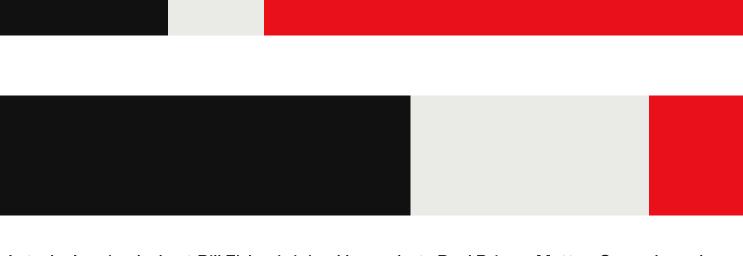# Around the World: How digital is having an ever-increasing impact on elections

Audio

In today's episode, host Bill Fisher is joined by analysts Paul Briggs, Matteo Ceurvels, and Jasmine Enberg to discuss the pervasive nature of digital in political campaigning. How big is

the disinformation problem? And are we in line for an existential AI crisis when it comes to political messaging?

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Episode Transcript:

Marcus Johnson (00:00):

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Bill Fisher (00:30):

Hello everyone. Welcome to Behind the Numbers Around the World, an eMarketer podcast made possible by Roundel. It is Thursday, June the 27th. I'm your host, Bill Fisher, and it's my pleasure as it always is, to welcome you to Around the world. And this month we're talking about political content on digital platforms around elections.

Bill Fisher (00:55):

Welcome folks to a behind the number show that takes you around the world looking at what various countries are doing in the worlds of commerce, media, and advertising. Each month we have our three in three global news recap. Then we have Talking Heads where my guests and I have an open discussion about the main theme for today's show, which as I've mentioned, is about political content around elections. And we finish it all off with my devious recap stats quiz. Again, all related to the topic at hand. This month, we will be asking just how important are digital platforms in election campaigns,

Jasmine Enberg (01:27):

But they're also using organic social tactics, whether that's creator or celebrity partnerships in order to connect with young voters on those platforms. Some of which, like TikTok or Pinterest, don't actually allow political ads.

Bill Fisher (01:41):

How easy is it to regulate campaigning on these platforms?

Paul Briggs (01:45):

And I think you're asking people who don't necessarily understand the technology and its capabilities and for good and for bad to really try to regulate it in a meaningful way that's not

unfair to the platforms.

Bill Fisher (01:55):

And does AI represent an existential crisis for political advertising?

Matteo Ceurvels (02:01):

But I mean, I look at some of the videos. I mean, it's pretty convincing if you're not too savvy on who the actual anchors are for some of these shows.

Bill Fisher (02:16):

Okay, I have three experts to help me out with today's show. Let's get them involved. First up, we have our jet setting social media experts fresh from hobnobbing with Taylor Swift in Cannes, or maybe not. It's Jasmine Enberg. Hello there, Jasmine.

Jasmine Enberg (02:32):

I wish Taylor Swift had been there, but unfortunately not. But thank you so much for having me. I'm happy to be here.

Bill Fisher (02:37):

Great to have you on the show. Next. He's our Latin American guru. He's Matteo Ceurvels. Hello, Matteo.

Matteo Ceurvels (02:44):

Hello, Bill. Great to be here. A

Bill Fisher (02:45):

Pleasure to have you on the show. And last but not least, he's our Canadian kingpin. It's Paul Briggs. Hey, Paul, how are you?

Paul Briggs (02:52):

Hey, Bill. I'm good. Thanks for having me.

Bill Fisher (02:53):

Great to have you as well. Okay, before we get into the episode proper, let me introduce you to this month's culture shock.

Bill Fisher (03:02):

And given we're talking politics and elections, let me tell you about mandatory voting. So according to world population review, you are required by law to vote in elections in 26 countries around the world. 11 of those countries are in South and Central America, and though most infractions result in a fine in Bolivia, things get a bit more serious than that in the country. A voter is given a card once they voted as proof of participation. If they then fail to show this proof within a three month period following the election, when asked to do so, their salary may be withheld from them via their bank. Pretty harsh. Wow. Do we know any folks that might fall foul to such a law?

Jasmine Enberg (03:46):

I remember this from when I lived in Argentina actually, and I believe this was before digital voting or mail voting. I'm not sure actually if they even have that yet in Argentina, but at the time they didn't. So you had to go back to your hometown where you were registered if it was different from where you were living in order to vote.

