CONTENT
TRENDS
REPORT
2018

Buzzsumo

March 2018

Author: Steve Rayson
🐦 @steverayson
🌐 **www.buzzsumo.com**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD BY MARK SCHAEFER

I've been delivering a new speech that names the 10 most important trends in digital marketing. As I countdown to number one, many of the familiar characters are there … Artificial Intelligence, chatbots, and virtual reality, to name a few. But when I get to the penultimate trend, the audience is frequently surprised to hear something most have not even considered, let alone prioritized.

Information density.

The titanic eruption of web-based content creates a scenario I characterized in 2014 as "Content Shock," a time when the overwhelming amount of information in a business niche radically drives up the cost of marketing, perhaps to the point where content marketing is no longer an economically viable option for some.

As the BuzzSumo team elegantly illustrates in this report, that time is here.

The economic value of simply publishing content is zero – unless it is seen and shared. When even the most successful content producers are seeing their posts, videos, and infographics stall against the wall of Content Shock, it is time for us all to recognize the battlefield before us.

The imperative to find some way to stand out as the signal amid this wall of noise will impact every marketing strategy, budget, and even the skillsets needed on our marketing teams.

I hope you don't view this report as intimidating or even depressing. It's a gift. The data alarm is ringing and telling us that it's time to do what the best marketers have always done: adapt, adopt, and overcome.

Mark Schaefer
Consultant, educator, and author
of *The Content Code.*

SUMMARY

If you're sticking with your content approach from 3 years ago, it's now 50% less effective.
Content engagement, such as shares, likes, and comments on social networks, has halved since 2015.
Here's what's happened, and what you can do about it:

The key content trends are as follows:

> The volume of content published continues to increase, and new topic areas get rapidly saturated with content.
>
> Social referral traffic declined in 2017 and was overtaken once again by traffic from Google sites.
>
> Average sharing of content on social networks fell due to increased competition, Facebook changes, and a rise in private sharing.
>
> Based on a sample of 100 million posts published in 2017, 50% of all content gained just 4 shares or less across all the main social networks. This has halved since 2015, when we last did this research.
>
> In a world of content saturation and falling social shares, the big winners are sites that have built their reputation and authority. There has been a concentration of social sharing and some authoritative, quality sites are actually seeing increases in social sharing.
>
> Facebook algorithm changes have had a major impact on levels of engagement and the types of content that get shared. As a result:
>
> ➡ Brands and publishers are gaining less organic referral traffic from Facebook and less engagement with their Facebook posts.
>
> ➡ There has been a sharp decline in viral posts that gain hundreds of thousands or millions of shares.
>
> ➡ Clickbait style headlines and listicles are far less effective at generating social engagement than they were.
>
> There has been a growth in content sharing on LinkedIn and many publishers are seeing steady increases in content engagement on the platform albeit from a relatively small base.
>
> The majority of content gets zero backlinks, but authoritative research and reference content continues to gain links.
>
> There is more sharing of partisan political content.
>
> Social sharing of music videos appears unchanged and was possibly higher in 2017.

We explore these trends and set out in the final section the implications for content marketers.

CONTENT PUBLICATION CONTINUES TO INCREASE BUT ENGAGEMENT FALLS

We looked at a number of indicators which all point to continued growth in the volume of content being published.

For example, the number WordPress posts published on Wordpress.com over the last 10 years has grown strongly and continues to accelerate.

Number of Wordpress Posts Published on Wordpress.com

100M

0
Oct 2006
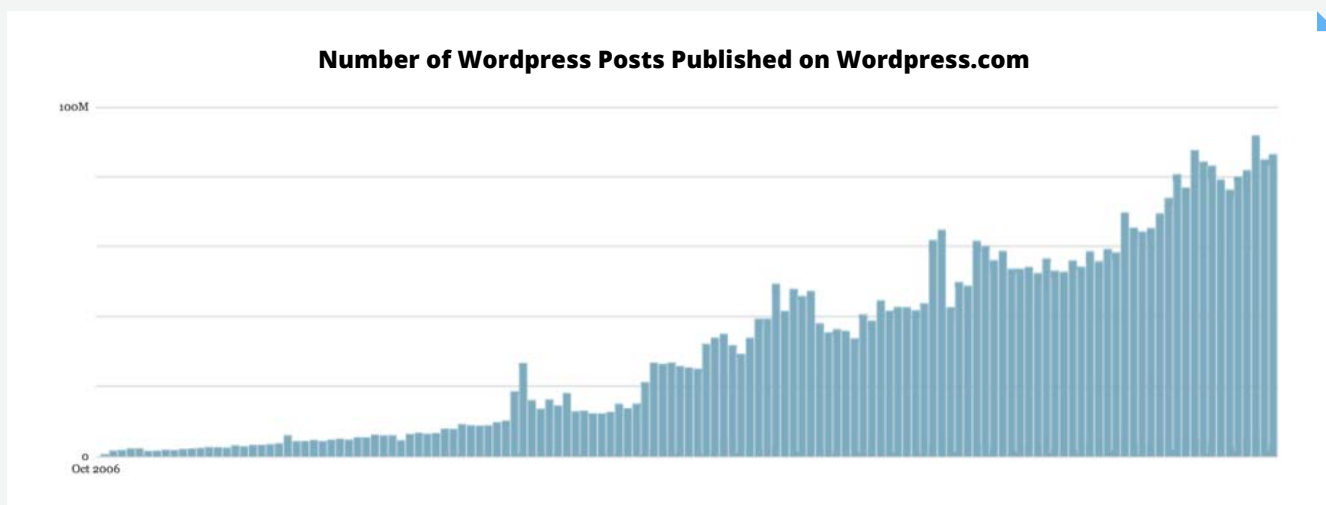
This growth in content has not been matched by growth in engagement. For example, if we look at the number of page views of posts published on wordpress.com, we can see they have declined over the last 6 months. The number of views peaked in March 2017 at 24.5bn views.

Number of Pageviews of Posts on Wordpress.com

30B

0
Oct 2006
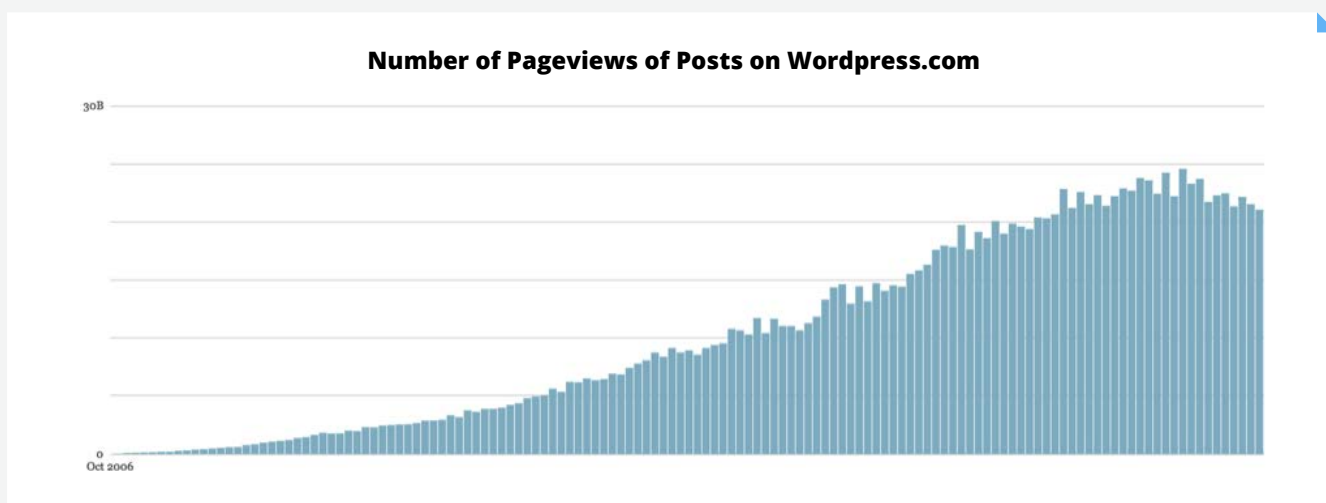
CONTENT SATURATION IS MAKING IT HARD TO STAND OUT

Our BuzzSumo data reveals that as topics become popular, there is often an explosion in published content which saturates the topic area. An extreme example is Bitcoin which became a very popular topic at the end of 2017. The growing interest was accompanied by a significant rise in articles about the cryptocurrency as shown below.

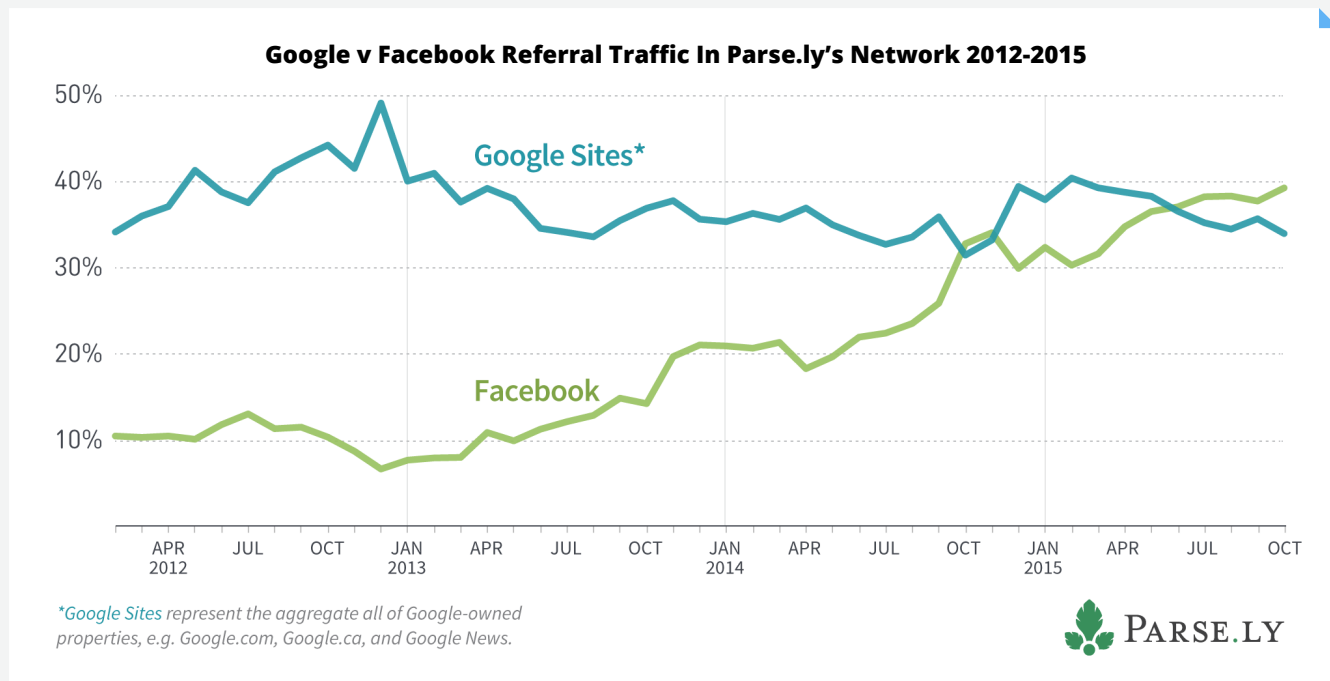**Number of Articles Published on Bitcoin Per Week**
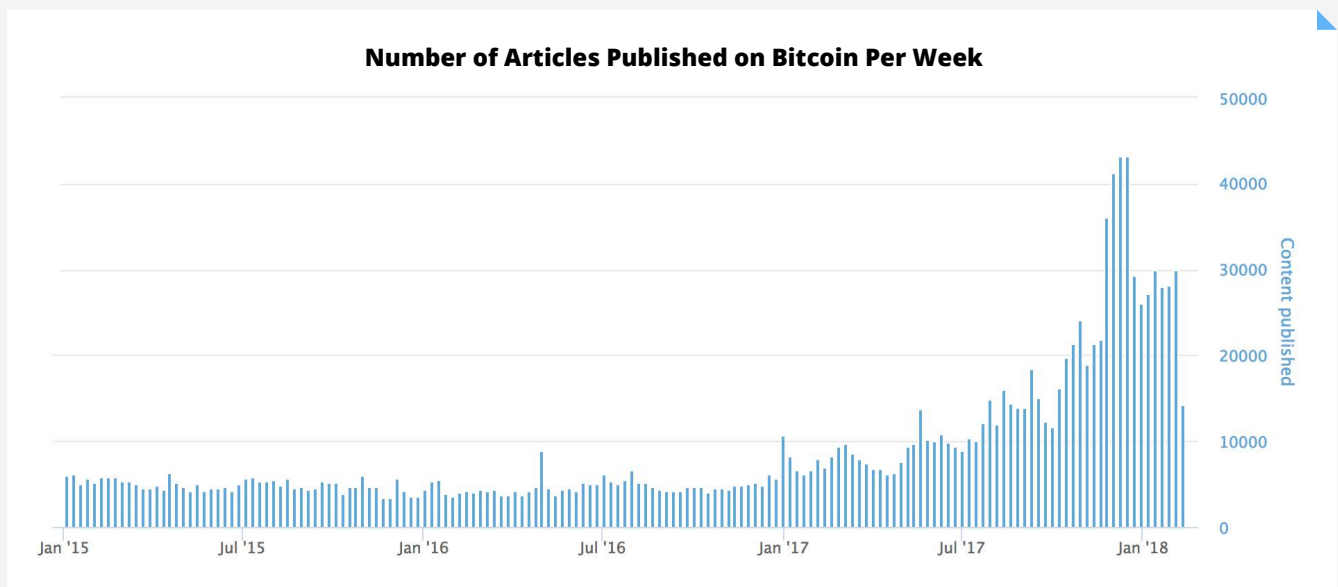
By December 2017 there were over 40,000 articles a week being published about Bitcoin.

