

# Media Monitor

Center for Media and Public Affairs • 2101 L Street, NW • Suite 505 • Washington, D.C. 20037

202-223-2942

Volume I, Number 9

December, 1987

## The Aids Story Science, Politics, Sex and Death

How have the media covered the AIDS epidemic? We examined 250 stories in the *New York Times* and the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news from the June AIDS Conference through the Gay March on Washington in October. The results:

- \*Media Counsel Calm - Most stories portrayed public fears as excessive and the general public's risk level as low. (p.4)
- \*Spotlight Testing - Sources were evenly divided on the usefulness of mandatory AIDS test (p.3). Most medical experts opposed testing, but most non-expert sources supported it. (p.4)
- \*Downplay Gay Role - Only four stories specified that AIDS is transmitted through gay sex (p.3); only 9% of victims shown on TV were identified as gay. (p.4)
- \*TV Out of Focus - TV visuals of AIDS patients rarely showed gays, minorities or drug users. (p.5)

## Gorbachev Goes to Washington

- \*Summit Spectacular - 168 summit stories in 11 days filled over 6 hours of airtime on TV nightly news, nearly 60% of the newshole from November 30 through December 10. (p.5)
- \*Gorbachev Bests Reagan - Gorbachev was quoted more often than Reagan and got more positive coverage (79% vs. 47%). (p.6)



## Tracking AIDS

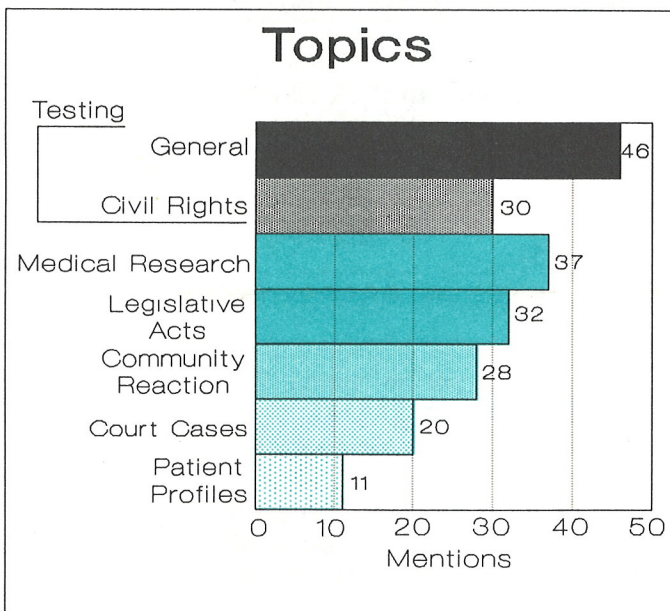
AIDS is a major story that won't go away. How are the national media reporting this saga of science and politics, with its grim combination of sex and death?

We monitored the coverage from June 1, the week of the Third International AIDS Conference, through October 12, following the National Lesbian & Gay March on Washington. This period also witnessed a debate over Reagan administration plans for mandatory AIDS tests of selected groups and the appointment of a Presidential commission that quickly proved controversial.

During this period TV news aired 100 stories, almost one a day. CBS ran the most stories (43), followed by ABC (29) and NBC (28). Coverage was even heavier in the *New York Times*, which ran 150 stories.

## Testing...Testing...

The debate over testing dominated the coverage. It was mentioned in 76 stories, more than twice the number devoted to the search for an effective treatment or cure. The sharpest attention was focused on the conflict over public health vs. privacy rights with regard to testing of members of risk groups, immigrants, prisoners, workers, and others.

