



JOURNALISM, CLIMATE ACCOUNTABILITY, AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS: A CRITICAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Environmental destruction and climate instability have now reached a critical stage, yet mainstream media coverage often fails to clearly identify the forces most responsible for these interconnected crises. This paper investigates the difficulties journalists encounter when trying to expose the real agents behind environmental harm, especially those linked to global production networks and the broader logic of capitalist economic systems. Using a critical perspective informed by discourse analysis and political economy, the study brings together academic scholarship and corporate reporting to examine how profit-driven structures, weak transparency, and systemic patterns of accumulation make accountability difficult to trace. The analysis shows that journalists confront a range of obstacles, including limited data access, fragmented regulatory systems, corporate influence, and widespread public misunderstanding of how climate responsibility is distributed. These barriers make it difficult to connect visible environmental damage with the deeper structural actors and institutions that sustain it. The paper argues that reporting on climate responsibility will remain partial and insufficient unless journalism moves beyond surface-level events and engages more directly with the systemic foundations of ecological crisis. In response, the study proposes alternative investigative and framing strategies that can help climate journalism place greater emphasis on structural accountability.

Keywords: Climate crisis, capitalism, journalism, accountability, global supply chains.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental destruction and the climate emergency can be understood as outcomes deeply connected to the structure of capitalist modernity. While this system has long promised progress, prosperity, and improved human well-being through market-driven mechanisms, its critics argue that it has simultaneously produced widespread ecological damage affecting both living and non-living elements of the planet. Although evaluating the overall outcomes of capitalism may seem straightforward, the deeper issue is far more complex. Addressing this complexity requires a shift in priorities, a departure from conventional capitalist thinking, and the adoption of alternative perspectives that lie beyond dominant economic frameworks.

This paper is built around two central arguments. First, it proposes that the climate crisis is fundamentally rooted in capitalist systems. Second, it suggests that solutions cannot emerge from the same structures that have contributed to the problem. Exploring these arguments involves identifying the deeper causes and responsible actors behind environmental degradation, which in turn demands a transformation in perspective. While forming a viewpoint is not inherently difficult, communicating such ideas—and gaining acceptance for them within dominant academic and intellectual environments shaped by capitalism—is far more challenging.

For journalists, this challenge is even more significant, as their work is embedded within media systems that are often influenced or sustained by the very forces contributing to environmental



harm. As a result, critically examining these systems may require stepping beyond conventional academic boundaries. Although this may appear exaggerated to those who emphasize objectivity and neutrality, it highlights the extent to which knowledge production itself operates within capitalist epistemological and value-based frameworks. The widely accepted “scientific method,” often viewed as neutral, is also shaped by underlying assumptions and values. Observation itself is not impartial; it is influenced by perspective and context. What is considered a problem in one framework may not be viewed as such in another. Given that capitalism remains the dominant global system, its norms and structures are deeply embedded in both academic and professional practices. While it is possible to critique certain aspects of the system from within, a fundamental critique requires stepping outside its intellectual boundaries—an act that can be described as a form of epistemic departure. Just as an organism is shaped by its environment, individuals working within a system may find it difficult to challenge the very foundations of that system. Consequently, both the diagnosis of climate-related problems and the solutions proposed often remain rooted in capitalist logic, which limits their effectiveness.

For environmental journalists, identifying those responsible for the climate crisis is therefore not a simple task. A key obstacle lies in the reliance on analytical tools and methodologies that are themselves products of capitalist reasoning. Genuine identification of responsibility requires moving beyond these conventional approaches and adopting alternative frameworks that can uncover deeper structural causes. Such a shift can open pathways toward more meaningful and sustainable solutions.

The concept of a “climate crisis” is often defined as a critical turning point or a situation that may lead to severe and irreversible consequences (Mukheibir & Mallam, 2019). It is also described as the range of harmful impacts resulting from unchecked climate change, particularly those affecting human societies (Dean, 2019). More broadly, the term encompasses environmental disruptions such as extreme weather, rising sea levels, biodiversity loss, food and water insecurity, health risks, economic instability, displacement, and conflict (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Related concepts such as climate justice, climate security, climate finance, carbon markets, and indigenous knowledge are also commonly used in discussions of climate change.

