Social, Search & Direct:
Pathways to Digital News

About This Report

This is the latest in a multi-part research project by the Pew Research Center and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation examining the role of news on social media platforms. This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at pewresearch.org/journalism

Amy Mitchell, *Director of Journalism Research*
Mark Jurkowitz, *Associate Director*
Kenneth Olmstead, *Research Associate*
Katerina Eva-Matsa, *Research Analyst*
Michael Keegan, *Graphics Director*
Jan Boyles, *Research Associate*

About Pew Research Center

Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It does not take policy positions. It conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, media content analysis and other empirical social science research. The center studies U.S. politics and policy views; media and journalism; internet and technology; religion and public life; Hispanic trends; global attitudes and U.S. social and demographic trends. All of the center's reports are available at www.pewresearch.org. Pew Research Center is a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Alan Murray, *President*

Michael Dimock, *Vice President, Research*

Elizabeth Mueller Gross, *Vice President*

Paul Taylor, *Executive Vice President, Special Projects*

Andrew Kohut, *Founding Director*

Managing Directors

Jim Bell, *Director of International Survey Research*

Alan Cooperman, *Director, Religion Research*

Claudia Deane, *Director, Research Practices*

Carroll Doherty, *Director, Political Research*

Scott Keeter, *Director of Survey Research*

Vidya Krishnamurthy, *Communications Director*

Mark Hugo Lopez, *Director of Hispanic Research*

Amy Mitchell, *Director of Journalism Research*

Kim Parker, *Director of Social Trends*

Lee Rainie, *Director, Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project*

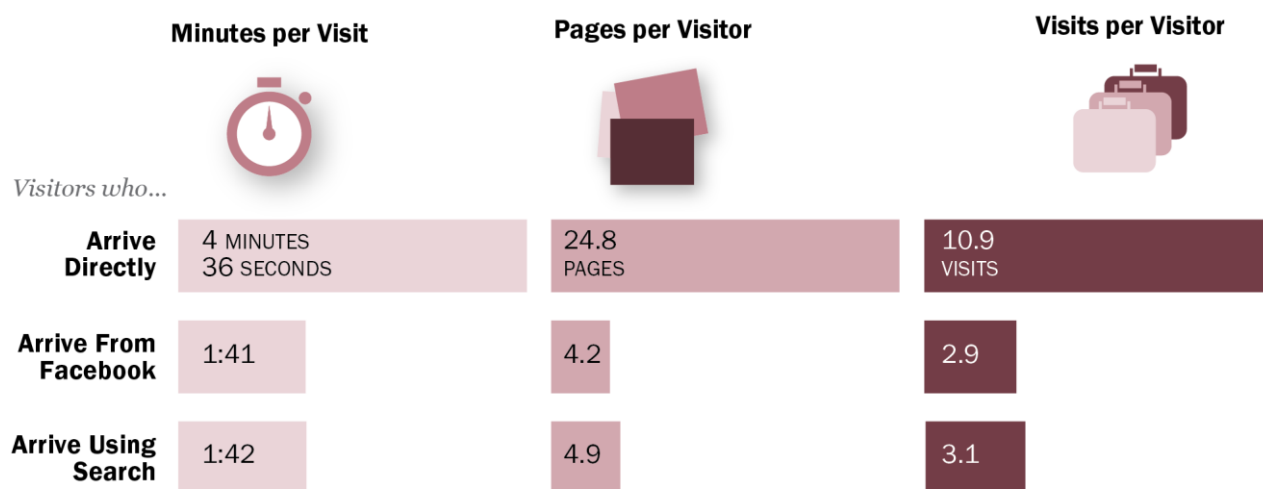Richard Wike, *Director of Global Attitudes*

Overview

How someone gets to a news organization's website says a lot about the level of engagement and loyalty he or she displays toward the site and its content, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis conducted in collaboration with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. In this study of U.S. internet traffic to 26 of the most popular news websites, direct visitors—those who type in the news outlet's specific address (URL) or have the address bookmarked—spend much more time on that news site, view many more pages of content and come back far more often than visitors who arrive from a search engine or a Facebook referral. The data also suggest that turning social media or search eyeballs into equally dedicated readers is no easy task.

These are among the key findings that detail how 1 million people enrolled in one of the nation's most popular commercial internet panels have been connecting through their desktop and laptop computers with the most accessed or shared news sites of our time.

An analysis by Pew Research of three months of comScore data finds that among users coming to these news sites through a desktop or laptop computer, direct visitors spend, on average, 4 minutes and 36 seconds per visit. That is roughly three times as long as those who wind up on a news media website through a search engine (1 minute 42 seconds) or from Facebook (1 minute 41 seconds). Direct visitors also view roughly five times as many pages per month (24.8 on average) as those coming via Facebook referrals (4.2 pages) or through search engines (4.9 pages). And they

Referral Traffic to News Sites

Average monthly...

Visitors who...	Minutes per Visit	Pages per Visitor	Visits per Visitor
Arrive Directly	4 MINUTES 36 SECONDS	24.8 PAGES	10.9 VISITS
Arrive From Facebook	1:41	4.2	2.9
Arrive Using Search	1:42	4.9	3.1

Aggregation of all sites, average of April, May and June, 2013.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

visit a site three times as often (10.9) as Facebook and search visitors.

This higher level of engagement from direct visitors holds true across the full mix of sites studied, from those that rank among the most shared on Facebook, such as breitbart.com, to those whose traffic is heavily driven by traffic from search engines, such as abcnews.go.com (the website for ABC News); and from those with a small total audience (mrconservative.com) to aggregators (yahoonews.com). Even sites such as digital native buzzfeed.com and National Public Radio's npr.org, which have an unusually high level of Facebook traffic, saw much greater engagement from those who came in directly.

