of the demands that was to prove crucial in the process, thereby helping us to see the media itself in the context of the prevailing economic and social circumstances. The initial message of the protesters was circulated by text and it read, in part:

> From September 7-14 2003, switch off your GSM handsets between 10am-12 noon daily. Do you know that The GSM charge of N50 per minute is the highest in the world? In the US, a minute is N20, in Europe N23, in China N18, in South Africa N22 and in Ghana N23. Why N50 in Nigeria? This is a rip off! (Do not believe

> their story that they pay more for diesel in Nigeria).
> Right now GSM operators in the UK are about to further
> reduce charges on airtimes.

However, for some reason, this initial campaign led by Concerned GSM Subscribers was not popular with the majority of subscribers. Part of the explanation may have had to do with the fact that the organisers did not see the need to court the media and woo it to their cause. Not that this would have been difficult. A casual survey of the media would have discovered the widespread disaffection caused by a similarly profound disenchantment with the services of the GSM companies. This is evidenced by some of the headlines of stories focusing on their activities. The following sample of story headlines seems to reflect the overall mood of the media: "Two years of GSM pains and gains", "GSM providers rip Nigerians of millions daily", "GSM is 'Go Spend Money'", "GSM: Two years, too many troubles", "The Great GSM rip off", "Lies the networks tell", The GSM Scam", "Open Robbery", "GSM Operations: A colossal rip-off", "Grand Swindling Machine", "GSM dream turns sour", GSM: Network Robbery or 'Network Busy'?"

While therefore protesting subscribers limited themselves to letters to the editor and direct articles, the companies by contrast actively courted the media. One example of this determined courtship was the decision by the companies to give free handsets and lines to senior editors of media organisations[25]. This was complemented by the huge numbers of paid advertisements which they (the companies) caused to be published in different newspapers. These two factors made the phone companies extremely popular with the media.

Perhaps this was why the planned boycott was not an instant hit with the media, and part of the reason why the media eventually decided to come on board might be traced to the tenacity of the subscribers and the pungency of the text message which caught the popular imagination. In this regard, contrary to the earlier call to action (see above) which demanded that subscribers switch off for two hours everyday between 7-14 September, the latter text was simple and canvassed a one-day boycott. The message

read thus: "Let's force GSM tariffs down. Join a mass protest switch off ur fone on fri sept 19 '03. They'll lose millions. It worked in US & Argentina. Spread Dis txt".

It is also not unlikely that many were attracted to the cause by the 'knowledge' that the method had already worked in other parts of the world, thus making its success in Nigeria feasible. Besides, evidence that the protest had struck the right chord could be seen in the decision of at least two newspapers, *New Age* and *The Vanguard* to feature a countdown to the boycott. While *New Age* encouraged its readers to follow the boycott and related events, and send their views comments to its website, *Vanguard* for its part created a column to collate arguments and views from the point of view of both the protesters and the service providers. For some reason however, this column disappeared a few days before the boycott, spawning rumours that the newspaper had been induced to take a dive. Media opinion notwithstanding however, many subscribers were clearly dissatisfied with the services of the GSM companies.

If anything is clear from the discussion thus far, it is that the protesters did not have a monopoly of the public ear. The service providers, if we can call them that in the light of the quality delivery issues raised by the subscribers, also put their own case across as vigorously as possible. In a curious convergence with some of the claims made by the protesters, the companies also blamed factors integral to the Nigerian state and social environment for their alleged poor services. The easiest target was electricity, the erratic supply of which they blamed for their failure to guarantee reliable signals to their customers. The MTN claimed for instance that due to frequent power cuts, it used over a million litres of diesel a day to power generators at its installations across the country. The same situation apparently also applies to Econet for which the unreliability of power supply, according to Emeka Oparah, its Head of Corporate Affairs, means, for example, that while a base station costs USD250,000 in South Africa, the same facility goes for USD375,000 in Nigeria because it has to be reconfigured to make it compatible with the erratic power supply in Nigeria (Oparah 2003).

As a result, the GSM companies argue, rather than castigate them for charging exorbitant tariffs for their products, subscribers ought to appreciate the unique constraints imposed by the Nigerian socio-political environment. Some of these constraints include the $285 million dollars paid for licences which the companies considered to be among the highest in the world, and the failure of the federal

government to channel the same money into developing necessary infrastructure as earlier promised[26]; the huge investments in hiring private security services to protect staff and equipment; and the huge sums paid out as ransom whenever to liberate kidnapped staff and/or protect installations from damage by social miscreants, known in the Nigerian parlance as 'Area Boys'[27].

