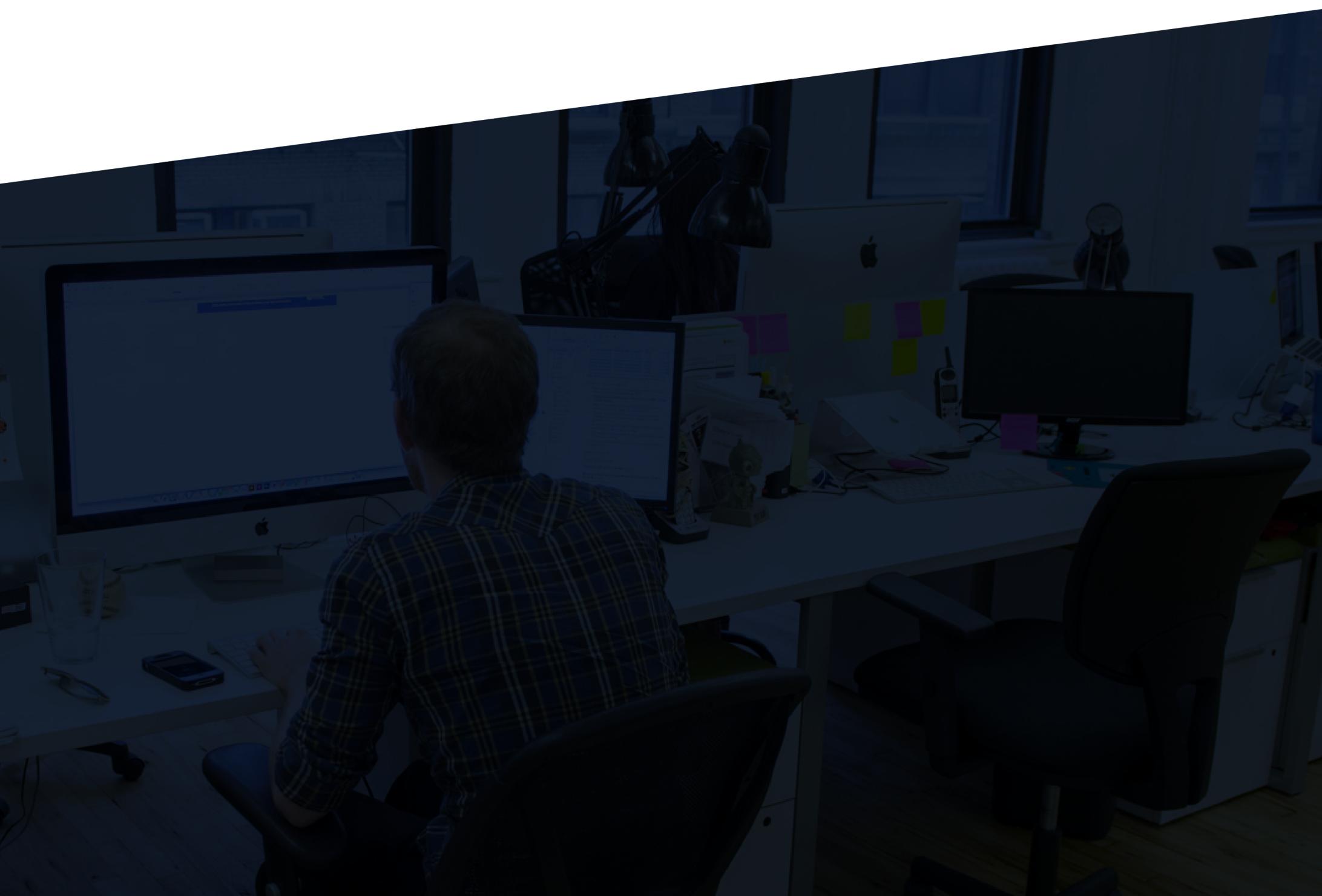

Audience development guide

Three of the biggest challenges for audience development teams and projects to solve them



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Introduction

Being tasked with “audience development” sometimes feels like being blindfolded, handed a spade, and asked to dig a (really vast, “engaging”) moat around a (gigantic) castle.

