

Bolette M. Christensen

Constructing a Social Movement The case of ATTAC: A case of constructive journalism

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For a research project under MODINET a case study of the emergence and organizing of the social movement organization (SMO) ATTAC in Denmark has been chosen as a starting point for the investigation of

(1) the relations between the network society, including network based kinds of governance, and the network culture of political practices from below.

(2) the relations between global and local practices of power, resistance and alternative.

(3) The functioning of the media in the organizing of power, resistance and alternative societal projects, with a particular focus on the combinations of “new” media, based on interactive or semi-interactive information and communication technology, and “traditional” mass media .

The movement organization ATTAC may be seen as part of a broader network based “movement field”, sometimes characterized as “the anti-corporate movement”, manifesting itself in places as Seattle, Nice, Prague, Gothenburg, and Genoa, among others (Starr 2000; Smith 1997; Kriesberg 1997; Castells 1997; Klein 2001).

A striking feature of ATTAC is the “media-ness” of the organization. The name, taking on the function of a trademark, as well as the phenomenon of ATTAC as a “popular movement”, had existence in the media before any member, participant, or activist ever entered the organization. The “mode of existence” of the proclaimed movement was the stage of the mass media before it was ever fulfilled in social practice and agency. This holds true for France, where the phenomenon was born, with Denmark following the same pattern. Here the newspaper Information has been the prime mover of staging, constructing, articulating and marketing the movement organization, as well as supplying organizational tools like spaces for people to meet and communicate, electronically in the form of a web forum, and eventually by summoning a physical meeting in the “space of place”.

This paper will be focusing upon the role of the newspaper Information in the initial staging of the organization.

Introducing the need and the answer

In December 2000 the following could be read in an editorial in the newspaper Information:

“It is a time of tremendous change. The liberalization of financial markets, the increased free trade, the fall of the wall and the explosive development of the internet have sparked off a stormy globalization process, which in these years breaks down all borders and changes any economic, political, social and cultural relation. We are at the transition to a completely new society that may be marked by tremendous turbulence, enormous brutality, the aggressive competition and fundamental unpredictability of the free market forces. This society in the power of hyper capitalism – where currency brokers on a daily basis transfer thousands of billions of dollars – is vulnerable to new financial crises, fall in demand, social breakdowns and political-cultural conflicts. (...)

But this new, feverish society implies new opportunities. It holds the potential for great creativity, for reform of stiffened structures, for new ways of learning and cooperation across all barriers (...)

A new global civil society is needed. A barrier-breaking movement which (...) can defy speculation capital and market. A movement which can save the EU and ensure that the European Union becomes an energetic player for equality and sustainability.” (Information, editorial, December 20th 2000)

After having told about the successful organizing of ATTAC in France, the editorial ends up with this appeal:

“Would it not now be the proper time for civil society to manifest itself and let a Danish section of ATTAC become one of the ways to get influence on the future.” (Information, editorial, December 20th 2000).

The newspaper Information is a relatively small, traditionally mildly left wing, paper appealing mostly to students and intellectuals. It was founded during the second world war as an illegal paper for the resistance movement. Traditionally it has been covering the movement sector and in the year of 2000 the growing so called anti-globalization movements (or as they are more properly named in an English context: the *anti-corporate* movements, see Starr 2000).

What is salient in the case of ATTAC is the active, *constructive*, role the newspaper took on in actually creating a movement which until then did not exist in a Danish context.

Until december 2000 the paper had dealt with the anti-globalization movements in the plural. However, after January 2001, a campaign was set to work, concentrating exclusively on the so called movement of ATTAC, subsuming all resistance to economic globalization under the heading of ATTAC. It was proclaimed as *the* anti-globalization movement, the leader or at least the coordinator of the movement field as such. From now on, all efforts were seemingly concentrated on the task: to create an ATTAC in Denmark.

Among the questions one could ask, are (1) why did the paper to this degree engage in the constructing of a certain movement, and (2) how long could the construction which the paper promoted actually fulfil the promises, i.e. how much power could the paper in the long run exercise over how the movement was to develop, when it first came into existence?

