Chartbeat

Facebook and Google: The Great Divide

In a multiplatform world, consumers find content in a multitude of ways — not only on your site, but also while scrolling on Facebook or searching on Google. The different ways a visitor can land on your content influences not only what they read, but also how they read. Recent research from Chartbeat shows that people exhibit different content consumption behaviors when coming from platforms like Facebook and Google than when already on your site.

Until now, the gaps in content consumption between Facebook and Google audiences haven't been fully explored or researched. We're hoping to change that by illuminating these differences using data from Chartbeat's network of 50,000 media sites across the globe. We hope this unique perspective helps you understand the distinct role of each platform, so you can maximize your readership wherever it lives.

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Which platforms drive the most traffic?

About 75% of the global external traffic going to publisher sites on a daily basis, according to Chartbeat network-level data, is actually coming from just five main platforms.

THE 5 LARGEST REFERRERS TO MEDIA SITES

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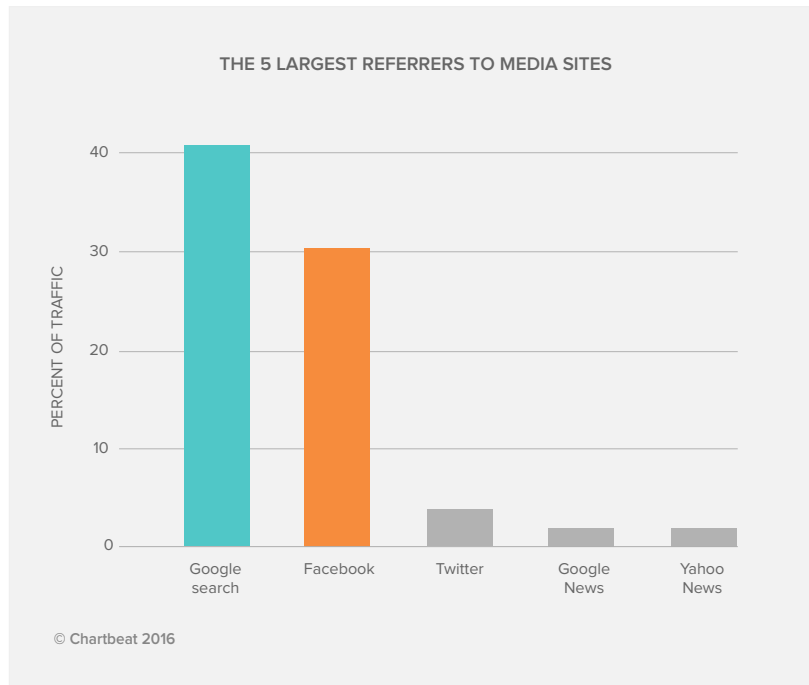
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Together, Google and Facebook drive more than 70% of external traffic to publisher sites.

Of the five referrers seen above—Google Search, Facebook, Twitter, Google News, and Yahoo! News—Google drives 40% of all external global traffic to publisher sites, and Facebook drives about 30%.

With about 70% of traffic coming from these two platforms alone, it's critical to understand what distinct roles they each play in the media ecosystem and how they're most successful as you define your audience building strategy.

How diverse is the content read on social versus search?

The diversity of content consumed is very different based on the platform, and this is in large part due to the intended use of each platform; while readers use Google to actively search for content around a specific subject, they find content more passively in their Facebook news feed only after it's been shared by a friend.

This means that the number of publisher pages getting referral traffic from search engines at a given time is enormous, but because social networks have what's called a "rich-get-richer" property where a story that's highly shared is more likely to be seen (and then shared) by others, social networks see concentrated traffic on only a few pages.

To quantify this, we use what's called a "diversity index" (in this case, Shannon entropy) to measure the diversity of traffic sent from a referrer. A low entropy corresponds to traffic that's highly concentrated on a few pages, while a high entropy corresponds to traffic that's more distributed across a larger number of pages. As we see in the chart below, Google traffic tends to have about 3 bits more entropy than Facebook traffic, meaning it's about 8x more spread out across topics.