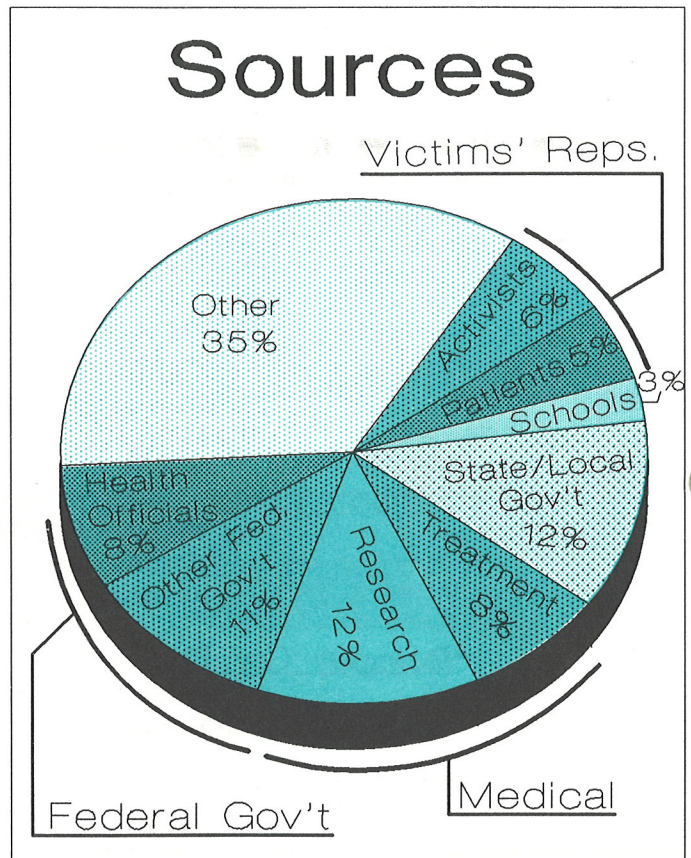


## Who Says?

So far the AIDS story offers plenty of leads but no closer. The disease's novelty, uncertainty, and

multifaceted impact have opened up the news to an unusually wide range of sources. Out of 1421 sources coded, only three individuals were cited ten times or more. The leaders were Surgeon General Koop (19), President Reagan (17), and Health and Human Services Secretary Bowen (10).

Our previous studies show that the media rarely turn to researchers and other specialists outside the government, industry, and interest groups. Government sources tend to dominate major stories that combine science and politics.



AIDS proved an exception to this trend, with private sector researchers and clinicians making up one source in five. These medical sources actually outnumbered all federal officials, even including a sizeable group of health officials from organizations like the National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control.

Coverage was about evenly divided among medical researchers, federal officials outside the health sector, state and local officials, and patient-related sources (including patients, their friends and families, and various activist groups).



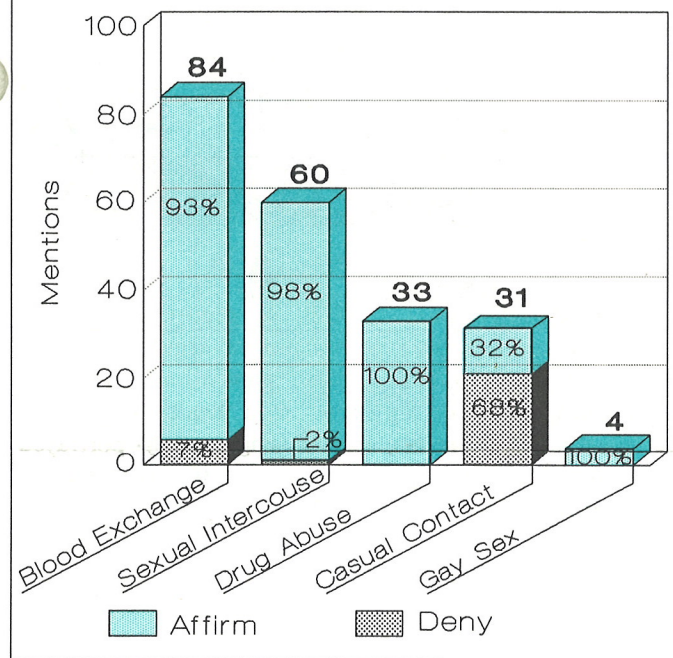
## Passing It On

Over 200 sources addressed the topic of AIDS transmission. The greatest attention was devoted to risks associated with sexual intercourse and the non-sexual exchange of blood through accidents or transfusions. Secondary topics were the dangers of intravenous drug use and various forms of casual contact, ranging from toilet seats to tears, and sweat to saliva.

Most sources (68%) rejected the possibility of transmission through casual contact, but this conceals a split between health experts and other sources. A majority of non-expert sources (54%) expressed concern over casual contact, while five out of six experts (83%) rejected the dangers.

Whether from discretion, aversion, or sympathy, the media minimized discussion of homosexual transmission. Only four sources mentioned sexual contact between males as a source of infection.

