

Engaging City Futures: Social Media Success Factors

Colin Russo

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1.0 Introduction

Social media is essentially about web-based and mobile technologies that turn communication into an interactive dialogue. This paper explores how social media impacts community engagement – particularly community consultation in cities and what the likely city futures success factors will be for the future of cities.

The recent proliferation of social media has changed forever the methods used for engaging communities in the planning and delivery of the future of cities. In 2009, Clay Shirky described the introduction of social media as “the largest increase in creative express-ability in human history”ⁱ. The future of ‘express-ability’ in engagement decision making processes, is now interwoven with that of social media.

Gold City Council's largest ever community engagement, the visioning project “Our Bold Future” plays a significant role in planning the future of the Gold Coast. Although the vision has been developed, the task ahead is to continue to unite the community around a vision, and to reach out into community facilitation/partnership tasks that generate solutions. This paper discusses Bold Future along with other case studies that are examples of how social media and engagement critical success factors/strategies can help to solve tomorrow's problems, today.

The challenge of online engagement for the future includes the commercial drive to market technology that meets community needs. The community see the social opportunities in social media but not necessarily the impact on democratic information flow and decision making. In terms of community engagement, better decision making can only result if resources are available to monitor, influence and representatively evaluate community feedback within a system that is prepared to wait for a democratic outcome by official decision makers. Perhaps social media and widespread awareness that participation in open networks brings makes consumers impatient for outcomes. The ultimate solution(s) are about engagement efficiency (smart/efficient use of methods) as well as resourcing Council/city capacity to manage online. But how long into the future can this cycle continue? There is no doubt at this stage, that social media proliferation has not stopped. Cities that do not participate online will lose the race for information meritocracy and the physical rewards that it precipitates e.g. online advocacy leads to commercial results.

Australian use of Social Media

- May 2011 Australian Sensis Reportⁱⁱ showed from 2700 survey responses, 79% of Australian internet users use the internet every day. Most (79%) large businesses use the internet for two-way communication. Only half use social networking sites daily.
- Social media is used mostly (90%) at home for friends and family sharing videos/photos and according to Box Hill Institute and Hitwise families mainly use social media to organise events, while youth mainly play games.
- “By 2020, business transactions on the Internet – business-to-business and business-to-consumer – will reach 450 billion a day.”

The following are the major social media platforms used in Australia during November, 2011ⁱⁱⁱ:

1. Facebook – 10,659,580 users / 13 million UAVs
2. Youtube – 11 million UAVs / mo (up 1,000,000)
3. Blogspot – 3.8 UAVs / mo (down 300,000)

4. LinkedIn – 2 million UAVs / mo (down 200,000)
5. Twitter – 1.8 million UAVs / mo (steady)
6. WordPress.com – 1.6 million UAVs / mo (down 200,000)
7. Flickr – 1.1 million UAVs / mo (steady)
8. Tumblr – 1 million UAVs / mo (steady)
9. MySpace – 560,000 UAVs / mo (down 60,000)
10. Google Plus – 540,000 Users (up 38,000)

(UAVs = Unique Australian Visitors to the site)

Of interest to Councils would be the “live chat” facility. The report advised that only 8% of the 50 websites surveyed had some form of live chat facility. The site that stood out was the 1-Day website, which allowed users to instantly communicate with a live operator, allowing users to keep on the same communication channel. I tested the service at <http://www.1-day.co.nz/#> with a genuine enquiry and found the service did provide an instant live response which was free of any communication charges and required no additional interfaces to use. Gold Coast City Council is now screening the service for use on community consultation projects, where a consultancy will be asked to staff the service, along with a traditional telephone hotline service.

Systems of social media

With the increase in social media information and use, has been the development of social media methods that have been adapted for use in community engagement projects.

The following are nine social media engagement methods that have developed for use in community engagement projects: location based apps, augmented reality, 3D projection mapping, Groupon systems, alternate gaming reality, futurist scenario planning, social networking and SMS and other devices.