The Danish context: The debate over EU

The left wing (that is, to the left of the Social Democracy) of Denmark has been predominantly against the EU. The debate over EU has been harsh, with very little openness from either side. For some of the editors and journalists of Information this has been very frustrating, as they have eventually moved towards a pro-EU stand. An estimate says that half of the journalists at the paper are students of political science, a study dominated by pro-EU positions. To these journalists the stubborn opposition to EU among the Danish left wing was at the least an annoyance. They had a profound wish to change the Danish agenda, away from the pro or contra in relation to the EU, towards a more “constructive” and, in their own words, “globally oriented” debate over the concrete politics of the EU. Accordingly, one of the prime opponents as they saw it, would be the left wing anti-EU organization, the June Movement. However, the agenda was not easy to change. The paper would probably lose a substantial part of its readers, if it openly proclaimed a frank pro-EU stand. The discovery of ATTAC offered an opportunity to change the agenda, fight the June Movement, and prepare the ground for a more “constructive” debate over EU, without losing the left wing image and constituency.

ATTAC was started in France, initiated by an editorial in the paper *Le Monde Diplomatique*, originally around the claim for the Tobin tax, a taxation on financial transactions. It was supplemented with a few further claims, among others the abolition of tax havens, and releasing the third world countries of their debts. ATTAC rather fast managed to get an impressive number of members and supporters in France. All in all ATTAC in itself was reformative, directed towards democratization of global capitalism by means of international institutions. And the French ATTAC sees the EU as an important instrument against American domination.

Covering the Nice EU meeting for Information in December 2000, a young journalist (and student of political science) heard of the French ATTAC movement and was enthusiastic about what he heard.

“I do not want to hide at all that to us there is some political to it. There has been a turn in the attitudes of Information in the direction of what French ATTAC represents. That you are a believer in federal institutions in a clearly democratic structure. Where a movement as ATTAC enters the scene with a possible middle position. Where it becomes possible to relate critical to the concrete politics of EU without falling into this discussion

about sovereignty. We think about how we can in some way get things going again, and here ATTAC enters as an interesting player.

(...) All the time our aim was to create a debate on other terms than those that had hitherto dominated the debate over EU, and it should give room for the new generation to get involved” (Interview with journalist at Information)

A visit to Sweden. Constructing the image

In the autumn of the year 2000 a booklet was published in Sweden (Clinell 2000), dealing with the French ATTAC. The book was enthusiastic and proclaimed a new worldwide movement. It was reviewed in Information in an article transcending the genre of review, moving more in the direction of enthusiastic proclamation, ending up with the exclamation “A new world is possible”.

The appearance of the book started the organizing of a section of ATTAC in Sweden. In the beginning of January 2001 a meeting was held, formally starting the movement. The journalist from Information was sent to cover it. As it was a weekend it had to make a story for the Monday paper. And, as Mondays were ordinarily short of really good stories, as few journalists were working on sundays, it had to be something that could hit the front page. So, the journalist had to construct a story telling something spectacularly new.

What the journalist found at the meeting were 8-900 people gathered, among these a considerable number, though less than half of them, young and students as himself: “a group of people with whom I could immediately identify” (Interview with journalist at Information)

The rest of the participants were older, and many were already organized elsewhere; some had allegedly a past in the peace movement. However, the sight of all those young people carried the journalist away. And the extensive use of the internet, which the groups from the Swedish ATTAC practiced, filled him with enthusiasm and seemed to him to usher a new kind of organization, transcending old fashioned and what he considered traditional bureaucratic political organizations.

The journalist had to produce a front page article. It had to be sensational. So he produced two articles, giving them a sensationalist twist.

Writing the articles, he chose to foreground the youth and political innocence of the participants, backgrounding the presence of the older and more experienced participants which actually attended the meeting as well. The word “young” was repeated 12 and 11 times in each of the two articles respectively.

Even recognizing the breadth of the mobilization, he “chose to focus on the fact of it being young people. And I do that out from the consideration that to me it is what is the sensational thing (...) It has to be sensational. And the angle

I lay on it is that it is something that young people in Sweden participate in” (Interview with journalist from Information)

These articles were then to represent the authorized construction of what ATTAC was and should be, not only in Sweden but in Denmark as well. At least what Information meant it to be.