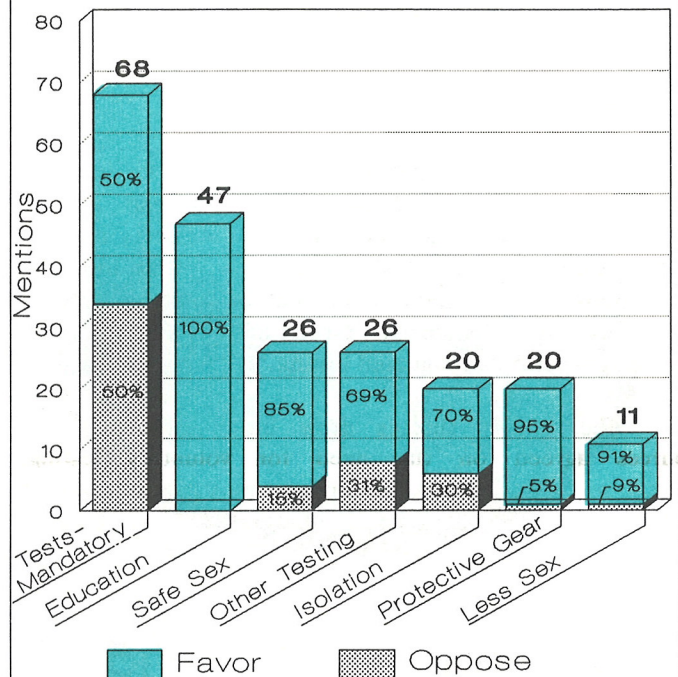
## Means of Transmission



## Avoiding AIDS

Media mentions of preventive and protective measures roughly equalled interest in transmission. Much of this coverage was straightforward public service information on the need for education, "safe sex" (e.g. condom use), and protective gear for health workers. But the measure mentioned most often was also presented as highly controversial.

## Preventive Measures



Mandatory testing of selected groups was mentioned in more than one quarter of all stories. But sources were evenly divided over its use, with critics often rejecting its feasibility, cost-effectiveness, or violation of privacy rights. Substantial minorities also opposed non-mandatory testing and efforts to isolate AIDS patients from the general population.

Despite the Reagan administration's support, conservative calls for sexual abstinence or monogamy drew the least attention, with fewer than half the mentions of "safe sex" techniques.

*The consequence of this unnatural practice [homosexuality] is AIDS.*

--Sen. Gordon Humphrey, ABC, 7/23

*The enemy is not homosexuals or IV drug users. The enemy is the virus.*

--Gov. Mario Cuomo, NY Times, 8/5

*What's the big deal about AIDS, except that young people don't have the sexual freedom they used to?*

--man on the street, NY Times, 7/19

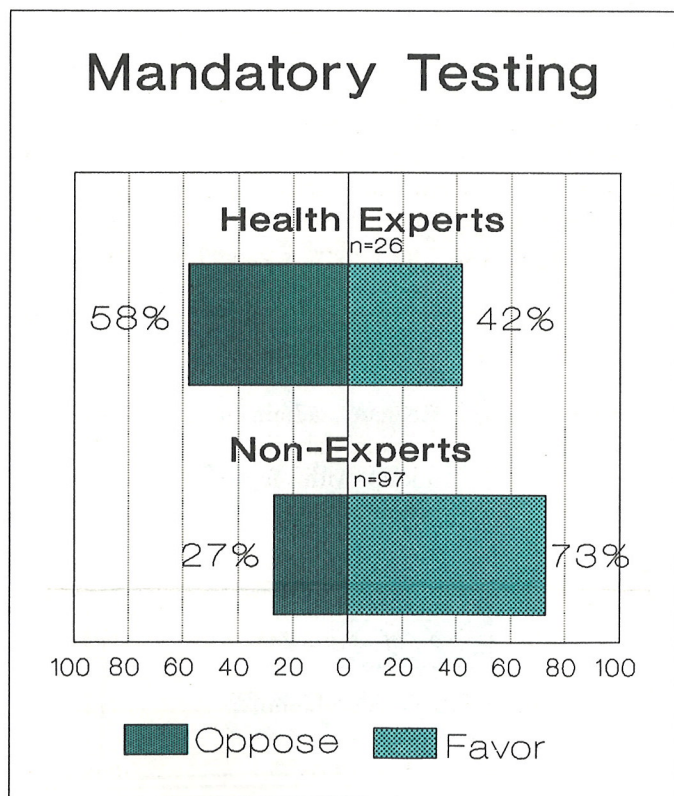


## What to Do?

The debate over testing carried over into the realm of government policy. Mandatory testing was mentioned as a policy option 120 times, nearly twice as often as education programs, the next most frequent option (65 mentions).