Audience development teams face the dual tasks of going wide and deep; not only do they need to reach new audiences, but they need to strengthen engagement with existing ones.

The teams taking on these challenges rarely look alike. Roles might range from audience development editors to analysts, social media editors, SEO specialists, and partnerships and influencer marketers. Brands and publishers even differ on whether they consider audience development part of the [editorial or business divisions](#).

The range of roles and disagreement over divisions underscores the scope and importance of audience development. If the tasks that accompany the role seem vast, there’s one through-line in how to approach them: start with data.

We gathered advice from current audience development professionals at brands like Slate, The Intercept, The Atlantic, Vogue, and Domino, and found three areas that everyone agreed you have to tackle to successfully grow and engage audiences.

DATA IN THIS GUIDE

Engaging audiences

80%

of homepage visitors are return visitors

39%

of traffic from Business & Finance articles comes from sources other than Google or Facebook

Diversifying traffic sources*

45%

of external referral traffic from Google

20%

of external referral traffic from Facebook

COMPANIES QUOTED IN THIS GUIDE

domino

SLATE

The Atlantic

ONE DIGITAL

The Intercept

VOGUE

CHALLENGE ONE

Connecting readers with content that matters to them and fostering engagement, even on platforms



WHY IT IS A CHALLENGE

Scaling your audience through the reach of platforms is great, but how can you ensure that the people seeing your content are—or will become—your core audience?

Even as they identify that the duopoly has too much power, publishers and brands could miss reaching segments of their audience if they step away completely from distributed content.

Complicating the issue, the [homepage](#) may not refer as much traffic as external referrers like

Facebook or Google. For over half of publishers, the percentage of article referrals generated by the homepage is less than 10%.

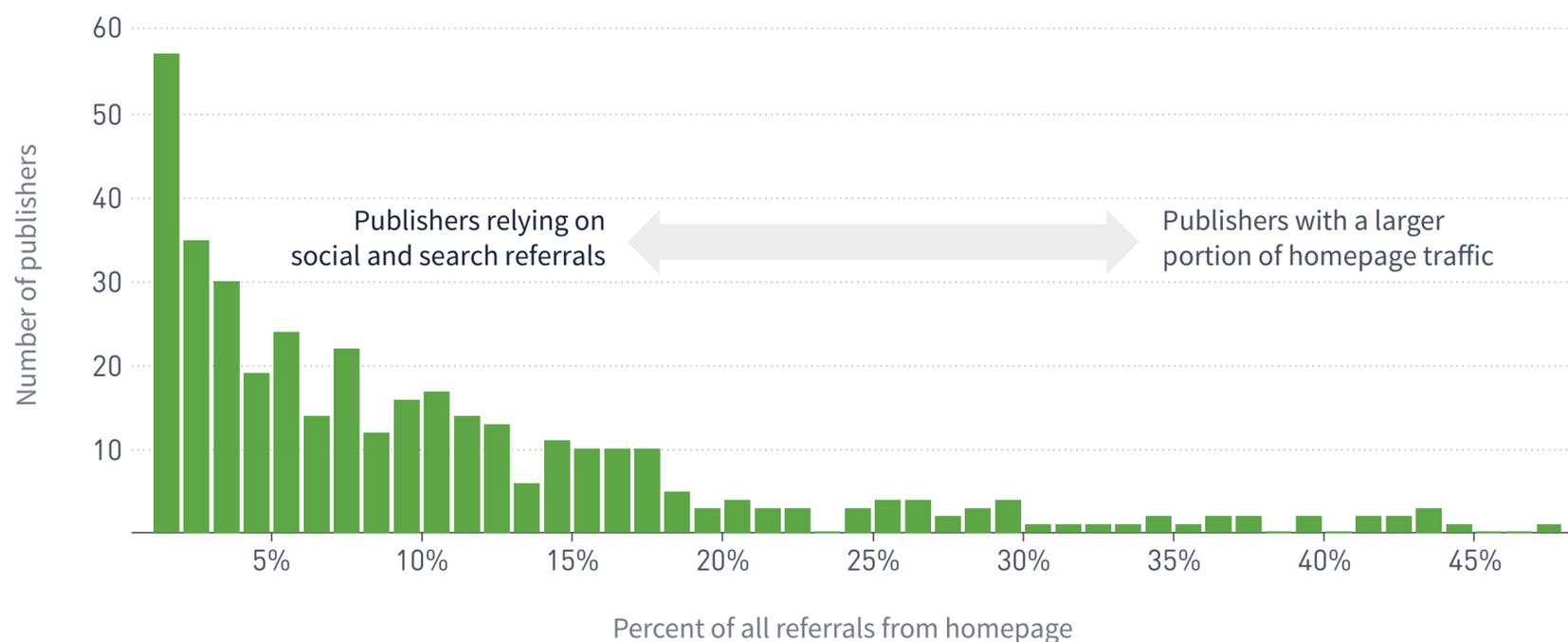
However, the catch is that the homepage is critical in cultivating a loyal audience. 80% of homepage visitors are return visitors. How do you connect distributed content to the primary goal of on-site audience engagement?



