

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: TRENDS AND STRATEGIES OF NEWS ON
SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE U.S.: A
MULTIMETHOD ANALYSIS

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of Arts, 2019

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There is growing interest in how social media and news interact, but much of that information is not widely available because news organizations pay third party analytics services for proprietary data. This study, however, employs a multimethod design to explore the issue. First, a quantitative analysis of audience data and social media trends is based on an aggregate of metrics ([Parse.ly](https://parse.ly)) from hundreds of news organizations to identify the most popular news categories on the top social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Reddit). Second, qualitative interviews are conducted with social media strategists at four U.S. news organizations to capture emerging trends of best social media practices within newsrooms, including humanizing content, shifting coverage, training, encouraging subscriptions, third-party tools, and crowdsourcing.

TRENDS AND STRATEGIES OF NEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE U.S.:
A MULTIMETHOD ANALYSIS

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master's of Arts
2019

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
News-Finds-Me Theory.....	2
Business Model	3
Categories of News.....	4
Facebook.....	6
Adapting Social Media in the Newsroom	7
Impacting Journalistic Practices	10
Social Media as a Newsroom Role.....	15
Why People Share News	16
Defining Success	18
Research Questions	19
Chapter 2: Method.....	20
Quantitative Content Analysis.....	20
Qualitative Content Analysis.....	21
Materials & Data Sample	21
Quantitative Data Analysis.....	21
Qualitative Data Analysis.....	21
Procedure	23
Quantitative Data Analysis.....	23
Qualitative Data Analysis.....	25
Chapter 3: Results 1.....	26
RQ1:	26
Facebook.....	26
Twitter	27
Pinterest	28
LinkedIn	29
Instagram	30
RQ2:	31
Chapter 4: Discussion 1.....	32
Chapter 5: Results 2.....	35
Chapter 6: Discussion 2.....	59
Emerging Themes.....	59
Being Human.....	59
Shifting Coverage.....	62
Training	64
Customer Service Channels.....	64
Encouraging Subscriptions.....	65
Research Question 4:.....	67
Emerging Tools	68
Crowdsourcing	68
Third-Party Tools	69
Platform Trends	70
Facebook Groups.....	70

Facebook (Algorithm Changes)	72
Twitter	73
Instagram	74
Reddit	75
Other Platforms	76
The Shift to Private Messaging	77
The Power of Silicon Valley	78
Chapter 7: Research Limitations	78
Chapter 8: Directions for Future Research	81
Chapter 9: Conclusion	82
Appendices	86
Bibliography.....	108

Chapter 1: Introduction

Americans are increasingly consuming news through social media. In a Pew Research Center study, two-thirds of adults said they get at least some news from social media platforms (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Facebook is a regular news source for millennials—those between the ages 18-34 — in which more than half consume news via Facebook on a daily basis and 88 percent do so “regularly” (American Press Institute, 2015). Yet on average, millennial consumers get their news from more than three platforms: You Tube, Instagram and Reddit are the most popular, according to one study (American Press Institute, 2015). For children ages 10-18, social networking sites and family are their main sources of news (Robb, 2017). It cannot be ignored that social media platforms have recently become a constitutive part of online news distribution and consumption (Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling, 2015). As social media becomes more ubiquitous, and the next generation relies even more on these websites for information, understanding which types of stories consumers are reading on different platforms will be crucial to the news industry moving forward.

According to Pew Research Center, the prominence of a social media site in the news ecosystem depends on two factors — its overall popularity with users and the extent to which they see news on the platform. Facebook, followed by YouTube and Twitter, are the leading social media sites for news among adults (Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Although there has been uncertainty surrounding Facebook in the news industry during the last few years due to algorithm changes, it is still seen as the most significant social media platform for driving traffic, as other platforms are slowly increasing news engagement (Tinworth, 2018). Far more news is consumed on

Facebook because it has the ability to reach a large and diverse user base (Sehl, Cornia and Nielsen, 2018).

News-Finds-Me Theory

Many people are consuming news on social media through incidental exposure, meaning that they came to the platform for other purposes – usually to interact with friends – but end up reading an article that was shared on their feed. Not only does this mean people are becoming more informed, but there is an upside to this trend for individual news organizations. Readers who are consuming news on social media through incidental exposure are consistently being exposed to more news brands and perspectives (Fletcher, 2017; Sveningsson, 2015). This can help news organizations grow their audiences. However, incidental exposure of news is also resulting in the concerning effect of people thinking that do not need to seek out information.