Bitcoin is exceptional, but we find the same pattern again and again. Popular and trending topics tend to get saturated with content very quickly.

SOCIAL REFERRAL TRAFFIC HAS DECLINED

From 2014 to 2017 we saw a rise in social referral traffic. At the end of 2015 Parse.ly produced the chart below showing how referral traffic from Facebook had grown for the 2,500 publishers in their network.

Google v Facebook Referral Traffic In Parse.ly's Network 2012-2015

Google Sites represent the aggregate all of Google-owned properties, e.g. Google.com, Google.ca, and Google News.

PARSE.LY

In 2016 Facebook was driving more referral visitors to publishers than Google sites. This led marketers to increasingly focus on social traffic and social networks, particularly Facebook, often at the expense of search engine optimisation. This was a key moment for social networks, Facebook in particular, as they crossed the rubicon and became more important than Google for driving traffic to publishers. However, as Bob Dylan says, "the times they are a changin." Here is the latest Parse.ly chart for February 2017 to February 2018.

Google v Facebook Referral Traffic In Parse.ly's Network 2017-2018

Source: Parse.ly
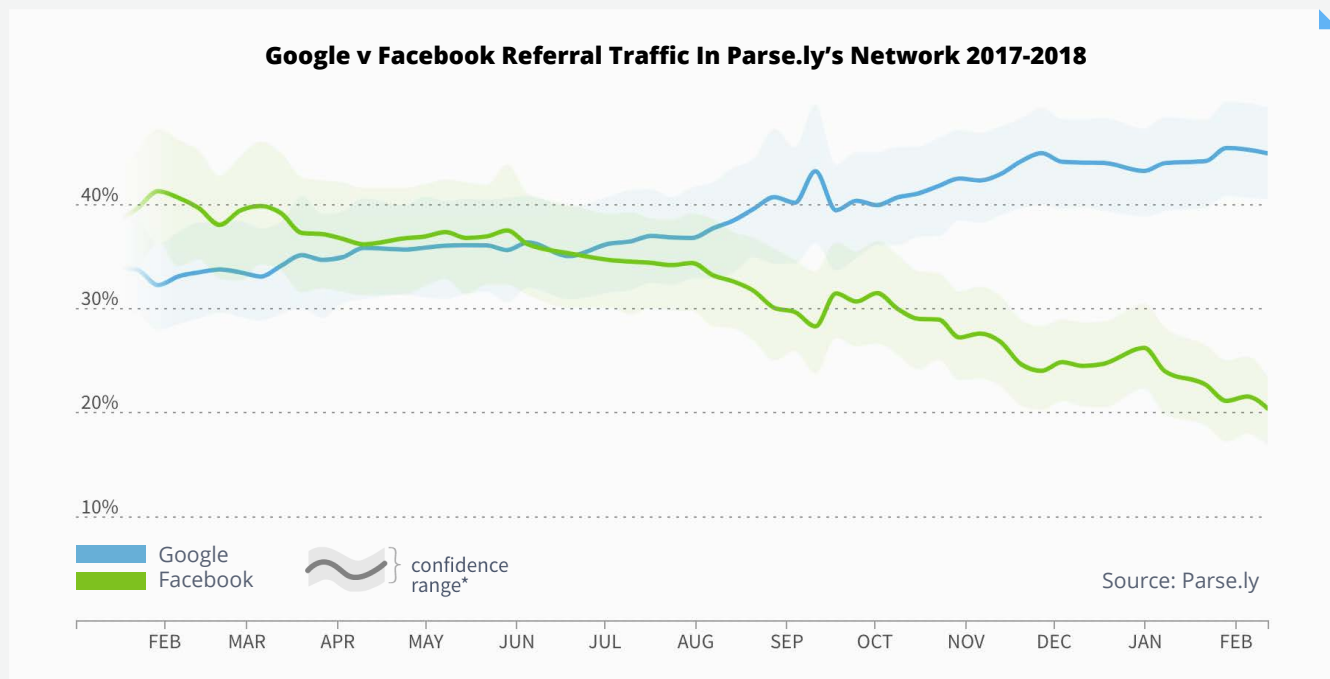
We can see that in 2017 the position has reversed markedly, with Google sites now sending twice as much traffic to publishers in the Parse.ly network.

Recent data published by Shareaholic on 22 February 2018 shows a similar picture of declining social referrals.

Search vs. Social: Share of Visits

*Based on activity aggregated from 250,000 sites and 400+ million unique monthly visitors
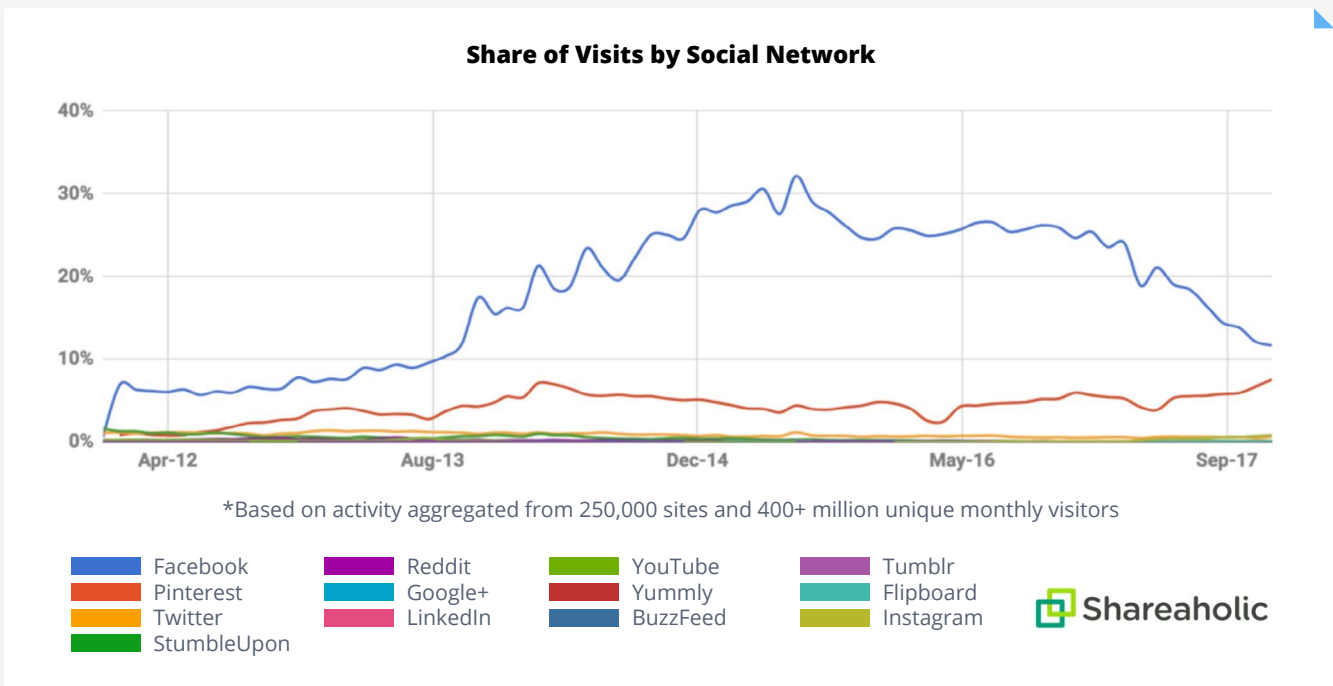
Social
Search

Shareaholic
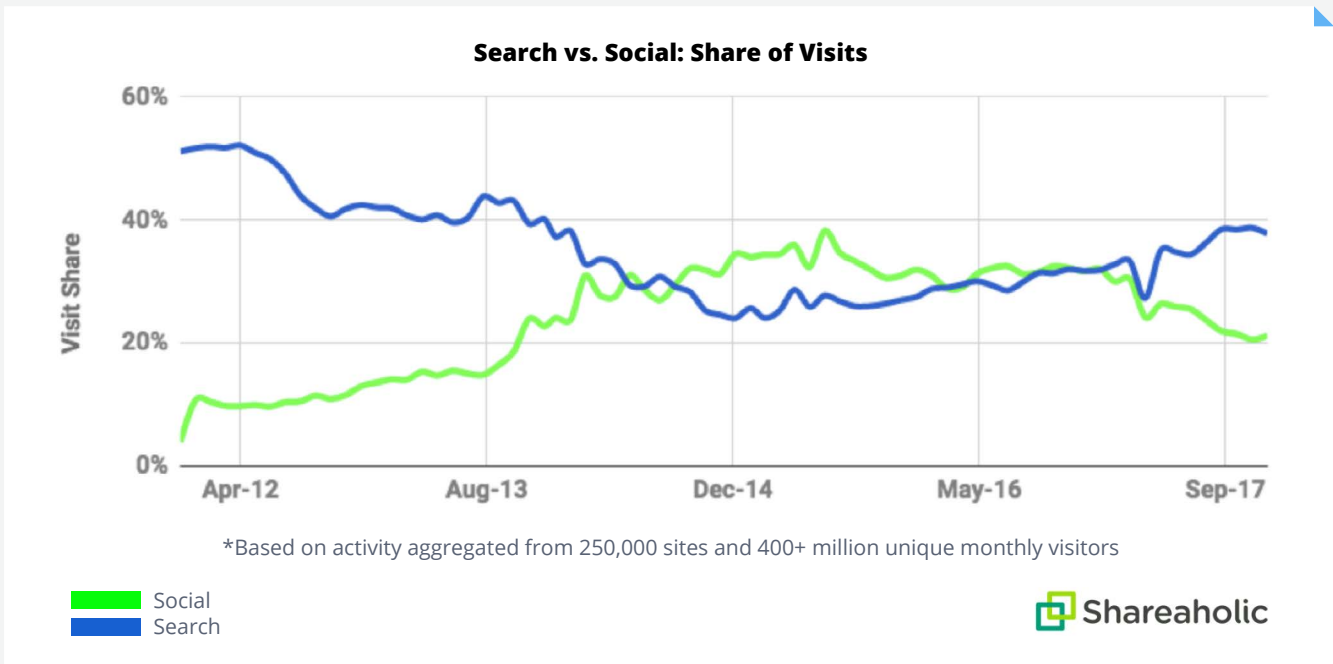
The decline in social referrals is almost entirely due to falling Facebook referrals as we can see from the chart below.

Share of Visits by Social Network

*Based on activity aggregated from 250,000 sites and 400+ million unique monthly visitors

Facebook   Reddit   YouTube   Tumblr
Pinterest   Google+   Yummly   Flipboard
Twitter   LinkedIn   BuzzFeed   Instagram
StumbleUpon

Shareaholic

We should note that the referral traffic here is primarily to publishers. Data from Jumpshot shows Google traffic was always above social when you look across all sites with 59.2% of all referrals in 2016 increasing to 62.6% in 2017. However, the consistent finding across all studies is a decline in Facebook referrals.

CONTENT SOCIAL SHARING IS DOWN 50% SINCE 2015

One of the reasons for lower levels of social referral traffic is simply less sharing of content on the main social networks.

We took a random sample of 100m posts published in 2017 (Jan to Nov) from the BuzzSumo database and compared the level of social sharing to what we found in our 2015 study. We found that **median shares have fallen from 8 in 2015 to just 4 in 2017**.

We should also note that at BuzzSumo, we focus on shared content, and we frequently do not index content with zero shares. Thus our data is biased towards posts that are shared. Despite this bias in our sample, 90% of the content gained less than 62 shares.

The top percentiles were as follows:

Top Percentiles	
1%	2409 shares
5%	343 shares
10%	62 shares

Thus to be in the top 1% of shared content in 2017, you needed 2,409 shares. To be in the top 10% you needed just 62 shares.

The data reveals it is getting increasingly harder to gain shares and engagement. There are a number of reasons why this is happening:
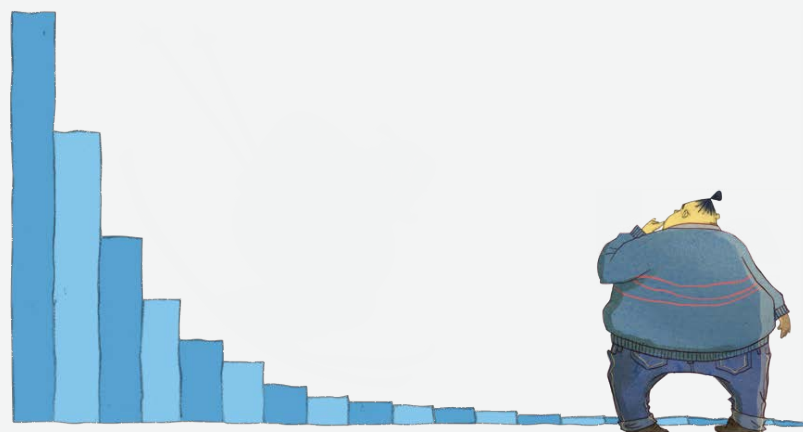
THE INCREASE IN CONTENT PUBLICATION MEANS GREATER COMPETITION FOR ENGAGEMENT

In many topic areas we see that as the volume of content rises, the average number of shares per article declines. Below is a typical example, in this case tracking the number of articles published on machine learning and average Twitter shares.