Cable News Sites Levels of Engagement

	Minutes per Visit (min:sec)	Pages per Month	Visits per Month
Foxnews.com	7:54	14.4	6
CNN.com	1:30	9.9	6.6
NBCnews.com	4:18	11.3	6

Source: comScore; Average Monthly Data, April-June, 2013. At the time this data was collected NBCnews.com was the site for the MSNBC cable channel content. Since then MSNBC.com has re-launched and is now separate from NBCnews.com

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The data also suggest that converting social media or search eyeballs to dedicated readers is difficult to do. Most people that arrived at one of these popular news sites used only one of the three modes – suggesting that, at least on desktop/laptops, individuals tend to come to these news sites using a single method. Users had not, in other words, logged into abcnews.go.com in the morning to get the latest news and then later that night followed a link to another ABC story when checking status updates on Facebook. Of the sites examined, the percentage of direct visitors who also came to the site via Facebook was extremely small, ranging from 0.9% to 2.3%, with the exception of Buzzfeed at 11.3%. Similarly, direct visitors who also came to a site through a search engine ranged from 1.3% to 4.1% - again with one exception, this time being examiner.com at 8.6%.

Within these overall findings, some news sites display higher levels of overall visitor engagement than others. The average visitor to Foxnews.com (a site operated by the Fox News Channel), spent almost eight minutes per visit. By comparison, the average visitor to CNN spent 1 minute and 30 seconds on the site while visitors to nbcnews.com[1] stayed about four minutes on average.

At a time when news organizations are working to understand how consumers interact with news in the digital space and are implementing digital subscription plans while energetically pushing

---

[1] At the time this data was collected nbcnews.com was the website for the cable news channel MSNBC (after the split with Microsoft). MSNBC.com has since re launched and is currently the website of the cable channel.

content in social spaces, these findings encapsulate some of the key challenges facing digital news. Facebook and search are critical for bringing added eyeballs to individual stories, and they do so in droves. But the connection a news organization has with any individual coming to their website via search or Facebook seems quite limited. For news outlets operating under the traditional model of building a loyal, perhaps paying audience, obtaining referrals so that users think of the outlet as the first place to turn is critical.

The data also shed light on new audience approaches. The strategy of Buzzfeed, for example, is very different from that of traditional news organizations. It is not built around building a loyal, returning audience. Instead, it is built around "being a part of the conversation," says editor-in-chief Ben Smith. The site's writers and editors develop content that people want to share so that a story reaches all those it "should" reach. It may well be a completely different audience from one story to the next. That strategy is reflected in the 50% of their desktop/laptop traffic that comes in through Facebook with low engagement, but high volume – far more than the 32% of traffic that accesses the site directly and show higher levels of engagement. The revenue strategy – built around advertising rather than subscriptions – reflects that strategy as well. On the other hand, a site like the New York Times – that relies on user subscriptions for a substantial portion of their revenue, and thus, likely places high priority on loyalty and engagement – gets 37% of its laptop/desktop traffic from direct visitors and only 7% from Facebook.

For organizations producing news content, what may be most critical is how much they understand about these different audience pathways and the degree to which their strategies – both in terms of content and revenue – match their audience flow.

While the main analysis does not include mobile traffic to these sites due to comScore's smaller mobile panel size, the overall findings translate to the mobile realm as well. As Patrick Cooper, NPR's Director of Web and Engagement told Pew Research, "The big thing publishers should take away from the desktop data, even if desktop is going away, is that: 1) method of entry matters to the experience and 2) they can't control method of entry."

The 26 news websites examined include sites that rank in the top 15 according to monthly unique visitors as measured by comScore data, as well as sites that are among the top 20 most frequently shared pages on Facebook, according to internal Facebook data shared with Pew Research. The data measured visitors coming through each of the three pathways, the number of visits per month through that path, pages viewed per month and time spent per visit (averaged over April, May, and June 2013). Direct visits, search referrals and Facebook referrals are the most common pathways to these sites, but comScore's broad category of "other" often represents the greatest portion of visitors to most sites. It is a sprawling category that includes everything from email and websites

operated by non-news entities to message boards and other news websites. For most sites included in this study, the "other" category accounts for such a small percentage of visitors that comScore does not break them out separately. In addition, it is also worth noting that referral data is complicated, as some visitors arrive to a site without any referral data attached.[2]

The visitor engagement data for this study comes from comScore's U.S. panel of 1 million desktop/laptop users. ComScore does collect some mobile behavior data, and one section of this report examines that data for these 26 news sites. But the panels that comScore (and other web analytics firms) have established to track mobile behavior are, at this point, much smaller than the desktop/laptop panels. The data, therefore, cannot be broken down nearly as granularly as the much larger desktop panels. Even if the mobile panel were larger, the variation in how news organizations approach mobile could make data analysis difficult. Some news organizations have completely separate desktop and mobile sites, while others have one site that adapts to the current platform being used. In other cases, a few news outlets have developed separate mobile apps that basically serve as the mobile form of the website or have created an app (or apps) with a somewhat different orientation or mission than the site itself. Nevertheless, the analysis that Pew Research was able to conduct on the mobile data suggests an engagement pattern similar to that seen in the desktop/laptop space.

---

[2] Email links can be one of the hardest forms of engagement to track. Occasionally, these visits are tagged incorrectly as direct traffic. Examining the comScore system more deeply indicates that this occurs less than 9% of the time. Taken together, total email traffic was normally did not rise above 2% of a site's total traffic. For a deeper explanation, see the full methodology.

Audience Routes: Direct, Search & Facebook

This study focused primarily on the three main paths internet users take to get to the 26 most popular news websites: Direct visitors who either type a URL into the browser or use a bookmark; those who come through a query on a search engine; and those who get news by following links they see on Facebook.