Other social constraints which, according to the companies, justified the allegedly high tariffs imposed for services are: the relatively low earnings of Nigerian consumers and the hugely unfavourable exchange rate of the Nigerian Naira[28] to the dollar in a dollar-denominated market; the dependence of the companies on expatriate staff who are necessarily remunerated in hard currency; and the dearth of well-trained Nigerian personnel and the attendant huge corporate investment in the training of new recruits. Finally, the service providers also claim that there are other hidden cost elements in the provision of GSM services which seem to justify the allegedly high tariffs. These include interconnection costs, overheads, taxes and levies, interest charges and amortisation on leased facilities (Oparah, op.cit.).

The majority of subscribers did not seem to have been impressed by these arguments, many rightly pointing out that as the GSM companies knew well in advance of the vagaries of the Nigerian socio-economic environment, they cannot use the same environment as an excuse to either charge high tariffs or justify poor services. In any case, the subscribers were convinced that the companies might have decided to invest in the Nigerian telecommunications industry *because of* the same environmental limitations, given the scope it is known to provide for corporate profiteering. They argue that it is because the companies were in cahoots with the National Communications Commission (NCC), for example, that they persistently got away with their embarrassing services, and that they were only out to make profit out of poor customers.

The GSM companies' case was not helped by revelations in the media about the Central Bank of Nigeria's concern that the companies' cash flow is usually not allowed to stay for more than a few weeks in Nigerian banks before being converted to foreign exchange for one purchase or the other, thus reinforcing the worry that they

may only be contributing to the cost of turnover (COT) of the banks rather than the overall economy (see *ThisDay* August 6 2003). This was the evidence many needed to confirm their suspicion that the companies were more interested in profit than service to their customers.

5 The Boycott and its Aftermath

This was the situation in the period leading up to the September 19 boycott. That day has since gone down in the annals as a landmark in the history of public agitation and customer-corporation relations in Nigeria. According to the organisers of the protest, an estimated 75 per cent of mobile phone users switched off their phones in apparent compliance with the boycott call, a claim which, if true, would have led to the companies losing millions of Naira.

The companies themselves admitted that a substantial number of customers actually switched off their phones, but insisted that these were fewer than the 75 per cent claimed by the protesters. What we do know of course is that a number of high profile individuals joined the protesters, thus giving their case definite publicity, if not a certain moral validation. Two examples are Gani Fawehinmi, lawyer and social justice crusader, and former external affairs minister, Bolaji Akinyemi.

To be sure, the public attitude towards the boycott was mixed. Although the print media generally recorded a simple victory for the protesters, it was also apparent that a significant number of people had decided not to obey the boycott for many reasons, including the possible loss of crucial business contacts and scepticism about the possibility of the boycott to achieve the intended ends.

But no one could doubt the dent that the boycott and the fractious debate leading to it had left on the corporate image of the GSM companies, and this, it seems, was more satisfying to the protesters. This perception was confirmed when, in the weeks following the boycott, the companies embarked on a charm offensive intended to win back the larger public and disaffected customers. For example, both MTN and Econet vigorously renewed their commitment to 'corporate social responsibility' by promoting a number of high profile social causes. Both, especially MTN, have become

visible in the sporting and educational arenas, and MTN's Book Aid Programme is promoted in the media as its own contribution to Nigeria's search for quality education[29].

For its part, Globacom, the indigenous-owned corporation which began operations in August 2003 has made a considerable impact in the promotion of soccer. It sponsors the premier division of the national soccer league which has since been renamed the *NFA Globacom Premiership*, and was a constant presence in the media in January 2004 when Nigeria settled for a bronze medal in the 24th edition of the African Cup of Nations football tournament. Many supporters who made it to Tunisia, the venue of the tournament, to cheer on the national soccer team, did so thanks to sponsorship from the company.

In addition to these, the protesters could also point to a few other concrete gains. The major one perhaps is the introduction of per second billing (PSB) as opposed to per minute billing (PMB) which subscribers complained about as it meant that they automatically had to pay for the whole of the next minute for calls that exceeded the previous minute even by a second. The excuse of the subscribers had been that it was impossible to offer customers per second billing until they attained "reasonable maturity" or at least three years after the commencement of operations. However, following the boycott and the introduction of *Glomobile* which gave its customers the per second billing option on August 29 2003, Econet and MTN had no choice but to follow suit. Yet, they did not do this without attempting to claw something back- subscribers who opted to be billed on the per second billing platform were made to pay a switch-over fee of NGN300 each (Oluseitan 2003).

