Populism, Social Media, Trump and Fake News in the 2016 Election

Presented Sept. 22, 2018 by Jay Smith, Ph.d., Professor Emeritus, Athabasca University ©

I wish to acknowledge that we are on the traditional lands of the Coast Salish Peoples. We honour the ancestry, heritage and gifts of the Indigenous Peoples and give thanks to them.

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Should we believe what see on the Internet?

From {https://www.metrowestdailynews.com/opinion/20161211/holmes-america-takes-clickbait

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Overview of Presentation

- What is populism?
- What are its characteristics?
- Why is it on the rise? Where?
- In what ways does social media facilitate populism?
- How did Trump use social media in the 2016 presidential election?
- What is fake news and what role did it play in the 2016 election?
Countries where populism and populist leaders play a significant role I

- United States, Trump, “America First” R
- India: Narendra Modi R
- Turkey: Recep Tayrip Erdogan R
- Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte R
- Italy: Matteo Salvini (League) and Luigi Di Maio (Five Star Movement) R

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Countries where populism and populist leaders play a significant role II

• Greece: Alexis Tsipras (Syriza) L
• Hungary: Viktor Orban R
• France: Marine Le Pen R Not in Power
• Netherlands: Geert Wilders R Not in Power
• Spain: Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) L Not in Power
What is populism?

- Difficult to define - there are many varieties of populism
- Origins: United States, late 19th century
- View populism as a belief system “which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008)
Unpacking Our Definition

- Who are the virtuous people? The producers, workers, patriots displaying the ‘wisdom of the common man’
- Who are the people against?
- The elites – 1) political elites who don’t listen to the people; 2) economic elites – plutocrats, fat cats, bankers; 3) Legal elites - the courts, judges; 4) Supranational elites – Institutions of global governance who have taken power from the people – the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the European Union; 5) Media elites - journalists; 6) Others - bureaucrats, intellectuals, special interests

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Let’s meet some fat cats

• Classic Image – 1930s?
• From: Wikipedia
Question – real or fake fat cat?

- They are everywhere!
Who are the ‘dangerous others’, the non-producers, the undeserving?

• Immigrants (particularly illegal immigrants) – seen as lowering wages, being dependent on government, a security threat, a threat to identity

• Refugees

• Those on welfare, those who don’t pay taxes but receive public services, particularly poor African-Americans. (Tea Party bumper sticker: “You are not entitled to what I have earned.” – From Judis, 2016, p. 57)

• African-Americans in general, a source of crime
Is Populism, Particularly American Populism, Racist?

• Why is this claim made? (Benjamin L. McKean, “Populism, Pluralism, and the Ordinary” 2018)

• Populism emphasises a virtuous homogenous people in opposition to an emphasis on diversity and pluralism. Homogenous interpreted as white.

• That is, populism can be seen to exclude others who are different.

• Is this accurate? Where does Trump’s populism fit in?
Distinguishing Leftwing from Rightwing Populism

• Leftwing populists champion the people against an elite or establishment.
• Leftwing populists, those at the bottom and the middle, are arrayed against an elite at the top. (Our first “fat cat.”) Approach is dyadic.
• Rightwing populists also champion the people against an elite but more than that they accuse the elite of molly-coddling another group, e.g. immigrants, those on welfare, others as noted previously. So rightwing populists are triadic, looking up but also down at an undesirable group. (See Judis, 2016, 15)
What have the People Been Deprived of?

Great sense of deprivation, dispossession and loss by the people.

What has been lost must be restored.

What has been lost? Their “rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice”

Their control and sovereignty taken away by elites and a corrupt system.

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The people need an advocate, someone who will:

- Stand up for them
- Be plain speaking, who will speak the truth, tell it like it is
- Not be politically correct
- Be authentic, down to earth
Populism as a Challenge to Liberal-Democracy

Liberal-democracy favours limits on government by means of constitutions and separation of powers, at least of the legal system.

Liberal-democracy based on representative government, free and fair elections, group pluralism, rule of law, individual human rights and assumes that citizens are rational and attentive to public affairs.

Populism is less interested in limited government, constitutions, separations of powers.

Populism favours direct rule rather than indirect rule by representatives, is based more on emotion (particularly anger) than reason.
Why does Populism Arise?

- Populism arises under particular circumstances.
- Populism is a warning sign that the political system is in crisis
- Populism can arise when people feel that they are not been listened to by the political classes and political parties who are seen to have formed a consensus that excludes them.
- Immigration has pitted politicians and business leaders against popular sentiment. Fear of loss of jobs
- Trade deals, for example, NAFTA have never had much popular support but both parties supported them. Trade deals form part of the neoliberal agenda.
What is Neoliberalism?