A growing number of people share the belief that they no longer need to seek out news from legacy media sources because if an event is newsworthy enough, they will hear about it through their social circles or social networks. Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu (2017) have coined this trend as the news-finds-me perception. They define it as “as the extent to which individuals believe they can indirectly stay informed about public affairs—despite not actively following the news—through general internet use, information received from peers, and connections within online social networks. Thus, it captures people’s perceptions that news will simply ‘find’ them without seeking it” (107). Recent studies of teenagers engaging with news point to this growing trend. Researchers who studied incidental news consumption of teens in Sweden found that some study participants do not

search for news because they believe if an event is big enough it “will find them” by showing up in their social media feeds (Bergström & Jervelycke Blefrage, 2018). This was also a prevalent theme in the book *Young People and the Future of News* in which two researchers interviewed hundreds of teenagers in four urban areas on how they are consuming and sharing news. “Overwhelmingly, young people we interviewed expressed to us that if a story were important, it would find them” (Schoefield Clark & Marchi, 2016, 55).

Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, and Ardèvol-Abreu (2017) tested implications of their news-finds-me perception in a study on news seeking and political knowledge. Their study indicates that this perception is resulting in a less informed audience. Data showed that Americans who perceive that the news will find them are less likely to use traditional sources of news and less knowledgeable about civic and political affairs over time. “Perhaps most problematic, those who hold the news-finds-me perception actually believe they are staying informed when in reality this misperception is detrimental to their levels of knowledge” (118). The news-finds-me perception makes research of news on social media all that more significant to journalism and the civic sphere.

Business Model

Understanding how to engage audiences on social media and direct traffic to news websites will be crucial to the industry’s business model moving forward. More and more news organizations are adopting engagement via social media as a strategy to confront with declining revenue (Wu, 2018). Journalists can utilize platforms to accumulate brand loyalty, then convert it into traffic and revenues (Tandoc & Vos,

2015). In a study on audience engagement in U.S. newsrooms, editors said that they see engagement as “part of good business.” Therefore, 86 percent of respondents were having conversations in their newsrooms about how to make the news more social or participatory (Mayer, 2011). The battle for attention is a central challenge in journalism because its role is premised on connecting with an audience. This is the business model of private news media and the legitimacy of public service media (Cherbuni & Kleis Nelson, 2016). News organizations that don’t understand how to use analytics to sustain and grow their audience are unlikely to survive the transition into the digital age.

Categories of News

While there are many studies documenting how these social media platforms are shaping audience engagement inside newsrooms, there is little data specifically on which types of stories drive the most social referral traffic. According to a study by the Reuters Institute of Journalism that looked at audience engagement across six European countries, Facebook users tend to consume soft news that is deemed shareable on social media; whereas Twitter users are more engaged with hard and breaking news focused on politics or economics (Sehl, Cornia and Nielsen, 2018). Another study that compared content posted by *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* concurred; stating that Facebook emphasizes art and opinion pieces, and Twitter is more dedicated to the economy, technology and national news (Bastos, 2015). A third study that analyzed differences in social referral traffic found that articles on women’s issues and health bring in more traffic from Facebook, and that the network attracts “shallower” readers who are less likely to engage with in-depth

stories (Mahmood, Sismeiro, 2018). Meanwhile, Instagram drives more visual and video content (Sehl, Cornia and Nielsen, 2018), and the majority of Pinterest posts are dedicated to fashion, arts, lifestyle, and entertainment (Bastos, 2015).

NewsWhip – a social media engagement tracking firm – provides free social media research reports that cover a wide range of topics including analyses on the types of stories that drive the most referral traffic. In a study of the top shared news videos on Facebook in January 2017, researchers concluded that the majority were soft news, yet videos on politics and human rights can also perform well on the platform (NewsWhip, February 2017). Focusing on LinkedIn traffic, NewsWhip researchers concluded that business articles as well as stories on career advice and self-improvement tips were—not surprisingly—the most popular on the career networking site. However, LinkedIn has niche groups of fashion, social media, sports, tech and politics, so there are still opportunities for other types of stories to perform well. Food and interior decorating stories perform best on Pinterest, with half of the top ten publishers related to cooking (NewsWhip, February 2017). In a separate report, NewsWhip concluded that celebrity gossip and sports perform exceptionally well on Instagram (NewsWhip, August 2017). News stories on the same platform drove the most traffic if they were about human-interest topics, celebrities (particularly the British royal family), or politics. The report also identified that the most popular posts evoke emotion, and the videos with the most traffic accomplished this through human interest or animal-focused stories. According to another NewsWhip study that focused on popular Facebook content for Generation Z users, that audience—under age 23—tends to gravitate toward stories that have

conversational headlines, stories that are “light-hearted but authentic,” mention brands they are loyal to, or focus on socially conscious topics.