Overall, sources favored required AIDS tests of selected groups by a 2 to 1 margin. But a split appeared between health experts (doctors, medical researchers etc.) and other sources. Nearly three in five experts (58%) opposed mandatory testing. Among all other sources, nearly three out of four (73%) favored government mandated testing.

Other policy choices drew little dissent. Most sources agreed on the need for voluntary testing, education, more research funding, and even isolation of victims short of a general quarantine (e.g. keeping children out of public schools).

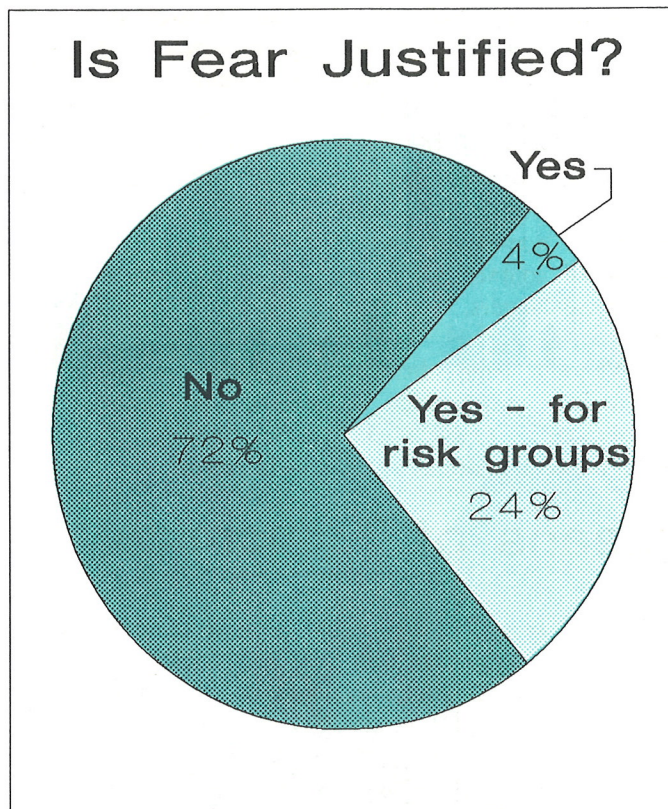


## ...Is Fear Itself

The media took pains to avoid sensationalizing this volatile story. A common theme of the coverage was that the public should avoid AIDS hysteria.

One story in ten dealt with public fears, and most sought to minimize anxiety or combat panic. Only one

story in 25 (4%) presented fears of contagion among the general public as justified. Most (72%) dismissed public alarm as groundless or excessive, and the remainder (24%) argued that anxiety is warranted only among specific high risk groups.



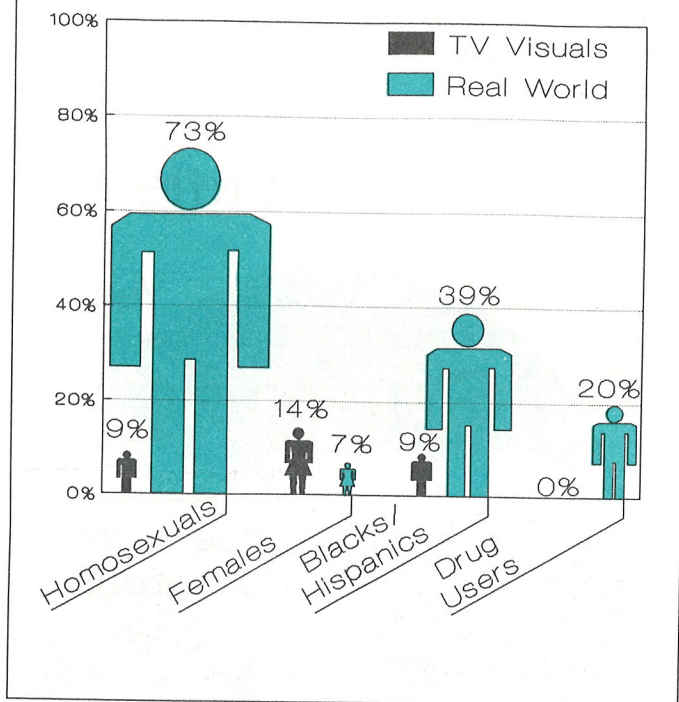
This message was seconded by reports on risk to the general population. Nine stories argued that the risk of infection to the general population is low or insignificant; seven of the nine cited health experts to this effect. By contrast, not a single story portrayed the general public's current risk level as high or significant.