Articles Published on Machine Learning And Average Twitter Shares

Legend: ● Content Published   ◆ Avg Twitter Shares   ◆ Estimated Avg Twitter Shares
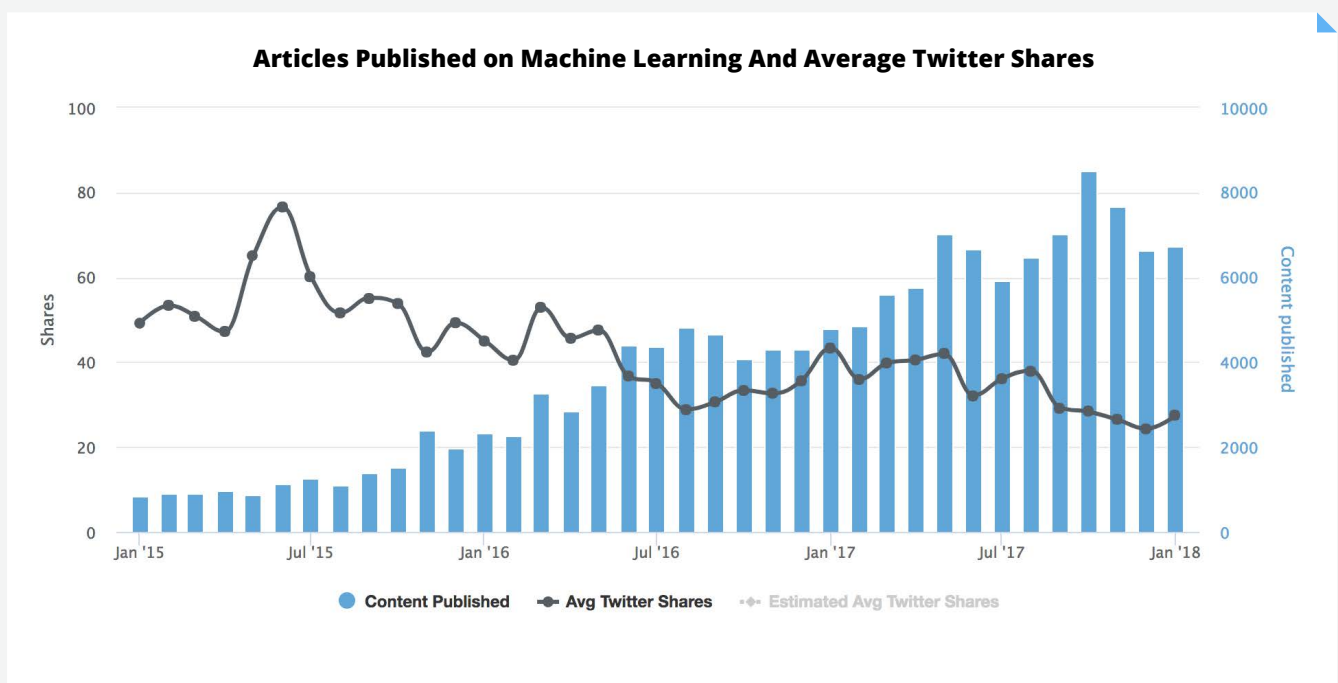
This is effectively what 'content shock' looks like in many topic areas. As a topic gains traction, publishers and marketers pile in. As a content marketer, if you enter the topic area towards the right of the chart, it is much harder to gain traction and social engagement.

# FACEBOOK CHANGES MAKE IT HARDER TO SEE AND SHARE PUBLISHER CONTENT

Most social engagement takes place on Facebook due to the sheer scale of the network. Their recent algorithm changes have reduced the organic reach and distribution of brand and publisher content on the platform. Facebook have also taken a clear view on promoting and demoting specific content types, such as clickbait headlines, in the news feed. We explore this further in the report.

A RISE IN PRIVATE SHARING

Some people have always shared content privately via email to their colleagues rather than sharing content publicly. There is some evidence this private sharing is growing with a rise in private messenger groups and in platforms such as Slack where teams can share content and comment. According to Business Insider, social messaging has surpassed social media usage with more people using the top four social messaging apps (WhatsApp, Messenger, WeChat, and Viber) than the top four social media apps (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn). In 2016 Mark Schaefer argued that there was a shift taking place from social media to private media.

These views are backed up by research from GetSocial which tracks dark shares for its clients, such as copy and paste of URLs. Their data suggests that private sharing in 2017 is twice as large as public sharing.

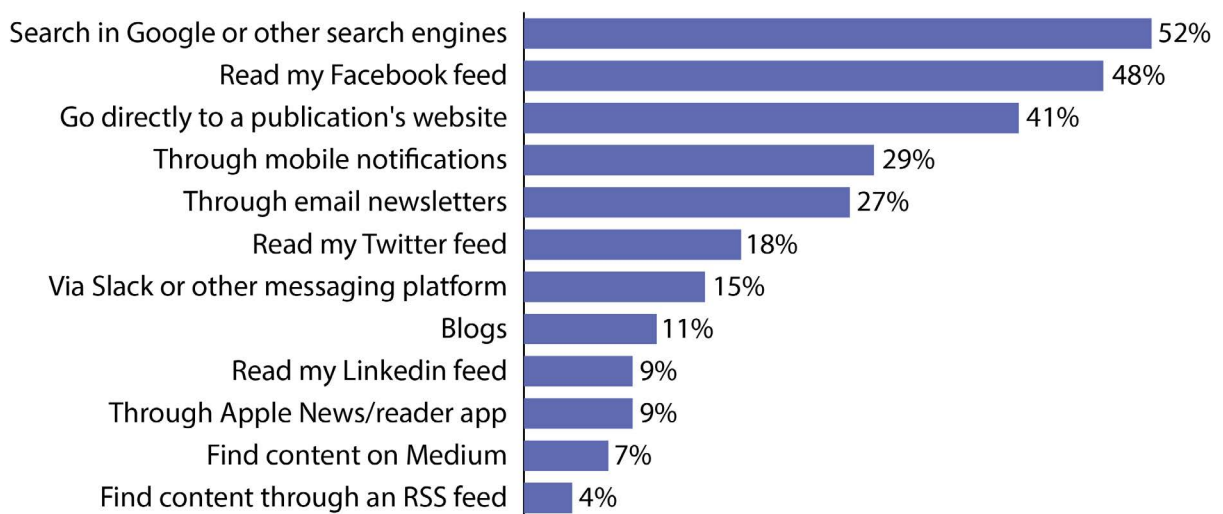**Dark Social Shares - Sample of 150,000 Sites June 2017**
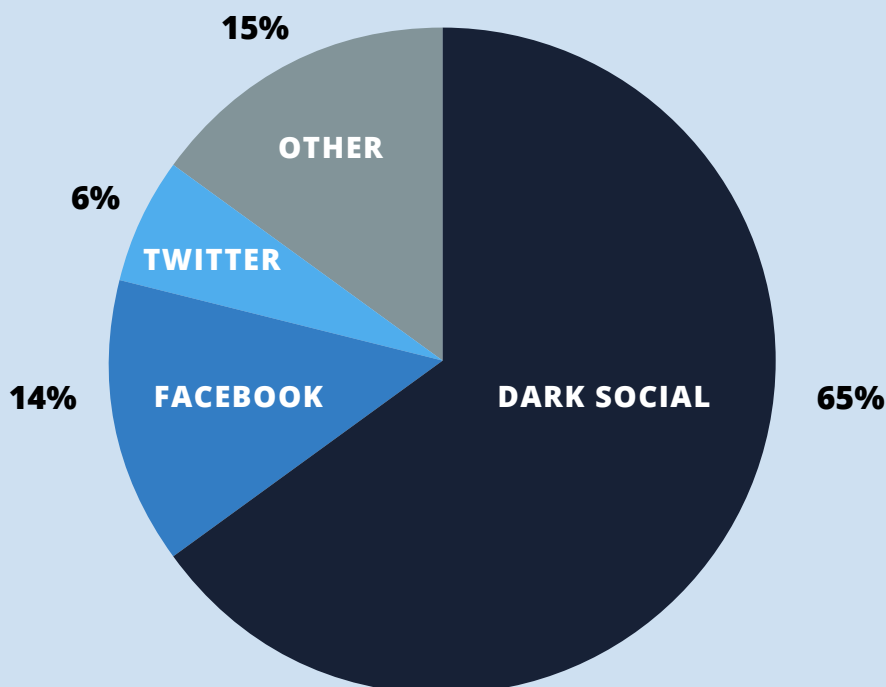
Data from GetSocial

10

CONTENT DISCOVERY IS CHANGING

[Research](#) from Hubspot reveals that people find content through a multiplicity of channels beyond Google and Facebook. What is interesting is the growth in people finding content through mobile notifications and Slack channels.

Sources of Content Discovery

Source	Percentage
Search in Google or other search engines	52%
Read my Facebook feed	48%
Go directly to a publication's website	41%
Through mobile notifications	29%
Through email newsletters	27%
Read my Twitter feed	18%
Via Slack or other messaging platform	15%
Blogs	11%
Read my Linkedin feed	9%
Through Apple News/reader app	9%
Find content on Medium	7%
Find content through an RSS feed	4%

Base: 3,010 consumers in the US, Germany, Colombia, and Mexico
Source: HubSpot Content Trends Survey, Q3 2017

HubSpot
RESEARCH

The good news for marketers is that owned websites and email newsletters also rate quite highly, which reinforces the case for publishing content on your own site and building your own email list. SEO still matters.

WINNER TAKES ALL:
SOCIAL SHARES ARE NOT EVENLY DISTRIBUTED

Social shares of content are not distributed normally. A normal distribution can be represented by a bell curve, as shown below, where some articles get a low number shares, some get a high number of shares, and most get a medium number of shares.

Low Performing Content **Average Performing Content** **High Performing Content**
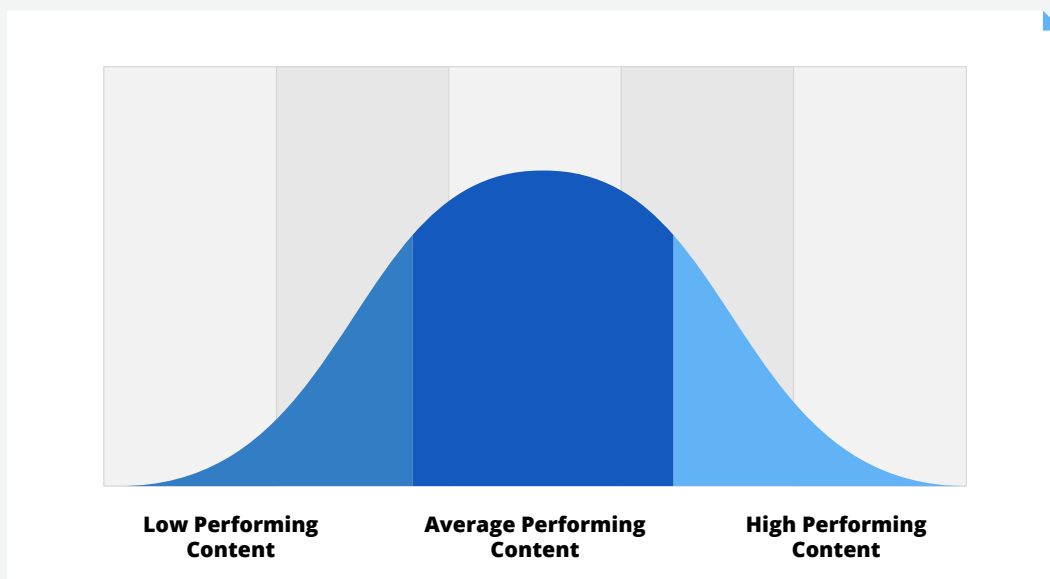
Our research data reveals that a relatively small minority of posts and sites consistently gain the majority of engagement. Below is a histogram showing the distribution of posts with up to 350 shares from our sample.

Histogram Of Social Shares Distribution

Number of articles

0   50   100   150   200   250   300   350

Number of shares
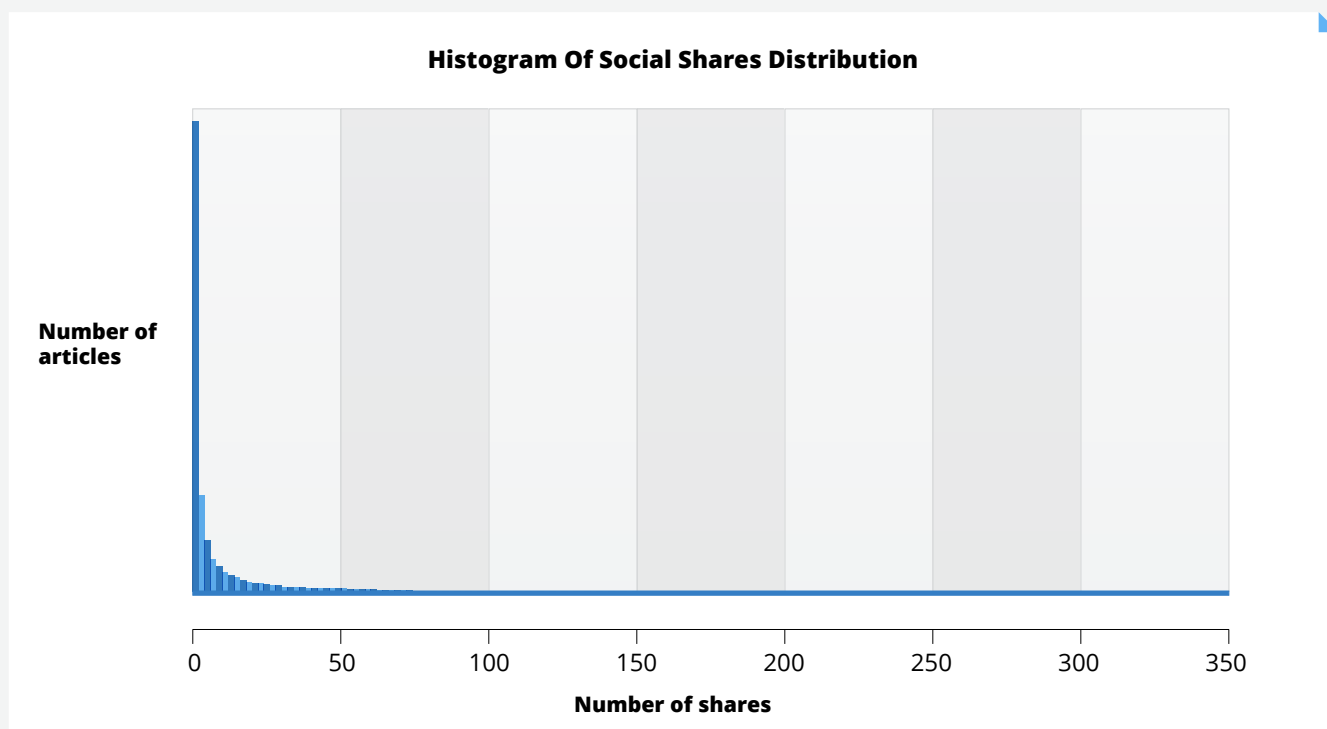
Source: BuzzSumo Study of 100m Articles Published In 2017

This histogram represents 95% of all posts. It is difficult to include the top five percent of content as these posts received hundreds of thousands of shares and one post over 2m shares. Thus the chart would need to be extended a long way to the right. We can see that the majority of posts get very few shares.