SOLUTION

Optimize content for each channel to translate engagement on platforms back to engagement with your brand on owned and operated properties.

Importance of the homepage across the Parse.ly network

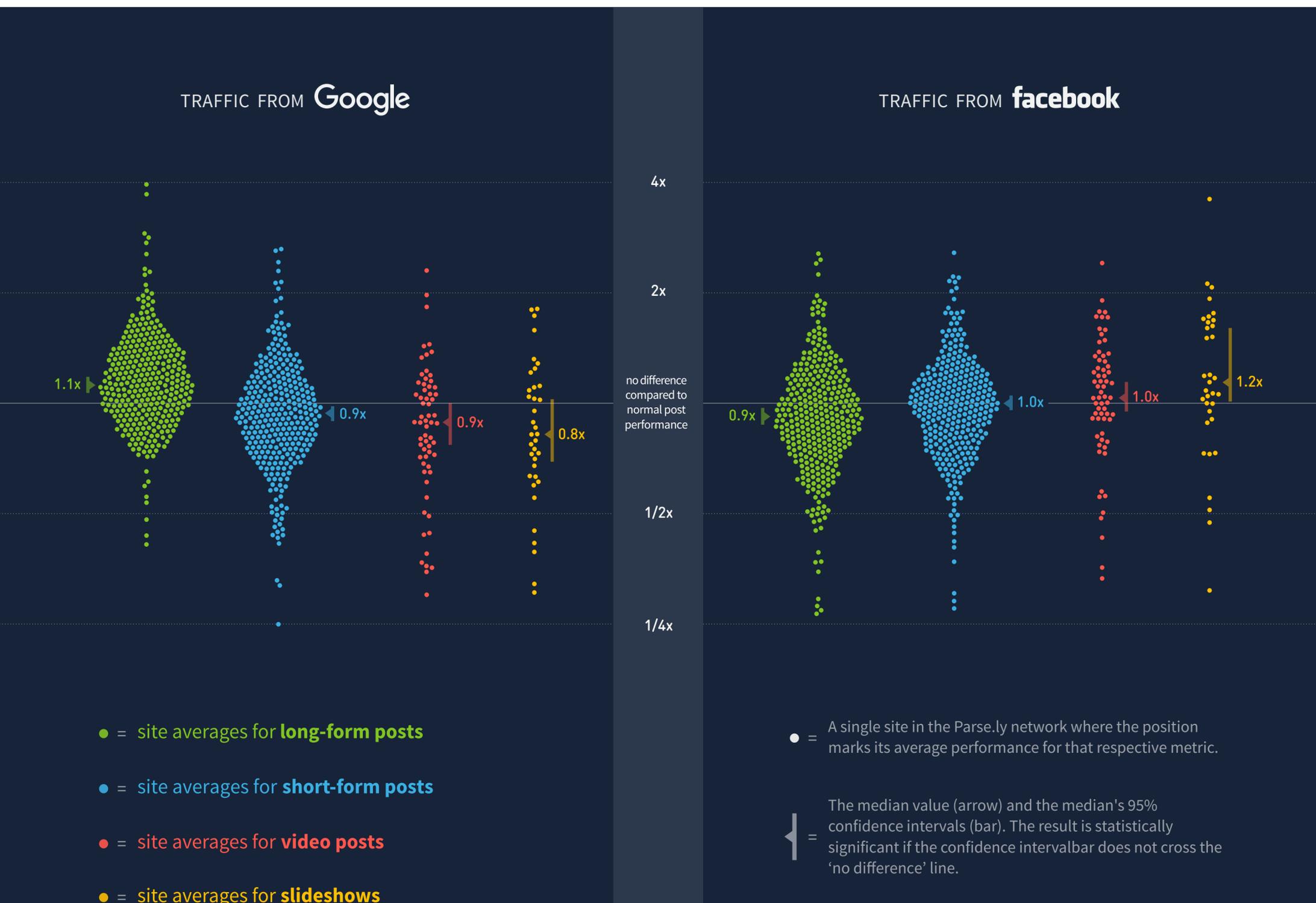


Data from Parse.ly's network suggests that referral performance varies for different post formats. Long-form articles perform the best on Google, at 1.1x the average, which makes them prime candidates for SEO. Shorter posts and visual posts, including slideshows and videos, perform better on Facebook.

Instead of distributing every piece of content across every platform, turn to audience data to understand what kinds of posts readers respond to on each channel.

Ultimately, looking at engagement from multiple angles helps make the most of your (most likely limited) resources. Once you understand what engagement you want (Engaged time? Loyalty? Sharing? Views? It's up to you!) you can focus only on improving that with your efforts. The most engaging posts could be candidates for updates, redistribution, or inspiration for a future series.

Referral performance for different post formats





“Your ultimate goal when you’re putting out things on social is to make sure that you have the best headline, excerpt, image, and caption so that you can maximize the number of people who not just click into your article, but actually go through it, read as much of it as you can.”

Rubina Madan Fillion

Director of Audience Engagement,
The Intercept