It was to represent breadth, including intellectuals and activists, young and older, experienced and not experienced. However, at the same time it had to be dominated by young and politically innocent people. It had to transcend the left-right divide in politics, and at the same time it had to be profound anti-corporate, against neo-liberalism and economic globalization on the basis of the forces of the free market. It had to organize civil society, and at the same time be directed towards solutions at the institutional level. And it had to be dominated by people who did not oppose the EU. Instead EU should be seen as part of the solution to the problems of the world.

Still, there was not a single member or participant in Denmark. The movement had come into being, but it encompassed no participants. It still had to move from virtuality to some form of reality

Creating the movement

Now, the competing newspaper Politiken began to bring articles on ATTAC, adopting the construction Information had brought into being. This was not totally welcome at Information.

“Then Politiken suddenly launches some longer articles on ATTAC. And Politiken is probably the main competitor of Information. According to subscribers and the like. So we (the journalist and the editors) decide that in the coverage of globalization and grass-root movements Information should be leading. So if you are interested in these matters it must be Information you should read (...) So I am asked to make an element on ATTAC every day for the following month (...) It is basically commercial marketing of Information” (Interview with journalist at Information)

However, at this time there is no ATTAC in Denmark. And it is difficult to keep on writing about Sweden. You have to start somewhere to make a story every day. And, “at the outset there is nothing”. Tales are created. But they have to be embodied some way or other.

As told by the journalist, it was decided that there should be at least one element on ATTAC every day in Information in the following month. The problem was that ATTAC did not exist in Denmark. And it was impossible to keep on writing of the Swedish ATTAC. Actually, the solution became to create a Danish ATTAC by means of an extensive campaign.

First of all, a web site for debate on ATTAC was established and heavily marketed by the newspaper. Secondly, and probably most important, a public meeting was announced and arranged, taking place in the end of February.

The web site functioned better than could be expected, with a lively debate, however not always with the content Information had wanted. Among others, the anti-EU left wing showed a strong interest in the new movement. The debate on the EU could not be held outside the debate on ATTAC. And several established organizations showed an interest in the new phenomenon. The young and the innocent did not dominate the web debate, as Information had in mind. And unfortunately an organization called Counter-ATTAC was started, and interfered with the debate. This group consists of strong and convinced neo-liberals, pro economic globalization in all its manifestations. The entrance of Counter-ATTAC was much to the annoyance of Information, as the divide was established between neo-liberals and ATTAC, thereby not transcending the left-right divide. And not seeing the anti-EU left as the main opponent for ATTAC.

Anyway, the web debate delivered material for the paper to print, so helping in the production of at least an element per day.

Starting the movement in real world

After the movement had been heavily promoted in Information, and by means of the web site, the public meeting was held on February the 24th.

Originally, the public meeting had been planned as an ordinary meeting for debate over the whole field of anti-corporate movements, recognizing that no single movement or movement organization could account for the breadth of global anti-corporate movements. However, as the paper had initiated the promotion of ATTAC, the whole matter moved from the plural to the singular. The meeting, as well as the newspaper coverage as such, came to concentrate on ATTAC, to such a degree that the whole field of anti-corporate movements was to be identified with this single organization, ATTAC. ATTAC was assigned the role of coordinator and leader of the anti-corporate movements as such.

This should later show to be fatal. As the breadth of anti-corporate movements was to be encompassed in one single organization, so ATTAC in the news coverage would be the one organization responsible for all the different kinds of manifestations of the many groups acting in the anti-corporate field. At the same time ATTAC was claimed actually to encompass a breadth of constituency, which probably no organization would be able to realize.

The February meeting was heavily promoted, and around 1000 people were gathered. The paper Information at one and the same time stressed the diversity and breadth of those participating, and the predominance of young and politically innocent, though extremely enthusiastic, participants, finally having found a new way of dealing with politics.

“The enrolments pour in by letter and by e-mail from all parts of the country, yes, some people even enroll several times from sheer bubbling enthusiasm. And at some places in the country people cannot wait at all, but have already started to invite to local meetings in order to prepare local groups of the ATTAC movement” (Editorial in Information February the 7th 2001)

As Information claimed that the paper was just a “midwife” for the movement, they did actually start organizing local branches at this meeting in February. So there was more to the role of Information than just to act as a midwife. The paper came to represent ATTAC in the other media as well.