This distribution distorts the mean, the average of all values. For our sample the median was just 4, which means that fifty per cent of posts had four or less shares. If we had a normal distribution, something like the bell curve above, the median and the mean would be very similar. In our case the mean is 182. However, to say the average shares is 182 could be very misleading when we consider the distribution above.

This is why in our research we focus on the median (the mid-point of a distribution i.e. half of posts below and half of posts above) and percentiles because the mean (the average of all the data), is skewed by the top posts that can gain hundreds of thousands or millions of shares.

In the world of social sharing, you need to provide the best and most authoritative content on a topic or the best answer. For example, if you wanted to link or share to an article on 'what is content marketing' you are likely to share the best article you can find, not the second best or third best.
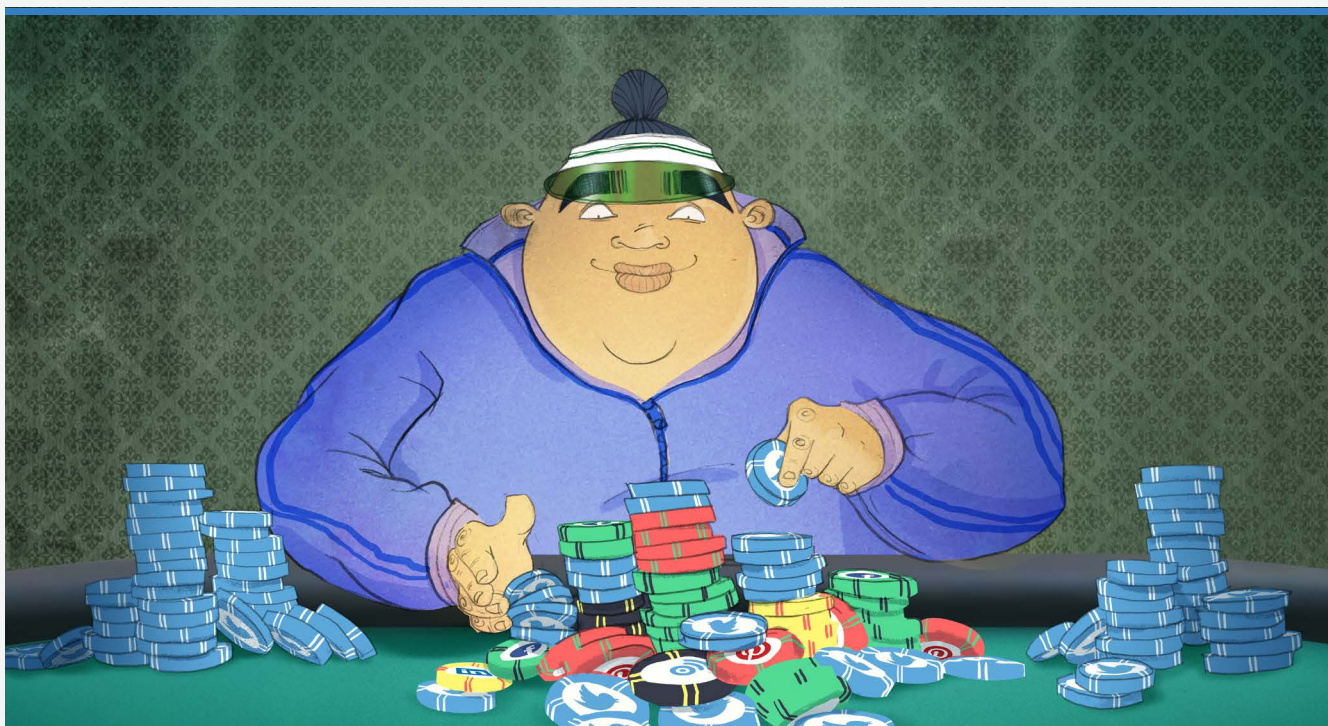
FACEBOOK CHANGED ITS ALGORITHM:
YOU'LL NEVER GUESS WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

In the summer of 2017 Facebook announced changes to reduce the amount of clickbait content in the news feed. Facebook specifically said that posts with clickbait headlines, such as headlines that withhold information or exaggerate with sensational language, would appear lower in the News Feed.

We ran a couple of tests to review the impact of these changes on headlines that withhold information such as 'you will never guess what happened next'. Before Facebook's changes, we routinely saw clickbait headlines with this style of headline gain over a million Facebook engagements. However, when we look at the last six months, after the Facebook changes, we can see that only two of these style of posts gained more than 200,000 Facebook interactions.

| Top Articles Pre-2017		Top Articles July-Dec 2017	
Article	**Total Shares**	**Article**	**Total Shares**
2 People Described The Same Person To A Forensic Artist And This Is What Happened	3.1m	That's What Happens When You Pick Your Best Friend As Maid Of Honor For Your Wedding	0.25m
What Happens When A Kid Leaves Traditional Education	2.2m	16 Brutally Honest Comics Reveal What Happens When You Get Too Comfortable In Your Relationship	0.24m
What Happens When You've Got One Chance	1.9m	Studies Show What Happens To The Human Body When We Walk Barefoot On Earth	0.19m
A young man asks a homeless man to borrow his bucket, what happens next will burst you into tears	1.7m	VIDEO: He was shot in the leg in Las Vegas, but WATCH what happens when President Trump walks in!	0.17m

It is possible to argue that older articles have had much longer to gain shares and hence will always have more shares. However, the data suggests that the majority of shares for any article take place in the weeks immediately after publication.

People may simply be fed up with clickbait headlines, but it also seems very likely that the algorithm changes made by Facebook have significantly reduced the distribution and visibility of these types of posts.

BuzzFeed are often credited with popularising the listicle. We took a look at the level of shares of BuzzFeed listicles over the last five years and again found a significant reduction in the listicles that went viral. In 2013, 2014 and 2015, BuzzFeed listicles gained over 2m shares. In the last 6 months of 2017, BuzzFeed's most viral listicles gained far less shares, only one above 500,000 shares. This is still very large but significantly down from previous years. The fall was primarily in Facebook engagement but shares were also much lower on Twitter.

Top BuzzFeed Listicles Pre-2017		Top BuzzFeed Listicles June-Dec 2017	
Article	**Total Shares**	**Article**	**Total Shares**
26 Pictures That Will Make You Re-Evaluate Your Entire Existence	2.6m	21 Photos That Show Just How Bad The Flooding In Houston Really Is	0.53m
21 Things You Know Only If You've Been Best Friends For 10 Years	2.2m	9 Tweets Only People Who Shop At Aldi Can Truly Understand	0.4m
26 Reasons Kids Are Pretty Much Just Tiny Drunk Adults	2.2m	47 Things You'll Immediately Understand If You Were A Teen In The Late '90s	0.27m
41 Camping Hacks That Are Borderline Genius	2m	85 People Who Are Sexier Than Blake Shelton	0.2m

Many of the big viral sites such as upworthy.com and playbuzz.com have seen significant falls in total and average shares of their content. The charts below show the steady decline in shares of Upworthy.com content.

Total Shares of Upworthy.com Content

Source: BuzzSumo Content Analysis

Average Shares of Upworthy.com Content
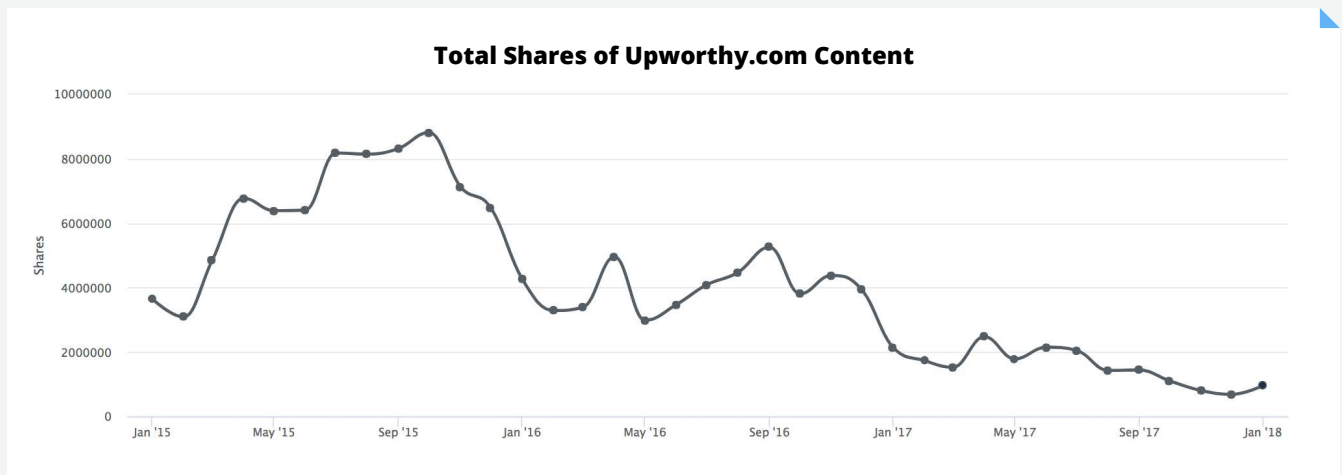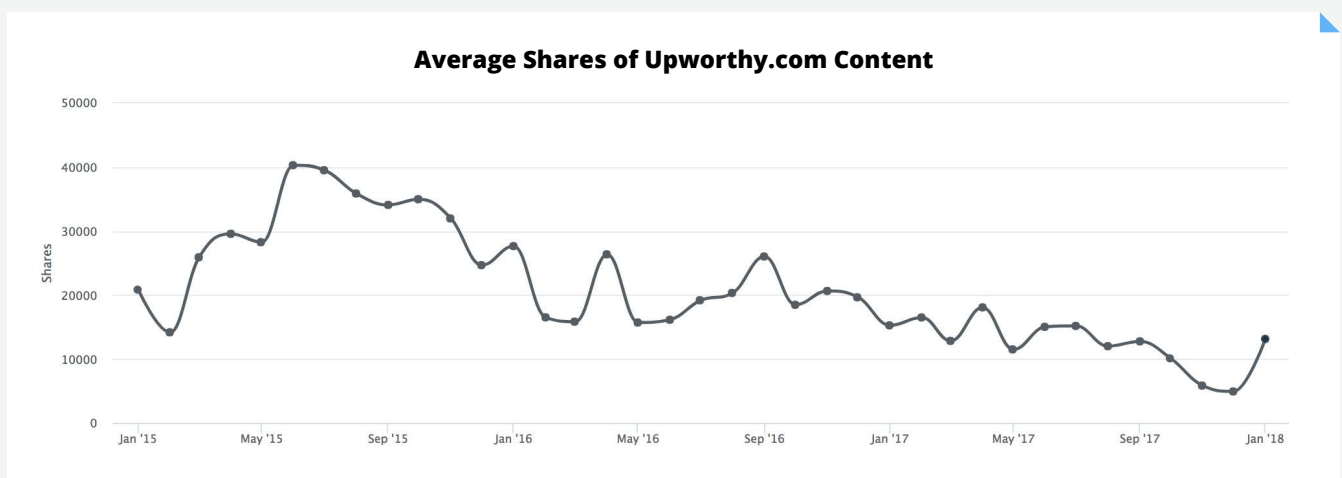
Source: BuzzSumo Content Analysis

Back in 2014 Playbuzz.com routinely gained over a million shares for posts and over 6m shares (primarily Facebook) for some of their viral posts as we can see below. However, in the past year only four posts of theirs have gained over 100,000 shares.

| Top Articles Pre-2017		Top Articles July-Dec 2017	
Article	Total Shares	Article	Total Shares
What country in the world best fits your personality?	8.6m	Which LipSense shade fits your personality?	0.195m
Can we guess your real age?	6.4m	Only highly creative people can pass this IQ test	0.144m
Which song was actually written about YOU?	6.3m	Can you get 25/25 on this advanced grammar test?	0.143m
Who were you in your past life?	6m	This beautiful color test can determine your dominant personality trait!	0.103m

The Playbuzz posts from 2017 do not appear materially different from those in 2014. So what's caused the massive decline? It seems likely that the fall is due to Facebook changes and possibly a degree of boredom with viral posts and quizzes.

The one area where we still see millions of people regularly share content is music videos. The most shared music video on Youtube in 2017 was 'Despacito' with over 22m shares on social networks and 25m likes on Youtube itself. This was higher than Coldplay's 'Hymn for the weekend' that gained 9.5m shares in 2016 or Adele's 'Hello' which gained 20m shares in 2015. So if you're in the business of creating viral music videos, things are looking good. Unfortunately, most of us aren't (though maybe we can learn from them).