- Neoliberalism can be defined as an ideology that asserts that most decisions regarding who gets what in society should be made through markets, not governments.
- Neoliberalism promotes: 1) trade deals, trade liberalization on a global scale; 2) deregulation, removal of rules that impede investment; 3) cutting back on government spending; 4) Liberalization of investment, permitting others to invest in your country.
- Neoliberalism has opponents on the right and the left.
- The ruling ideology of many governments including US and Canada
Why did Neoliberalism Arise?

- Lagging growth in the 1970s
- Falling rates of profit for business
- Growing global competition and overcapacity
- Wage pressure from below, increasing number of strikes
- Business sees free trade deals as one answer
The Precursors to Trump and Sanders – Neoliberalism has it enemies

• Ross Perot – 1992 Presidential election forms his own party – promised he would be the ‘servant’ and the people, ‘the boss.’
• Argues that free trade with Mexico under NAFTA would create a “giant sucking sound,” draining millions of jobs from the American heartland.
• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdaitZx3njw
• Pat Buchanan – 1992 Promises to "Make America first again" saying: “The NAFTA-GATT trade deals sold out America’s workers, ravaged our manufacturing base and caused disruption in our small towns and harming communities. The Clinton-Gore trade policy is a betrayal of America’s workers, and virtual economic treason against the US.”
• As economy improves later in the 1990s populism recedes.
The Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the Tea Party and the Occupy Movement

• The crisis creates immense uncertainty, anger and fear. Not one player in the crisis is prosecuted by the Obama administration.

• The Tea Party movement (2010) attacks neoliberalism from the right. Its base of support - older white middle classes is very insecure. Sees itself has having to pay higher taxes and health care premiums to finance programs such as Obamacare. It is angry at the government. Tea Party turns on Republicans when it doesn’t get rid of Obamacare.

• Occupy Wall Street (2011) attacks from the left. Makes a case for rising inequality in the US, the 1% vs. the 99%. This finds strong resonance among many Americans.
Along Comes Donald Trump

• Bernie Sanders champions leftwing populism, the power of the people against the billionaire class. Strongly opposes neoliberalism, loses to Hillary in the primary elections.

• Trump opposes neoliberalism, particularly free trade deals, from the right. Promises to restore what has been lost. He will “Make American Great Again.” Runs a nationalist campaign, wins the nomination and presidency.

• Challenges prevailing Republican and Democratic views on defence and national security, free trade, outsourcing, immigration.
Trump Policies

- On defence and national security – NATO countries getting a free ride, NATO obsolete, expensive.
- Opposes free trade, it costs Americans jobs. “We can’t beat Mexico … in trade.”
- Strongly opposes the outsourcing of jobs across the border or overseas. Promises to restore manufacturing. The economic and political systems are both rigged.
Trump as the Peoples’ Champion

• 2016 – Says he will be the champion of the ‘silent majority’ against the ‘special interests’ and the ‘establishment’ of both parties.

• At the Republican Convention in July 2016 in an appeal to blue collar workers who felt that they had been left behind in the 21st century he states:

“The forgotten men and women of our country — people who work hard but no longer have a voice: I am your voice.”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehvUQrRDyyU

Claims Hillary is a ‘puppet’ of corporations and elites and would “keep our rigged system in place.”
2016 As the Anger Election

• Emotion, particularly, anger was a motivating force in the 2016 election, not reason.
• Republicans and conservatives three times as likely to say they felt angry than were Democrats and liberals. (Rudolph, 2018)
• Republicans voters angry at Washington. “Drain the swamp!”
• Survey “results suggest that populist anger at the federal government played an important and, arguably, a pivotal role in tipping the outcome of the presidential election toward Trump.” (Rudolph, 2018, 19)
How Does Social Media Facilitate the Rise of Populism

• The Internet and Social Media as disruptive forces.
• They challenge the top down gatekeeping control of political communication by legacy media – newspapers, television, radio. (One to many communication.)
• Social media facilitates one to one (emailing to a friend) and many to many political communication (putting up your own website, writing a blog).
• Social media social media permits users to be producers of content rather than just passive consumers. Anyone can get online and become politically engaged.
### About four-in-ten Americans often get news online

**% of U.S. adults who often get news on each platform**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cable, local, network nightly</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media, websites/apps</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print newspapers</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### % of each age group who often get news on each platform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>18–29</th>
<th>30–49</th>
<th>50–64</th>
<th>65+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print newspapers</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Just 1% said they never got news on any platform (not shown).
“The Modern News Consumer”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
Social media news use: Facebook leads the pack

% of U.S. adults who ...