“That was the role of Information. We have been the ones that should tell about what the whole thing was about, for example in television. The reason for the use of us was that we were the ones who could actually tell the story, *because we had invented it ourselves*. In relation to all this with generation, network society and organization by means of the internet. Because, at that time there was still no real organization” (Interview with journalist at Information)

But from the time of the meeting in February the paper had to give up its control over the construction. And the baby of ATTAC did not turn out exactly as the midwife Information had had in mind. It began living a life of its own, now that the organization actually got members and participants and they formed local groups. After the meeting the movement began living a life of its own. Even though Information tried to set the agenda for the new organization, the paper could no longer control its own construction.

“The meeting today is the first step. Ahead is – besides of non-violent activism – lots of study groups, analytical work, internal discussions” (Editorial in Information February the 24th 2001)

— “More than 1.000 people then participated in a grand meeting seething with enthusiasm, power and renewed courage to take part and coresponsibility for the management of the globalized society. After the meeting people swarmed out to build local ATTAC groups and networks” (Editorial in Information October the 6th 2001)

Threat from the left

Information had stressed the organizing of ATTAC to be for the young and politically innocent. And especially the people from the anti-EU movement should be held outside. To Information the main enemy of ATTAC should be the June Movement and those on the left wing opposing the EU construction, and *not* the neo-liberals from Counter-ATTAC.

This may also be seen in what could be a special Danish context. As the extreme right has marched forward, the “traditional” left, called the 68’s, is seen

as “dinosaurs”, and has been miscredited in public opinion, not least in the media in Denmark during the 90’s.

However, when reality entered the organizing of ATTAC, people from the left wing organizations could not be held outside. The heavy marketing of ATTAC in itself made the upcoming organization an attractive playing ground for the established organizations. And the journalists and editors of Information were alarmed. This was not what they had intended. “In some way or other we had to make shure that they (the left wing organizations) were kept out” (Interview with journalist at Information).

However, Information did not succeed in keeping “traditional” left wing people out. Young and not so young people already organized at the left did attend ATTAC – as they had actually done in Sweden as well. But to Information the judgment was definitive. “If there is not a majority of people not organized elsewhere it is a stillborn project” (Interview with journalist at Information). And first and foremost: It is no longer interesting for a newspaper.

Information had constructed ATTAC as something in opposition to the “traditional” left wing. However, when the organization was to be realized, it turned out to be much more “left wing” than Information had wanted it to be. And Information was disappointed. And so they stopped being interested in the upcoming organization. They stopped covering it in the daily newspaper, especially in a positive manner.

“Information turns from having a positive view to have a real negative. Maybe we get disappointed (...) Anyway I can tell that I personally get this problem that I can feel I have an accumulated disappointment. Because it has moved in quite another direction than I had hoped for” (Interview with journalist at Information)

The loss of news-value

The disappointment of Information shows in the overall coverage of ATTAC in the year to come. Below it is shown in numbers. The table shows the number of contributions in Information containing the word “ATTAC” per month, from November 2000 until December 2001.

Month	Misc.	Debate	Feature article	Editorial	Analysis	Sum
11	4					4
0012	12		3		2	17
0101	22		16			39
102	43		22	2	5	73
0103	22		30		3	58
0104	8		14		1	23
0105	10		4		2	16
0106	14		10		1	26