DIVERSITY OF MEDIA CONSUMPTION ● Google ● Facebook ● Twitter
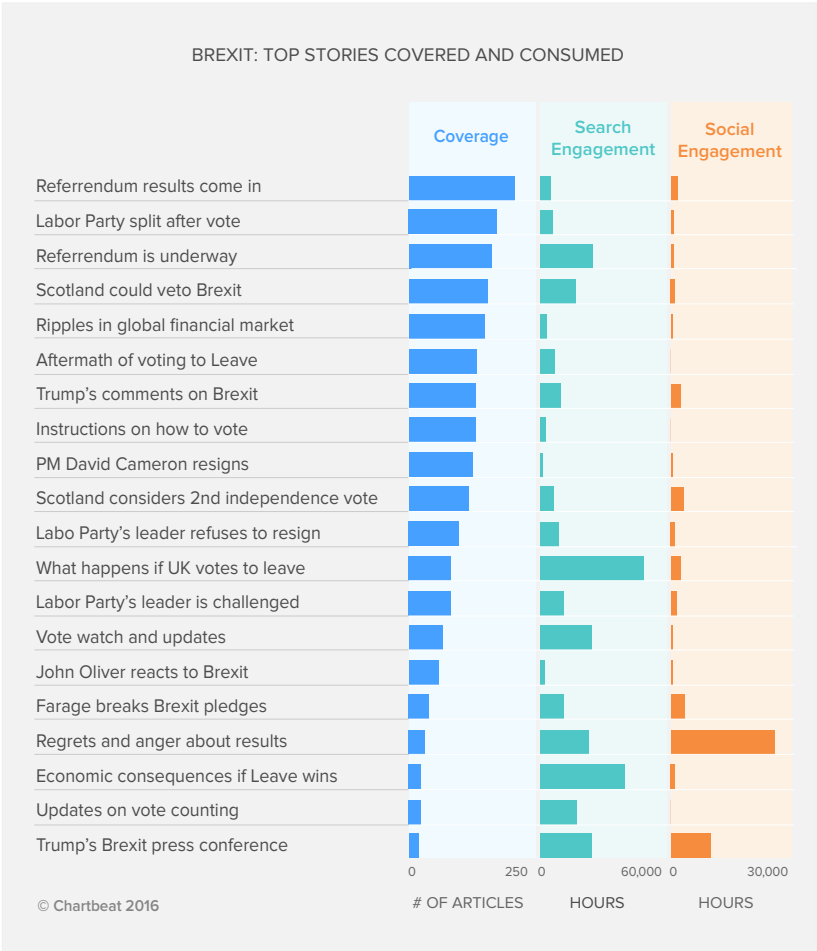
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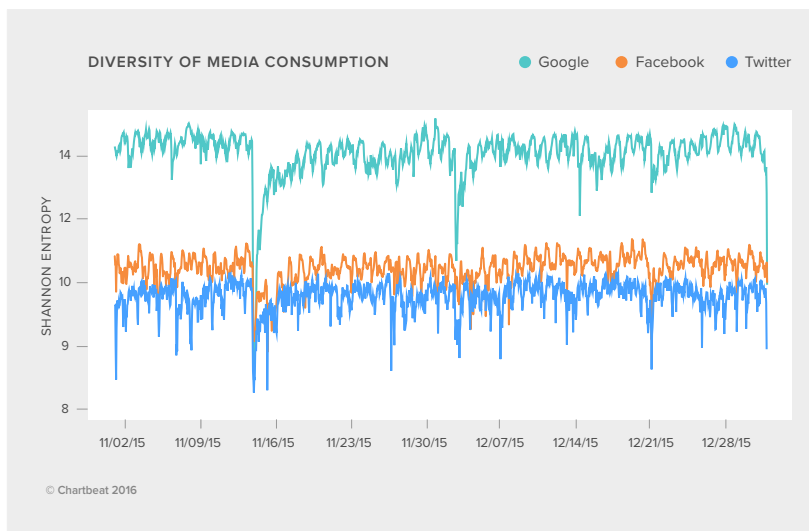
What we search for is nearly limitless, but because social sharing is much more narrow, so is the diversity of what content we find from social channels.

However, while a story is less likely on average to see traffic at all from Facebook than it is to see traffic from Google, the amount of traffic you could see from Facebook in just a short period of time is much greater.

We also see a pattern where during major news events, such as the Paris attacks in November 2015, entropy across all channels drops and traffic is ultra-concentrated on a few major stories on a few major sites (see downward spike on graph). But how does this relate to actual engagement with these articles when finding them via Google search versus your Facebook news feed?

When we dig in further to major news events, with multiple articles and angles covering the same topic, we find that what publishers write about and what audiences search for—and actually read—are completely different. As an example, we looked at the coverage and subsequent consumption of different story lines leading up to and following Brexit.