However, the way “crisis” is framed in public discourse carries significant implications. The term often conveys urgency, which can justify rapid interventions. Within a capitalist context, such interventions are likely to be influenced by corporate interests and advisory structures. Moreover, framing climate change as a crisis can create new economic opportunities, including disaster-response industries, green technologies, and carbon trading systems, which may ultimately reinforce existing economic structures. This framing can also obscure the role of key actors by shifting responsibility toward individuals, encouraging lifestyle changes rather than systemic transformation.

The definition provided by Dean (2019) reflects several characteristics aligned with capitalist thinking. It prioritizes human impacts, reinforcing an anthropocentric perspective that places human interests above ecological considerations. It also emphasizes consequences rather than root causes, focusing on mitigating effects rather than addressing the underlying drivers embedded in production and consumption systems. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (2023) framework includes terms such as climate finance and carbon markets, which reflect market-oriented approaches that may sustain rather than challenge existing economic systems.



These frameworks often emphasize economic stability and growth, suggesting that environmental protection is secondary to maintaining economic structures. Concepts such as carbon markets and climate finance indicate that the costs of environmental damage are distributed broadly, while the benefits of economic activity remain concentrated. Even the inclusion of indigenous knowledge may be interpreted as symbolic if it does not lead to a genuine shift away from dominant paradigms. As a result, these approaches, although well-intentioned, may limit the development of transformative solutions.

Historically, capitalism has maintained a resource-intensive relationship with nature, initially relying on fossil fuels to drive industrial growth. In response to environmental challenges, newer forms such as “green capitalism” or “climate capitalism” have emerged, promoting renewable energy and sustainable practices as solutions. However, these approaches often represent an adaptation rather than a fundamental transformation, allowing the core logic of accumulation to persist (Carroll, 2020, p. 12). As noted, capitalism “never truly solves the crimes it generates” (Wright & Nyberg, 2015, p. 34), suggesting that proposed solutions may reproduce underlying problems.

Evidence indicates that market-based strategies and technological solutions have had limited success in addressing climate change. Carbon emissions continue to rise, and global temperatures are increasing, suggesting that existing approaches are insufficient (Adkin, 2017, p. 4). This reinforces the idea that problems rooted in capitalist systems cannot be effectively resolved through the same frameworks (Griffiths, 2023). Despite widespread discussion, meaningful progress remains limited (Buchanan et al., 2020), and environmental awareness alone has not significantly influenced behavior (Barragan-Jason et al., 2020).

For journalists, these complexities create uncertainty regarding the reliability of dominant scientific and policy narratives. They must navigate competing interpretations, including distinctions between older and newer forms of capitalism, while questioning whether meaningful transformation is occurring. Since journalists play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of climate issues, adopting a critical and systemic perspective is essential. However, their work is often constrained by institutional pressures and structural limitations.

In this context, the paper aims to address two key objectives:

1. To investigate the reasons why journalists face difficulties in identifying and holding accountable the key actors responsible for climate change, particularly those embedded within capitalist systems.
2. To propose alternative frameworks that can help journalists adopt broader analytical and investigative approaches in climate reporting.

By examining the structural factors that obscure accountability, this study seeks to encourage a shift in perspective that enables journalists to critically examine the systemic roots of the climate crisis. While capitalism has historically contributed to economic development, its emphasis on continuous expansion and profit maximization has also generated significant environmental consequences. These systemic characteristics often conceal the roles of governments, corporations, and industries, making it difficult for journalists to accurately identify and report responsibility.

The research ultimately aims to explore these challenges through a set of guiding research questions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE



A substantial body of research emphasizes the significant role of media in shaping how audiences understand, interpret, and even become confused about climate change (Khanya, 2024). Media representations are often influenced by political narratives, which frame the issue differently and assign responsibility in varying ways (Murali et al., 2021). In reporting climate-related issues, journalists typically depend on institutional sources such as corporations, international news agencies, national stakeholders (Rochyadi-Reetz, 2022), governmental bodies, and scientific communities (Comfort et al., 2019). As a result, media coverage frequently reflects the viewpoints of these actors, who tend to advocate technological innovations, market-driven responses, or changes in individual consumption patterns as solutions (Jaworska, 2018; Barnett, 2020). Such framing often diverts attention away from deeper structural causes of environmental degradation.