Of the three, users who navigate directly to news sites provide the highest percentage of traffic to online news content. Direct visitors accounted for at least 20% of the total visitors to more than half (15) of the 26 sites studied. In contrast, search visitors accounted for at least 20% of the traffic to 11 of the sites. Facebook lagged behind, accounting for 20% or more of the visitors to only four sites.

Users who navigate directly also deliver the highest levels of engagement on these sites, as measured by time spent, number of pages viewed and visits per month.

On average, users coming directly to these news sites spent 4 minutes and 36 seconds per visit. Facebook visitors spent 1 minute and 41 seconds on a site, almost three minutes less than the direct visitor. Visitors from search spent essentially the same amount of time as Facebook visitors: 1 minute and 42 seconds.

The differences were even more pronounced when it came to the number of pages viewed by visitors to news sites. Those coming directly averaged almost 25 pages (24.8) viewed per month. That is about five times the pages viewed by both search visitors (4.9) and by Facebook visitors (4.2 pages).

Direct Visitors Spend by Far the Most Time on Sites

Time per visit

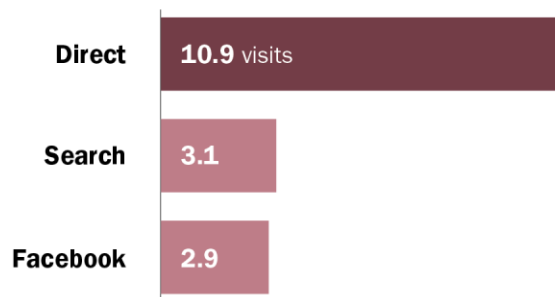|	
Direct	4 minutes 36 seconds
Facebook	1:41
Search	1:42
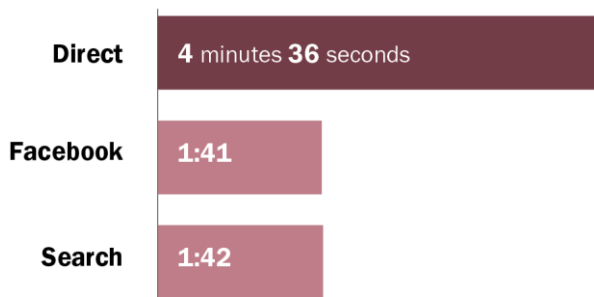
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Facebook Visitors Return Less Often than Those from Search and Direct

Average visits per month per visitor

Direct	10.9 visits
Search	3.1
Facebook	2.9

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The same pattern emerged when it came to how often users returned to a site monthly. The average direct visitor made 10.9 visits per month, far more than the 3.1 visits from those coming via search and the 2.9 visits from Facebook referrals.

To some degree, these levels of engagement reflect the different user experiences connected to each type of path. Visitors using search engines tend to be looking for a particular story or content on a specific topic, and may be less concerned about the source of the story. On Facebook, news use tends to be more of a random and "incidental" experience. Indeed, only 16% of the Facebook users surveyed said that getting news was a major reason they go on the social media site, according to a fall 2013 Pew Research Center survey. News consumers who arrive on sites by typing in URLs or by clicking on bookmarks are likely to already have some connection with that news brand, which may explain the significantly higher levels of engagement.

Users Coming from Search or Facebook May not Stay Long or Return

The comScore data also suggest that whether a site has a large or small share of its traffic coming from a search or Facebook has little impact on how engaged that traffic remains with their content. Either way, those coming through these channels have engagement levels far lower than those coming to a site directly.
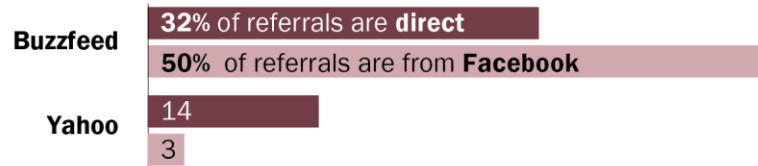
There is, for example, a diverse group of sites that received a far larger proportion of Facebook traffic than the overall group: mr.conservative (73%), buzzfeed.com (50%), npr.org (22%)[3] and theblaze.com (20%).

But with the exception of the mr.conservative site—which is overwhelmingly dependent

Visitors' Engagement via Facebook Referrals

Even when Facebook referrals outnumber direct referrals (Buzzfeed)...

Buzzfeed
32% of referrals are **direct**
50% of referrals are from **Facebook**

Yahoo
14
3

direct visitors are still far more engaged.

Direct visitors
Facebook referrals

	Buzzfeed	Yahoo
Minutes per Visit	5.6 minutes / 2.3	2.7 / 1.3
Pages per Visitor	17.8 pages / 2.7	9.9 / 4.2
Visits per Visitor	4.0 visits / 1.8	3.0 / 1.4

Aggregation of all sites, average of April, May and June, 2013.
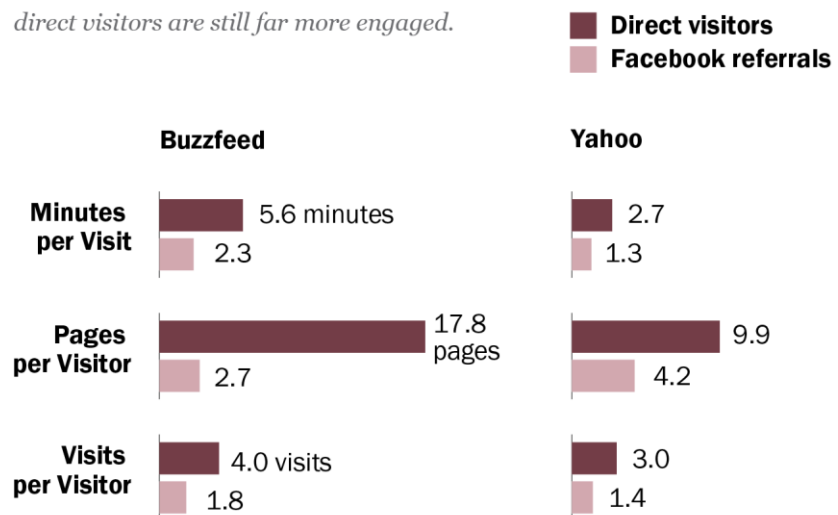Source: comScore