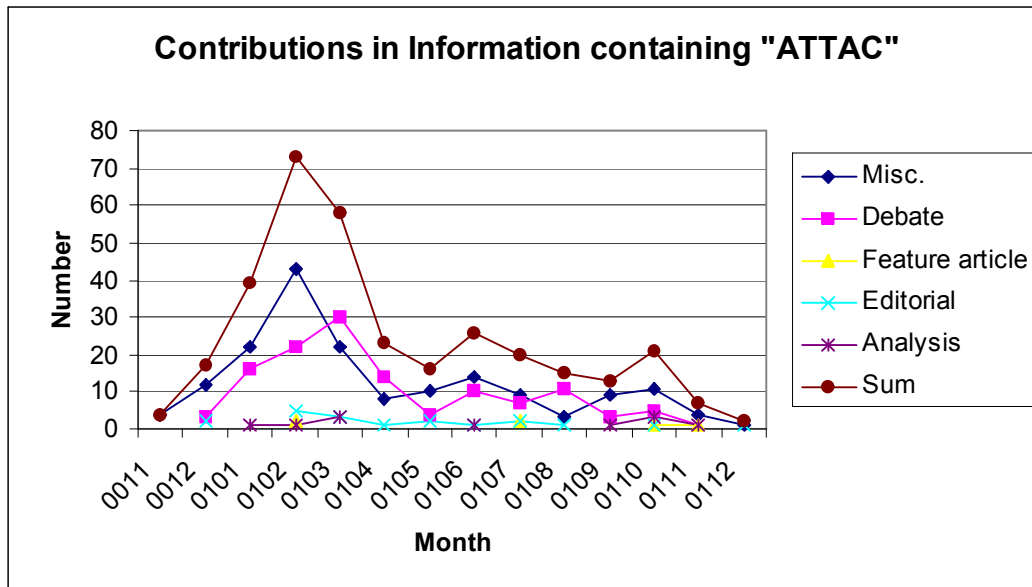
0107	9	7	2	2		20
0108	3	11		1		15
0109	9	3			1	13
0110	11	5	1	1	3	21
0111	4	1	1		1	7
0112	1			1		2
9999						2
	172	126	6	19	11	336

Below the same is shown, distributed by percent.

Misc.	Month	Debate	Feature article	Editorial	Analysis	Sum
2,3	0011	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	1,1
6,9	0012	2,3	0,0	10,5	0	5,0
12,7	0101	12,6	0,0	0,0	9,0	11,6
25,0	0102	17,4	33,3	26,3	9,0	21,7
12,7	0103	23,8	0,0	15,7	27,2	17,2
4,6	0104	11,1	0,0	5,2	0	6,8
5,8	0105	3,1	0,0	10,5	0	4,7
8,1	0106	7,9	0,0	5,2	9,0	7,7
5,2	0107	5,5	33,3	10,5	0,0	5,9
1,7	0108	8,7	0,0	5,2	0,0	4,4
5,2	0109	2,3	0,0	0,0	9,0	3,8
6,3	0110	3,9	16,6	5,2	27,2	6,2
2,3	0111	0,7	16,6	0,0	9	2,0
0,5	0112	0,0	0,0	5,2	0,0	0,5
0,0	9999	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,5
100,0	Sum	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0
172	N	126	6	19	11	336

In the beginning, before ATTAC was actually started in Denmark, the coverage is intense, especially before the grand meeting in February. Almost 40 percent of all contributions are from February and before. However, after ATTAC actually came into being, the coverage declines.

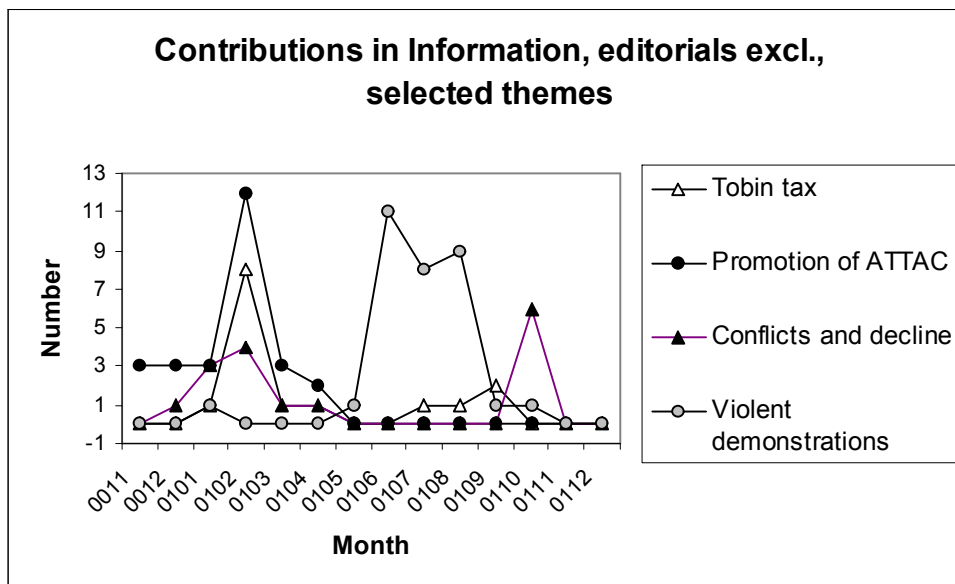
This becomes more evident when depicted graphically. While the number of contributions in the category Miscellaneous – which covers news articles and journalistic reports – peaked in connection to the grand meeting, the number of debate contributions (among which are reader's letters) peaked the following month. The grand meeting seemed to generate debate. In the course of the summer the violent demonstrations in Gothenburg and Genoa gave some publicity, and the official start of the organization in October meant a bit of coverage, but at no point of time is the coverage as intense as in the promotion period around the time of the grand marketing meeting.