Bill Fisher (04:03):

Wow. Sounds like something from the Bible, doesn't it? Heading back to Nazareth or something for, yeah. Okay. Right. Let's crack on with the next segment. This is our new segment, which we call three in three. I have three interesting and related news stories. I'm going to introduce intern one story to one guest, and they're going to give me their quick take between the two of us. We're going to do it all in a minute. So three stories in three minutes. The time is set. Let's go. Story one is for Jasmine in the uk, according to the byline times, the Telegraph newspaper has been reminded by the electoral commission about the rules around partisan campaigning after pushing anti-labor stories and ads on meta and on X, ultimately no sanction was handed out as the regulator ruled. The ads didn't present any clear call to action. Jasmine, what are your thoughts on this?

Jasmine Enberg (04:59):

Well, even though this ended up being somewhat of a non-story, I think it does show how murky some of the rules around political advertising can be on social media. And that's of

course especially concerning in an election year. But beyond that, I also think it's a great example of how the lines between news, politics and entertainment have blurred. And so even without this, so-called Call to Action in the ads, I was struck by how click-baity and divisive those headlines were. And that makes sense from Telegraph's point of view, because as we've learned, that tends to be the kind of content that grabs our attention on social. But it can be problematic, of course for meta and X because they're making money off of that kind of engagement. And of course also for society if it ends up interfering or affecting election outcomes.

Bill Fisher (05:46):

Great points. That was our first story. Story two is for Paul, and this is a slightly older story, but very interesting. Nonetheless, in February's Pakistani elections, votes were still being counted. When former Prime Minister Imran Kahan claimed victory for his party, the PTI, nothing unusual there until you hear that Imran Kahan was in jail and his video message was AI generated. Paul, just how concerning is this story?

Paul Briggs (06:11):

I think it's very concerning, and I think it kind of speaks to a couple of conditions that are at play with people on digital media generally. One is media literacy, just the understanding of how, and especially digital media literacy, how content is produced, what is the source of the content, and what are the content's aims. So I think generally speaking, I think people have a lower understanding of that these days. And the ability for people to go direct to the public averting the usual channels, which is sort of news media going direct through channels like YouTube can be beneficial to candidates, but can also be very confusing for people who don't understand the value of an important news media.

Bill Fisher (06:52):

Indeed. Thanks, Paul. That was story two. Story three is for Matteo and Mexico's recent elections saw Claudia Shane Baum elected as the country's first female president, but the campaign was quite nasty with the female nominees each being exposed to personal attacks, focusing on their appearance and credentials. Social media, unsurprisingly, was a particular breeding ground for such comments. Matteo, is there any way to counter this sort of thing?

Matteo Ceurvels (07:18):

Unfortunately, I always think that during election seasons we see the worst in humanity. We had a lot polarization. We have a lot of negative comments on all sides of the spectrum. And in the case of Mexico, you had two women as front runners with that. So that opens the door to a lot of harsh criticism, and especially in a country where machista culture runs wild. I'd say for counteracting, I mean, I think it's a really not just a problem just for Mexico, but a global problem in terms of how do you moderate negative language. Language that can be construed as bullying, harassment, and even misinformation that we are seeing run rampant. And in the case of Mexico, we do see that unlike other countries, there is a general distrust in news media from Mexican consumers and the populace at large and they turn to social media. So roughly about 50% of people in Mexico get their news from Facebook. And we do see rise in things like YouTube and WhatsApp in particular. So when you have this fact-checked sometimes sources, that really does lead to a spread of disinformation. So on the platform side, better job at regulating. But on the candidate side too, making sure you are controlling the narrative with the facts.

Bill Fisher (08:24):

Thanks, Matteo. And that wraps up our three in three for this month.

Bill Fisher (08:30):

Okay. Now it's time for the main part of the show, what we call talking heads. This is where we dig a little bit deeper in today's topic. So 2024, it's the year of elections, it seems according to Time Magazine, nearly half of the world's population. Yes, half of the population is 49%, actually will head to the polls this year in at least 64 countries. But we're in an ever more digitalized world, ever more polarized it seems as well. So how do we deal with, as Matteo mentioned, the spread of disinformation, how have laws adapted to cover digital platforms? And just how important are these platforms in helping elect new leaders? So let's start with that question. How important are these platforms? I mean, obviously we know people spend more and more time with digital, so how are politicians leaning in to digital? Who wants to kick us off?