In addition, in an apparent attempt to recoup some of the money they conceivably lost in making the per second billing platform available to interested customers, both MTN and Econet started charging specified amounts for a range of services that were previously free. For example, access to the MTN customer service centre and the customer's account balance (which used to be free) now attracted N6 per minute or 6k per second. To further assuage disgruntled customers, MTN also offered 100 free texts many of which, ironically, did not reach their destinations as usual. One other seemingly positive fallout of the boycott could be noticed in the increased determination of the Ernest Ndukwe-led National Communications

Commission (NCC) to ensure that the compliance of the service providers with the industry's basic regulations. To this end, it introduced the idea of the establishment of a Consumer Arbitration Panel in each of the 36 states of the country to listen to the grievances of subscribers and arbitrate where possible in disagreements between them and the GSM companies. In addition, the NCC issued a firm deadline on interconnectivity[30] to the companies, although as at the time of writing, the companies were yet to comply despite repeated calls and new deadlines[31]. The process leading to the boycott also called official attention to the plight of consumers, and it is on record that on at least two occasions, the senior officials of both MTN and Econet were invited to the federal capital in Abuja to defend themselves. They were also made to appear before the Senate Committee on Commerce and Communications for the same purpose.

6 Conclusion: Mobile Technology, Civil Society and the State in Nigeria

> GSM phones are a great blessing in our lives…These new phones provide direct personal contact. We relate to them in a private manner. GSM phones have similarly reduced the distances in our lives. Reuben Abati, "How Did We Live Without GSM? *The Guardian on Sunday*, 11 January 2004

> Religion was once known as the opium of the people…A new age has dawned with a new opium known as GSM. In this brave new world of capitalism and globalisation, GSM is the drug that lulled everybody into excited stupor. People are daily going broke in the name of making very expensive phone calls, but like all drug addicts kicking the habit is easier said than done.

There is no doubt that the introduction of mobile telephony has radically transformed the Nigerian social landscape. By the end of 2003, there were more than two million mobile phone subscribers in the country. This transformation is what the two commentators above speak eloquently of.

Evidently, it has also given civil society a new energy by providing a new *cause* around which to organise, and a new *platform* for challenging both statist and corporatist hegemonies. Furthermore, mobile telephony has come to manifest simultaneously as both the *subject* and *instrument* of agitation, lending a new dimension to the nature of the struggle for the public space in Nigeria. In this way, it ought to be noted that '9/19' was symbolic both in the context of anti-corporatist politics in the country; and the use of technological means (the text message in particular) as a tool for attempting to right perceived wrongs in the domains of both politics and communications.

Against the background of our initial aim however, what appears to be even more important is the way in which the totality of the boycott, beginning from the process of mobilisation for it, through the strategies employed by the main protagonists (protesters and service providers), and down to its aftermath helps illuminate the dynamics of actually existing civil society. We have seen (among other things) ordinary citizens' mobilisation (in this case against entrenched business interests) on the platform of civil society; the circumstances under which civil society 'erupts' or emerges; and the points on the social canvas at which civil society and the state both connect and depart. At the same time, considerable light has been shed on the configuration, strengths, and inevitably, weaknesses of actually existing civil society. This seems to be a good way of testing the validity or otherwise of claims made in the theoretical literature in respect of civil society in social formations like Nigeria's.

We now move on to some observations which follow logically from the foregoing and arise from the data presented in the preceding paragraphs. The first concerns the relationship between (mobile) technology and social democratic activism. It would seem from our analysis here that optimistic prognoses about the utility of mobile technology for social activism are partly justified. Through text messaging and concerted media mobilisation, the organisers of the '9/19' boycott were able to call official and corporate attention to the challenges facing mobile telephone users. And while the protest did not necessarily bring down a government as was controversially the case in the Philippines, it at least led to a number of decisions which partly redressed the situation of subscribers.