1. Location based apps – FixVegas is an example of a location based app that will help to connect Brisbane based individuals who identify broken city infrastructure, to Council support staff. Community can photograph broken infrastructure such as park benches, pot holes (etc.) and send the photo with exact GPS location automatically included, directly to Council staff. This same app will have a field for community to also forward new ideas about the City and potentially, ideas about a range of engagement projects. Also regional opportunities for sharing resources may emerge such as sharing a single “fixSEQ” across a whole regional area. Such apps as FixVegas are being prepared on a regional basis in the United States and variations could be applied in many Australian Cities. Location based apps will also work with QR (Quick Response) Codes.
2. QR codes are essentially a means of easier interaction with a site URL to supply additional background information about a project or product. Commercially this may mean scanning data at the point of sale or pre-purchase in shopping centres where a device is available to scan QR codes located on tags. In the engagement environment QR codes can be located on presentations, business cards, t-shirts, coffee mugs etc. A potential use for QR codes is on signage at sites where community consultation is to occur. Advantages over written URL’s are that QR scanners can quickly embed URLs on neatly organised hard-drives or clouds. QR codes can facilitate/encourage community access to a full website or activated social media site, in order to participate in a discussion about the community consultation project. Signage would however, still retain the project web address (e.g. to a Have Your Say Site URL) on the sign, for those

who do not have QR scanners present. A further advantage of the QR codes is that they dispense with lengthy subdomains / URL's. This means they enable community direct access to online interaction. Different types of QR codes can be created for linking to different applications such as emails, youtube and other social media. The following QR code is to www.goldcoast.qld.gov.au/haveyoursay



3. The concept of 'augmented reality' may be valuable to projects such as proposed heritage renovations or new buildings, park landscaping, designs for a range of engagement purposes where a design of the future proposal is overlaid onto an image of the existing site. With this concept will come the ability to overlay images of the current design/image over a past design/image to show nostalgic values, particularly useful in community consultations where traditional values are being compared to current practices e.g. local area plans. Also there is cultural and heritage value in such images.
4. 3D projection mapping may also be valuable to community engagement processes. 3D mapping adds entertainment value to historical buildings that can be 'brought to life' through light shows that seemingly bend and distort buildings adding a sense of spirit/play and modern value to cultural buildings. This reduces austerity and increases recreational tourism value in community engagement, reaching out to different demographics through the contemporary arts.
5. Group Coupons or 'groupon's' are part of the competition/incentivising feature of modern community engagement. This is a means of bolstering feedback through incentives and incentives programs online.
6. Alternate gaming reality is another potential 'wow factor' for community engagement projects. This is being introduced through 'mash-ups' of games such as Sim City and city builder games as well as through 3D virtual modelling currently incorporated into city developments e.g. Gold Coast light rail. The concept of the fly-over and fly-through is taken to the next level of real time online experience of navigating through a proposed city development. In this experience you can communicate with friends, say 'hi' to the mayor and generally have fun as you contribute to city decision making.
7. Futurist scenario planning is the next stage of existing scenario development methods. Major online scenario platforms will make possible the use of crowd sourcing /intelligence otherwise known as the 'mass mind', for decision making purposes. Currently, sites like Facebook and Bang The Table enable real time discussion about scenario arrays, however integration and analysis, although improved from what it was a decade ago (e.g. through SurveyMonkey and other online survey technology) is still time consuming. Mass volumes of feedback still require large amounts of time to synthesise into meaningful conclusions.
8. Social networking is used in the decision making process as a gateway through sites like Facebook and Twitter applications to generate feedback. City Councils still have to develop memberships to increase responsiveness. Major sites where traffic counts are high are used as preliminary gateways to Facebook which further diverts community to Have Your Say Sites for medium to large projects. Have Your Say Sites still retain the Council background information which acts as a gateway to a Bang The Table or other

sites for the purposes of moderated or unmoderated open or closed, cascading discussions.

9. SMS and other devices are certainly being used already as community members tour a city and want to comment on problems that need a new idea or “Fix-it” solution.

In coming years the platforms that the above technologies appear on will be streamlined for ease of use. This integrative technology is called Near Field Communication (NFC). It will start to bind the administrative structure of the above online systems into a more seamless and integrated product. NFC will allow ‘bumping’ together of telephones in a wireless user integrated network with services such as payment systems, identification systems, groupon systems, transport systems. It will mean that the keys and ‘wallet’ and everything in it such as business cards and credit cards, can be replaced by the iPhone or Android. This means that smart phones will become indispensable, as will the capacity to engage the community using them.