Paul Briggs (09:26):

I would argue that it's probably the most important channel for candidates these days because most people are getting their news via social media. And I think it's proven that

spending in social media channels to promote a message is very effective and especially effective for political parties.

Jasmine Enberg (09:43):

Yeah, I would agree with that. I mean, if you think about the US and the grand scheme of things, digital is hugely important even though traditional media still accounts for the majority of political ad spending here. And that's because the growth we're seeing in political ad spending really is coming from digital channels, mainly CTV, on the social media side, which is of course what I cover. We have seen political advertisers become a little bit more skittish towards the platforms, but they're still spending heavily, but they're also using organic social tactics, whether that's creator or celebrity partnerships in order to connect with young voters on those platforms. Some of which like TikTok or Pinterest, don't actually allow political ads. I think President Biden and Donald Trump joining TikTok really is a case in point of just how important digital platforms, social media platforms in particular are to reaching those young voters who aren't going to be watching traditional TV and are less receptive to traditional forms of advertising.

Matteo Ceurvels (10:44):

I concur with that. And I think when we step back a bit too and look at emerging markets, which I cover within Latin America, a lot of the population does skew younger and where are younger consumers getting their information? Social media, and I think it was a really clear evidence when we looked at Argentina, which had its elections at the end of last year, that you look at a divisive candidate like Javier Melay, who was crowned really the king of Instagram and TikTok because he leveraged those platforms to talk to the populace in that age group, of which I think it's about a third of the voting population. Argentina is under 29. So if you're able to dominate these digital public squares and really get a footing in there, they are very important. And just to step back to the Mexico one, since we talked about earlier, I think it's interesting when we look at the spend in terms of what their campaign budget was spent on Claudia Shaba only spent about 11% of her media budget on social media. So I think versus her other rivaling candidate spent almost 30%. So it is interesting to see how politicians are thinking about their media buys and where they're spending them.

Bill Fisher (11:48):

You mentioned, what was it, a third of the population being under 29, right? Yes. So two thirds are older than that, so you've got to reach those as well, right? So surely these old traditional methods of reaching them still must carry some favor, right?

Matteo Ceurvels (12:03):

Yes and no because even when we do look at demographic habits, we do see older demographics migrating towards social platforms because of that general mis distrust in media outlets. So then we go back into the bread and butter basics, as I'm sure Jasmine can tell you too. You see a little older migration towards Facebook, the millennials towards Instagram, the younger ones on TikTok, and then you start seeing those general social habits play out, but then within the news gathering and political information realm. So yes, TV does have that mass reach, but in this more interconnected world and where these platforms are gaining a bigger foothold, the social platforms are really winning out.

Paul Briggs (12:40):

I just wanted to go back to something Jasmine said about the share of traditional versus digital from political parties or the government in general. I had to look at what's happening in Canada, and it seems to be maybe the opposite of what's happening in the us. So in 2023 year, the report that I was looking at reports on that given year, 70% of government ad spending was in digital channels and 16% was in social media. Now, that's just a non-election year, that sort of run of the mill government advertising. It probably would switch in an election year where TV becomes much more effective as a way to get your message out. But I just find that interesting that share may be a little different in Canada than it is in the US or elsewhere.

Jasmine Enberg (13:22):

Well, I think also one of the reasons that traditional channels, especially TV remains so important for political advertisers is because it's safer. This is pre-produced content that you're advertising against when you're on social media, it can be kind of a free for all. These are primarily user generated platforms. And I spend a lot of time thinking about what it means that you now have political creators or politicians partnering with creators to share news. And that poses a lot of risk for the candidates as well, because if you're posting a quick TikTok or an Instagram reel, there's a lot that can be lost in translation, so to speak. And even a well timed meme can be taken out of context or misunderstood. And now we have ai and that

makes content really easy and quick to manipulate in a very compelling way. And once that's out in the world on social media, it spreads like wildfire.

Bill Fisher (14:13):

It's easier to regulate TV as well, right? Is that fair?

Jasmine Enberg (14:17):

Well, yes. In the US there are regulations for TV that don't exist. For social media.