Nevertheless, as in the Philippines, it could also be argued that the boycott also showed up the very limitations of the use of technology for purposes of social activism. Rafael (2003) has noted in the case of EDSA II that the protesters neither challenged the nature of the state nor its class divisions, and that at the end of the day President Joseph Estrada was replaced by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, his Vice President and daughter of a previous president. In the case of the September 19 boycott, it can also be said that at the end of the day, the GSM companies appeared to have had the last word by taking back with one hand what they had given away with the other. But does this suggest that mobile technology is largely ineffectual? Again, that may not be the case. Instructively, in the Philippines, one of the first steps taken by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was to ban "malicious, profane, and obscene texts" (see Agar 2003, 109), a move which more than anything demonstrates her recognition of the potential power of text messaging.

One possible conclusion could be that mobile telephony or technology alone, while no doubt important, may not be sufficient to accomplish specific democratic objectives. For one, it seems to be more effective when aligned with other instruments geared towards the same end. Second, and more important, its effectiveness is greatly determined by the prior strength and creativity of the social forces in whose hands it is a weapon. Technology (including mobile technology), it seems, does nothing on its own rather specific social conditions shape its use and effects. To cite Agar's dialectical observation about the Filipino experience, "mobile phones are moulded by the countries they are used in and give form to the nation in return" (2003, 110). Thus, for Nigeria, while mobile telephony has no doubt come to be seen as a veritable instrument of political struggle, its potential effectiveness is bound to be determined by the way in which it is used. And while it is definitely a welcome addition to civil society's arsenal, it may not necessarily fulfil the fondest 'telecommunicative fantasies' about securing total victory in the contest for social and economic justice.

Another observation centres on civil society, especially how its character seems to change in relation to the issues around which it mobilises at a given historical moment. From the Nigerian case outlined above, it would seem as if social adversity and a perception of injustice (economic or political) are required to rouse civil society into action.

Following Nigeria's return to civil rule in May 1999, the landscape that is civil society has been rapidly transformed due to the 'desertion' of many influential figures to the state sector, a process which, many believe, has led to the relative emptying out and weakening of civil society.[32] As part of the same process, many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which had sprung up earlier to mobilise against military rule have sought to reinvent themselves, with many leaving Lagos (the former capital and seat of democratic activism) for Abuja, federal capital since 1991, to seek new opportunities. The overall result of this process was to weaken civil society and expose it to the depredations of the state.

This was the state of affairs as agitation for the boycott gathered and spread, and it comes as no surprise that many of the public voices that had fallen relatively silent in the previous three years or so saw an opportunity to weigh in on behalf of the public and make themselves heard again. In this sense, the boycott could be said to have presented civil society with both a new platform for mobilising as well as a welcome opportunity to re-charge itself.

Yet, given what we have observed earlier about the limitations of technology, and mobile telephony in particular, it is obvious that civil society cannot rely absolutely on it in order to reinvent itself. Indeed, many associations sprang up in the heat of the day to champion the cause of the protesters, but as we have noted earlier, the majority of them have since become strangely inaudible, highlighting the critical need for organisational continuity on the part of civil society actors. In this way, it is reassuring to observe that, after the boycott, some of the organisations continued to pursue the judicial option. For example, on November 23 2003, an Abuja Federal High Court granted a group, Nationwide, permission to sue the GSM companies for failure to connect their networks (Okenwa 2003).

My final point concerns the relationship between civil society and the state. The state was a recurring decimal in the process which we have outlined in this paper. It came under attack from civil society organisations and citizens who thought that it had failed to take firm action against the erring telephone companies. Some went to the extent of accusing it of acting in cahoots with the service providers. The latter, for their part, blamed it for not providing adequate infrastructure (like regular electricity and security) that might have made life less difficult for them and easier to satisfy their

customers. They also blamed it for not channelling the huge sums paid for licences into the development of required infrastructure for the communications industry.

Leaving the merits or demerits of these allegations aside, what definitely emerges is that to be effective, civil society requires a state that is efficient, transparent, firm, and able to enforce compliance with its wishes without degenerating into tyranny. Notably, the GSM companies failed to link up their trunks despite repeated calls from the federal authorities to do so. While it is not unknown for business concerns to try to maximise profit, experience shows that it usually takes the firmness and determination of the state to rein them in. Lastly, it is also apparent that no matter how determined, civil society, ranged against the immense powers that huge business concerns are capable of mustering, cannot create the desired changes in society alone. It requires a strong state that is resolutely committed to the rule of law and social transparency.