The violent demonstrations

The way ATTAC had been promoted, it had become synonymous with globalizations movements as such – being proclaimed as the center, leader and coordinator of the whole field of anti-globalization movements. Now in the course of the summer 2001 two events occurred. The violent demonstrations in Gothenburg and in Genoa. And as ATTAC had been proclaimed the head of the movement field, so it was held responsible for the violence. This did not make the conditions for the upcoming organization better.

In the paper of Information it showed by a changing focus. Now it became essential to oppose the violence and accordingly deny the breadth – especially including the activism – as something which ATTAC should encompass. In the paper of Information the stress was put on criticism of the violence when ATTAC was mentioned, as shown in the graphics below.



The theme “Promotion of ATTAC” covers contributions which accentuate the news value, the tremendous support and appeal by ATTAC. It is here ATTAC is promoted, marketed and constructed. Contributions with this as the main theme dominated in the promotion period around the grand meeting. It follows the promotion of the Tobin tax which peaks in this period as well. But in the course of the summer, violence connected to demonstrations becomes the dominant theme.

The theme of conflicts and decline covers reports on the internal conflicts and the proclaimed death of ATTAC. They dominate at the time where ATTAC was officially started with a national congress in October. So Information did not actually contribute to a fruitful official start of the organization. Quite on the contrary.

From the very positive articles in the promotion and construction period – before any Danish ATTAC was established – the stress was on the negative, when ATTAC was actually realized as an organization populated by people.

How far can you construct a movement?

“We had written something into it which it does not fulfil. And in the meantime we have been coupled to ATTAC in the public. That is, the reputation of Information has been coupled to ATTAC. And when ATTAC then enters a spiral of death, we fear that our coupling to ATTAC in the public will continue (...) We have had this activist engagement in it and had some pure commercial, strategic reasons. (...) But you risk a boomerang effect if they do something foolish. Then it is dangerous. If those people acted as living billboards for Information it would be fine. But when they suddenly begin to act differently, it is suddenly problematic.” (Interview with journalist at Information)

To Information ATTAC has become a sinking ship. And the newspaper has been busy turning its back on it. But the question is if is the fault of Information or the fault of those who actually entered into the organization and tried to realize it.

The construction of ATTAC as pretended by Information may have been built on sand or at least on an insufficient analysis from the very start. No doubt, that new social movements, especially the globally oriented movements, do attract young people. But, as was the case in Sweden, experienced and already organized people will enter the scene and become active in starting and organizing of even new movements. And the hope that you could overcome the left-right dimension is probably naive. Trying to control global finance is not the agenda of the neo-liberal right. The criticism of global capitalism has to create cleavages, and there will be opposing sides in the matter. Finally, the heavy stress on institutional solutions may not create the sort of enthusiasm as is needed in an active movement.

The field of globally oriented movements is first and foremost a field of anti-corporate movements. And so these movements must have opponents. The hope of Information was to create a movement, institutionally oriented and not suffering from the pollution of the Danish EU debate, appealing to enthusiasm and cool common sense at the same time, both to breadth and to the small number of people willing to spend most of their free time in acting politically. As long as the construction of the movement was in the hands of the paper, the construction may have been successful. But when real people were to populate the organization, reality had to take over.

For the time being, ATTAC is an organization trying to establish and consolidate itself. Many of the people who participated in the initial euphoria, created by the campaign of Information, have dropped out. So, in that sense, ATTAC is now just a movement organization fighting to establish itself. And hoping, together with a long list of other groups and NGO's, to play a positive role in preventing violence when Copenhagen becomes the place of international meetings, following the Danish chairmanship of the EU this year. And this may not be too bad after all.

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