The other area where viral content continues to gain millions of shares and high Facebook engagement has been political content. It does appear that there has been more tribal and partisan sharing of content in recent years. For example, posts about Trump and Clinton during the last US Presidential election regularly passed 1m shares.

SOCIAL SHARING OF CONTENT FALLS FOR MANY POPULAR SITES

Nobody's immune from content shock. As we saw from the Parse.ly data even the big players are taking a hit. A number of major publishers have seen a fall in total shares. For example, below are total shares for content each month published on Buzzfeed.com. This is no surprise given the reduction in big viral posts as we outlined above.

Total Shares of Content Published on BuzzFeed.com
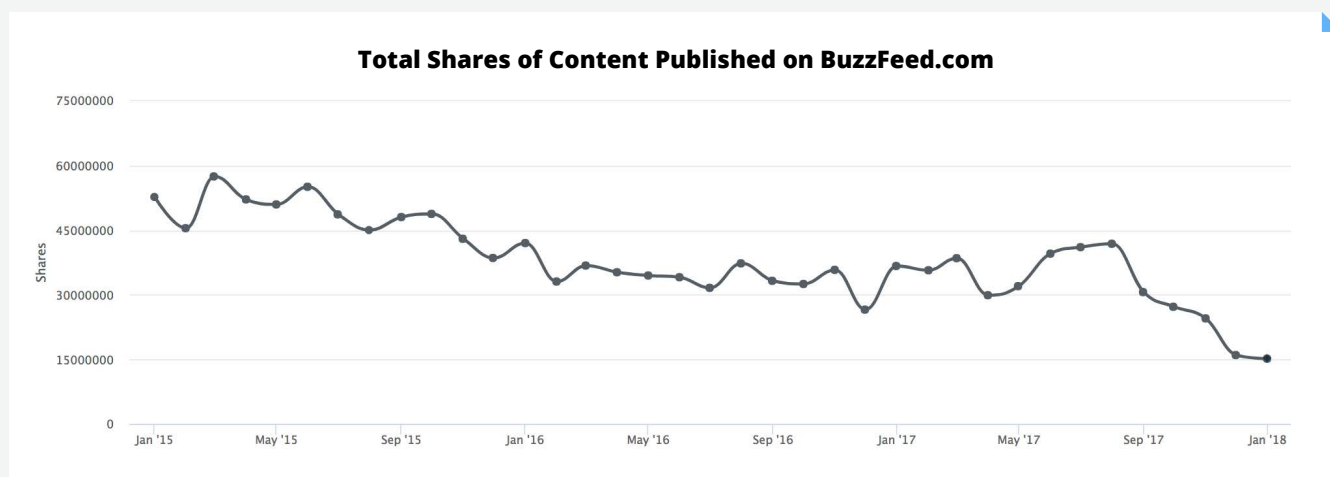
Source: BuzzSumo Content Analysis

We have also seen a reduction in shares for other business sites and publishers. During 2014 and 2015, many sites were getting tens of thousands of shares. In 2017 few of them were publishing a single article that gained more than 10,000 shares.

Hubspot is often seen as the pioneer in inbound marketing and has built an industry leading blog. We looked at the social shares and links of all articles published on Hubspot's blog from 2014 to 2017.

In the three years from 2014 to 2016 Hubspot's blog posts had median shares of 415 and average shares of 753. In 2017 their blog posts had median shares of 288 and average shares of 590. These are still great numbers but significantly down on

what they were. Interestingly the biggest reduction in shares was on Twitter rather than Facebook. In 2017 the top post was from January which had 7,900 shares, previously top Hubspot blog posts regularly passed 10,000 shares. This suggests the fall is not purely because of Facebook's algorithm changes.

We have seen a significant fall in the number of shares gained by popular posts on sites like Moz, Social Media Examiner and Buffer. Below is a comparison of some of their top posts from 2013 to 2016 and their top posts in 2017.

BUFFER

Buffer Top Posts Before 2017

		Facebook Engagements	Linkedin Shares	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Shares ↓
Why Facebook Is Blue: The Science of Colors in Marketing By Leo Widrich — Apr 25, 2013 bufferapp.com `Why Post`	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	6.5K	8.5K	21.5K	3.8K	197	90	40.2K
53+ Free Image Sources For Your Blog and Social Media Posts By Courtney Seiter — May 14, 2014 bufferapp.com	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	7K	3.5K	15.4K	2K	415	108	28K
The Ideal Length for All Online Content By Kevan Lee — Mar 31, 2014 bufferapp.com	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	2.5K	5K	16.8K	1.7K	507	102	25.9K
How to Create a Social Media Marketing Plan From Scratch By Kevan Lee — Jul 16, 2014 bufferapp.com	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	3.5K	3.2K	10.3K	8.9K	375	166	25.9K

Buffer Top Posts 2017

		Facebook Engagements	Linkedin Shares	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Shares ↓
Why I Think Social Media Is For Branding and Engagement, Not Traffic or Revenue By Alfred Lua — Jul 20, 2017 bufferapp.com `Why Post`	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	2K	2.1K	2.3K	99	144	44	6.5K
20 Creative Ways to Use Social Media for Storytelling - The Buffer Blog By Alfred Lua — Feb 22, 2017 bufferapp.com `List`	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	1.9K	1.1K	2.4K	117	83	44	5.5K
A Facebook Posting Strategy Change That Led to a 330% Increase in Reach and Engagement By Brian Peters — May 30, 2017 bufferapp.com	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	2.3K	1.3K	1.7K	76	203	42	5.3K
Social Media Storytelling Formulas: 11 Quick-Fire Ways to Create Your Stories By Alfred Lua — Feb 28, 2017 bufferapp.com	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	1.4K	1.6K	2K	102	92	43	5.1K

Kevan Lee previously wrote a post on how Buffer lost almost half of their social media referral traffic in 12 months. He speculated that "content crush" is a factor - too much competition, too difficult to stand out in social, compounded by algorithm changes.

SOCIAL MEDIA EXAMINER

Social Mediam Examiner Top Posts Before 2017

		Facebook Engagements	Linkedin Shares	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Shares ↓
Social Media Success Summit 2016: Largest Online Event By Socialmedia Examiner — Jul 31, 2013 socialmediaexaminer.com	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	23K	6.9K	18.3K	299	109	44	48.5K
How to Design a Social Media Campaign By Debbie Hemley — Jun 3, 2014 socialmediaexaminer.com How Article	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	6.3K	2.5K	14.1K	3	8	94	22.9K
26 Creative Ways to Publish Social Media Updates By Ali Luke — Aug 28, 2014 socialmediaexaminer.com List	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	9.7K	1.9K	10.8K	20	3	49	22.5K
28 Social Media Marketing Predictions for 2015 From the Pros : Social Media Examiner By Socialmedia Examiner — Jan 1, 2015 socialmediaexaminer.com List	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	6.2K	2.6K	9K	3.8K	141	29	21.5K

Social Mediam Examiner Top Posts 2017

|		Facebook Engagements	Linkedin Shares	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Shares ↓
How to Create Social Media Marketing Videos Without Appearing On Camera By Megan O'neill — Feb 2, 2017 socialmediaexaminer.com How Article	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	3K	1.2K	2.2K	279	91	40	6.7K
19 Facebook Marketing Predictions for 2017 From the Pros : Social Media Examiner By Lisa D. Jenkins — Jan 23, 2017 socialmediaexaminer.com List	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	2.7K	1.5K	2K	375	45	19	6.6K
LinkedIn Changes: What Marketers Need to Know By Viveka Von Rosen — Jan 2, 2017 socialmediaexaminer.com	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	1.9K	2.2K	2.4K	1	4	26	6.5K

MOZ

Moz Top Posts Before 2017

		Facebook Engagements	Linkedin Shares	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Shares ↓
How to Build an Online Community for Your Business By Mackenzie Fogelson — Apr 16, 2013 moz.com How Article	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	64	555	579	23.1K	32	6	24.3K
Beginner's Guide to SEO (Search Engine Optimization) By Rand Fishkin — Jul 10, 2013 moz.com	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	8.1K	3.8K	5.4K	3.2K	5277	356	20.4K
8 Old School SEO Practices That Are No Longer Effective - Whiteboard Friday By Rand Fishkin — Apr 29, 2016 moz.com List	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	11K	2.8K	4.6K	193	140	110	18.6K

(note the second post was originally published in 2013 but is regularly updated so is not a true comparator)

Moz Top Posts 2017

		Facebook Engagements	Linkedin Shares	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Shares ↓
How to Rank in 2018: The SEO Checklist - Whiteboard Friday By Rand Fishkin — Dec 29, 2017 moz.com How Article	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	1.7K	1.5K	3.3K	52	172	0	6.4K
What Do Google's New, Longer Snippets Mean for SEO? - Whiteboard Friday By Rand Fishkin — Dec 8, 2017 moz.com What Post	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	1.8K	1.6K	2.3K	199	241	18	6K
Launching a New Website: Your SEO Checklist - Whiteboard Friday By Rand Fishkin — Apr 14, 2017 moz.com	Saved / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	1.6K	1.3K	2.8K	120	107	68	5.8K

Below is a chart showing average shares of Social Media Examiner articles over time.

Average Shares Of Articles Published By SocialMediaExaminer.com
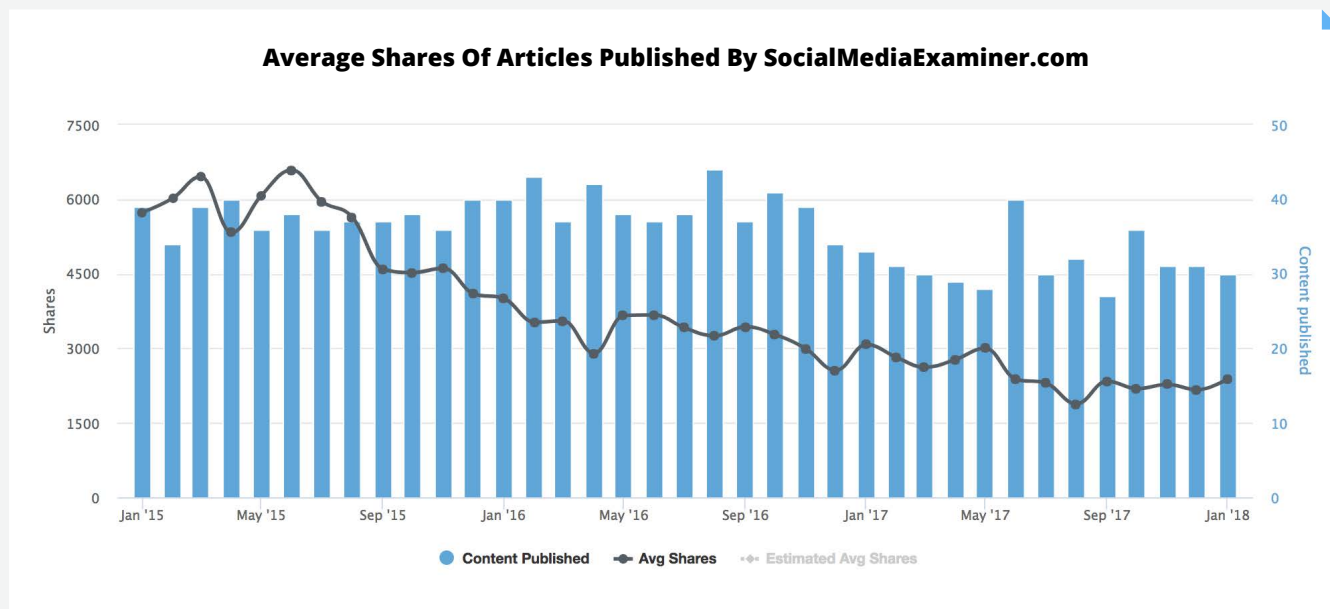
Source: BuzzSumo

Still with us, content marketers? None of the above is a reason to give up. But it is a reason to rethink your approach.

Take solace from this: Not all sites have seen a fall in content engagement. We have seen some major publishers increase both their total and average shares. Let's look at which ones, and why they're bucking the trend.

A FLIGHT TO QUALITY?

When we look at sites like the Harvard Business Review or The Economist we find content sharing has bucked the general trend and increased.

Seven of the top ten most shared articles on Harvard Business Review over the last five years were published in 2017. The other three were published in 2016. The median number of shares was lower in 2017 than in the previous two years, but the average number of shares increased from 4,007 in 2015/16 to 4,506 in 2017.

The two most shared posts from The Economist over the last 5 years were both published in 2017. The median number of shares for posts published by The Economist in 2015 and 2016 was 43. In 2017 it increased to 78. The average number of shares in 2017 was slightly lower at 1,583 compared to 1,795 in the previous two years. The average number of linking domains was also higher in 2017 than the previous two years.

It appears that increased content competition has not adversely affected these sites. Paradoxically it may have helped them reinforce their position in a world of content saturation. If you are going to share something with your audience you want to make sure it is well researched and authoritative from a trusted source, thus it is possible people are more selective in their sharing.

Another example is the New York Times, where average shares have increased as we can see below.