“After looking at the data, we saw that users on social wanted quick stories and newsy content and we started actually creating that content for them. And so what we found was that this might not be content that our direct readers were consuming, but we’ve actually been able to increase our traffic from Facebook roughly 40% year over year.”

Abby Sjoberg

Associate Director of Audience
Development, Vogue



AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Undertake a referral source audit to understand the different types of content that resonates on each platform.



TIP FOR PARSE.LY USERS

By tagging links with UTM parameters, track which organic and paid efforts across platforms are engaging readers using the [Campaigns](#) feature.

CHALLENGE TWO

Fighting the duopoly: diversifying traffic sources



WHY IT IS A CHALLENGE

Platforms represent a double-edged sword for brands and publishers.

Facebook and Google combined drive approximately 65%–75% of external, identified referral traffic to media sites. While publishers (of course) want to drive traffic back to their sites, it's problematic when platforms have so much control over that traffic—and, by extension, the environment around publishers' content and potential revenue opportunities.

There's a wide disparity between the amount of traffic to media sites from the duopoly and from other platforms. For example, over the last year, Twitter and Yahoo! have gone from each having an approximate 3% share of external referral traffic to each having about 2%. However, the volume of traffic doesn't necessarily correlate to the value of that traffic. Some referral sources that are overshadowed by the duopoly might represent valuable audience segments.