Facebook

A snapshot of current social media trends in journalism would be incomplete without an in-depth look at how Facebook — the most widely used social media platform with two billion active monthly users — has recently impacted the industry. In January 2018, Facebook disrupted newsrooms’ social media strategies by altering its algorithms to prioritize friends’ posts in newsfeeds over posts from brands or publications. The reason behind the change was to maximize “meaningful interactions” on Facebook instead of “passive content” like videos and articles, according to Facebook’s Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg (Issac, 2018). Taking it a step further, Facebook also chose to start prioritizing local news in users’ feeds. Later in the same month, Facebook rolled out another update to prioritize news stories that only come from “trusted sources” which was determined by user surveys. These changes were in part a response to the criticism that the network received for prioritizing and spreading misleading news that may have influenced the 2016 presidential election in the United States, as well as incited violence in other countries. Based on various conversations with academics in the industry during 2018, many media outlets reduced the amount of time and resources spent on strategizing Facebook posts because there was no clear picture as to how audiences would be engaging with their content. However, the visibility of the updates was still dependent on how readers reacted to them online (Benestad Hågvar, 2019).

One year after the triple algorithm change that shook “up the world of social publishing” (2019, 2), NewsWhip published a study analyzing the most successful

news content on Facebook. The researchers first compared engagement totals of January through March in 2017, 2018 and 2019. They found that engagements on Facebook dropped significantly in 2018, likely due to the algorithm changes, but completely recovered by 2019, surpassing 2017's numbers. On average, 2019's content garnered 10 percent more engagements than in 2017, and 50 percent more compared to 2018. Since many of the shares came from non-public Facebook pages, NewsWhip believes that Facebook's friends and family focus did contribute to an increase of users reading articles shared by their friends, compared to posts published by news organizations. Successful posts among media outlets varied based on metric type, including overall engagement, highest proportion of comments, and highest proportion of shares. In an analysis of the top 100 stories on Facebook by genre for the three first months of 2019, 36 percent were political stories and 17 percent were defined as soft or viral news, described as "normally something quirky involving parenting or animal." Death announcements and obituaries made up 11 percent of the stories with the highest engagement, science stories came in at 10 percent, hard/general news at eight percent, and economic stories made up six percent.

Adapting Social Media in the Newsroom

In addition to understanding which news stories are generating the most engagement on social media, it is crucial to understand how these new platforms are impacting newsrooms. There is some criticism in previous research that journalists tend to rely on traditional norms and practices within newsrooms instead of evolving with new technologies. They will adopt new communication tools, such as blogs and social media, just to normalize and adapt them to fit their existing norms and routines

(Tandoc & Vos, 2015). One study that analyzed social media policies at seven international newsrooms noted that news organizations are relying on editorial guidelines and policies meant for other forms of traditional journalism, with social media viewed as an “add-on” rather than a replacement for traditional news dissemination (Bloom, Cleary & North, 2016). For example, some previous research has found that journalists tend to use Twitter for one-way communication only, when the platform provides other ways to connect with audiences. This research suggested that Twitter is “simply a new airwave” (Bloom, Cleary & North, 2016). Previous research has also shown that journalists are hesitant to incorporate social media into their routines because of drawbacks like the time commitment of maintaining a social media presence, issues around privacy, and untrustworthy sources (Sacco & Bossio, 2017).