Scholars argue that environmental decline and climate disruption are closely linked to capitalist systems of production, which are driven by continuous accumulation of capital (Gellert, 2020; Sadiq et al., 2022). Within this framework, economic growth and profit maximization are prioritized, often sustaining exploitative processes across the entire chain of production and consumption (Tawfeeq & Al-Ameer, 2024). Concepts such as “resilience” or “green capitalism” are often presented as solutions; however, they may function as rebranded extensions of the same economic logic, generating new profit avenues through mechanisms like climate finance (Long, 2021).

Accountability for climate change is further obscured by the displacement of environmental costs to distant regions and marginalized communities (Hofbauer & Putz, 2020). The complexity of global supply chains—characterized by outsourcing, subcontracting, and multiple layers of production—makes it difficult to identify those directly responsible for environmental harm (Ermgassen et al., 2022). Journalists often struggle to trace these connections due to limited access to specialized or transparent data (Figueroa, 2017). Although public awareness of climate change has increased, it remains uneven and fragmented, partly because journalists face challenges in obtaining reliable and comprehensive information (Baiardi & Morana, 2020).

Additionally, climate reporting is complicated by factors such as political inaction, corporate influence, and the spread of misinformation (Ejaz et al., 2021). Weak regulatory systems and insufficient political commitment to hold polluting corporations accountable further intensify the crisis (UNDP, 2023). While existing research on climate communication is extensive, relatively few studies adopt a critical political economy perspective to examine how journalists can identify systemic actors responsible for environmental harm. Much of the literature focuses on improving reporting practices, promoting resilience, or encouraging behavioral change, without critically addressing how underlying power structures limit accountability. This paper seeks to address this gap by situating the challenges faced by journalists within the broader ideological and material constraints of capitalism.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a critical political economy perspective combined with critical discourse analysis, both of which emphasize that media systems operate within broader structures of power and economic interests (Schwartz & Nossek, 2024; Mosco, 2018). From this viewpoint, media content and news values are shaped by capitalist dynamics, including ownership patterns, class relations, and profit-oriented motives (Radebe & Chiumbu, 2022). These structural factors influence what is considered newsworthy and how issues such as climate change are framed.



Journalists working within this environment encounter multiple constraints. Access to information is often restricted or strategically controlled by corporations and governments seeking to protect their economic or political interests (Tao et al., 2019). Furthermore, the concentration of media ownership can discourage critical or investigative journalism, especially when such reporting may threaten the financial interests of media organizations (Forcha & Ngange, 2022). Dominant narratives within media discourse tend to reinforce market-based solutions, normalizing the idea that capitalism is both inevitable and irreplaceable (McGuigan, 2005). This limits the possibility of exploring alternatives beyond the existing system.

By applying these theoretical perspectives, the study moves beyond simply describing the difficulties journalists face. Instead, it seeks to uncover the deeper structural conditions that produce these challenges, allowing for a more critical understanding of how power, ideology, and economic systems shape climate reporting.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual qualitative approach rooted in critical discourse analysis to examine academic writings, corporate communications, and policy-related documents. Rather than aiming to generate statistical findings or measurable empirical data, the study seeks to critically explore how narratives surrounding climate change and environmental damage are shaped, framed, and often obscured within capitalist systems. The material analyzed includes scholarship on climate change, journalism, and political economy, along with official reports, sustainability agendas, and media representations dealing with responsibility and climate framing. The analysis focuses on how dominant interpretive frameworks divert attention from structural causes and shift blame away from the principal actors responsible for environmental harm. In addition, the study conceptually argues that alternative ways of framing the issue may offer a more effective means of addressing climate responsibility than conventional approaches. Because the research is primarily conceptual and discourse-based, it does not involve direct interviews or quantitative content analysis of media coverage.