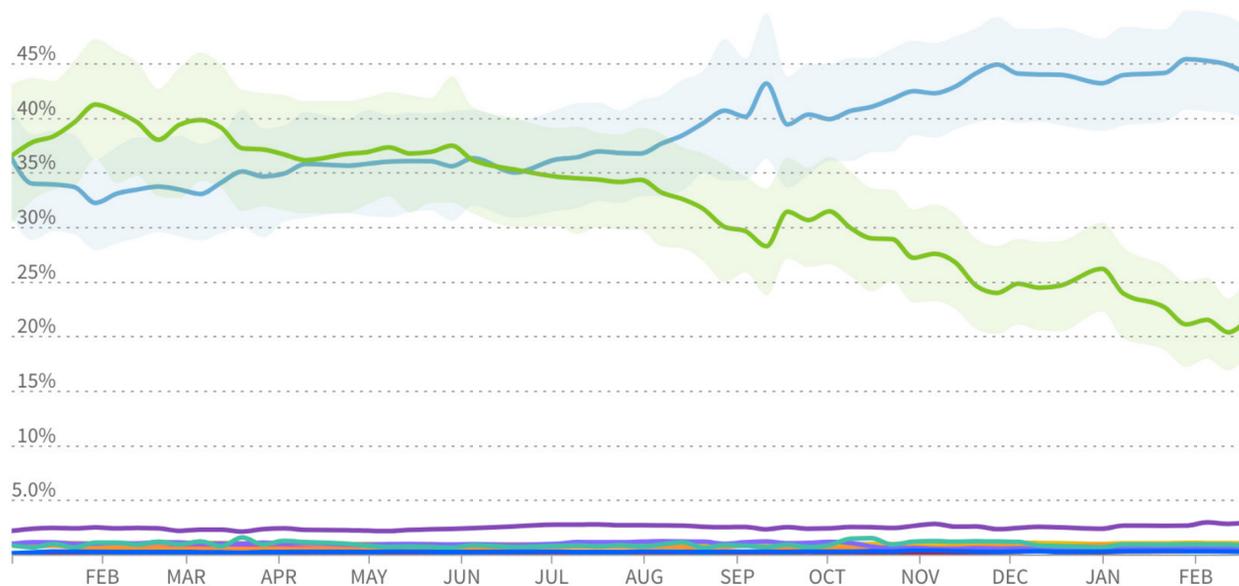


SOLUTION

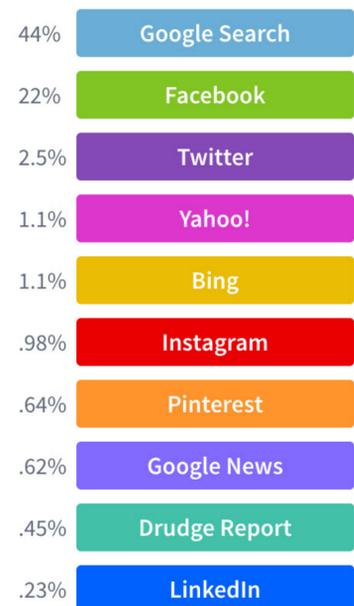
Uncover the underdogs of traffic sources.

Referrer dashboard

External referral traffic to Parse.ly's customers
100% = all external referrers



Current top 10 external referrers



Show past 12 months

Show past 30 days

Share on: [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [LinkedIn](#)