BREXIT: TOP STORIES COVERED AND CONSUMED

	Coverage	Search Engagement	Social Engagement
Referrendum results come in			
Labor Party split after vote			
Referrendum is underway			
Scotland could veto Brexit			
Ripples in global financial market			
Aftermath of voting to Leave			
Trump's comments on Brexit			
Instructions on how to vote			
PM David Cameron resigns			
Scotland considers 2nd independence vote			
Labo Party's leader refuses to resign			
What happens if UK votes to leave			
Labor Party's leader is challenged			
Vote watch and updates			
John Oliver reacts to Brexit			
Farage breaks Brexit pledges			
Regrets and anger about results			
Economic consequences if Leave wins			
Updates on vote counting			
Trump's Brexit press conference			

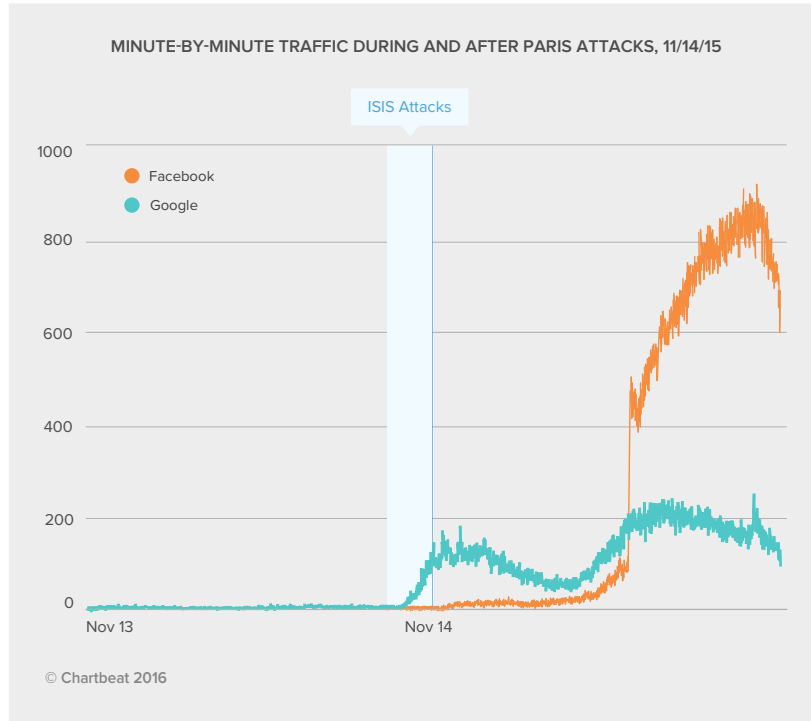| 0 250	0 60,000	0 30,000
# OF ARTICLES	HOURS	HOURS

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Consumers engage with more emotional stories on Facebook and more informative stories on Google.

We see that the most successful stories on Facebook have an emotional lens, whereas the most successful stories on Google tend to have a strictly informative lens. Only a few highly emotional topics, like "Regrets and anger about results," received significant engagement via Facebook, and the more factual topics such as "What happens if UK votes to leave" received much more significant engagement via Google search.

How do people approach search and social during major events?

Where do readers turn during breaking news?

MINUTE-BY-MINUTE TRAFFIC DURING AND AFTER PARIS ATTACKS, 11/14/15

ISIS Attacks

● Facebook
● Google

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After a major news event occurs, readers flock to search channels to find the most recent updates. It's not until things have settled that they move to social channels to share information and discuss what happened.

While Facebook drives a high percentage of referral traffic, social traffic tends to have a significant ramp up period, most likely due to the fact that finding an article in your news feed is dependent on someone in your network sharing it first. Evidently, people don't like to wait passively for news to come to them, but rather they prefer to search proactively for the latest updates.

During breaking news events, our research shows that search peaks first, followed by social. In fact, it isn't until about 12 – 24 hours later when social traffic picks up and reaches its peak via discussion and sharing. For example, as seen above during the Paris attacks in late 2015, Google traffic to *The Atlantic* article "What ISIS Really Wants" spiked 12 hours before Facebook traffic reached its peak. However, social channels may drive more traffic than search in the long run.

How does onsite engagement correlate with Facebook shares?