Notes

[1] The recent global upsurge of interest in civil society has inevitably produced a chaos of understandings. For a brilliant summary of a confusing (and often confused) debate, see the "Introduction" by John and Jean Comaroff to their edited volume (1999). In this paper, civil society will be understood as the free association of ordinary citizens in pursuit of the common good. The conceptual lineage to which this understanding is closest is what might be called the Dahrendorf School which envisions civil society as 'the anchorage of liberty'. See Dahrendorf (1990).

[2] Such claims range from the outright denial of the possibility of civil society in African and other non-Western societies (Gellner 1994), to other controversial assertions about the character of civil society in Africa, and the nature of its relationship with the state. For a summary of this debate see Obadare (2004).

[3] For more on this see Adebanwi 2001

[4] Most probably a pseudonym for Dr. Deolu Ogunbanjo

[5] See *The Guardian*, Lagos, 19 September 2003

[6] Here, we draw theoretical inspiration from Albert Hirschman's landmark study of Exit, Voice, and Loyalty (1970)

[7] For more on this see for example Borgmann (1987), Heidegger (1977) and Cooper (2002).

[8] See for example Bauman 2000, and Gaonkar and Povinelli's incisive introduction to *Public Culture*'s 'Accidental Issue' on 'Technologies of Public Persuasion' Volume 15, Number 3, Fall 2003

[9] "Informational societies", he argues, are those "in which information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power because of new technological conditions emerging in this historical period". "Informational societies", of course, are different from mere "information societies" in which "information, in its broadest sense, e.g. as communication of knowledge, (is) critical" (parenthesis added). See Castells (2002, 21)

[10] Quoted in Kuvaja and Mursu (2003)

[11] Many African/ist commentators also concur with this conclusion. See for example Yau 2003, Williams 2004, Cogburn and Adeya 1999, and De Alcantara 2001

[12] This is not unheard of as the government of China, for instance, continues to impose varying degrees of restriction on its people.

[13] After EDSA I, the popular insurrection against Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. The full meaning of EDSA is Epifanio de los Santos Avenue

[14] 'Erap' was Joseph Estrada's text-compliant nickname. It means 'buddy' backwards in Tagalog, the Philippines' main language.

[15] See Ochereome Nnanna, op.cit.

[16] National Electric Power Authority. For more on NEPA see Olukoju (2004).

[17] See *The Guardian*, Lagos, 12 November 2003

[18] For a global history of the mobile phone see Agar (2003).

[19] For more on this see Myerson 2001.

[20] This is an argument that can be stood on its head as it can also be argued that in a sense, the mobile phone possesses the capacity to 'imprison' or fixate.

[21] The first text message was sent accidentally in 1993 by Riku Pihkonen, a Nokia engineering student. At that time, it was not thought to be important. See Agar, op.cit., p. 169.

[22] The high cost of the licences was to become an issue in the run up to the 19 September 2003 boycott. The GSM companies claimed that the cost was one of the highest in the world, seemingly justifying the exorbitant tariffs which the protesters also claimed were among the highest in the world.

[23] As at the time of writing, it was embroiled in a long-drawn takeover bid by South-African based Vodacom, a subsidiary of Vodafone UK.

[24] The sudden explosion of GSM in Nigeria was, admittedly, part of a continent-wide momentum. 95.61 per cent of African users use GSM. In the past 12 months, there has been a 101.85 per cent growth of GSM users in Africa, as opposed to a growth rate of 52.49 per cent globally. Vodacom, the biggest African network is Vodacom has over 7.5 million subscribers, while the total number of African subscribers (all technologies) is 34.3 million. The biggest market is in South Africa with 14.4 million users. This is expected to grow to 19 million by 2006 (Ashurst 2004, 20).

[25] Personal communication with a newspaper editor, Lagos, July 2003.

[26] It is on record that this money was paid into the federation account from where it was eventually shared among the three tiers of government-federal, state and local.

[27] For more on the phenomenon of 'Area Boys' see Herault and Adesanmi (1997).

[28] As of summer 2005, N255 (Nigerian Naira) exchanged for £1.00 (GBP).

[29] See for example *The Punch*, Lagos, June 12 2003.

[30] This was one of the issues behind the boycott. The service providers could not agree on the modalities for opening their trunks to one another, making it impossible at best and nightmarish at worst for users to make calls between networks. One result is the quite ridiculous sight of consumers with three different handsets for the three different networks.

[31] The first deadline expired on November 20 2003.

[32] Personal Interview, Tope Toogun, Lagos Nigeria, March 2003.

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