FINDINGS AND CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

Conventional Understanding

Across the full lifecycle of production—from the extraction of raw materials to final consumption and disposal—environmental impacts are widely dispersed, creating a complex web of ecological consequences (Kumar et al., 2021). This diffusion makes it difficult to clearly assign responsibility, as environmental harm is embedded within intricate global supply chains. In the current economic system, accountability is further obscured because environmental effects are distributed across multiple regions and actors (Köksal et al., 2018). The layered and interconnected nature of global production networks complicates efforts to identify primary contributors to environmental damage. Numerous stakeholders, operating at different stages of production, processing, transportation, and consumption, are involved in these systems (Brun et al., 2020). Moreover, the level of responsibility varies significantly across these stages, and in many cases, involvement is indirect or shaped by broader systemic pressures (Wiedmann et al., 2007).

Practices such as outsourcing and subcontracting further fragment accountability, making it increasingly difficult to hold specific actors responsible for environmental harm (Brun et al., 2020).



Critical Reinterpretation

From a critical perspective, environmental degradation can be linked directly to the growth-oriented and profit-driven nature of capitalist systems. The structure of supply chains and subcontracting networks not only distributes production but also disperses accountability, making it harder to trace responsibility for ecological damage. While these systems prioritize efficiency and cost reduction, they simultaneously shift environmental costs outward, intensifying the scale and severity of ecological crises.

Within this framework, resource extraction and labor exploitation become central mechanisms of production. Rather than focusing solely on individual actors, this perspective highlights systemic responsibility, suggesting that environmental crises are manifestations of deeper contradictions within the capitalist system. Addressing these issues may therefore require reconsidering existing economic structures and exploring alternative models that emphasize sustainability and ethical responsibility toward nature.

Lack of Transparency and Data

Conventional Understanding

Information related to environmental impacts, supply chains, and corporate activities is often fragmented and difficult to access. Journalists and the public frequently face limitations in obtaining accurate and comprehensive data about corporate practices contributing to climate change. Companies may restrict access to information regarding their operations, including extraction, processing, and supply chain activities (Megeid, 2024). This lack of transparency complicates efforts to identify responsible actors and assess the extent of their environmental impact.

Additionally, available data may be outdated, incomplete, or unreliable, making it challenging to evaluate environmental consequences accurately (Hsu et al., 2017). The involvement of multiple actors across different stages of production further complicates efforts to trace responsibility. Barriers to accessing information affect not only journalists but also policymakers and researchers, hindering attempts to ensure accountability and develop effective climate strategies (Gonzalez-Zapata & Heeks, 2015). As a result, the absence of reliable data limits the ability to identify key contributors and hold corporations accountable.

Critical Reinterpretation

From a critical standpoint, the lack of transparency can be understood as a structural feature rather than an accidental limitation. The limited availability of data about corporate practices may reflect underlying priorities within economic systems that emphasize profit over accountability. Complex organizational structures and supply chains can obscure the visibility of environmental impacts, making it difficult for the public to access information about working conditions, resource use, and ecological damage.

This perspective suggests that greater transparency and accountability may require structural changes that prioritize ethical considerations and public access to information. Addressing these issues could contribute to more effective environmental governance and a clearer understanding of responsibility.

Systemic Issues and Structural Dynamics

Conventional Understanding

Current economic and political systems exhibit several structural challenges that contribute to environmental degradation. The pursuit of profit and continuous economic growth often leads to the overexploitation of natural resources. Corporations and interest groups may influence policymaking processes, prioritizing economic objectives over environmental and social



concerns. Market competition can intensify resource extraction, while global economic systems may disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

Furthermore, institutions operating within these frameworks may lack the capacity or willingness to address environmental issues effectively. Climate impacts are often unevenly distributed, affecting communities that have contributed least to environmental degradation. The focus on short-term economic gains can also limit attention to long-term environmental consequences.

Critical Reinterpretation

A critical approach views these so-called structural issues not as accidental flaws but as inherent characteristics of the system itself. Economic models that prioritize growth and accumulation can generate both environmental challenges and new economic opportunities, creating a cycle in which problems and solutions are interconnected. Within this framework, environmental crises may be seen as recurring outcomes of systemic processes.

This perspective also suggests that regulatory limitations and institutional constraints are not merely due to a lack of resources but may reflect deeper structural priorities. The uneven distribution of environmental impacts can be understood as part of broader patterns of global inequality. Addressing these issues may require reconsidering existing economic priorities and exploring alternative approaches that emphasize sustainability and long-term ecological balance.