**Average Shares of New York Times Content**
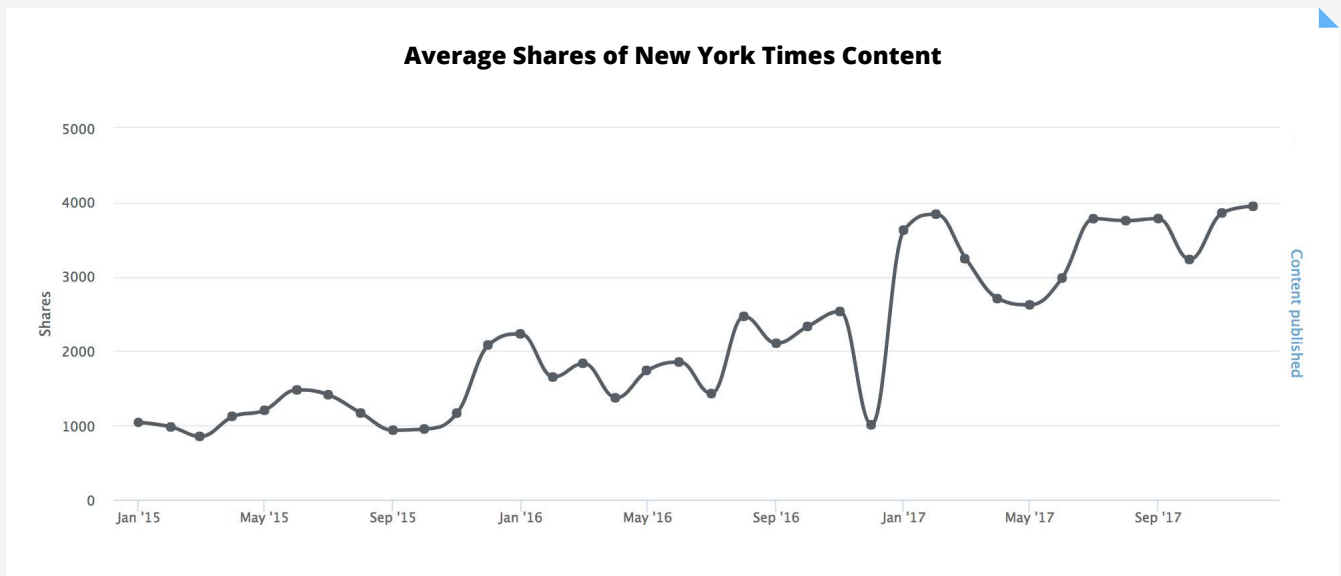
Source: BuzzSumo

In the case of the New York Times, this higher engagement may be in large part due to political content. Their editorial stance has been consistently anti-Trump, and as such, seems to have appealed to a tribe seeking political opinion content of that nature from an authoritative source (authority of course being a subjective term depending on your outlook). For example, if we drill down into their most shared posts in the peak week of 22nd Jan, we can see that they were primarily political posts about President Trump.

Average Shares of New York Times Content

|		Facebook Engagements	Linkedin Shares	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Shares ↓
A Lie by Any Other Name By /charles-m-blow — Jan 26, 2017 nytimes.com	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	520.2K	336	9.6K	68	39	18	530.2K
Trump's Immigration Ban Is Illegal By David J. Bier — Jan 28, 2017 nytimes.com	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	446.5K	324	16.8K	42	201	16	463.7K
Judge Blocks Trump Order on Refugees Amid Chaos and Outcry Worldwide By Michael D. Shear — Jan 28, 2017 nytimes.com	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	144.3K	1.8K	87.5K	61	730	21	233.7K
Trump Bars Refugees and Citizens of 7 Muslim Countries By Michael D. Shear — Jan 28, 2017 nytimes.com	Save View Backlinks View Sharers Share	217K	455	8K	68	508	20	225.5K

Source: BuzzSumo

There are many other sites that have seen increases in engagement, particularly when the topic they write about becomes popular. For example, we can see from Google Trends below, that there was a jump in interest in Bitcoin in late 2017.

Bitcoin Interest Over Time Measured By Google Searches
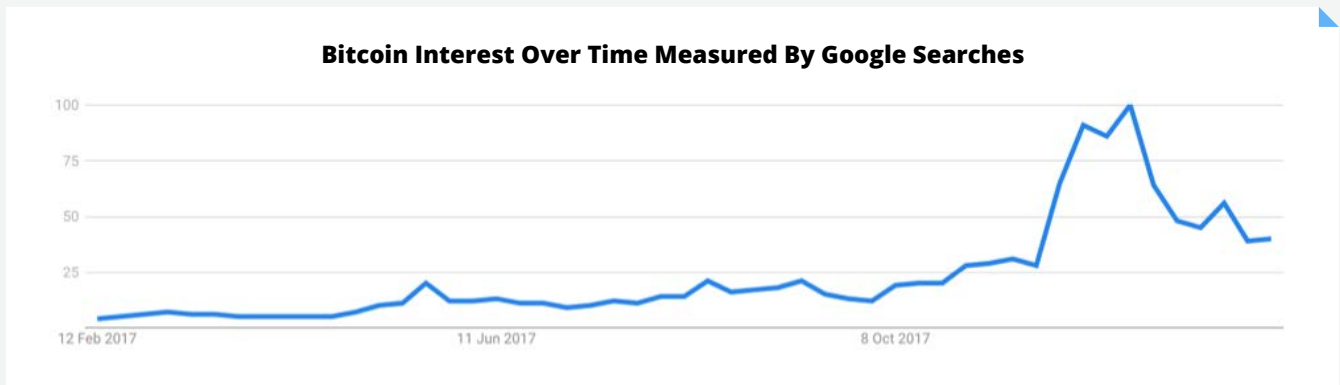
Source: Google Trends

CoinDesk.com, which focuses on cryptocurrencies and blockchain, was already established prior to the upsurge in interest in Bitcoin. Thus it was in a strong position to gain traffic, potentially being seen as a trusted and authoritative site. We can see how social shares of their content leapt in late 2018 as interest in Bitcoin increased.

**Coindesk.com Articles Published and Total Shares**
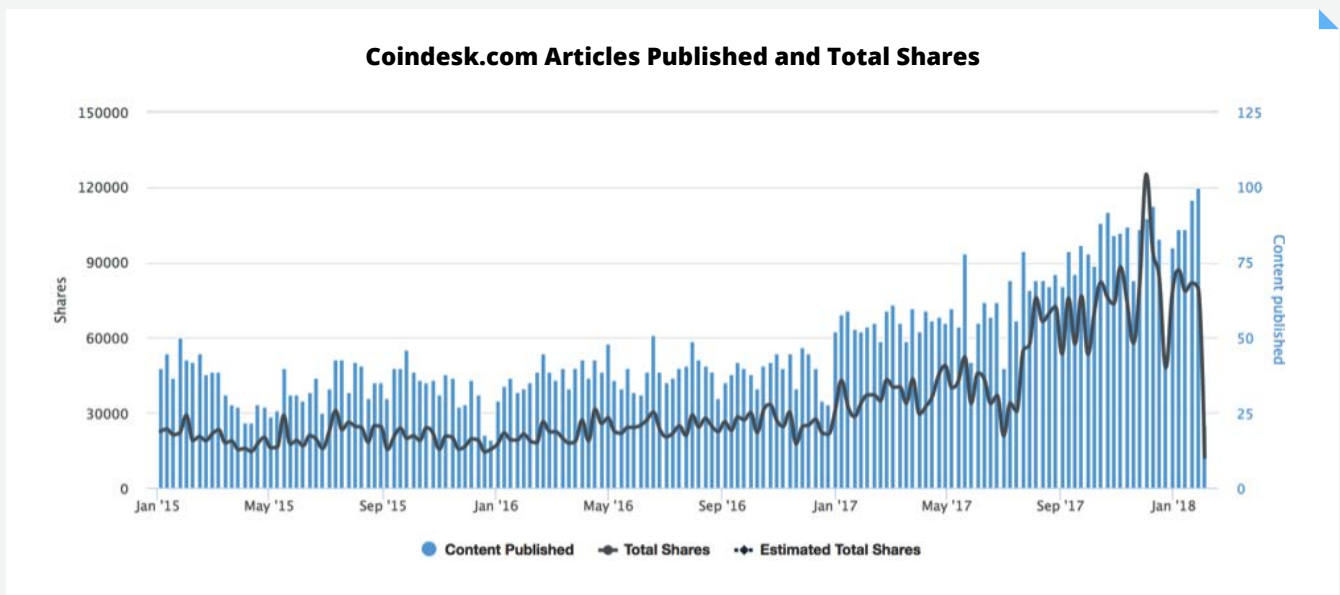
Source: BuzzSumo

Tapping into changing audience interests and leveraging trending topics remains a key part of any content strategy, but the key is to build your authority early and be consistent in publishing on the topic, rather than a "me too" late entrant.

GROWTH IN LinkedIn SHARING

LinkedIn recently told [Digiday](#) that comments, likes and shares on the platform are up more than 60 percent year-on-year, due to product updates, new features and analytics. Our data also shows that while social engagement with content is falling on Facebook and Twitter, many B2B publishers are seeing increases in social sharing on LinkedIn. For example, here is a chart showing total shares of Forbes.com content on LinkedIn.
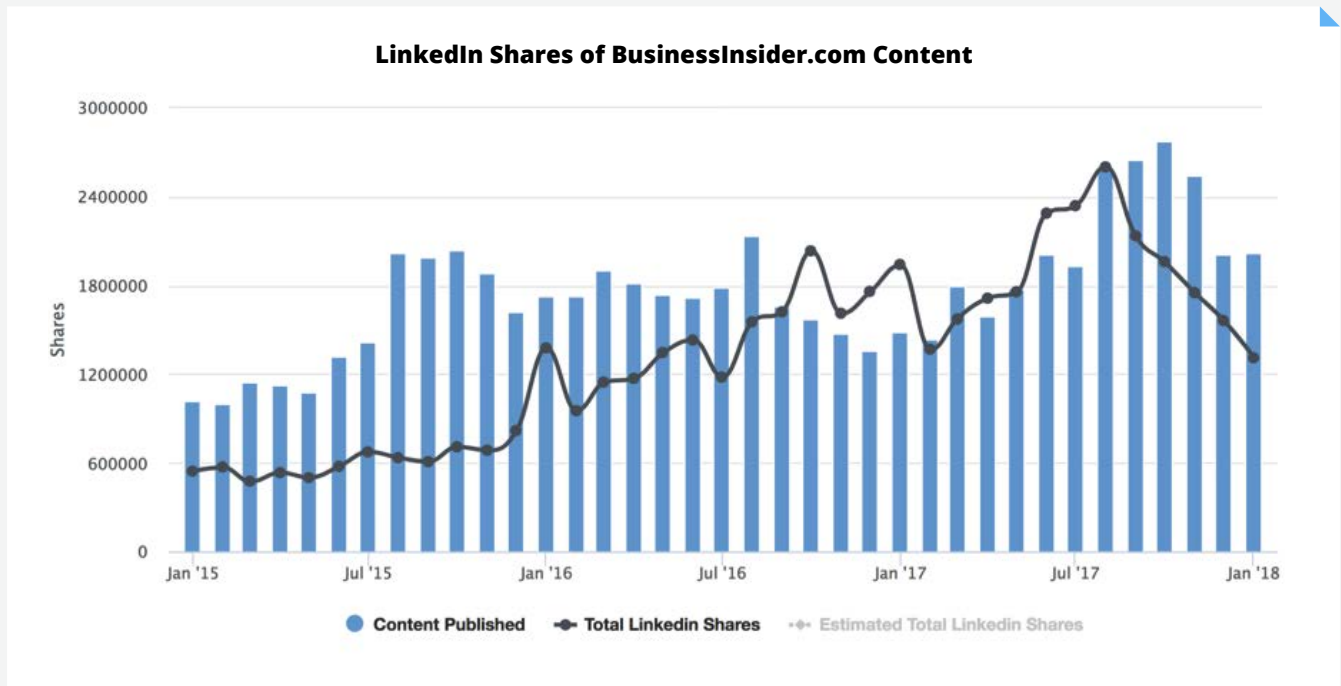
LinkedIn Shares of Content Published on Forbes.com
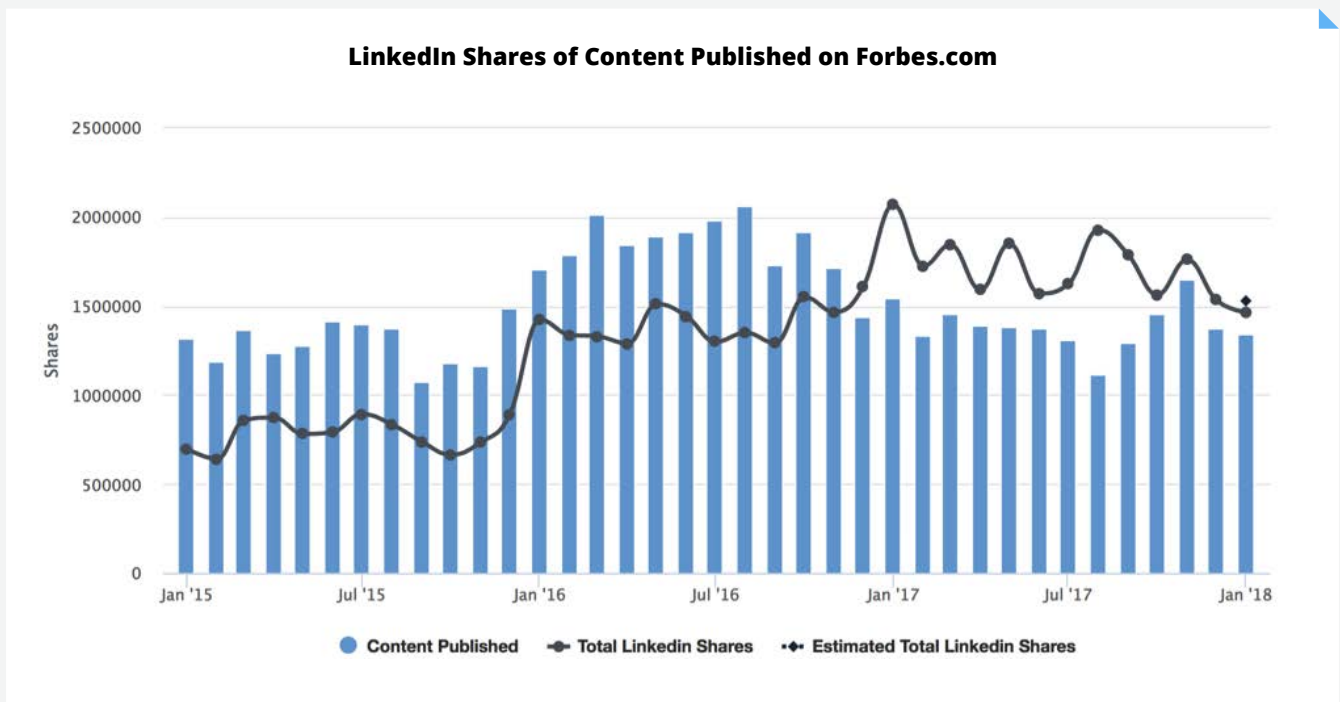
Source: BuzzSumo

By contrast here is a chart showing shares of Forbes.com content on Twitter.