- Facebook: 67% use site, 44% get news on site
- YouTube: 48%
- Twitter: 16%, 9%
- Instagram: 19%, 4%
- LinkedIn: 20%, 4%
- Reddit: 4%
- Snapchat: 1%
- Vine: 2%
- Tumblr: 4%

PEW RESEARCH CENTER
Why do Populist Leaders Like to use Social Media?

• They can tell their story directly. They can circumvent traditional news organizations and journalistic gatekeepers.

• They are not bound by the ethics and standards of traditional media. They can say what they want, unfiltered and they do.

• Social media is relatively inexpensive to use. What goes out on social media often finds its way into traditional media outlets.

• Trump’s social media of choice? Twitter. How Trump “fights back.”
How did Trump Use Twitter?

• To portray himself as a leader who can solve problems, eg, on crime and terror.
• To promote American nationalism – “Make America Great Again”
• To attack the traditional media and Hillary Clinton.
• To disseminate fake news. According to Kali Holloway “Trump has put thousands of fake news stories out ‘there’ and he is a ‘fake news factory’ and a ‘curator of untruths.’” Eg. “Hillary was too ill to serve as president.”
What is Fake News, Who Produces it? Who Looks at it?
Defining Fake News

• “Fake news is not simply news that is false, it is deliberately false. It has been created for a purpose.” (Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 2018, 105)

• Fake news as disinformation.

• Fake news weaponized for the purposes of political sabotage.
Is this Fake News?
This is Fake News – Pizza Gate

• One of the biggest fake news stories was one which claimed that Bill and Hillary Clinton were running a child sex slave ring out of a Washington DC pizza restaurant.
• False “memes” (an image or text that are spread rapidly online) were created.
YOU CAN SAY...

“ALIENS EXIST”  “CHEMTRAILS ARE REAL”
“9/11 WAS AN INSIDE JOB”  “ELVIS IS ALIVE”
“OBAMA IS A SHAPE-SHIFTING LIZARD PERSON”

BUT IF YOU DISCOVER HARD EVIDENCE
OF A CHILD TRAFFICKING RING OPERATED
BY THE GOVERNMENT AND THE ELITE...

• OBAMA SAYS IT’S FAKE NEWS
• HILLARY CONDEMNS IT
• THE POPE CALLS YOUR RESEARCH A SIN
• MAINSTREAM MEDIA CALL IT “FAKE NEWS”
  • GOOGLE HIDES IT
  • YOUTUBE DELETES IT
  • FACEBOOK DELETES IT
  • TWITTER ERASES IT
  • WIKIPEDIA REMOVES IT
  • REDDIT BANS IT
• JOURNALISTS ARE KILLED FOR INVESTIGATING IT

THE ELITE SCRAMBLE TO ORCHESTRATE
THE GREATEST COVER UP OF ALL TIME

WE WISH THIS WAS FAKE NEWS.  #PIZZAGATE
Pizzagate was false but with consequences

• The owners of the restaurant received hundreds of threats.
• Shortly after the election a deranged man from North Caroline went armed into the restaurant seeking to liberate the children. He shot open a lock hoping to find the captive children in the restaurant’s basement.
• He found only cooking supplies. The restaurant had no basement.
Fake News – "Pope Francis shocks world, endorses Donald Trump for president"
Some Facts and Figures About Fake News

• “In the final three months of the US presidential campaign, the [20] top-performing fake election news stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the [20] top stories from major news outlets such as the New York Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post, NBC News, and others, a BuzzFeed News analysis has found.” Craig Silverman November 16, 2016

• (https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook)
More Facts and Figures

• Of the 20 top-performing false election stories identified in the [Buzzfeed] analysis, all but three were overtly pro-Donald Trump or anti-Hillary Clinton.
• 2017 study on fake news in the 2016 presidential election by Allcott and Gentzkow found that three times more fake news stories supporting Trump than Clinton.
• Allcott and Gentzkow “database contains 115 pro-Trump fake stories that were shared on Facebook a total of 30 million times, and 41 pro-Clinton fake stories shared a total of 7.6 million times.”
• Many people believed fake news were true, more so for Republicans than Democrats
More Facts and Figures II

• Fake news is 70 percent more likely to be shared than real news (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018)

• When presented with fake news, the false information fooled people 75 percent of the time (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016).