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

on Facebook traffic—Facebook visitors to those sites still showed far lower engagement than those coming in directly. (Facebook visitors to mr.conservative.com were the exception: They spent 2 minutes and 24 seconds, viewed 4.3 pages and made 1.8 visits – numbers that are very similar to direct traffic engagement there.)

---

[3] It is important to note that for NPR.org this dataset is limited, given that it only reflects desktop traffic. NPR.org stands out as having a relatively low total unique audience to its website; although it is one of the most popular mobile news apps. In fact, 2012 internal NPR data showed that the mobile app alone averaged 3.4 million monthly unique visitors, which puts it near CNN in terms of mobile app traffic (though CNN.com has almost nine times the desktop traffic as NPR.org).

In the case of Buzzfeed, Facebook visitors were on the site for less than half the time direct visitors spent, viewing about one-sixth as many pages.

In addition, Facebook visitors to sites with a large amount of Facebook traffic had similar engagement metrics compared to those coming to sites with relatively little Facebook traffic.

Yahoo! News, for example, had only 3% of its audience coming from Facebook. But it saw roughly the same engagement from its Facebook visitors as Buzzfeed, which was also far less robust than the engagement of direct visitors.

The same pattern holds true for visitors coming from a search engine. The size of a site's search audience had little effect on engagement levels.

CBSnews.com had one of the highest proportions of visitors come from search, at 30%. But those search visitors viewed about one-quarter as many CBSnews.com pages as direct visitors, and came to this site only about one-third as often as the direct visitors.

Forbes—a site near the low end of search referred traffic (12%)— saw virtually the same engagement from search visitors as CBSnews.com. And search visitors to Forbes viewed less than half as many pages each month as direct visitors. That highlights another finding from the comScore data. The

Visitors' Engagement via Search Referrals

Even when search referrals outnumber direct referrals (Cbsnews.com)...

Cbsnews.com
23% of referrals are **direct visitors**
30% of referrals are from **search**

Forbes.com
16
12

direct visitors are still far more engaged.

■ **Direct visitors**
■ **Search referrals**

	Cbsnews.com	Forbes.com
Minutes per Visit	2.6 minutes / 2.2	3.1 / 2.3
Pages per Visitor	14.7 pages / 3.7	9.0 / 4.0
Visits per Visitor	3.7 visits / 1.3	1.5 / 1.3

Aggregation of all sites, average of April, May and June, 2013.
Source: comScore

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

engagement levels of users coming to the 26 news sites from Facebook and search were quite similar, and stayed within a relatively narrow range.
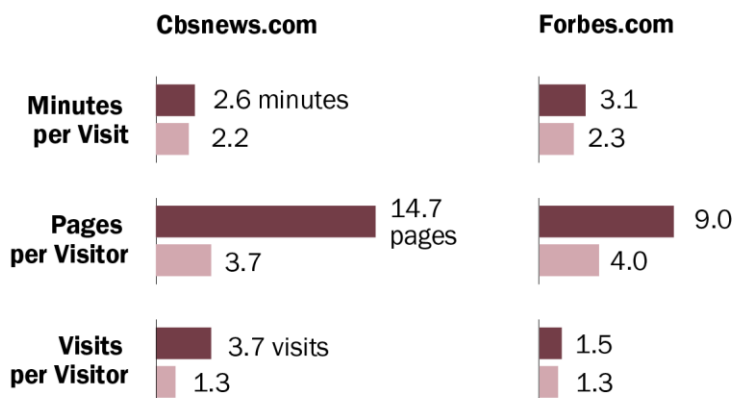
Indeed, Facebook referred visitors to a large majority of the sites (23 of the 26 studied), where users spent between 1 minute and 12 seconds to 3 minutes and 12 seconds per visit – a range of just two minutes. On 23 of the 26 sites, Facebook visitors viewed between 1.3 and 3.3 pages per month, a difference of only two pages. And users attracted via Facebook referrals visited all 26 sites between 1.1 and 2.0 times a month.

The numbers were similar for visitors coming from search engines. Visitors to 24 of the 26 sites spent between 1 minute to 2 minutes and 30 seconds there—a 90-second gap. Search visitors viewed between 1.4 and 4.0 pages a month on 24 of those sites. And the range of visits was even narrower. For each of the 26 sites, search visitors came between 1.1 times and 1.8 times a month.

Engagement among Direct Users Does Vary

If engagement levels of Facebook and search visitors remain fairly consistent, the same is not true for those coming to news content directly. While some of these top news sites display higher levels of overall engagement than others, that variance is tied almost entirely to differences in engagement among the direct visitors.

Overall, direct visitors to the 26 news sites examined in this report display a far wider range of engagement behaviors than do visitors from search or Facebook. Take, for example, the 10 sites with the highest percentage of visitors coming directly to the site. CNN tops the list with 60% direct traffic, whose visitors view on average 13 pages per month and return 8.7 times a month. But they stay for just 1 minute and 30 seconds per visit. This length of time is essentially the same as visitors coming to CNN.com from search or Facebook, and is much less time than direct visitors spend on Buzzfeed (5 minutes and 36 seconds), NYTimes.com (9 minutes and 24 seconds) or Foxnews.com (9 minutes and 6 seconds).