Even though it has been widely recognized as a way to increase engagement and reduce news production cost, the integration of social media in newsrooms ranges at various levels (Wu, 2018). Prior research indicates that journalists at elite media organizations tend to stick to traditional journalistic norms, whereas newer media start-ups are more likely to embrace innovative tools. Coordinating the time of day that newsrooms publish content on social media is a sign of whether or not editors are effectively adapting today’s audience engagement practices into the newsroom. Analytics provide peak times of when audiences are online to maximize views. Newsrooms who “launch things at midnight is a hangover from a legacy/print experience” (Cherbuni & Kleis Nelson, 2016, 14). How a journalist tweets about a story is a strong indicator as to how he or she is adapting the platform into their work. The traditional journalist will post the link to the story once it has been published and

nothing else. Meanwhile, other journalists will tweet about the story before the article is ready, and then again with the link to the published article (Tandoc & Vos, 2015). Live tweeting at events is another way that adaptive journalists utilize the platform. These practices are actually a form of old school journalism—publishing information first—adapted into social media (Tandoc & Vos, 2015).

The relationship between journalists' age and their adaption of social media tools is another aspect that has been studied by media scholars. Journalists of different ages have different expectations of social media engagement, which may also influence how much they integrate the tools into their routines (Wu, 2018). Younger journalists favored Twitter according to one study, while older journalists embraced Facebook, and middle-aged journalists adopted both Facebook and Twitter. The more that middle-aged journalists interacted on Twitter, the more they tended to have a positive attitude toward social media platforms. Yet the opposite was true for both younger and older journalists, who tended to have a negative attitude after increased engagement. Journalists from all three age groups tended to hold a negative attitude toward social media if they engaged more on Facebook. Based on these results, the researcher suggests that newsrooms should create a culture that favors Twitter more than Facebook. His research also indicates that the digital age divide among journalists may be in their 50s instead of their 30s (Wu, 2018).

Researchers who studied social media within German newsrooms found three factors that impact how an organization adapts and reacts to an innovation such as social media: the organization's available resources, its degree of role specialization in the innovation, and clear strategies for handling the innovation (Neuberger, Nuernbergk & Langenohl, 2018). Elsewhere, Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012)

surveyed journalists in four European countries and concluded that media sector and size of organization are significantly affect journalists' use and views about social media. Meanwhile, a study on Australian newsrooms found that the perception of different editorial and management roles, and the relationships between people in those positions, influenced the success of social media newsroom integration (Sacco & Bossio, 2017). The majority of previous research on social media in newsrooms has been in Europe and elsewhere; there is lack of data on how it is impacting routines and practices in U.S. newsrooms. Studies from other geographical locations are still relevant; however, potential cultural and language differences must be taken into consideration since journalism and social media is practiced and consumed differently around the world. As more newsrooms further integrate social media into their routines, more research will be needed on how it is impacting journalists' roles and practices, especially in the U.S.

Impacting Journalistic Practices

While social media resources are primarily used for promotional and audience tracking purposes (Bloom, Cleary & North, 2016), there are a variety emerging ways that newsrooms are utilizing social media as a journalistic tool. Journalists are increasingly turning to social media platforms to research topics, curate information, analyze stories, engage in dialogue with their readers, identify sources, interview eyewitnesses, and share their experiences, thoughts and opinions with their audience (Bae Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggens & Følstad, 2015). Furthermore, journalists who are actively integrating social media into their work have opened new avenues for audience feedback that can potentially influence the

news construction process (Tandoc & Vos, 2015). After a story is published, they can utilize platforms to clear up misconceptions, answer questions, and/or offer follow-up reporting (May, 2011). This process contributes to a never-ending news cycle in a diminishing linear order, in which audience feedback continuously leads to new stories (Neuberger, Nuernbergk & Langenohl, 2018). Interacting with the audience directly by liking and responding to comments is a new way for journalists to increase engagement and audience loyalty. “But they also repurpose old, if not institute new, routines to accommodate these new information technologies and platforms” (Tandoc & Vos, 2015, 954). Examples of journalistic practices that are evolving with social media include framing, agenda setting, newsgathering, verification, gatekeeping, and crowdsourcing.

Previous research has shown that the trending sections on Twitter and Facebook—a tool that aggregates what is being shared and posted about the most in real time—influences agenda setting and the framing of stories. Journalists can immediately see what is trending then shape their messages and story pitches accordingly. They may use this to decide which stories to stick with and develop, as well as when to move on because the audience is not responding (Bloom, Cleary & North, 2016). This could improve reader engagement because the organization is able to better deliver a product that the audience is interested in. However, some scholars worry that “the instant gratification of being able to track the reach of a social media message may cloud the more germane issue of the news value and how it is framed for the audience” (Bloom, Cleary & North, 2016, 353). Journalists must be careful not to become too dependent on covering stories based only on audience metrics. They have an obligation to their role as a watchdog, and to cover stories that their

audience may not yet be aware of. “Newsrooms need to strike a balance between news that is understood to be important, and news that answers the wishes of their increasingly interactive and demanding readers” (Bastos, 2015, 321). Further research is necessary to better understand how the relationship between news coverage and trending stories is influence framing and agenda setting in today’s news cycle.