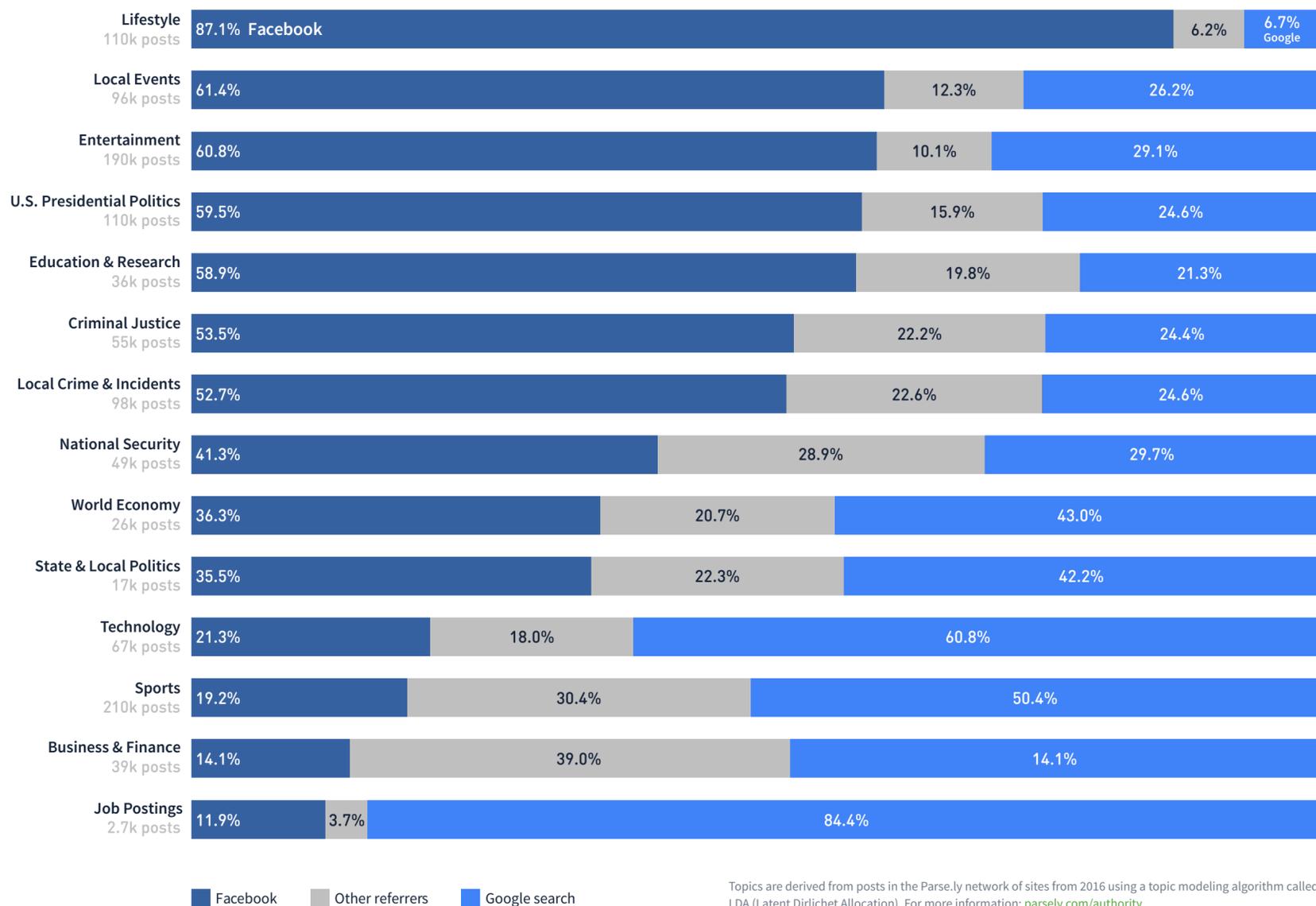
Slicing your audience data in different ways sometimes yields surprising results. Take Flipboard for example.

Narrowing the scope to mobile reveals how powerful Flipboard is as a referrer. Over the course of 2017, [Flipboard grew over 300% on mobile](#). Flipboard, which recently launched a [self-service publisher program](#), could be an option for publishers looking to diversify traffic sources and reach a mobile audience.

Looking at the breakdown of [how audiences find articles by topic](#) can also reveal small-but-mighty referrers. Whether Google Search or Facebook is more likely to drive traffic to an article depends on the topic. For example, 60% of traffic to technology articles comes from Google Search, while 87% of traffic to lifestyle articles comes from Facebook.

Of the topics analyzed, Business & Finance had the largest portion of traffic from “Other” sources at 39%. Reddit, and Yahoo! finance are examples of referrers that don’t drive high amounts of traffic overall, but could be key channels for reaching readers who are interested in content about Business & Finance.

How audiences find news articles, by topic





“I think the biggest thing in the last year that data has really impacted is business operations, like how do we build out this team? It’s something that we looked at to see which channels or distribution are we seeing the biggest opportunity in and making sure that we’re hiring the right people to man those.”

Tracy Cho

Executive Director of Marketing,
Growth and Analytics, Domino



“Two years ago, Facebook was probably driving 66%, 75% of our traffic. Today, it’s probably a little bit closer to 20% to 25% depending on the brand. I think everybody’s kind of been in the same game of Facebook... that you can’t let somebody else own your audience. And so some of us are betting on the channels we can actually own and control such as email.”