New systems/methods such as those identified above, will help Council staff to communicate with the community in more interesting ways, which will greatly boost the number of participants engaged.

Overall, a range of technological advancements are supporting pc and mobile use of social media:

- desktops to mobile social media being delivered by smaller, faster more powerful data ‘crunching’ smart tablets
- features are easier to use
- mobile tablets have increased battery life
- more realistic screen displays bring images to life and make text more readable and interactive
- increased data accuracy
- apps have commenced matching personal preferences to smart databases
- icloud access means reliable use of data
- better broadband networks for accessibility of longer durations and better servicing.

Deep Structure of Social Media

While smart devices such as iPads have seemingly quadrupled their capacities in only the past 2 years, evolving soft systems are also available to social media community engagement. For example new ways of seeing the future are being developed via ‘futures studies’. An approach I have been exploring is the ‘vinculum method’. “Using the vinculum approach, methods can be bolted to each other temporarily, on a case-by-case basis. This allows and indeed supports epistemological pluralism.”^{iv} The method/approach is designed to compare past nostalgic values to present situations and future possibilities. The vinculum method was used with the Palm Local Area Plan study on the Gold Coast, in 2010 and is appropriate for use in social media technologies such as surveys and discussion forums, or in face to face (F2F) workshops. The vinculum method is an example of a futures method that easily bridges the F2F and social media environments. Methods that are well established in the futures studies research community, such as Inayatullah’s CLA, have numerous associated written case studies, to help make

engagement more meaningful than just the study of the social media technologies alone (such as apps and SMS use).

Traditional face to face methods in the engagement space are evolving, however there needs to be a bridge between the methods we use online and offline and the context in which we use them, in terms of the principles and research work/communities around those methods.

So research methods and research communities are an example of the deeper structures that help to deliver social media engagement methods every day. What other deeper structures have helped to build the 'myths and metaphors' around community engagement? Firstly, the overall status of social media as either purely effective and positive, or purely ineffective and negative, is likely to be a myth. The following are ideals of community engagement for which social media has been known to have "affected each both positively and negatively":

- 'the construction of citizenship',
- 'the strengthening of practices of participation'
- 'the strengthening of responsive and accountable states', and
- 'the development of inclusive and cohesive societies'.

When I use the term 'myth and deep structure' with reference to 'ideals of engagement' this is because 'the map is not the territory'. The aims of the current day are not the actual reality of the outcome or achievement. A common myth with social media in community engagement, is that "the one size fits all". In fact, each project develops its own aims based on the resources it has and the significance of the project. The myth is that everyone is able to participate in the same way and will value the outcomes the same way. In fact, communities from different sectors of the community perceive outcomes through different lenses, based on their values. They perceive the benefits of outcomes, but realize the costs as well.

Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, Kelly, Zuckerman^{vi} also find that "Scholars and policymakers should adopt a more nuanced view of new media's role in democratization and social change, one that recognizes that new media can have both positive and negative effects." The authors find that: The impact of new media can be better understood through a framework that considers five levels of analysis:

- individual transformation
- intergroup relations
- collective action
- regime policies
- external attention.

Although Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, Kelly, Zuckerman identify the negative statement that 'new media helps people to seek out views that supports their beliefs', it is only one of a list of positives presented:

- Social media may reduce the transaction costs for organising collective action, by facilitating communication and coordination across both physical and social distance.
- The networked nature of social media may undermine hierarchical, top-down movements and generate new forms of "flat" social movements.
- Social media may change the political opportunity by publicising splits among the ruling elite, creating lines of communication for challengers to engage segments of the elite in new ways, or by drawing international attention to local problems.

- Yet another possibility is that new media will change perceptions about the real distribution of opinion within a society, so that others feel safer coming forward in support of a previously taboo position once they see how others share their views.

Those terms were created in response to contentious overseas environments, however in my view, they can be related back to the following decision making levels:

- Individual – perceptions are formed, loosely held until reinforced at one of the following levels.
- Group – perceptions are shared and potentially views are hardened in response to a sample of collective opinion
- Organizational – if perceptions are endorsed at this level, they gain the referential power that the organization wields
- Community – through sharing of organizational or community group views at this level, aligned views can quickly turn into beliefs that changes should follow
- Whole of City perceptions of reality – if perceptions are endorsed at this level, there is certainty that change will follow particularly where a majority, or persuasive community and groups of organizations agree.