Although social media has provided journalists with more content and story ideas to work with, it has also made the processes of gathering and verifying information more difficult. The greatest challenge of social media, according to a study of European newsrooms, is to monitor and identify potentially interesting stories in the flood of incoming tweets to fully reap the benefits of underexploited news and data sources. (Bae Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggens & Følstad, 2015). Correctly verifying this information should be the second greatest challenge, especially for those who are publishing breaking news. The “era of fake news” has brought an endless amount of doctored photos and videos, as well as misleading and incorrect news stories. This has lead to violence in other countries and debatably impacted the 2016 election in the United States.

A study that interviewed 24 European journalists about verification practices on social media identified five main approaches to handling the process, yet noted that there are no guided or universal strategies for verification. 1) Identifying trusted sources, 2) finding eyewitness sources, 3) using social media as a news tip, but then following up with traditional journalistic methods, 4) verifying the authenticity and sources of photos and videos, and 5) using disclaimers if something cannot be fully verified, were the key takeaways from the study (Bae Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggens & Følstad, 2015). Improving the verification process of

news through social media will be a continuous challenge for the field. The development of the cost–benefit ratio of speed and verification skills will be a key question in coming years (Bae Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggens & Følstad, 2015).

The gatekeeping of information is another journalistic role that is shifting due to social media. Platforms have destabilized the gatekeeping role of professional journalists while simultaneously expanding the role of citizen journalism. However, this shift has brought about new gatekeeping tasks for journalists, such as facilitating conversation (Tandoc & Vos, 2015). One way journalists have stepped into this position is by creating a hashtag to correspond with a local event, or for their local audience to respond to a national or societal issue. Starting that conversation is one way for journalists to stay in touch with a community, and the conversation itself is considered a form of journalism (May, 2011). Often a story can be created by compiling the most significant posts with that hashtag. For example, for the ninth anniversary of 9/11, *The Washington Post* created a #wherewereyou hashtag and then told a collective of story of where people were when they first heard about the terrorist attack (May, 2011). Smaller media outlets applying this strategy to cover local snow storms appeared in more than one study. Journalists asked their audience to share the height and photos of snow in their backyards, and then quickly created a story of how a blizzard impacted that area.

This snow story approach is also an example of crowdsourcing, defined as the process of obtaining information and content from people online. Crowdsourcing has recently become a buzzword in journalism (Tandoc & Vos, 2015). Now audiences can provide journalists with content through social media— including tips, opinions,

photos, videos, quotes and story ideas—generating a new channel of communication and invaluable resources. They have “long asserted journalistic autonomy by keeping audiences at arms’ length, but now embrace interaction with audiences as vital to crafting news” (Tandoc & Vos, 2015, 958). Not only can journalists utilize social media to connect with engaged audience members as sources of information, but they can also search for sources that might be unusually hard to find. For example, social media widens the spectrum of sources like non-elitest sources, including those who cannot develop large-scale PR activities to draw attention to themselves (Neuberger, Nuernbergk & Langenohl, 2018; Bae Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggens & Følstad, 2015).

Readers use social media to reach out to newsrooms directly as well. Audience members pointing out corrections in articles through social media has also helped to enhance products (Neuberger, Nuernbergk & Langenohl, 2018). In addition, social media has opened a customer service channel for subscribers to complain about not receiving a print copy, or problems with the website. In one newsroom, a social media manager even created positions to monitor the news organization’s social media accounts for customer complaints (Tandoc & Vos, 2015).

Social media has brought an abundance of real time information to journalists’ fingertips that can help them decide which stories to cover and how to frame them. Platforms have also given journalists a new channel to crowdsource content and gather information, which in turn has made the verification process more challenging. The paradigm shift of internet-based news is requiring journalists to rethink long-held practices and beliefs (May, 2011). Further research is needed on how the social media

sphere impacts newsrooms as journalists evolve their practices to keep up with new technologies.