Detavio Samuels

President of iONE Digital & One Solution



AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

For each metric you care about, track the top 25 referral sources. Identify three that you aren’t currently putting any resources into and create a project that would engage only that audience.



TIP FOR PARSE.LY USERS

Discover who’s driving traffic back to your site at the micro-level: Referrers may differ by section, author, or even tag.

Select “Other” to reveal domains and articles that are driving traffic outside of search and social. Real-time tracking can surface articles currently referring traffic back to your site, which may be good candidates for immediate promotion. Historical traffic trends can highlight domains that frequently refer traffic and guide where to devote your resources for content distribution or partnerships.

CHALLENGE THREE

All together now: combining audience development efforts with business goals



WHY IT IS A CHALLENGE

Because media is hard. If your efforts don't support the business, there won't be a business to support.

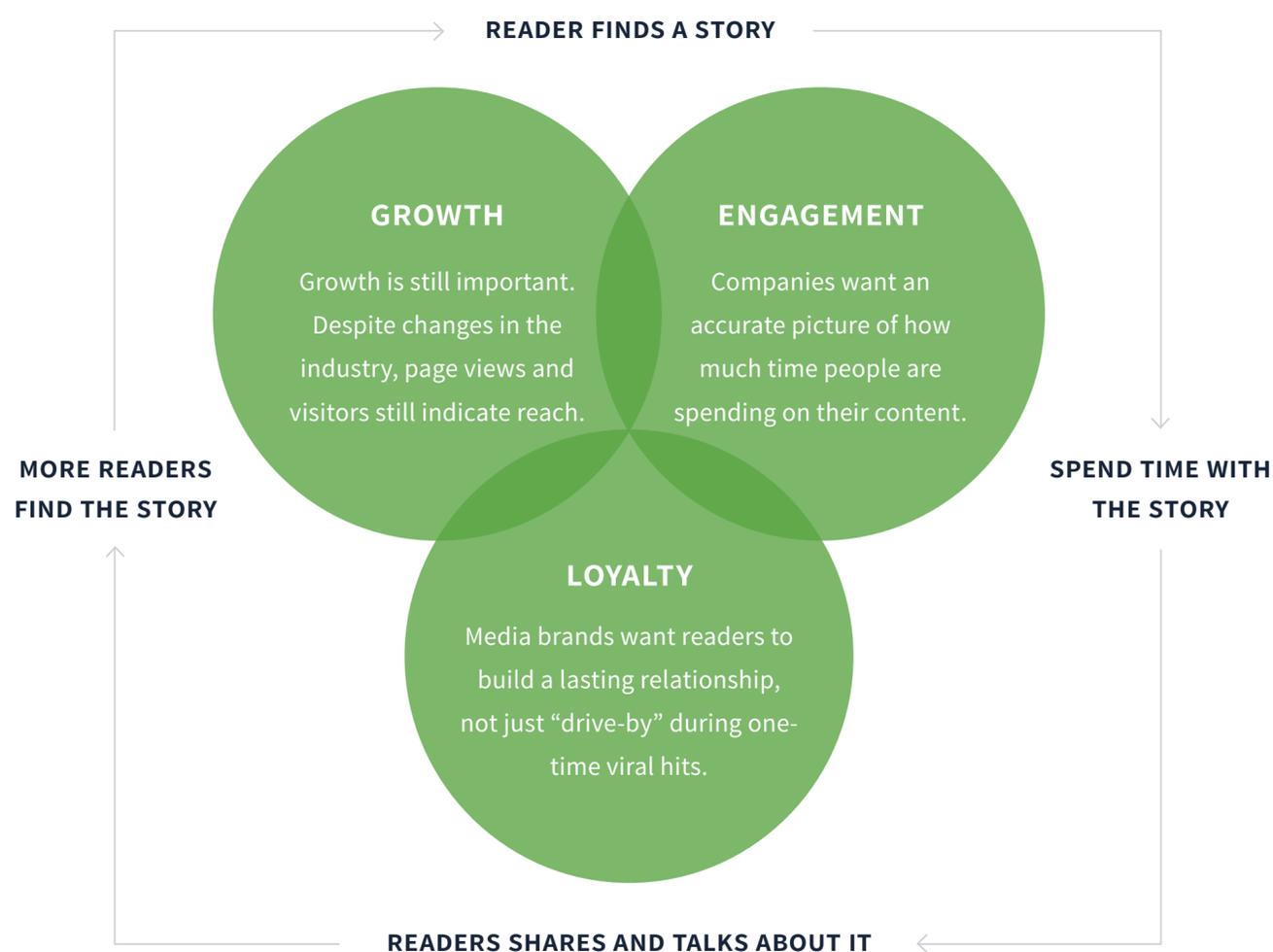
A number of publishers are moving away from a reliance on advertising towards models that hinge on direct reader support. The shift in business models necessitates a parallel shift in measurement practices: measuring attention metrics like engaged time instead of focusing primarily on unique visitors and page views.