Engagement Among Direct Users Varies but Still Outpaces Other Visitor Types

	% Unique Visitors	Average Monthly Minutes per Visit (min:sec)	Average Monthly Pages per Visitor	Average Monthly Visits per Visitor
bbc.co.uk	35%	2:12	13.0	6.8
buzzfeed.com	32	5:36	17.8	4.0
cnn.com	60	1:30	13.1	8.7
foxnews.com	42	9:06	29.0	11.1
npr.org	35	2:24	5.8	2.7
nytimes.com	37	9:24	17.2	5.9
theblaze.com	42	6:12	21.7	6.6
wnd.com	35	2:54	13.1	5.6

Source: comScore

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Conversely, chicagotribune.com gets 25% of its visitors directly. But that group views 23 pages per month, a far higher engagement level than for other sites—such as bbc.co.uk or npr.org—with a greater percentage of direct visitors.

The amount of minutes direct visitors average on a site ranged from 54 seconds (guardian.co.uk) to 17 minutes and 18 seconds (nydailynews.com). The number of pages viewed also varied widely—from 3.1 a month (examiner.com) to 52.6 (nydailynews.com).

And while the range of monthly visits to a site by those coming via Facebook or search was confined to between once and twice a month, direct visitors behaved very differently. On the low end were those who visited several sites (including forbes.com) as little as 1.5 times a month. On the high end were foxnews.com visitors who showed up more than 10 times as often (11.1 times per month).

Multiple Pathways to News?

Pew Research Center also examined the extent to which individuals entered one of these sites from more than one of the three main pathways: direct, Facebook and search. For example, what percent of search-referred visitors also come to the site directly at some point over the month? And how about vice versa? Are consumers, in other words, connecting with news organizations through more than one route?

These data reveal that at least on desktop/laptops, individuals tend to be one type of visitor or another. Among the sites studied, only between 0.7% and 2.3% of direct visitors also came in via Facebook over the course of the month (with the exception of Buzzfeed for whom 11.3% of direct visitors also come in through Facebook). And only between 1.3% and 4.6% also came in via search (here, with the exception of The Examiner at 8.6%). Looked at another way, for the majority of sites studied (19 of the 26), more than three-quarters of their direct visitors only visited the site directly over the course of a month.

A similar pattern holds true for Facebook referrals. A majority of sites saw more than three-quarters of their Facebook referrals come in only that way, though the range of those also coming in directly varied a bit more: from a low of 4.4% to a high of 13.6% (again at Buzzfeed). Too few also entered via search to be measurable.

Again, these data do not include mobile traffic, which Facebook says now accounts for 48% of all users in a given day. [4]

---

[4] Lunden, Ingrid. ["Facebook's Mobile Tipping Point: 48% of Daily Users Are Now Mobile-Only."](#) October 30, 2013

Other Ways Visitors Arrive at Sites

While search, direct and Facebook are the main referral methods studied here, comScore's broad category of "other" often represents the greatest portion of visitors to most sites. But it is a sprawling category that includes everything from email and websites operated by non-news entities to message boards and other news websites.

For most sites on this list, each of these sub-categories counts for such a small percentage of visitors that comScore does not break them out separately. But a few sites do stand out for the percentage of traffic they get from one of the "other" referral methods. Two of the digital general sites – news.msn.com and newsyahoo.com – get roughly three-quarters of their traffic from corporate sites (these are sites like nike.com or other websites of corporations). And gma.yahoo.com, the site for ABC's "Good Morning America" program, gets 90% of its traffic via corporate sites.

That makes sense when you consider that all three are the digital news outlets for much larger corporate entities. In the case of news.msn.com (Microsoft) and news.yahoo.com (Yahoo!) users can arrive at these sites via virtually any of Microsoft's or Yahoo!'s other products. In the comScore data, these visitors would be counted "corporate sites" referrals. For example, if a user signs out of his or her MSN or Yahoo! email accounts, they are taken to various sign out pages. In the case of Yahoo!, users are redirected to the Yahoo.com homepage, which features news.yahoo.com content. In some cases, users are taken directly to those sites. In fact, after a recent redesign of Microsoft's email, a user with an MSN account could see news.msn.com content alongside the user's email inbox.

At the same time, a few sites derived a significantly large percentage of traffic from other news websites. One is Breitbart.com, the digital political site founded by the late political activist Andrew Breitbart. The conservative news website got 42% of its traffic that way. Not far behind, at 33%, was Washingtontimes.com, the legacy print site with a conservative tilt. This inbound traffic from other news sites suggests news outlets like Breitbart and The Washington Times may be linked to on the pages of other like-minded media outlets.

Given the diversity of sub-types under comScore's "other" category, it is challenging to make a direct comparison to other referral types. Taken as a group, these "other" visitors look very similar to users who come from search or Facebook. They are much less engaged than visitors who come directly, and there is little variation across sites.

A good example would be Examiner.com. The "other" category makes up 32% of the site's total traffic, roughly in the middle of the list in terms of "other" audience size. Visitors coming to the site through those "other" paths spent 1 minute and 18 seconds on the site per visit; they viewed 2.2 pages per month, and returned 1.2 times. That is quite similar to visitors coming from search, who spend 1 minute and 30 seconds per visit on the site, view 2.2 pages, and visit 1.5 times per month – or those coming to Examiner.com from Facebook, who spend 1 minute and 24 seconds on the site, view 2.2 pages and return 1.4 times a month.