Social Media as a Newsroom Role

The responsibility of social media in the newsroom varies widely as organizations figure out how to best adapt the technologies into their day to day work. Some outlets find it necessary to appoint one or more social media editors, while others disperse the responsibilities throughout the newsroom because they believe that everyone should be a part of the process (Ananny, 2014). Many news organizations began hiring social media editors to manage Facebook and Twitter accounts around 2009, according to previous studies. The effectiveness of the position can be evaluated by the organization's subscriber base and amount of traffic directed to the website from social media channels (Ju, Ho Jeong & Chyi, 2014). A study that interviewed 24 journalists in a variety of European countries found that at some organizations, specialized journalists hold the titles of "social media journalists" or "social media editors;" while in other newsrooms, groups of people gather around social media desks to collaborate (Bae Brandtzaeg, Lüders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggens & Følstad, 2015).

A recent study on more than 100 German news organizations found two main approaches for integrating social media into newsrooms. The editorial offices either rely on a stronger specialization in the team with corresponding positions, or see social media as a basic task for everyone in the department (Neuberger, Nuernbergk & Langenohl, 2018). Another study — that analyzed three media organizations in three separate countries undergoing newsroom convergence — found differences in how staff were being trained to use social media with different results. The German

news organization required participation in social media seminars, but only some journalists used it in their work. The organization also appointed two social media editors. Meanwhile, the organizations in Austria and Spain offered optional courses in social media and blogging. Social media became a common practice for all journalists in the Spanish newsroom. In the Austrian newsroom, the editor-in-chief was tasked with developing new forms of user–platform interaction (Garcia-Aviles, Kaltenbrunner & Meier, 2014).

Since the use of social media in newsrooms has been rapidly increasing, it appears that almost every U.S. news organization have some kind of social media position on their digital team in 2019, but there is not any up-to-date literature to back this up. There is currently no organization or conference held for social media editors, as there are for science writers, copy editors and a variety of other specialized journalists in the U.S.. However, an organization may form in the future as social media positions at media outlets become increasingly common.

Why People Share News

News sharing can be understood as an inherent human activity in which digital technology has sped up the process (Kalsnes & Olaf Larson, 2018). Since one of the goals of posting news on social media is to generate retweets and shares — potentially generating more revenue — journalists must take into consideration how the audience may be influenced to share their post. They need to consider the shareworthiness of the stories along with their newsworthiness (Benestad Hågvar, 2019).

Impressing social media followers and friends is large component of why people have profiles, and sharing stories on these platforms becomes integrated into

their public personae. “By sharing heartfelt stories or profound commentary on social media, users strive to show the best sides of themselves—to come across as concerned, engaged citizens to friends, family and acquaintances” (Kalsnes & Olaf Larson, 2018, 1683). Previous research has also shown that individuals who typically share news may be early adopters of new technologies, have a rich media diet, perceive themselves as opinion leaders, already have a positive attitude toward news sharing, and/or are looking to gain social status. Their motivations can be divided into self-serving motives, altruistic motives, and social motives (Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling, 2015). However, more research is needed to explain why people choose to share specific stories to help organizations better understand how to further facilitate this process. In the long run, this may also impact the journalistic practices of framing and agenda setting. Yet it would be valuable to further study people who do not share news or refuse to do so, as well as study news items that are not as successfully shared, to truly understand the information flow in social media spheres (Kümpel, Karnowski & Keyling, 2015).

Several studies have shown that news articles that express or invoke strong emotions, whether positive or negative, will spread more (Kalsnes & Olaf Larson, 2018; Benestad Hågvar, 2019; NewsWhip, 2019). A study on Facebook in Norway concluded four key strategies that lead to increased audience engagement on the platform: adding emojis, posing a question, requesting for users to tag or share content and expressing an emotion (Benestad Hågvar, 2019). Encouraging journalists to include emotions in a post may appear to go against the traditional journalistic norm of objectivity. However, “we might also argue that the opposite is true,” says the researcher. “By being open about their intentions, journalists appear more

transparent in social media, thus strengthening their ethos” (Benestad Hågvar, 2019, 18). Further research is needed to understand the implications of framing news with emotion on social media.