Twitter Shares of Forbes.com Content
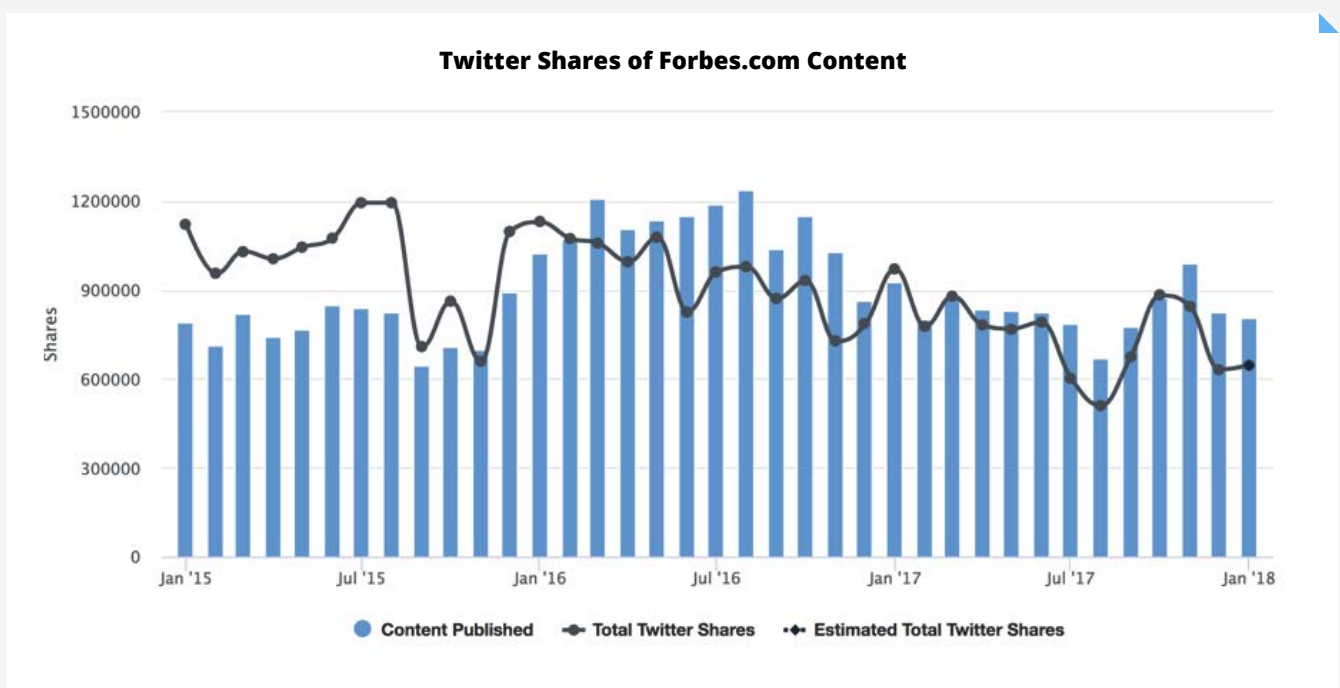
Source: BuzzSumo

Other business focused sites have seen similar increases, below is BusinessInsider.com.

LinkedIn Shares of BusinessInsider.com Content

Source: BuzzSumo

We have also seen major publishers like the New York Times increase their LinkedIn shares, albeit this is still a small proportion of their overall shares.

LinkedIn Shares of NYTimes.com Content
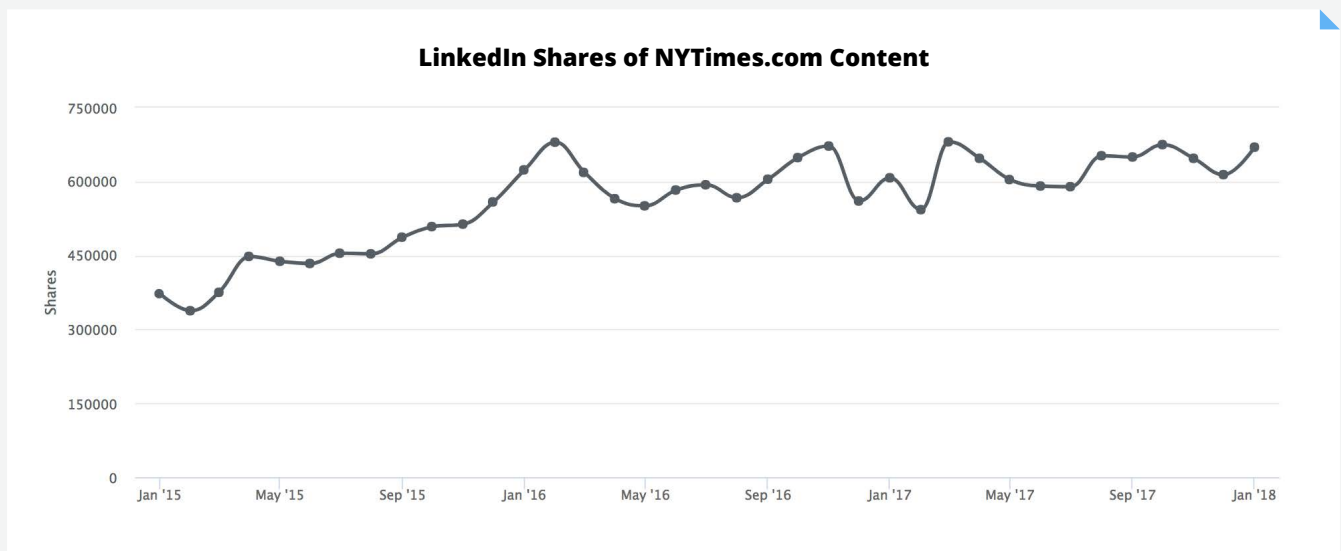
Source: BuzzSumo

LinkedIn may represent a better opportunity for business to business sites. Many businesses were building their presence on Facebook but the recent algorithm changes could prompt a renewed focus on LinkedIn.

BACKLINK TRENDS:
IF YOU CAN GET MORE THAN ZERO, YOU'RE DOING WELL...

The median number of backlinks in our sample of 100m posts published in 2017 is zero. In fact over seventy percent of all content published is never linked to from another domain. Given that link building is a key objective for many marketers, this should cause more than a little concern. However, backlinks are gained consistently by authoritative sites. The data shows that research content, reference content, opinion content and long form content on authoritative sites consistently gains backlinks. For sites such as Pew Research, median backlinks per article in 2017 was higher than in previous years. Below are some examples:

Pew Research Content 2017: Shares and Links

		Facebook Engagements	Linkedin Shares	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Number of Links
Record shares of Americans have smartphones, home broadband By Aaron Smith — Jan 12, 2017 pewresearch.org	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	755	495	404	100	1224
5 facts about illegal immigration in the U.S. By Jens Manuel Krogstad — Apr 27, 2017 pewresearch.org List	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	3.7K	29	382	23	571
Support for single-payer health insurance grows in U.S. By Jocelyn Kiley — Jun 23, 2017 pewresearch.org	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	17.7K	62	2.5K	13	771
U.S. academic achievement lags that of many other countries By Drew Desilver — Feb 15, 2017 pewresearch.org	Save / View Backlinks / View Sharers / Share	4.4K	127	475	94	523

Source: BuzzSumo

EVERGREEN CONTENT BUILDS MORE LINKS AND SHARES

Despite the falls in social sharing, we still find posts that get consistently shared and linked to over time. We define these as evergreen content. Below are some examples.

Examples of Evergreen Content

	Number of Links	Evergreen Score ↓	Total Shares
Millennials surpass Gen Xers as the largest generation in U.S. labor force By Richard Fry — May 11, 2015 pewresearch.org	2730	237	9.5K
What is Blockchain Technology? A Step-by-Step Guide For Beginners By Ameer Rosic — Sep 18, 2016 blockgeeks.com	1422	237	23.4K
What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team By Charles Duhigg — Feb 25, 2016 nytimes.com	403	204	58.8K
Brexit: All you need to know By Bbc News — May 27, 2015 bbc.com	2753	229	106.9K
42 Visual Content Marketing Statistics You Should Know in 2017 By Jesse Mawhinney — Jan 22, 2015 hubspot.com	1814	355	16.8K

This last post was first published in 2015 and is regularly updated.

Source: BuzzSumo

We can see a pattern when looking at evergreen content. The posts have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Research based content which gives it authority.

- Reference style content such as "visual marketing statistics" or "what you need to know about Brexit" --This is particularly true for content that is kept updated.

- Longevity. Articles such as, "What is blockchain?" or the article on "How to build the perfect team" are relevant over time.

- Regular updates: Several of these posts are regularly updated with fresh insights giving them extended relevance and resharability.

FALLING ENGAGEMENT WITH FACEBOOK POSTS

We are seeing a consistent fall in Facebook engagement for publishers. Last year we reported on a [20% fall in Facebook engagement](#) for major brands and publishers. This appears to have continued over the last six months. Parse.ly's referrer dashboard shows a steady decline in referral traffic to publishers from Facebook.

**Facebook Referral Traffic To Parse.ly's Customers**
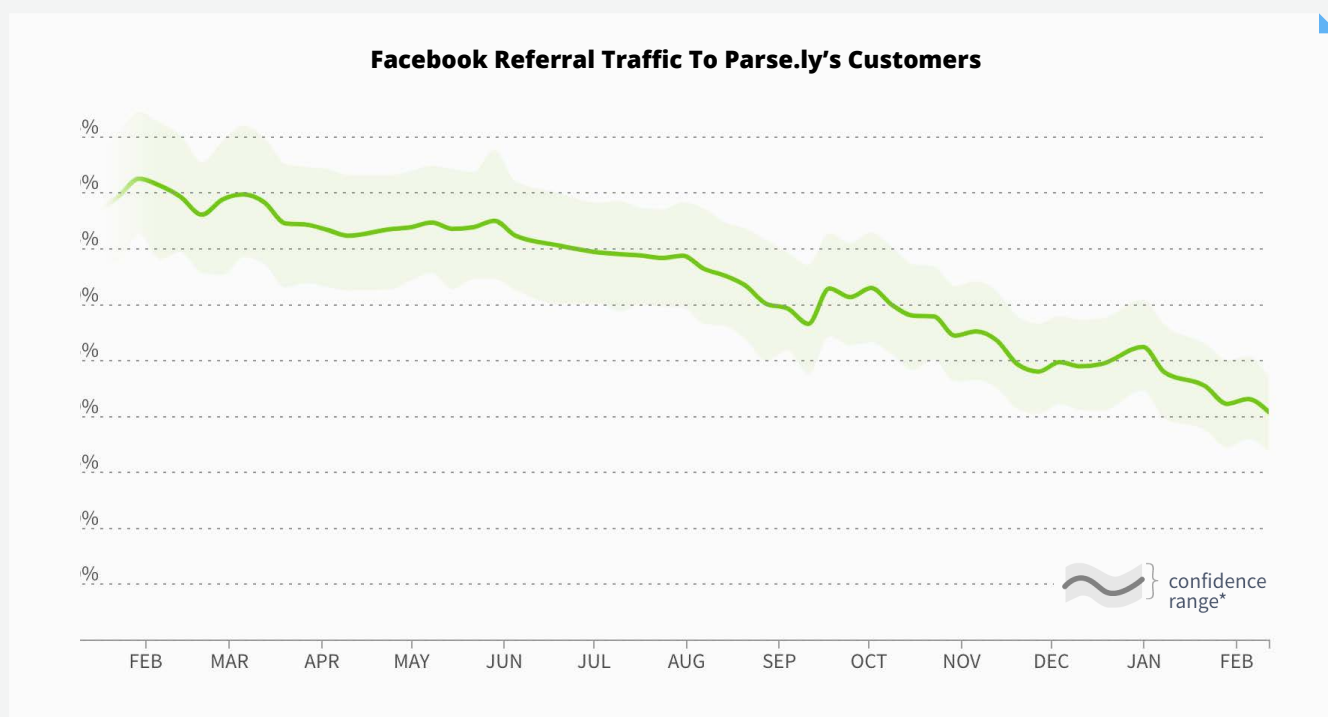
Source: Parse.ly

On 11th January 2018, Mark Zuckerberg announced that [Facebook would be updating its news feed algorithm](#) to prioritize content from "friends, family and groups." These latest changes may further reduce the visibility of publisher content in the news feed, and we may well see further falls in Facebook engagement.
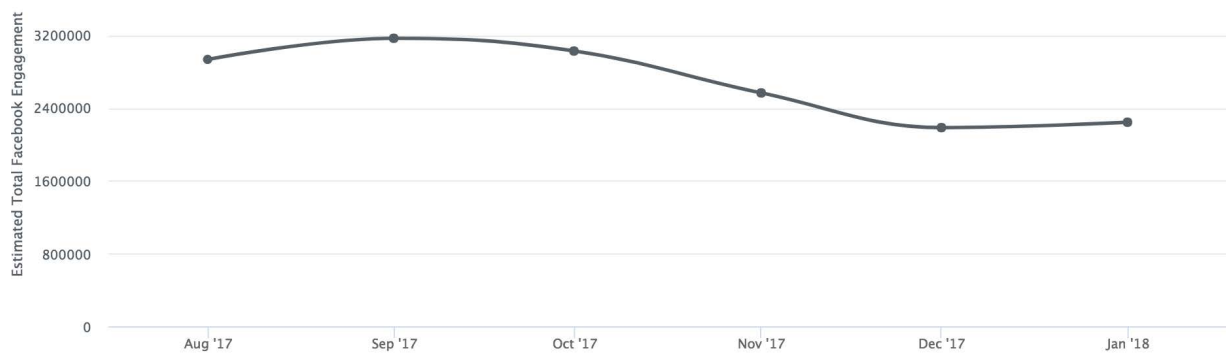
Our BuzzSumo data also shows a decline in engagement with publishers' Facebook content even before these algorithm changes have taken hold. The charts below show the total engagement (likes, shares and comments) with posts by publishers' pages over the last 6 months.