How Mobile Users Come to News Sites

As is the case for most major analytics companies, comScore's panel of mobile users and total mobile traffic is too small to allow the same deep level of analysis that can be conducted with data from desktop and laptop computer use.

comScore was able to provide the total number of mobile visitors—those going to either the mobile browser or the mobile app—to each website in the sample during the three months studied. The browser numbers include data from any web-connected mobile device; while mobile app data reflect offerings in the iTunes and Google Play stores.[5] The U.S. mobile panel is so much smaller than the U.S. desktop/laptop panel (14,000 versus 1 million) – restricting what can be learned because a smaller panel limits the weighting that can be done on specific sites, demographics groups or behavior traits.

Mobile Web Browsing Continues to Outpace Mobile Apps for News Sites

Sites	Total Mobile Application	Total Mobile Browser
abcnews.go.com	1,218,472	15,220,509
cnn.com	5,347,209	20,425,039
foxnews.com	3,257,858	14,494,106
news.yahoo.com	3,811,766	7,837,632
usatoday.com	4,001,379	12,873,341

Source: comScore, Average Monthly Data, April-June, 2013

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

NPR's mobile traffic provides an example of this limitation. comScore had enough panelists visit NPR's mobile browser to meet the threshold to collect and extrapolate data, but did not have enough panelists access the NPR mobile app . Thus, it did not break out mobile app traffic for the public radio site. However, NPR's internal data shared with Pew Research shows that the news organization had 13 million app downloads across the Android and iOS platforms, making it one of the most downloaded news apps. Thus, while Pew Research finds that the mobile traffic data

---

[5] While these two stores constitute the vast majority of *smartphone devices* in the U.S. – with Apple devices at around 40% of all smartphones in the U.S. and Google at around 51% - the remaining 10% includes Windows, Blackberry and various other mobile device operating systems. The mobile browser data, on the other hand, includes data from any web-connected mobile device.

comScore does report is accurate, some sites' app traffic may fall below the threshold of reportability because of the makeup of the panel.

Factoring in those limitations, three key findings do emerge. First, despite the growth in mobile phone and tablet use, the desktop still dominates the traffic to news sites. None of the 26 sites studied had more traffic come from a mobile device than from desktop, although some had a closer mix of traffic from desktop vs. mobile. This is in line with earlier research by the Pew Research Center's Journalism Project, which found that (even among mobile news users) the desktop is still the primary device for web access.

Second, at the time of the study, only half of the news sites—13 of the 26—had a mobile app available for download in either the iTunes store or the Google Play Store, suggesting that many of the most popular sites have opted out of the app world so far.

Of the 13 that had apps, only five (for the reason listed above) met comScore's minimum threshold for reporting users: ABC News, CNN, Fox News, USA Today, and Yahoo! News. All those apps are free to download in both the iTunes and Google Play stores, and are also among the top 20 most downloaded news apps in both stores. And the trend was clear. Among those five sites, there were still far more visits to the mobile web browser than to the mobile application.

This trend is in line with past reports by the Pew Research Center on the use of mobile browsers versus apps. A Fall 2012 report found that on a smartphone, 61% of mobile news users got news "mostly" from their mobile browsers vs. 28% "mostly" from apps (11% said both equally.) Tablet owners reported a similar pattern with 60% saying they "mostly" got news from their browser and 23% "mostly" from apps (16% said both equally).

Visitors Arriving through Facebook are Younger than Other Visitors

For the majority of sites studied here, visitors coming from Facebook were younger than visitors coming to the site directly or through search. This was true for both 18- to 24- year-olds and 25- to 34-year-olds.

For example, of the total audience to bbc.co.uk, 23% are in the 25-34 age group. Among Facebook visitors to that site, however, that number is 41% the highest of any site studied here. The second largest gap was on another British site, guardian.co.uk, which had 24% of its total audience in the 25- to 34- year-old age group, but 38% of its Facebook visitors in that bracket. NYTimes.com saw a similar pattern, with 22% of its overall audience in that age group and 35% of its Facebook audience in that 25-34 cohort.

Indeed, in 16 out of the 19 sites where comparisons could be made, Facebook sent a significantly higher percentage of 25- 34- year-old visitors than the direct path. And in 16 of the 17 sites that could be compared, Facebook sent higher percentages of 25- to 34- year-olds than search—often by very large margins.

In an even younger age group, 18- to 24- year-olds, the same pattern emerges, though it is less pronounced. Of the 18 sites where comparisons could be made, the percentage of 18- to 24- year-olds coming from Facebook was higher than those coming directly on 15 sites and higher than the search visitors on all 18.

Buzzfeed actually had the largest percentage of 18- to 24- year-olds referred from Facebook at 31%, but that was quite close to its overall audience, of which 28% are 18-24 year olds.

Other demographics, for most of the sites studied here, remained similar across the three pathways. The fact that audience demographics differed from one site to the next suggests that it is the site itself, rather than the pathway, which determines the demographic makeup of its visitors.

The News Sites Studied

The 26 news sites studied in this report were identified from two separate lists: news sites generating the most monthly unique visitors, according to comScore measures from June 2013, and the news sites that were shared most often on Facebook, according to Facebook's internal accounting during that same month.

Seventeen of the sites are operated by organizations with a legacy news outlet, while nine of them are digital native sites with no legacy component. Within the legacy category were two subgroups—nine legacy print outlets and eight legacy broadcast outlets. The digital category was broken down into five, digital general news sites and four, digital political sites. Most sites—15 of them—appeared on both lists—most visitors and most shared.

Only six of the most heavily trafficked news sites were not among the most shared on Facebook. They were nbcnews.com (about 43 million unique visitors a month), nydailynews.com (about 15 million), cbsnews.com (about 14 million), guardian.co.uk (about 12 million), news.msn.com (about 12 million) and chicagotribune.com (about 7 million).