• Among Republicans, 75 percent trust President Trump to tell the truth about important issues versus only 16 percent trusting the media (Quinnipiac University, 2018).

• Democrats are the opposite and even more extreme, with 86 percent trusting the media versus five percent trusting President Trump (Quinnipiac University, 2018).
Total Facebook Engagements for Top 20 Election Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Feb.–April</th>
<th>May–July</th>
<th>Aug–Election Day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream News</td>
<td>15 million</td>
<td>12 million</td>
<td>8.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake News</td>
<td>3 million</td>
<td>6 million</td>
<td>7.3 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Engagement refers to the total number of shares, reactions, and comments for a piece of content on Facebook. Source: Facebook data via BuzzSumo.
Top 5 Fake Election Stories by Facebook Engagement
(three months before election)

“Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement” (960,000, Ending the Fed)

“WikiLeaks CONFIRMS Hillary Sold Weapons to ISIS... Then Drops Another BOMBSHELL! Breaking News” (789,000, The Political Insider)

“IT’S OVER: Hillary’s ISIS Email Just Leaked & It’s Worse Than Anyone Could Have Imagined” (754,000, Ending the Fed)

“Just Read the Law: Hillary Is Disqualified From Holding Any Federal Office” (701,000, Ending the Fed)

“FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead in Apparent Murder-Suicide” (567,000, Denver Guardian)
Some Anti-Hillary Fake News Themes

• #DrunkHillary, a hashtag (Twitter) used by Trump supporters to spread the idea Hillary was a drunk.
Fake News: Hillary to Sick to Lead

• Some fake stories from Breitbart (more on Breitbart later):
  • “Hillary Health Conspiracy Turns Out to be Real” (9/14/16)
  • “How Hillary Clinton’s Inner Circle Tiptoes Around Her Health Issues” (10/24/16)
  • “Doctors Weigh In on Hillary’s Health” (9/12/16)
• Hillary did have a short bout of pneumonia in September 2016
Where did These Fake News Stories Come From

• Internally from within the United States
• From Macedonia and country of Georgia
• From Russia
U.S. Sources and Promoters of Fake News

• From individuals creating and sharing fake news.

• Hybrid partisan political/media organizations such as Breibart
BREAKING: “Tens of thousands” of fraudulent Clinton votes found in Ohio warehouse

By admin1 - September 30, 2016  46921  0
“A Fake News Masterpiece”

• Created by Cameron Harris from Ohio
• Picture is of British ballot boxes taken from the internet
• His story shared with six million people.
• Made $5,000
• Was it worth it for Mr. Harris – was fired from his job immediately once it was revealed in the mainstream press.
BRET KAVANAUGH READY TO REFUTE ‘FALSE ALLEGATIONS’ OF SEXUAL ASSAULT BEFORE SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
Breitbart

• On the surface Breitbart appears to be just an online news outlet but with a partisan slant.
• Its goal is “the full destruction and elimination of the entire mainstream media.” (Matthew Boyle, Breitbart political editor from Yang, 2018)
• Breitbart is also a political organization, a political actor which spread and amplified many fake news stories against Hillary.
• Promoter of the Alt-Right composed of white nationalists/white supremacists
• Early promoter of Pizzagate with 109 million visits to its website in Nov. 2016
• Steve Bannon head of Breitbart from 2012 to 2016 went on to manage Trump Campaign

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Fake News from the Balkans


Picture from one of Latsabidze’s website
Macdonia – a hotspot for fake news

• Veles, Macedonia: Over 100 websites were tracked here during the final weeks of the 2016 U.S. election campaign, producing fake news that mostly favored Republican candidate for President Donald Trump.

• “Bill Clinton loses it – admits he’s a murder.”
PoliticsPaper.Com – FAKE, FAKE, FAKE

• Question – was this really an uncoordinated effort?
Russia – Another Source

• Is big power meddling in other countries’ elections unusual? No says Rand Paul, Republican Senator from Kentucky:

• The Russians “are going to spy on us, they do spy on us, they’re going to interfere in our elections. We also do the same ... We all do it. What we need to do is make sure our electoral process is protected.” From: *The Atlantic*, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/07/the-us-has-a-long-history-of-election-meddling/565538/
Some Facts on Russian-created Web content

- 150 million Facebook and Instagram users were exposed to Russian-generated content.
- 131,000 messages on Twitter
- 1,000 videos on YouTube Source: Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Washington Post, November 10, 2017
- 3,000 Political ads on Facebook.
Fake Russian Ad on Facebook

• “How 100% of the Clintons' 2015 'charity' went to...themselves” 10 million views

• https://www.facebook.com/RTAmerica/videos/10153703671361366/
Robert McNees @mcnees · Nov 1

Please report this account. Also the source of Sid Miller's C-word tweet.