Information used at each of these levels can either be self reinforced or it can be validated through standards, facts, external checks etc. An important point is that Social Media has the opportunity to be the conduit through which all of these decision levels flow. If only opinions are used to reinforce views, or Social Media creates “groupthink”, then the validity of decision making needs to be re-informed. This also points to the need for responsible community involvement in Social Media channels. “Although data on new media have been sketchy, new tools are emerging that measure linkage patterns and content as well as track memes across media outlets and thus might offer fresh insights into new media.”^{vii}

Social media therefore operates within complex interdependent systems through all levels of society and works with myths such as “one size fits all” and that all stakeholders will be equally satisfied with outcomes. A further myth is that each community group has the capacity to participate at the exact time that an engagement project is established. In that regard, Councils have to work very hard to engage communities who are affected (positively or negatively) by the potential outcomes.

Case Study - Bold Future

The Bold Future project was implemented to engage the Gold Coast community about the coming three decades of growth. Bold Future was commenced in 2007. After a process of city wide community consultation, a vision of the preferred future for the Gold Coast was finalized. That process of city wide community consultation was conducted through seven months of city forums, surveying and web input. At the end of May 2008 Council and community regarded this work as “a resounding success, having achieved over 11,000 formal responses from members of the community. This comprised some 50,000 individual inputs, and over 100 stakeholder meetings and workshops”^{viii}. The Bold Future Advisory Committee suggested that “the development of a fully detailed plan for the implementation phase of the Bold Future vision should incorporate the continuation of key Bold Future vision activities. These activities include, scenario planning, environmental scanning, integrated whole of city strategic planning, a

sustainability capacity development program for both Council staff and community members, as well as the development of a partnerships initiative that would, for example enable case study development.” The Advisory Committee also provided the following recommendation as a key element of their ‘roadmap’ for the future of the Gold Coast:

“the establishment of a **‘household panel’/community reference group** to provide ongoing and regular public engagement that is both broad and targeted with regard to key issues and challenges facing the city (eg. through scenario planning, testing, surveying etc).

Discussion about Bold Future

The author of this article was involved in all aspects of community consultation associated with this project.

In projects like Bold Future, a critical factor is being able to build the capacity of a city and being able to move from only randomly contacting city leaders to also being able to scan across the city, make available a program of involvement for other city leaders to assist in identifying whole of city priorities. The context of a cities’ size affects the ability to do this, further, as cities grow, the pace of growth stretches organisational capacity from time to time. The capacity to engage more city leaders in an automated manner through standing offer arrangements is an initial consideration. More and more, however, city visioning is about keeping leaders informed through partnerships and alliances e.g. through centre management associations, large employers etc. What appears to be essential, is scanning to ensure that each sector in the community, e.g. health, environment, transport etc, all have leaders to represent sectoral interests and who are happy to collaborate in learning from leaders of other sectors.

The capacity to engage online through a ‘household panel’ requires increases the cities’ capacity to engage with city leaders, but also the general community so that more demographics and sectoral perspectives can be considered, in line with the City vision. This reduces some of the pressure on the city to facilitate the involvement of all city leaders, as the hope is that their interests can be represented through geographically robust samples of the general community. City stakeholders can also be represented through such panels. While the engagement objective is always to provide the general community with easy access to participate, it is harder to inform and educate the general community, by comparison to the resources required to cumulatively educate an online community panel. At the same time, cities can provide for open discussion forums for the general community so that everyone has the capacity to add value while learning about the future of the city.

It is felt that the successful operation of e-consultation forums will require the operation of combinations of online and offline forum alternatives. That will mean that both refresh and replace’ long term participants, who can then become a source of knowledge .increase awareness of participants (achieving an ‘educational’ goal), while educated panel members add value to visioning and long term futures projects, quantitative polling must be conducted by community members who are ‘in-touch’ with local values.

New social media such as Google + have started to bring together local communities online. Democratic intent is required to be applied to online community spaces that Councils develop for engagement purposes.