Defining Success

Similar to marketing or political campaigns, social media is measured and tracked within news organizations to substantiate the message’s effectiveness (Bloom, Cleary & North, 2016). But one of the biggest current challenges within the field is that there is not one clear industry standard or metric to gauge effectiveness for a social media post. Analytics companies have created their own algorithms that combine metrics like page views, amount of time spent on the page, shares etc., into a numerical score that allows the success of different stories to be compared. Moreover, defining success with analytics becomes even more difficult when there is no universal standard for engagement either. As BuzzFeed founder Jonah Peretti is known for saying: there is no “god metric” for journalism (Sobel Fitts, 2015). The most agreed on, yet ambiguous, definition of engagement is “any meaningful exchange” between journalists and their audience.

One researcher who interviewed 29 journalists working on audience engagement in the U.S. found that the majority of them had not been asked to demonstrate proof of success, and many had no idea how to define it. Study participants said they were developing a culture of trial and error in their newsrooms, and adjusting practices to their idea of success. However, the researcher noted in 2011 that those days would not last, especially as newsroom resources decline (May, 2011).

In a qualitative study of audience engagement in 30 newsrooms in North America and Europe, researchers at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism concluded that there is no right way to do analytics. Each organization must develop strategies that are tailored to its own priorities, goals and competition. Researchers advise organizations to combine the right set of tools, an organizational structure that incorporates the expertise to use those tools, and a newsroom culture that embraces data-informed decision-making. “Falling short in any one of these areas undermines an organization’s analytics capability” (Cherbuni & Kleis Nelson, 2016, 7). However, even “the most sophisticated audience teams are keenly aware that their analytics are not perfect; the data never tell the full story, and quantitative analysis always has to be supplemented by editorial expertise and qualitative judgement” (Cherbuni & Kleis Nelson, 2016, 7). Since newsrooms have different sized audiences on various platforms, and utilize different third-party tools to analyze metrics, it is unlikely that there will be any uniform definition of success and engagement in the near future.

Research Questions

Based on the previous information and research, four research questions in this study include:

RQ1: *Which categories of news stories are accessed the most on social networks?*

RQ2: *Are certain categories of news accessed more consistently than others on social networks over time?*

RQ3: *How has social media impacted U.S. newsrooms?*

and

RQ4: *Do U.S. newsrooms’ social media strategies align with nationwide trends of news accessed on social networks?*

A multimethod design (analytics analysis and interviews) will be used to pursue the answers to these questions.

Chapter 2: Method

This multimethod study includes a quantitative content analysis of nationwide trends of news access on social media platforms, in addition to qualitative interviews with industry experts on social media strategies within newsrooms.

Quantitative Content Analysis

This study was based in part on the data available through Parse.ly, a digital media analytics company that tracks news analytics for hundreds of websites in the U.S. The content analysis is based on which categories of news generate the most page views on social media platforms. A page view is counted when a user clicks the link to an article. The study analyzed the top five social media sites that news is consumed on the most in the U.S at the time of data collection, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, and Reddit. Three months of data from Parse.ly was downloaded to form a comprehensive analysis of news traffic on these platforms. The analysis compared categories which include but are not excluded to: law, government & politics; health & fitness; sports; business; food & drink; science; technology & computing; news (media outlets); shopping; style & fashion; education; and arts & entertainment. Overall, the study compared if specific categories of news are consistently popular between three-week time increments on each platform. The top topics were also analyzed to provide context to the discussion.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Four audience engagement team experts were interviewed on social media strategy from various media organizations. The media outlets that were selected publish content on multiple topics so that their strategies could be compared with the quantitative analysis in this study.

Materials & Data Sample

Quantitative Data Analysis

The data sample is made up of the top topics and top categories of the five top social media referrals at the time of data collection. Parse.ly's data sample includes the top 20 categories for each platform, how many page views there were for each category, and the number of articles that contributed to those page views. The available data on the top 50 topics also includes the number of page views and number of articles viewed. The number of page views analyzed over the three-month time span was more than 1,219,000,000.