On the other end of the spectrum are five sites that are among the most shared on Facebook, but do not rank among the most visited sites. All five are conservative-oriented news sites: theblaze.com, breitbart.com, washingtontimes.com, mrconservative.com, and wnd.com. These sites have relatively modest audiences, with mrconservative.com at the bottom of the list at 772,000 monthly unique visitors.

Indeed on average, the four, conservative digital political sites (excluding the legacy washingtontimes.com) got 22% of their traffic from Facebook referrals – far more than any other grouping of news sites.

Sites on Both the Top Shared and Top Trafficked Lists

Number of Unique Visitors

news.yahoo.com	51,580,064
huffingtonpost.com	45,531,400
cnn.com	43,680,616
abcnews.go.com	41,242,251
foxnews.com	30,963,152
nytimes.com	30,790,532
usatoday.com	25,236,604
gma.yahoo.com	23,977,452
washingtonpost.com	18,970,234
dailymail.co.uk	18,357,593
buzzfeed.com	17,521,045
forbes.com	15,919,283
examiner.com	14,702,822
bbc.co.uk	10,352,060

Source: comScore

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Methodology

A number of people contributed to this report. Amy Mitchell, Director of Journalism Research, oversaw the research project and served as lead author of the report.

The report was written by Amy Mitchell, Associate Director Mark Jurkowitz and Research Associate Kenneth Olmstead. Graphics Director Michael Keegan and Research Analyst Katerina Eva-Matsa developed the graphics and tables. The report was number checked by Kenneth Olmstead and copy edited by Research Associate Jan Boyles.

comScore Methodology

comScore is a leading global web analytics firms that contracts with thousands of different companies from publishers such as the Financial Times to companies like Best Buy. comScore's metrics of online audience size and behaviors are based primarily on a recruited panel of Internet users worldwide, and then supplemented with server side metrics from website tagged by comScore (referred to by comScore as "server-centric"). comScore combines these two methods to create what they call a Unified Digital Measurement™.

A "tag" (sometimes called a "tracking pixel") is placed on content provider's websites in comScore's network of partner sites and clients. Each time a user visits a site that contains one of these tags, an "event" is then logged on the tag host server (where comScore stores information about all of the tags in comScore's network). An "event" in this context can be a visit to a website, loading a video or the delivery of an ad to the consumer. Along with the event, several other pieces of information are recorded such as: the Internet Protocol (IP) address of the computer visiting the site and thus the "tag," the type of browser (e.g. whether the user is using Chrome or Firefox) or cookies on that user's browser. The worldwide panel consists of 2 million panel members in 170 countries. This study is based on the U.S. panel only, and consists of 1 million panel members. This main panel consists of desktop and laptop Internet usage only. For mobile devices, comScore's has a smaller, entirely separate U.S. mobile panel, which is used for a small section of this report, consisting of 14,000 panelists.

comScore recruits members for its main panel in two ways. The first is through banner ads across a variety of affiliate websites through which users can volunteer to be on comScore's panel. The second is through third party application providers where a user is offered a free piece of software in exchange for being part of comScore's panel. Panel members download software on their computers that tracks their online visits without attaching any personally identifiable information to the traffic data, thereby ensuring anonymity.

There are two resulting panels from this process: the home panel and the work panel. The home panel consists of users who are accessing the Internet using a device in their home. The work panel consists of users accessing the Internet through a device owned by their employer. comScore then weights the panel to build a representative sample of U.S. Internet users ages two and older.

Unlike in a random dial survey, this is not a randomly selected and nationally representative group of U.S. internet users. But it is one of three or four analytics firms in the world that has a panel of this size.

Though the data are not a random sample, once the panel measurements are collected they are adjusted to reflect the demographic profile of the country in which the panelists live. These demographics measurements are generally based on national censuses, though in some cases comScore does its own demographic surveys.

For example, after it obtains traffic data from a panel, comScore analysts may discover they have a smaller percentage of males than the online population at large. They then add more results from males so that they are correctly represented. Again these measurements are corrected to the *Internet using population,* not the general population of a country.

In addition to demographic weighting, comScore attempts to ensure they are tracking the Internet usage of the correct panelists in a household with more than one panel member. comScore says that 60.7% of the devices being tracked are single-user devices (so there is no need to ascertain who is using the device while their Internet usage is being tracked).

To identify the user in any given session, comScore uses a process it refers to as "Session Assignment Technology," one of a host of methods by which comScore can identify the who is using that device.

Of the remaining 40% or so of sessions that are on multi-user devices, about half can be identified through what comScore refers to as "session markers." These are cues such as e-mail addresses or a form in which a user indicates his or her age and gender. In these cases, comScore uses these cues to ascertain which member of the household is using the machine.

For the remaining half of multi-user machines that cannot be identified with session markers, other methods are employed to ascertain who the user is. Biometric markers can be used, for most adults have a unique style and rhythm to their typing, which comScore can identify. In other cases, comScore can identify usage patterns over time, such as time of day modeling or by identifying the

types of sites that users repeatedly visit. In these ways, comScore can establish a pattern of individual users.

All of these methods are validated against a subset of US panel machines, where self-identifying pop-ups occasionally asks a user 'who are you?" during a browsing session.

comScore's full methodology can be viewed here.

Email Referral Data Analysis

As mentioned above, referral data is the information that each visitor to a site brings with him/her to the site, which tells comScore where that user came from before they arrived at that site (how that user got to the site). This data is imperfect. In some cases all referral data is stripped out and, therefore, cannot be counted by comScore in any category. Referral data can also occasionally be labeled incorrectly. Email tends to be the trickiest in this regard. And visitors coming from an email to a site can occasionally be labeled as coming directly to the site. The Pew Research Center asked comScore to examine the extent to which this could occur in their data.