Increased involvement leads to a participant database that can be valuable when delivering new projects. Collection of participant contact details (within the guidelines of the information and privacy act) is a valuable addition to all local governments.

What will the Australian engagement future have in stall for Councilors in 2012?

One new advance being introduced in Canada, 'open online data' could shed some insights. Alto's open data initiative^{ix} is supported by Mayor Dean Forting as "It will really hold Councilors accountable". "People can really go in and see how we vote on a consistent basis...somebody could literally in the future type in Dean Fortin and see every vote I've ever made on any subject. ... So it's not just how you vote leading up to an election but how you voted for the last three years." Open-data policies have been enacted in jurisdictions including Ottawa, Edmonton, Toronto, Vancouver, Nanaimo and Surrey.

How will Councils create more meaningful social media in terms of an holistic solution?

Councils continually aim to upgrade their engagement resources beyond immediate economic streamlining and legislation as a primary reason. Queensland Councils are required by legislation^x to provide more 'meaningful' community engagement. The reports indicate that community engagement should focus on benefits such as social media being seen as a "solution to providing renewed community influence and capacity for communities to engage in local issues". The pitfalls that come with social media bring 'a degree of scepticism about the intentions of government' and this 'implies serious limits on the potential influence of the citizenry and community groups'^{xi}.

In the context of community engagement for decision making purposes, exposure of research and considered options is valuable when looking at projects that might be considered to be appropriate for community involvement, community empowerment and for community partnerships. Therefore the model that information based engagement and only some community consultations are appropriate for unmonitored community engagements.

While the benefits of social media are about a "rich user experience, user participation, dynamic content, metadata, web standards and scalability"^{xii} democratic user participation experiences must come at the price of developing responsible use. Mackenna describes the need for responsible online behaviour, whether that be in terms of government, community or industry participation online^{xiii}.

In order to co-exist with the proliferation of engagement input through social media Councils could develop strategies around frameworks. Cavaye^{xiv}, identified the following factors to assist the enhancement of community engagement. These could be equally applied to new forms of social media:

- "Establishing principles". Cavaye highlights the role of high level leadership in exhibiting not only principles but also the values that go toward action learning / evaluation and enhancement of engagement. Social media structures are prevalent in the form of Council social media policies, however they also need to be evaluated in terms of their application.
- "Structures and arrangements". Cavaye discusses needs at the agency level, however at the local level arrangements and partnerships could provide, for example, online

responses in the form of references to clear local examples and reports and so begin to support a notion of research and professionalism in the online response community. This could help to sustain and inspire the quality of responses received during engagement projects.

- In terms of “Practice” Cavaye lists “training and skilling”; “use of new forms of participation”; “Investment in relationships” and “greater development and exposure of beacon projects”. Rather than only skilling Council employees, the local context could provide for skilling of priority community groups and organisations who could provide substantial feedback to Council projects. Skilling could be in terms of how the availability and use of Council social media, in a representative/ethical manner.

The critical success of community engagement into the future will rely as much on of traditional internal and external responsibility (accountability, transparency and access arrangements) as it will on managing ‘mindset marketshare’, management of mass involvement and appropriate integration of social technologies (the traditional face to face methodologies and methods that we are now able integrate into online social media).

Perhaps future engagement legislation will reinvigorate the value of accountability, transparency and access arrangements online, through principles structures/arrangements and by reinforcing the value of practical training initiatives.

What might some of the critical success factors for community engagement online be?

- Structures and arrangements introduced at the local level to ensure that stakeholders and community participate responsibly online. This is a message that is communicated with each engagement project, in an encouraging way. Personalised contact through direct contact with partners, ensures responsible participation online in the ‘spirit’ appropriate to the local community.
- Training and development is conducted through schools, universities and through Councils and businesses and their associations, to ensure that online information is relevant, creative and “outcomes aware”.
- Councils recognise the value of community input e.g. by themselves or through established community groups, convening annual awards for best engagement business and community participants.
- Major annual forums are exemplars of face to face, social media projects. Conference/brainstorming/status of the city reports all annexed with live online community involvement and media support.
- The operation of the major platforms of local social media e.g. by partnering with online platforms via paid advertising and other arrangements to reduce splintering of online information. Splintered social media is aggregated through apps and other devices to bring cohesive community commentary to Council engagement sites.
- The commonly used ‘call to action’ on Australian Council engagement sites changes from “Have your say” to “Help decide”. That is, the future focus for community is supplemented with community led decision making processes, that focus on how decisions are formed by community and by Council.