Do more shares mean more engagement on the article? Not really. High interactions or virality on social media don't always translate into actual reader engagement with stories.
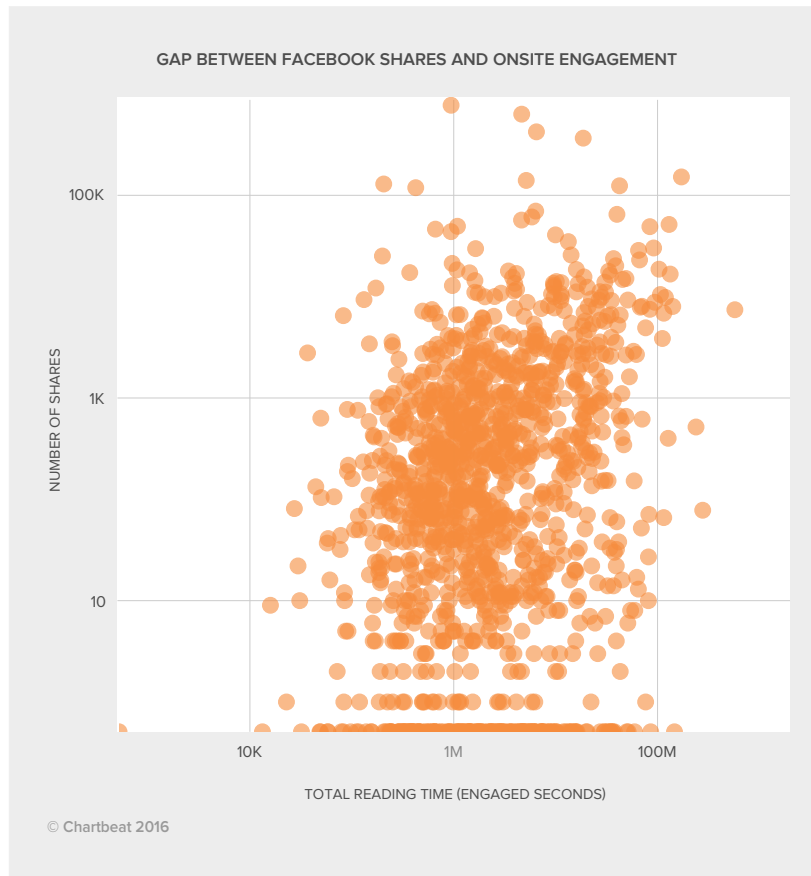
GAP BETWEEN FACEBOOK SHARES AND ONSITE ENGAGEMENT

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If the most engaging stories to read were the stories that were most likely to be shared, we'd expect this graph to look like a more conclusive line. Instead, we see that social engagement and onsite engagement are often different phenomena.

To examine the relationship between social engagement and readership, we looked at the 1,000 most shared stories for November–December 2016 and compared their share counts with the total amount of time visitors spent reading them. If the most engaging stories to read were the stories that were most likely to be shared, we'd expect this graph to look like a more conclusive line. Instead, we see that social engagement and onsite engagement are often different phenomena. For stories that earned more than 500,000 minutes of Total Engaged Time, the shares they attracted range from just a handful to over 100,000. This tells us that social media interaction and actual reader engagement are not as closely aligned as many tend to think.

What can we learn from these differences?

The first step in leveraging these differences is purely understanding them. Knowing which article and topic types have a better chance of being clicked on, read, and shared on Facebook vs. Google may give your audience development team a strong starting place for leveraging the distinct role of each platform. To summarize:

⚡ Together, Google and Facebook refer about 70% of external traffic to publisher sites, according to our network-level data.

⚡ While your content is more likely to be found via Google search, if it starts gaining traction from Facebook, there's a greater possibility that traffic will skyrocket. However, these are rare opportunities.

⚡ Readers tend to engage with more emotional topics when coming from social channels, and more informational topics when coming from search engines.

⚡ During major news events, Google traffic surges first. It isn't until things have settled that readers move to Facebook to share and discuss the event further.

⚡ Social shares and likes are not always direct indicators of actual reader engagement with your content.

As you start to see similar and/or different consumption patterns in your platform-related data, let us know. For a custom look at your own social data, please email us at **insights@chartbeat.com**. We are eager to continue the conversation.

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Chartbeat, the content intelligence platform for publishers, believes that today's content creators and audience developers need mission-critical insights—in real time and across devices and social platforms—to turn visitors into a loyal audience. With our mobile and social pivots, as well as Offsite Social, our real-time social article performance tracker powered by Facebook's Crowdtangle, we're building the tools to help you understand your content performance wherever your readers live.

For more about Chartbeat and how we're helping you understand your social audiences, get in touch at **insights@chartbeat.com**.

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