Political and Economic Interests

Conventional Understanding

Within existing political and economic systems, various actors—including corporations, governments, and interest groups—pursue agendas that may conflict with environmental sustainability. Industries such as oil, gas, and coal often influence policy decisions to protect their economic interests, potentially delaying transitions toward renewable energy. Similarly, businesses may prioritize profitability over environmental responsibility, while political actors may focus on ideological or economic objectives rather than scientific evidence.

Global economic systems and trade agreements may also reflect priorities that emphasize economic growth over environmental protection. These dynamics can influence public opinion, shape international agreements, and limit the effectiveness of environmental policies. As a result, efforts to address climate change may be delayed or weakened by competing interests (Munsterhjelm, 2023).

Critical Reinterpretation

From a critical perspective, these political and economic dynamics can be seen as outcomes of broader systemic structures that prioritize profit and accumulation. Individual actions and institutional decisions may reflect deeper patterns within the system, where economic and political power are closely interconnected. In this context, corporate influence, policy decisions, and global economic practices are not isolated issues but part of a larger framework that shapes environmental outcomes.

This perspective highlights the relationship between economic systems and political authority, suggesting that meaningful environmental action may require addressing these underlying connections. By examining how power and profit interact, it becomes possible to better understand the challenges associated with identifying responsibility for climate change and developing effective solutions.



Limited Regulatory Frameworks

Conventional Understanding

Addressing the climate crisis remains challenging due to the presence of weak, fragmented, and insufficient regulatory mechanisms. Existing legal and policy frameworks often lack the strength required to effectively control environmental degradation. At the international level, governing bodies typically issue recommendations and guidelines rather than enforceable mandates, leaving implementation to individual nations. This decentralized approach reduces accountability and consistency across regions.

At the national level, many countries struggle with incomplete legislation, limited real-time environmental data, and inadequate institutional capacity. Environmental policies are often sector-specific and fail to account for the interconnected nature of ecological systems. As a result, regulatory approaches remain fragmented, limiting the ability to conduct comprehensive environmental assessments.

Even where laws and standards exist, enforcement is often inconsistent. Violations frequently go unpunished, and it remains difficult to determine the exact contribution of individual actors to environmental harm. Furthermore, regulatory focus tends to remain on traditional pollutants, while overlooking broader economic activities that contribute to climate change. Despite claims of democratic governance, public participation in environmental decision-making is often minimal. Additionally, regulatory agencies frequently face shortages of expertise, personnel, and financial resources, further limiting their effectiveness.

Critical Reinterpretation

A critical perspective suggests that viewing regulatory limitations as simple gaps or weaknesses may overlook deeper structural dynamics. Regulatory systems are often embedded within broader economic frameworks and may reflect underlying priorities that align with dominant economic interests. In this context, international and national institutions may not always function independently but can be influenced by the same structures they are expected to regulate.

Long-term and comprehensive environmental governance may be difficult to achieve when short-term economic considerations take precedence. Incomplete assessments and selective implementation of policies may not merely reflect inefficiency but could also be linked to systemic priorities. Similarly, inconsistencies in enforcement and narrow regulatory focus may contribute to maintaining existing economic arrangements.

This perspective highlights the need to critically examine how regulatory systems are designed and whose interests they ultimately serve. Rather than focusing solely on reforming existing mechanisms, it suggests the importance of exploring alternative governance models that prioritize environmental sustainability and accountability.

Public Perception and Awareness

Conventional Understanding

Public awareness of environmental issues remains limited, particularly in developing regions. Many individuals perceive climate change as a natural phenomenon rather than one driven by human activity. As a result, environmental degradation often fails to receive adequate public attention. A lack of accessible and reliable information further contributes to misunderstandings about the causes and consequences of climate change.

Additionally, individuals may not fully recognize the environmental impact of their consumption patterns and lifestyle choices. Even among those who are aware of environmental challenges, there is often a gap between awareness and action. Limited access to credible



information and educational resources continues to hinder public engagement with climate issues.