Matteo Ceurvels (14:23):

I'd say yes and no, depending on what media freedoms you have, because you do have certain countries where the government does influence or the party in charge does influence the media. So you are going to be fed that state sponsored propaganda or from the party control where then the social platforms become that counterbalance to what the party line is towing in the mainstream media. So I mean, even look in the US too, I mean there are very few middle of the road. It's getting a bit more here too. So that puts the onus on you, the voter to understand, okay, here, this side, this side, and what is actually, what conclusion can I draw? Because I do think even with media companies, there are certain biases and swings towards one side of the spectrum or the other.

Jasmine Enberg (15:08):

Of course, I mean, we're all human, right? I mean, everybody is going to have a bias. And even if you think about the ways in which news organizations pick the stories, I mean, there's some bias there, even if it's supposed to be an objective news source. And just to echo some of the things that you said about Mexico, we've seen a big shift in people getting their news on social media here in the US too. The figures are somewhat similar to what you see in Mexico, for example. I do think we need to differentiate between getting news on social media and going to social media for news because the platforms have gotten really good at serving you that content, except for the ones of course that have vowed not to promote it. I'm looking at threads, for example. And so there are a lot of people who are on social media and stumble across news because it's unavoidable even if they're trying not to participate in it.

Bill Fisher (15:58):

So how are these platforms going about ensuring that you are not being fed a steady diet of disinformation? How are they going about regulating these things?

Jasmine Enberg (16:09):

The social media in particular, I mean, it's tough, right? These are global companies. They operate in many different countries that have different laws that they need to adhere to. And this is by no means an excuse because they haven't been good at content moderation for a really long time. And that was before the age of ai. And now we're in this situation again where media is so much easier and quicker to manipulate in this very compelling way. And these platforms have also pulled back a lot of their content moderation teams and rules. They've actually replaced some of those with ai, which is really interesting because I always think of AI as being both the problem and the solution to the misinformation problem because of course, AI tools can help you combat mis and disinformation at scale. But there's still a lot that slips through the cracks.

Jasmine Enberg (16:56):

And especially when it comes to political advertising on these platforms, the guidelines are still evolving, the rules are still evolving, and some of them are too little too late. So if you think about meta and YouTube, for example, they now require political advertisers or issue advertisers to label ads that have been made using ai, but that isn't necessarily going to be enough. And then also meta, for example, is going back to its kind of age old policy of not allowing political ads in the week before the US election, but there's still a lot of time for information and those ads to spread before that.

Matteo Ceurvels (17:36):

And I mean, even since you mentioned YouTube, I think it was interesting too what some countries are in terms of regulation or in terms of how these global companies are navigating these regulatory environments. In Brazil, for instance, they'll be having municipal elections later this year, I think in October, and Google will not be accepting political ads on its platform in compliance with some new regulation passed earlier this year. So we do see some stance with that. But yeah, with the use of ai, I think it, it's a whole new complex, wild, wild west in terms of the technology is really getting good. So some of these avatars you see, some of them, it's hard to discern is this actually a person or is this not? Is this a deep fake? Is this not?

So I think the technology's advancing a bit faster than the platforms can keep up with regulating it or keeping it in check.

Paul Briggs (18:25):

And it's moving so fast that the regulators are having a hard time keeping up too. I know in this country it's very early days on the government trying to figure out how to regulate AI and putting it into a larger set of legislation around digital policy. And it's, it's sort of uninformed at this point because what's around the corner is very hard to see, and I think you're asking people who don't necessarily understand the technology and its capabilities and for good and for bad to really try to regulate it in a meaningful way that's not unfair to the platforms.

Jasmine Enberg (18:58):

That sounds very much like what's happening in the us.

Bill Fisher (19:01):

Yeah, I mean, the story about Imran Kahan, it was a bit mind boggling to me. And Matteo, I believe you had a story about something similar in Venezuela happening, right?

Matteo Ceurvels (19:10):

Yes. So as we were saying about state controlled media, so that's a very prime example of it in terms of how politicians are trying to control the narrative and what is supposed to be a free and fair election where we see with Nicholas Maduro putting fake news anchors, using AI to create fake news stories with fake news anchors, but passing it off as real live anchors and real live news, but then disseminating it out through social platforms. So then you start seeing people sharing it and the usual rabbit hole that you go down. But I look at some of the videos, I mean, it's pretty convincing if you're not too savvy on who the actual anchors are for some of these shows. So it does pose a problem and it does pose, how do you break through this noise? What seeming to be a legitimate news anchor and a legitimate news show really is just state-sponsored AI misinformation or propaganda.