For an email referral to be mistaken as a direct referral in the comScore system, a visitor would most likely need to be logged into their email around the time they visited the news site. Thus, comScore took three of the most trafficked news websites (CNN.com, Huffingtonpost.com and Yahoo! U.S. News), and examined all referrals that came to those sites within a 1-hour window of a user being logged into an email session in one of the five largest email providers (Gmail, Yahoo! Mail, Outlook, AOL Email, and Xfinity WebMail). Given these parameters, comScore found that that the greatest possible false labeling at these sites could be as follows:

- 5% of sessions that were directly referred to CNN occurred within or directly after an email session
- 9% of sessions at Huffingtonpost.com
- 9% of sessions at Yahoo U.S. News

These data illustrate that 9% of the sessions on Huffingtonpost.com, for example, could have been characterized as 'direct', but in actuality were sessions coming to Huffingtonpost.com from email. Again, this number reflects a *possible* mischaracterization of a session as a direct referral rather than an email referral. Carried through that would be 5% of the 20% of direct sessions – so ultimately 1% of all sessions.

While this is not a perfect measure, it indicates that for three of the biggest news sites at least this mislabeling happens infrequently.

Methodology for This Report

The 26 news sites studied here were pulled from three lists of top news sites averaged over April, May and June of 2013. The first was comScore's top "general news sites" based on monthly unique audience. The second was comScore's list of top newspaper sites, again based on monthly unique audience. Third, was Facebook's internal list, shared with Pew Research, of most-shared Facebook pages of news outlets, based on the first two weeks of May and first two weeks of June.

The result was a list of 26 news sites, 15 of which appeared on at least two of those lists. The Pew Researcher Center's Journalism Project then asked comScore to provide several kinds of data for each website.

First, comScore identified monthly visitors coming to the site from four different paths: users directly typing in the URL or using a bookmark; users clicking on a search result; users following a link on Facebook; or users that came through a mix of other referral methods such as email, other social media and other news sites. These data reflect the number of visitors following each path. Some individuals could use more than one of these paths in a given month. Therefore, the percentages of visitors coming from each method do not add up to 100.

Second, comScore provided engagement metrics for each site overall, as well as the traffic coming to the site through each of the four pathways. There were three main measurements: average monthly minutes per visit, average monthly pages per visitor and average monthly visits per visitor.

The average monthly minutes per visit is how long a user spends, on average, viewing a given site per visit. For example, per visit (sometimes referred to as a 'session') the average visitor to abcnews.go.com spends 2 minutes and 54 seconds viewing the site before closing the page or navigating away from abcnews.com to another site.

The average pages viewed per month is one way to measure the amount of content a viewer consumes. A "page" is a single URL on a website that a user is viewing. In the case of a news outlet, this page could hold any kind of content from a text story to a video. For example, visitors to bbc.co.uk consumed 7.1 pages per visit on average per month.

Finally, average monthly visits per visitor is a measure of how many times a user returns to a site over the course of a month (both overall and then via each pathway). Overall, for example, the average visitor to Buzzfeed.com returns to the site 2.8 times over the course of a month.

comScore also provided demographic data on all of the sites. Demographic breakdowns for age, gender and household income were provided for all the sites. In addition to a site's overall demographic breakdown, comScore was also able to provide demographic breakdowns by referral type.

Separately, Pew Research asked comScore to provide statistics demonstrating traffic to the media outlets' mobile websites, based on its mobile panel. In five cases, comScore was also able to provide traffic data to a site's mobile applications, but was limited to only five because of the mobile panel's size (discussed in detail in the mobile section above.)

Appendix

Facebook Sends Younger Users

% of Referrals Coming from….

Site	Facebook	Direct	Search
Abcnews.go.com			
18-24	16%	10%	5%
25-34	29	23	13
Bbc.co.uk			
18-24	22	14	7
25-34	41	24	13
Breitbart.com			
18-24	N/A	N/A	N/A
25-34	N/A	24	N/A
Buzzfeed.com			
18-24	32	28	17
25-34	33	35	N/A
Cbsnews.com			
18-24	20	11	6
25-34	23	22	17
Chicagotribune.com			
18-24	N/A	10	8
25-34	N/A	24	17
Cnn.com			
18-24	19	10	7
25-34	34	24	15
Dailyimail.co.uk			
18-24	15	17	6
25-34	33	18	15
Examiner.com			
18-24	15	17	7
25-34	29	25	16
Forbes.com			
18-24	18	19	7
25-34	24	20	14
Foxnews.com			
18-24	15	6	7
25-34	25	19	13
Gma.yahoo.com			
18-24	13	4	N/A
25-34	N/A	16	N/A

Guardian.co.uk			
18-24	21	15	17
25-34	38	27	18
Huffingtonpost.com			
18-24	20	11	8
25-34	29	22	14
Mrconservative.com			
18-24	8	N/A	N/A
25-34	12	N/A	N/A
Nbcnews.com			
18-24	17	7	7
25-34	28	15	13
News.msn.com			
18-24	N/A	5	5
25-34	N/A	N/A	16
News.yahoo.com			
18-24	18	6	7
25-34	28	19	16
Npr.org			
18-24	18	15	4
25-34	38	25	16
Nydailynews.com			
18-24	14	11	5
25-34	30	20	13
Nytimes.com			
18-24	17	13	6
25-34	35	23	16
Theblaze.com			
18-24	11	6	N/A
25-34	19	19	N/A
Usatoday.com			
18-24	17	10	5
25-34	32	16	14
Washingtonpost.com			
18-24	20	10	6
25-34	34	24	14
Washingtontimes.com			
18-24	12	11	N/A
25-34	26	N/A	N/A
Wnd.com			
18-24	N/A	3	N/A
25-34	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: comScore

PEW RESEARCH CENTER