Critical Reinterpretation

From a critical standpoint, patterns of public perception can be understood within broader socio-economic contexts. Public attitudes and awareness are influenced by dominant cultural and economic narratives, including those that promote consumption and growth. These narratives shape how individuals interpret environmental issues and their own role within them. While increasing awareness is important, this perspective suggests that awareness alone may not be sufficient to address environmental challenges. Structural factors, including economic systems and cultural norms, play a significant role in shaping behavior. Therefore, meaningful change may require not only educating the public but also addressing the underlying systems that influence perceptions and actions.

Scientific Uncertainty and Causality

Conventional Understanding

Scientific research on climate change involves inherent complexities and uncertainties. Climate systems are influenced by multiple interacting variables, including feedback loops and non-linear processes, making precise predictions difficult. Challenges include uncertainty in climate models, difficulties in linking specific weather events to climate change, and limited understanding of tipping points.

Attributing environmental changes to specific human activities is also complex, as multiple factors interact simultaneously. Scientific debates continue regarding the relative importance of different contributors to climate change, such as various greenhouse gases. Additionally, distinguishing between natural variability and human-induced changes remains a significant challenge. These uncertainties can complicate decision-making and policy formulation.

Critical Reinterpretation

A critical perspective highlights how scientific uncertainty can be interpreted and used in different ways. While uncertainty is a natural part of scientific inquiry, it can also be emphasized in ways that delay action or create doubt about the urgency of climate issues. Complex scientific findings may be selectively presented, potentially influencing public understanding and policy responses.

In some cases, uncertainty may shift responsibility away from systemic contributors and toward individual actions, reframing climate change as a matter of personal behavior rather than structural processes. Differences in scientific interpretation can also contribute to confusion, making it more difficult for the public to engage with the issue.

This perspective underscores the importance of communicating scientific findings responsibly and ensuring that uncertainty does not hinder necessary action. It also highlights the need to consider how scientific knowledge is produced, interpreted, and applied within broader social and economic contexts.

CONCLUSION

The present condition of environmental destruction and climate instability can be interpreted as a structural outcome of capitalism. This is because the capitalist system is built around continuous expansion, profit seeking, and economic growth, often without regard for ecological limits. Within such a system, natural resources are extracted, processed, and consumed in ways that frequently damage ecosystems and transform living environments into degraded and hazardous spaces. While corporations and industries benefit economically from these activities, the environmental and social costs are largely shifted onto the wider public. At



its core, capitalism reduces nature to a resource for exploitation, treating it as something to be controlled, commodified, and used for accumulation.

This logic of endless growth encourages patterns of overproduction and excessive consumption. Global trade structures and supply chains, organized to satisfy expanding consumer markets, reinforce environmentally destructive forms of production. At the same time, economic inequality and social imbalance are not accidental features but central conditions that help sustain these market systems. Such inequalities intensify the burden of environmental harm on already vulnerable populations. In this sense, the climate crisis may be understood not as an isolated environmental problem but as a crisis deeply rooted in the functioning of capitalism itself.

Although identifying every individual or institutional actor involved in climate damage may be extremely difficult, the broader system within which these actors operate can be seen as the primary source of the crisis. Industrialized and economically dominant nations that have historically promoted capitalist models of development bear a particularly significant role in spreading these structures globally. Corporations, as central institutions of capitalism, represent the practical expression of its values and priorities. From this viewpoint, those who support and reproduce capitalist ideas and practices are implicated in sustaining the conditions that drive ecological breakdown, even if their degree of involvement differs.

It is therefore important to recognize that responsibility for climate destruction is unevenly distributed and that meaningful responses require structural rather than superficial change. At the same time, even attempts to analyze the obstacles surrounding climate accountability are often shaped by the same capitalist frameworks that produced the crisis. Many of the institutions, industries, and knowledge systems surrounding climate discourse have emerged within capitalism, which means the crisis itself is often turned into a marketable concept, a field of professional expertise, and even a new source of profit.

The historical development of capitalist civilization suggests that the system is unable to resolve the very problems it creates, because its internal logic remains tied to exploitation and accumulation. Rather than eliminating crises, it tends to relocate, disguise, or externalize them. As a result, many of the solutions offered within this framework may simply generate new and more complicated forms of harm. What is needed, therefore, is not only a different response but also a different way of thinking—one that produces new forms of knowledge and a new kind of human outlook no longer confined within capitalist assumptions.

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