Jasmine Enberg (20:07):

Can I give you a little bit of a hot take on what I think in the US at least? Please

Bill Fisher (20:12):

Do.

Jasmine Enberg (20:13):

Well, so when it comes to ai, because we're already so polarized, I find it very hard to believe that there will be a single piece or even several pieces of AI generated content missed or disinformation that is going to make a real difference in the election outcome here. I do think, however, that it could serve to further entrench our views and make us even more divided, which we know can lead to really terrible real world consequences. Where I'm probably most concerned about AI is its ability to surface more miss and disinformation and other bad content, particularly as social platforms, as they continue to lean into AI to bring more relevant content to users, because that too can have this profound impact on how we all view the world and political events, even if it isn't necessarily going to change how we vote come November.

Bill Fisher (21:10):

Interesting. Okay. A really, really interesting discussion there. But that's all we've got time for, unfortunately, because it's now time for our recap stats quiz.

Bill Fisher (21:23):

Okay. This is where we recap today's theme with a few related stats questions. There's no prize. It's all about bragging rights. There are only three questions and they're multiple choice. So it's nice and quick and relatively easy. I'm going to ask each of you to slack me or answers so there's no room for influence or anything like that. Okay? So first question. I spoke earlier in the culture shock section about mandatory voting. Well, just because something's mandatory doesn't mean everybody falls into line. There are always going to be exemptions and things like that, but some people just won't vote anyway. I mentioned the threat of withholding salary in Bolivia, but what do we think the last election turnout percentage was in the country? This was according to our world in data. So the last time Bolivia had an election, what was the percentage turnout? And here are your options. So get ready to slack me. We have 88%, 96%, or 99%.

Jasmine Enberg (22:17):

I'm nervous. You

Bill Fisher (22:18):

All went for 96% and you were all incorrect. That was the figure for Vietnam. Now, voting isn't mandatory in Vietnam, but you may or may not know there's a one party communist state in operation there. And elections are very strictly policed and encouraged. So that's why that figure is so high. 99% is also incorrect. Any idea what country? How does a 99% turn out?

Jasmine Enberg (22:45):

Is it Australia?

Bill Fisher (22:47):

No. It is the right sort of side of the world. North Korea. Oh,

Jasmine Enberg (22:52):

Well,

Bill Fisher (22:53):

Need I say more?

Jasmine Enberg (22:53):

It's pretty awkward right side of the world, but very different country.

Bill Fisher (22:58):

So 88% was actually the answer, which as Paul says, it's still pretty high, but a lean month for a few people, I imagine if they get caught, no salary. Okay, so all to play for because I don't need to go through the scores. We know no one's got anything. So for our second question, we are headed to Ireland where EU elections took place earlier this month, and Global Witness conducted a test there. It submitted 16 ads containing election disinformation to TikTok, YouTube, and X. Which platform do you think performed worst? IE. It allowed the most ads through its vetting systems, even though it contained disinformation. So they are your three options, YouTube, TikTok, or X?

Jasmine Enberg (23:44):

Are they political ads?

Bill Fisher (23:45):

Political ads? Yeah.

Matteo Ceurvels (23:47):

This is a trick question.

Bill Fisher (23:49):

Okay, the answers are in

Paul Briggs (23:51):

Unanimous. Again, Bill, are we all in

Bill Fisher (23:53):

Agreement? It's not quite unanimous. No, almost. So Matteo and Paul, you opted for X, which I would probably have gone for that. I would've been as wrong as you are. It actually performed best. All ads were rejected. So whatever your opinions on X with this very small sample, it performed very well. Jasmine, you've plumped for YouTube, which is also incorrect. It did a little bit worse. It rejected all but two of the ads. But the worst performing was TikTok. How many ads do we think it let through out of 16,

Matteo Ceurvels (24:29):

15,

Bill Fisher (24:32):

Close 16. All of them. Wow. It allowed all of them too. However, in response to the investigation, TikTok said that all 16 of the ads did indeed violate its advertising policies and were correctly identified by its systems, but they were approved after additional review by a moderator. So it was a human error. And the moderator has since received retraining, as you would hope. And I should also add that global witness removed all the ads after review so that they weren't shown to anybody.