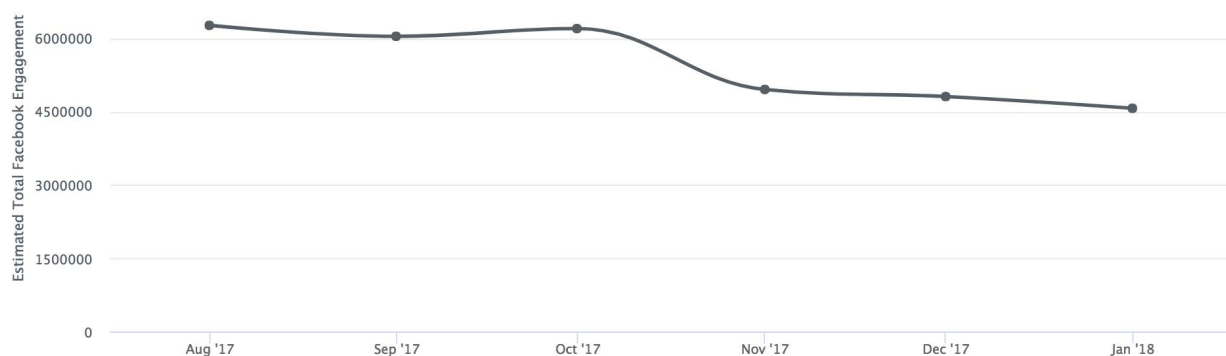**Total Engagement With Publisher Facebook Page Posts**

HUFFINGTON POST
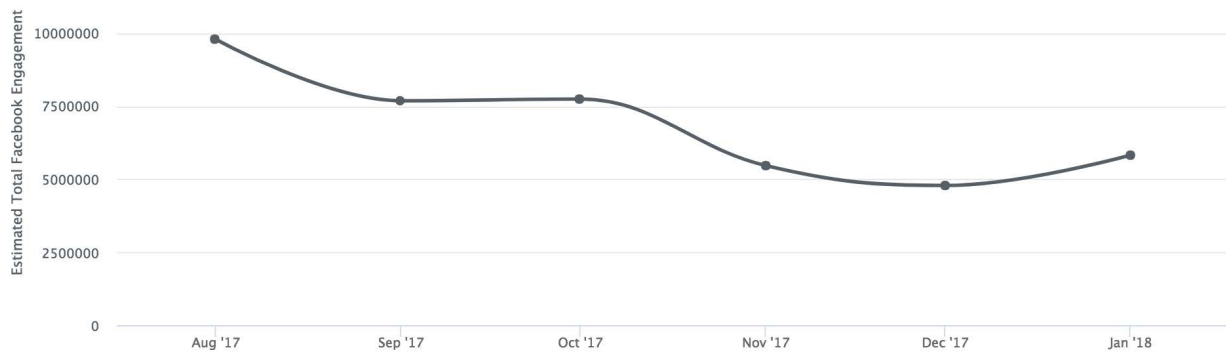
THE GUARDIAN

NEW YORK TIMES

Source: BuzzSumo

It is still too early to assess the impact of Facebook's latest changes, but we anticipate they will further reduce the organic reach of branded content, even for authoritative publishers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTENT MARKETERS:
10 TAKEAWAYS

We're aware that our findings above make for a sobering read for content marketers. However, we view it as a sign of maturity in content marketing. Clickbait and other overused formats have peaked and declined. Consumers are less engaged by them. Social networks, especially Facebook, are taking action to demote such content, further devaluing them. If we want to borrow from the financial lexicon, we could call it a market correction in response to oversupply of lower quality content.

However, there is still demand for helpful, quality, well researched and authoritative content, particularly from sites and publishers with a track record of authority in specific topics.

With these points in mind, here are some actions to consider as you plan for 2018 and beyond:

01 BE CLEAR ON YOUR OBJECTIVES FOR CONTENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social remains important but potentially more for engagement and brand building rather than driving referral traffic. In terms of content, we must remember that social shares and links are just two metrics. There are other important metrics such as traffic and conversions. The right metrics will depend upon your content objectives.

02 DON'T CHASE SHARES WITH VIRAL CONTENT AND HEADLINES

There is a danger that when marketers see their social shares fall, they may look to produce more viral content and headlines to gain shares. There are a number of problems with this approach. Firstly, broadening the content to get shares may lose the focus on the core commercial audience. Secondly, there is evidence that audiences get tired of very similar viral content headlines and formats. Thirdly, given Facebook are actively punishing headlines that withhold information or use exaggerated terms, there is a need to be careful when trying to create viral content.

03 BUILD AUTHORITY AND AN AUDIENCE - BEFORE THE TREND

Many marketers try to jump on a trending topic without having built any authority in the area. An extreme example is Bitcoin where in December there were over 40,000 articles published each week about the cryptocurrency. No one can read all of this content, hence people interested in the topic were more likely to go to established cryptocurrency sites such as Coindesk or to read articles from the publishers they trust.

The average (mean) shares of Bitcoin articles in the last 12 months (6 Feb 17 to 6 feb 18) was 64. Average shares of articles about Bitcoin in the same period published by the New York Times was 2,300 and by Coindesk was 874. The median number of shares was just 4. Over half of the 40,000 articles a week being published on Bitcoin got less than 4 shares . Whilst it is tempting to jump on a trending topic, you need to have built some authority and reputation in the space. This emphasizes the importance of spotting new topics very early and building a reputation and authority.

FOCUS ON THE LONG TAIL:
# FIND SUB-TOPICS AND OWN THEM BEFORE OTHERS DO

The good news is that there are always new topic and sub-topic areas emerging. The skill is in identifying these early to build authority, then leverage news and trends once you've established yourself as a trusted source on the topic. A great example is Social Media Examiner's content about the recent Facebook algorithm change.

Social Media Examiner was live.
January 12 · 🌐

BREAKING NEWS: Facebook Zero? Is this the end of the Facebook News Feed for pages? with Michael Stelzner

572K Views

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ↗ Share

Source: Facebook
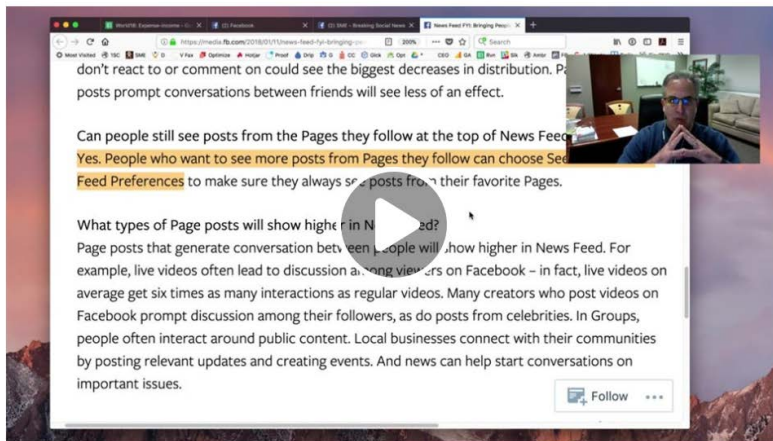
This video was viewed over half a million times as Mike Stelzner is already recognised as an authority in this area.

Ideally you want to spot new and emerging topics early before the topic becomes saturated with content. If you start at the left hand side of the chart below you can build your reputation and authority. If you enter towards the right hand side when the topic is saturated with content you will struggle to gain traction without exceptional content.
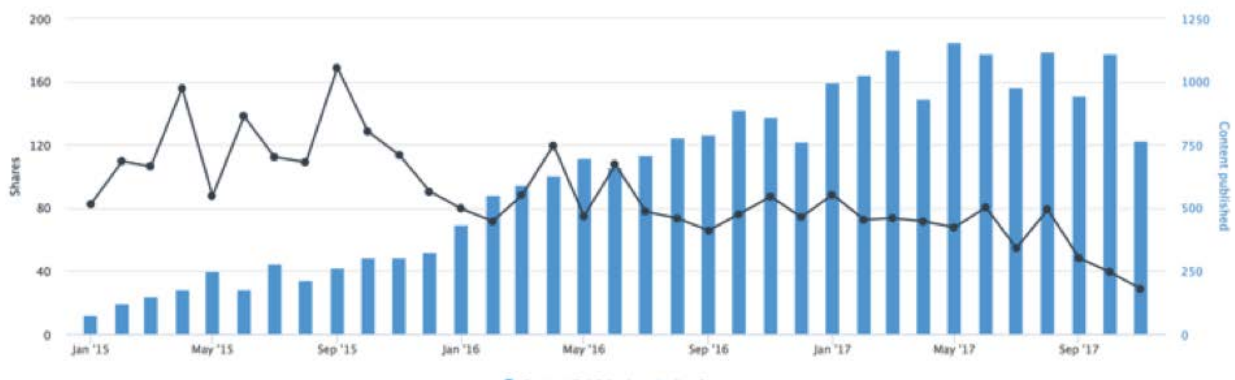
One of the key tasks of content marketers is to spot emerging areas of interest before competitors and certainly before the topic is saturated with content. The earlier you spot the opportunity; the longer you have to establish your authority and reputation. You can use tools such as BuzzSumo's trending content dashboard or Brandwatch to see what conversations are happening. You can also simply talk to lots of people across your industry. Take every opportunity to talk to people who are tracking trends. You can then identify the niche areas in your sector that are emerging and focus on creating quality content answering the key questions.

05 BACK TO BASICS: BUILD YOUR AUDIENCE AND WORK ON DIRECT DISTRIBUTION MODELS

Viral posts are impressive, but they're as rare as lottery wins. There's no get rich quick model in content marketing. It takes time to build an audience in any topic area. It is not rocket science; you have to produce quality, original content consistently over a period of time. By audience we mean people that value your content and read it regularly because they find it helpful.

Your content audience is NOT the same as your social media following. As Doug Kessler says in his recent post "we can't just tell our 'followers' about our latest ebook. Only 1-3% of them will see the tweet. (Turns out, Twitter and Facebook were in it for the money. And turns out our 'followers' were never really following us. Who knew?)."

Social will remain an important channel for building your audience, but there is a real benefit in developing ways to communicate directly with your audience such as emails or messenger groups. The danger with relying on social channels is that organic reach through those channels is outside your control and vulnerable to changes made by the social networks.

06 ENCOURAGE USER GENERATED CONTENT

An alternative to creating content to distribute to your audience is to use content generated by your audience. A study by Mavrck found that user generated content featuring a brand drove seven times as much engagement as brand generated Facebook posts. Develop campaigns that encourage and reward user generated content and engagement, such as surveys, competitions, and feedback.

07 DON'T FORGET PROMOTION

In a world of content saturation you cannot publish and hope people will find your content.

You need a promotion strategy. This may include paid promotion, outreach, influencer sharing, and staff sharing.

08 FOCUS ON HIGH QUALITY CONTENT

In a world full of content, people want to share authoritative and quality content. This also applies to links. People want to link to the best content they can find. Thus if you want to gain links, you really need to produce one of the very best articles on the topic. That means deep research, long form content, original findings. This takes more time, but the evidence suggests that you are better off investing time in the creation and promotion of fewer high quality articles than a large volume of lower quality ones.

09 SEO: MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER?

Referrals from Google have always been important. When social referrals are falling they become even more valuable.

In a world of falling social referrals, you can argue that search engine optimisation is more important than ever. Google rewards authoritative content that gains links. Thus as part of your SEO strategy, you may need to look again at the types of content you are creating.

10 LESS IS PROBABLY MORE

The data suggest there is a case for creating less, high quality content. We have previously written about a 'less is more' content strategy. One of the major benefits of publishing less content is that you have more time to focus on promoting and amplifying your content.

Brian Dean of Backlinko has executed this content strategy to great effect. Brian has published less than one new post a month over 5 years. These posts have driven 4m visitors to his site and an average of 275 links from unique domains for each post.

Content marketers would do well to heed Jay Baer's advice that you should only publish when you have something worthwhile to say. It also makes promotion easier as it is hard to get your influencers, or your own staff, to share content every day.

These are interesting times for content marketers. The flight to quality creates opportunities to raise our standards. Changes to social networks mean we need to watch more closely to track where engagement is actually happening. Arguably it's more important than ever to track the social performance of your content.

We'd love to get your feedback on how these trends are impacting you. Get in touch with us with any comments.

Buzzsumo

@steverayson
www.buzzsumo.com