Publius Gaius @TheRickyVaughn

#ImWithHer #GoHillary

African Americans for

Avoid the line. Vote from home.

Text ‘Hillary’ to 59925

Vote for Hillary and be a part of history.
Today Americans are able to elect a president with godly moral principles. Hillary is a Satan, and her crimes and lies had proved just how evil she is. And even though Donald Trump isn’t a saint by any means, he’s at least an honest man and he cares deeply for this country. My vote goes for him!

SATAN: IF I WIN CLINTON WINS!
JESUS: NOT IF I CAN HELP IT!

PRESS ‘LIKE’ TO HELP JESUS WIN!
There was a lot more too

- Bots (from robot) – software that automatically generated fake Twitter and Facebook accounts.
- 15% of Twitter accounts are suspected bots.
- A study by the Oxford Internet Institute found that 33% of the proTrump traffic on Twitter was driven by bots (Howard 2016).
- Most recently, Russian bots have tried to influence the 2018 US midterm elections by promoting the hashtag #WalkAway, which encourages Black voters to leave the Democratic Party (Love 2018).
Is the Problem Really Russia or Does it Come from Within?

• Relatively speaking what the Russians did was minor compared to what happened with the US. They took advantage of an opportunity that presented itself. The social media door was open. They walked in.

• Within the U.S. between March, 2015 and November, 2016 “128 million Americans created nearly 10 billion Facebook posts, shares, likes and comments about the election.” *Globe and Mail*, January 20, 2018

• How many Russian ads were there? 3,000

• Did Russian intervention make a difference in the outcome of the election?
What Can You Do to Assess Fake News Stories?- Here’s What a 5th Grade California teacher taught his students. Critical Education.
From McIntyre, 2018, p.121

- 1. Look for copyright.
- 2. Verify from multiple sources.
- 3. Assess the credibility of the source. How long has it been around?
- 4. Look for a publication date.
- 5. Assess the author’s expertise with the subject.
- 6. Ask: Does this match my prior knowledge?
- 7. Ask: does this seem realistic?
You Can Also Consult Fact-Checker Websites

• Snopes - [https://www.snopes.com/](https://www.snopes.com/) (e.g. [https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/christine-blasey-ford-not-my-president/](https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/christine-blasey-ford-not-my-president/))

• PolitiFact [https://www.politifact.com/](https://www.politifact.com/) Use of a Truth-O-Meter

• FactCheck [https://www.factcheck.org/](https://www.factcheck.org/)
It is Not Only the Very Young that Need Critical Education

• “Stanford researchers find students have trouble judging the credibility of information online” (https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-researchers-find-students-have-trouble-judging-credibility-information-online)

• “When it comes to evaluating information that flows across social channels or pops up in a Google search, young and otherwise digital-savvy students can easily be duped, finds a new report from researchers at Stanford Graduate School of Education.”

• Students included came from middle schools, high schools, universities.
What Can Be Done to Curb Social Media Excesses?

• Should Facebook (and others) be allowed to self-regulate and clean up their act as has been promised?
• Or, should Facebook be recognized as a media company and have the traditional regulations and responsibilities of traditional outlets such as broadcasters and newspapers.
• Should the Facebook model change from an advertising model to a subscription based one?
• Should it treated as public utility, an essential service? Shut down?
The Big Picture – What to do About Populism?

• Historically American populists live by the rules of liberal democracy and when they lose, they accept defeat. Is the same true today?

• Sometimes dominant political parties co-op populist policies and populism recedes. Eg. Franklin Roosevelt and Huey Long in the 1930s.

• Sometimes the situation improves as the U.S. economy did in the late 1990s and populism recedes.

• In the U.S. the economy has improved but “income inequality … has grown much worse.” Wage growth is slow. Globe and Mail, September 15, 2018
What Might Happen to Democracy?

• "We must make our choice. We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both.” Judge Louis Brandeis, associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court,(1856-1941, https://www.brandeis.edu/legacyfund/bio.html

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And, Finally, Some Words to Remember

• “Don’t believe everything you read on the Internet.” – Thomas Jefferson

• Thank you for your attention.