Jasmine Enberg (25:00):

That's very interesting. I mean, TikTok technically bans political advertising, and yet all 16 went through.

Bill Fisher (25:07):

There you go. Well, I can give you a score, but it's still pretty even on nil All. Okay, so let's see if we can do better with our final question. We're going to look at the perception of AI in political advertising. And this is a UK study from the ADA Lovelace Institute and the Allen Turing Institute. It asks UK adults about the perceived benefits and concerns with AI in a number of different fields, and it came up with a net benefit score in those fields. So all the overall concerns were subtracted from the perceived benefits to give a score. The question is, which of the following had a more negative score than targeted political advertising? So the use of AI in these fields was perceived as more negative than for targeted political advertising. And your categories are autonomous weapons, driverless cars or robotic vacuum cleaners. So weapons, cars, or vacuums. Which do you think people thought had a worst score? And everybody is in agreement on this one.

Jasmine Enberg (26:17):

Are we all wrong?

Bill Fisher (26:19):

Driverless cars? Well, let me just go through the answers. So robotic vacuum cleaners, as you might expect, was actually the most positive. It had a positive 1.36 score. So people aren't really concerned about AI and robotic vacuum cleaners as you would expect. The next highest was autonomous weapons with a minus 0.43 score, and the lowest score was driverless cars with minus N 0.52. I'm going to give you all a point, but the answer is actually none of them. So targeted political advertising was bottom of the list with minus N 0.73. So people are more concerned about AI in targeted political advertising than they are with driverless cars or all autonomous weapons, which blows my mind a little bit and concerns me a little bit.

Jasmine Enberg (27:08):

Bill, that was a trick question.

Bill Fisher (27:10):

It was a trick question, which is why I've given you all a point. So you all score one and we get to the end of the recap stats quiz with a three-way tie, which means I get to ask my tie break question. So I've planned this. It's as if I've planned it anyway. Okay, so this is a freeform answer. I'm not going to give you any options. You just have to give me a number. So we're going to return to voter turnout for this, and I've picked Tunisia for no obvious reason, or

maybe it is for a reason. Who knows. So Tunisia held parliamentary runoffs in January, 2023. What do you think the voter turnout was in percent? Just give me a number. Any number

Matteo Ceurvels (27:48):

60. I put 70.

Bill Fisher (27:49):

Oh, you're just going to shout it out. Are you? You're not going by

Paul Briggs (27:52):

Slack. I'm so, I'm so confident in that number. I had to shout it out.

Matteo Ceurvels (27:56):

I mean, I went with a solid 70. It was a very knee-jerk reaction. So we'll go with that.

Jasmine Enberg (28:02):

I'm going to shout mine out and say 48.

Bill Fisher (28:04):

48. Oh good. Because that means we got a clear winner and the winner is Jasmine. The answer was 11%. Wow. It was essentially a protest because the incumbents agenda and seizure of powers was so overreaching. Well, loads of parties didn't even put their name into the ballot, and lots of people didn't turn out as a result. Anyway, we have a winner. Jasmine, congratulations. Thank

Jasmine Enberg (28:28):

You. What do I win?

Bill Fisher (28:29):

Nothing. The adulation of your peers. Anyway, we always end this show with a winner because it is time to end the show, unfortunately. Congratulations again, Jasmine, and thanks for speaking with us today.

Jasmine Enberg (28:42):

Thanks so much for having

Bill Fisher (28:43):

Me. Matteo. Thanks for being back on the show again, been a while.

Matteo Ceurvels (28:47):

It's been a while, but always a pleasure.

Bill Fisher (28:49):

And Paul, thanks to you as ever. Thanks,

Matteo Ceurvels (28:52):

Bill.

Bill Fisher (28:52):

And thanks to all of you for listening in to Around the World, an eMarketer podcast made possible by Roundel. Tune in tomorrow for our weekly listen show hosted by Marcus. If you want to ask us any questions, you can of course, email us at podcast@emarketer.com. I hope that next month you can give me your vote of confidence and join me for another edition of Behind the Numbers Around the world. Bye for now.