## Visual Victims

Television's unique impact stems from its visual element. To find out what impressions of AIDS victims the cameras are conveying, we coded the backgrounds of all patients who appeared on TV news, using only information provided in the broadcast. We then compared the traits of TV's visual victims with real world data on AIDS victims compiled by the Centers for Disease Control.



## Patients: TV vs Reality



The result: TV's visual portrait of AIDS victims has little in common with real life. Real world AIDS victims are eight times as likely to be homosexuals as those shown on TV news (73% vs. 9%) and more than four times as likely to be black or Hispanic (39% vs. 9%). One in five actual AIDS victims uses intravenous drugs, a group never shown on TV. By contrast, female AIDS sufferers appear on TV news twice as often as they have in the real world (14% to 7%). Thus, the risk groups the news audience see are very different from their real world counterparts.

### Untold Stories

The shadow side of the news is what is not covered. We have already noted the media's blind eye toward homosexuals, who constitute the bulk of AIDS victims.

Another non-story was the long-term progression of the epidemic. Not a single source offered a prognosis on the possibilities of "break-out" beyond current risk groups into the general population. Only one story reported on whether the general population's risk currently is rising or falling.

The entire multifaceted debate over AIDS-related sex education for minors received only passing notice from a half-dozen sources. Finally, the media's own role in informing the public about AIDS was never addressed.

## Summit Spectacular

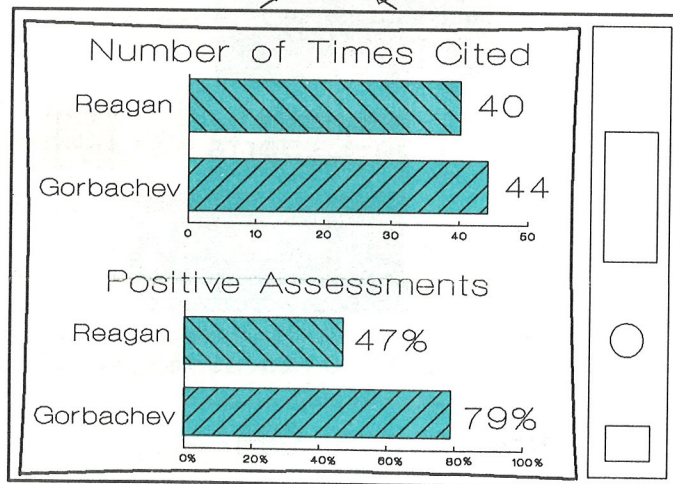
### Big Buildup

The summit dominated the TV news agenda from Mikhail Gorbachev's unprecedented NBC interview on November 30 through December 10. During those 11 days we coded 168 summit stories on the evening network newscasts, over 6 hours of coverage that filled nearly 60% of the total newshole. Coverage was similar on all three networks, except that NBC covered the fewest anti-Soviet protests.