Democratizing data and enabling each individual to act on analytics insights from engagement metrics is no small feat; it requires a culture shift. However, aligning on an approach to measurement that favors attention metrics like engaged time can have a big payoff when it comes to building successful monetization strategies.



SOLUTION

Empower your team to align on engagement metrics and understand loyal audiences through data.



In order to curb a reliance on platforms and monetize their audience, Slate launched a membership program called Slate Plus. The success of Slate Plus hinged on growing and retaining a loyal audience.

In order to achieve this, the organization shifted their focus from unique visitors to engaged time, their new “north star metric”. Slate provided one unified source of data through Parse.ly’s suite of products and helped every team, including product managers, journalists, and analysts, understand how to act on insights from tracking engaged time metrics.

Initiating a positive feedback loop with your audience hinges on understanding what resonates with them through data and establishing clear measurement goals for your team.





“Our deliberate shift in strategy stems from our belief that the engaged time goal uniquely aligns the priorities of readers, advertisers, and our editorial team. If readers spend more time with content that they value, they’ll be more likely to view more ads while they’re reading, they’ll be more likely to share our content, and they’ll be more likely to join our membership program, Slate Plus.”

David Stern

Director of Product Development, Slate



“We launched a membership program called The Masthead. We now send a monthly email from our editor-in-chief, Jeff, where he makes fun of himself, and talks in very honest ways about the process in the newsroom... Building a much deeper, more intimate relationship with all of our readers is what we’re seeing success with on the direct link, consumer revenue side.”

Sam Rosen

Head of Growth, The Atlantic



AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Find out who your most valuable audience members are. Connect the business goals of your company to the audience data you have and see what segments can be created and grown that will result in more audience revenue. How can you narrow your focus on those users to create a sustainable product for all of your readership?



TIP FOR PARSE.LY USERS

Put the emphasis on user experience instead of page views by [benchmarking engaged time](#) across all posts, individual posts, and author or section listings using the engaged time metric in the dashboard.

The ultimate goal: audience growth and engagement that starts with data

When it comes to audience development strategies, no two publishers look exactly the same. And that's the crux of it: publishers need to figure out what strategy works best for them. Audience development teams need to understand their unique audiences—who they are, what value they get from content, and where they consume it—in the context of greater industry data trends.

Whether an audience development team is housed within a media organization driving for subscriptions or a brand leveraging partnerships to drive traffic, each team needs to tailor growth and engagement strategy to their particular audience, a task that starts with data.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

[Design as a Driving Force for Audience Engagement](#) (NiemanLab)

[Here's the Secret Sauce to Audience Development](#) (Parse.ly)

[How Small Publishers Can Survive and Thrive After Facebook's News Feed Change](#) (MediaShift)

[Meet the Wall Street Journal Metrics Mavens: Amanda Lilly and Vivyan Tran](#) (MediaShift)

[New study: How to build revenue by connecting with your audience](#) (Columbia Journalism Review)

Quotes in this guide without direct links to sources are from panel discussions and presentations at the Audience Summit in New York City on November 2, 2017. Quotes from [Abby Sjoberg](#), and [David Stern](#) originally appeared in the sources linked here. Thanks to Jeff Andrews for his advice on this guide.