- The capacity of Council services to bring constructive and well managed, informed debates into the view of the decision making authority e.g. through provision of Council open online community reference groups, increases the pace of decision making and reduces the costs associated with decision making.
- Representatives for each community sector are identifiable as ‘personalities/champions’ of local issues e.g. beaches, transport, social harmony, environmental sustainability, water and air sustainability. Each of these sectors engages with Council, in addition to Council tirelessly engaging the whole community.
- Transparency, accountability and accessibility are integrated with simple apps, and guidelines online to ensure that each engagement process is evaluated.
- Community are always informed about why their input was accepted or why it was not accepted in the final outcome. Elected representative platforms/promises are registered against decisions at the end of each term in office^{xv}.

Conclusion

Cities such as Gold Coast City Council, are now increasing their capacities further, to link social networks to city engagement, community consultation and associated decision making processes. Social media is a bridge of improved technology to the development of an city wide engagement culture. Imagine people connecting in neighbourhoods who are now more in tune with community values and local issues because of having had the opportunity to spend more time networking than ever before. Social media is helping communities to bring their global, to local interests into discussions online, which will logically flow through to local decision making, if Councils can help to enable connections between social media platforms and Council engagement projects. Through participating in social media the community has a heightened awareness of what current issues affect their own and their ‘friends’ and families values, or at least their consciousness is raised about the world around them (from city services, to social networking, environmental consciousness etc). Whatever the contribution from social media to community consciousness may be, online social platforms are linking individuals values with groups and their objectives. This kind of deeper and broader discussion between local issues and what we aim to achieve as communities, helps to broaden discussion into future preferences and planning.

Those who have recently participated in city community consultation projects such as Bold Future, would find comprehensive reports about community preferences for the future of the Gold Coast across social, environmental, economic and other themes. In a learning environment, the online opportunities for community engagement will improve such that not only will the reports be available, but the communities interested in ongoing discussion will emerge also. They will find links are constantly refreshed to information about sustainability actions and outcomes. Council now has an opportunity to build on the quality of discussion and to help communities to engage mentally and physically through improving technology. This experience will transform online discussion into surveys and into online community reference groups and into measured outcomes. It will enable understanding of how local discussion leads to politics and administrative decisions.

The future for more Australian communities, will be learning about and participating in a variety of forum styles (for general to expert groups). The experience of online community reference groups is no longer only with the few larger Councils piloting online engagement. These systems

will become more robust with larger volumes of participants. Those in communities who plan, develop futures, will be more needed as the micro-management, from planning, to 'futuring' (e.g. exploring possible scenarios) and o evaluation of the online engagement space becomes a higher priority.

We can be sure that web-based and mobile technologies are continuing to increase community involvement in the online engagement space. This has positive effects of volumisation or increasing qualitative ideas as well as quantitative representation. It also promises innovative methods as services become more tuned in to delivering a better online experience.

Communities develop values that are derived through discussion at various levels of society from different spheres of influence and online activity e.g. clubs, schools, workplaces, professional institutions and associations, major organizations, universities, governments, etc all have different capacities to interact persuasively online. Each must have access and capacity to be involved in the engagement process. This means that Councils must continue to seek out demographics and sectors who are not represented in engagement outcomes to be inclusive, fair and valid.

Online forums require constant refreshing of participants to enhance energy levels and to accommodate views in touch with local issues and to retain a user base that is free of political friction. Communities will be invited to participate online more often. New structures and arrangements are required to develop relationships with community, to ensure that everyone is contributing to deliver the best possible outcomes for communities.

The fact that information is being consumed and created more readily and at a rate that outstrips Council resources (44 times the current use of information is expected by 2020), means that Councils now see more benefits in collaborating/partnering with others in the community, to share the online experience appropriately. No doubt, future online practices will recognise the need for organic human interrelationships. Consideration of the dynamic interaction between all the available engagement techniques and disciplines will be a hall mark of preferred future engagement practice.

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ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.socialmedianews.com.au/social-media-statistics-australia-november-2011/>

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