### Media Hail Mikhail

Gorbachev received heavier and more favorable coverage than Reagan. The Soviet leader was the most frequent source on TV, with 44 citations compared to Reagan's 40. (Other Soviet spokesmen and citizens were cited 84 times, for a total of 128)

## Scorecard



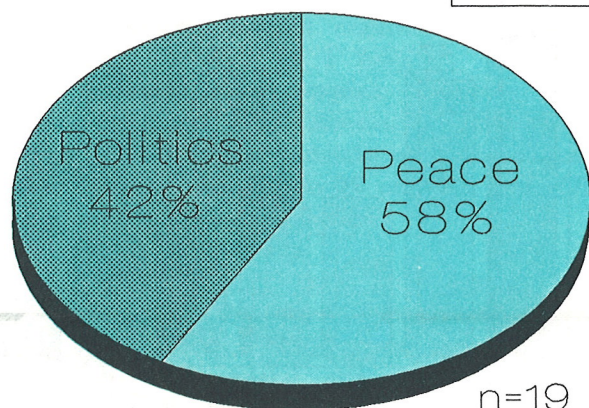
Four out of five assessments of Gorbachev were positive, while a slight majority of Reagan's assessments were negative. Most of Reagan's criticism came from conservatives. Gorbachev's coverage was most favorable on CBS-94% positive (15 of 16 sources).

Finally, Gorbachev's desire for peace or improved relations was mentioned more often than Reagan's, whose motives were portrayed as more political.

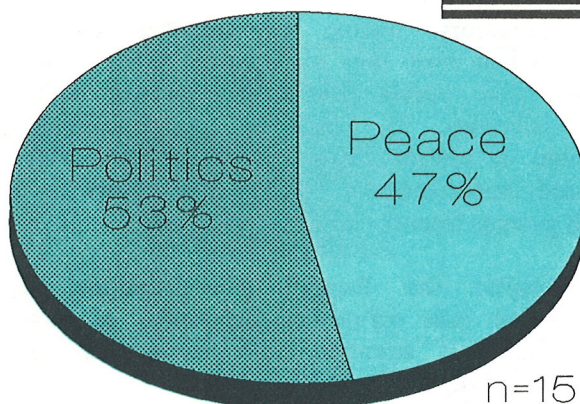


# Motives

Gorbachev



Reagan



*You can smell history in the cold evening air.*

--Peter Jennings, ABC, 12/7

*Gorbachev was beautiful. He was like Sinatra or Barbara Streisand.*

--man on the street, NBC, 12/10

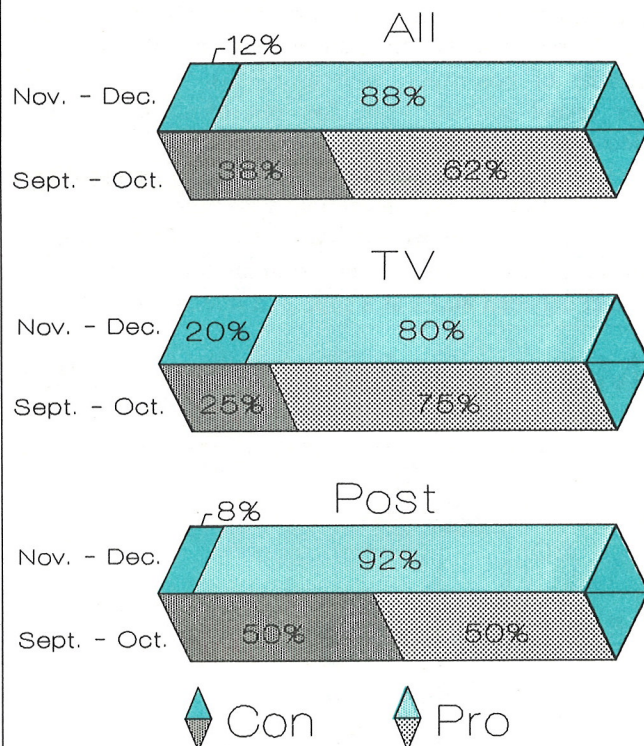
*[Raisa Gorbachev] is the first wife of a Soviet leader to weigh less than he does.*

--Mark Russell, CBS, 12/9

## Cheers for INF

On TV news, pro-treaty sources increased from 75% in September and October to 80% since the summit was announced October 30. But the biggest shift came at the *Washington Post*, which split its INF coverage 50-50 between supporters and opponents earlier this fall but gave proponents a 12 to 1 edge in November and December.

## Views on INF Treaty



*Media Monitor* (Copyright 1987) is a monthly publication of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and non-profit research organization. Subscriptions are available at the rate of \$36.00/year.

Editors: Dr. S. Robert Lichter  
Dr. Linda S. Lichter

Research Director: Daniel Amundson

Graphics: Scott Chronister

Production Manager: Monika Schmitter

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