Qualitative Data Analysis

A total four media organizations participated in this study. Three of the participants work for publishers in positions where they advise between 40 and hundreds of newsrooms on digital strategy. Two participants hold the job title of Director of Digital Audience Engagement; while the other two are the Social Media Digital Marketing Lead and Senior Content Editor at their respective organizations. All of the participants have bachelor's degrees in journalism or a related field, and

one participant also has a master's degree. Participants' experience working on social media strategy in the industry ranged from seven to ten years. All of the strategists interviewed said that their organizations mainly post content to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Three actively utilize Reddit, and two discussed YouTube. LinkedIn, Snapchat and Nextdoor were mentioned by one organization each. The phone interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour, and covered 14 questions on social media strategy. Specifically, the questions asked:

- 1) How would you describe the culture surrounding analytics in your newsroom?
- 2) What do you consider to be most important to your organization's social media strategies?
- 3) When do you consider a social media post to be successful?
- 4) Have you found that particular categories of news tend to be more successful on certain social platforms?
- 5) If your team strategizes about pushing specific content on different social media platforms, what are those strategies?
- 6) Can you recall an example of when your team shifted its strategy based on analytical data and why? If so, was the shift in strategy successful?
- 7) When else would you potentially shift your strategy based on analytical data?
- 8) What are the biggest challenges for your audience engagement team when it comes to pushing content on social media?
- 9) Can you think of a specific tweet or post that performed particularly well in the past year? Why do you think it was so successful?

- 10) Facebook has undergone multiple algorithm changes within the last year which has been challenging for many newsrooms. How has your team handled those changes?
- 11) Does someone on your team regularly read social media comments on news stories to gather audience feedback? Why or why not?
- 12) Do you use social media as a tool to crowdsource content from your audience? If so, in what ways?
- 13) Describe any other ways in which your news organization interacts with its followers on social media.
- 14) What is your outlook on the future role of social media platforms in news dissemination?

Procedure

Quantitative Data Analysis

Metrics provided by Parse.ly were collected for three months, spanning six weeks before and six weeks after the 2018 midterm election on November 6. These time periods are broken down into four separate three-week increments from: September 25 - October 15; October 17 - November 5; November 6 - November 26; and November 27 - December 17. This time span was chosen based on Parse.ly's time constraints of collecting data. However, this design allowed the researcher to gauge whether the midterm elections influenced the popularity of political stories on social media platforms.

Data was collected through Parse.ly's concurrents login page. To verify that Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Instagram were still the top five social

media traffic sources in the U.S. at the time of data collection, the first query search was of social media as a traffic source with the applied date range. Then the top categories and top topics were downloaded individually as queries for each of the five platforms into Excel spreadsheets. During the fourth time period, Reddit surpassed Instagram as the fifth most popular platform based on number of page views. Therefore, data was collected for six platforms during the fourth period.

The first part of the analysis focuses on the top five categories of news for each platform. This data is displayed in tables excluding subcategories of news. Parse.ly compiles their data with more specific subcategories of their main categories. For example, law, government & politics has subcategories of law, government & politics>legal issues and law, government & politics>politics. Food & drink has subcategories of food & drink > desserts & baking in addition to food & drink>cocktails & beer. These subcategories were removed from the tables to provide a clearer picture of the top five overall categories of news for each platform. These main categories were ranked 1-5 by the number of page views they received for each time period.

Then, the data was analyzed by percentages displayed in pie charts. Because removing subcategories would have thrown off the calculations of the percentages, they were kept for this part of the analysis. Moreover, the subcategories provide an alternative and more specific answer as to which categories of news are most frequently consumed on each platform. In this section, the top five categories and subcategories for each platform were analyzed first for comparison. Then, an analysis of all 20 categories and subcategories with the bottom 15 totaled together as “other” were calculated for each time period on each platform. This second analysis provides

a larger overview as to how the top categories compare to the rest of the news consumed on each platform. This resulted in two pie charts for each platform and time period. To review the charts, see the Appendix section.

Qualitative Data Analysis

One of the main focuses of this study was to compare news categories on various social media platforms; therefore, only media organizations that have a variety of sections were asked to participate in this study. The researcher had connections to media organizations in the Washington D.C. area as a result of academic work, so it was logical that those professionals were first contacted for the study. Two interviews were secured through those connections. The researcher sent dozens of emails and LinkedIn messages to a variety of media organizations all over the country seeking participants for the study. The other two interviews were secured through those methods.

Audience engagement experts were found on LinkedIn by searching the term “audience engagement.” LinkedIn’s algorithm organizes results by who you have shared connections with. Because of the researcher’s professional work in journalism, and that she currently attends a well-known journalism school, the majority of search results were people who worked at news organizations with those shared connections. A total of 20 messages were sent through LinkedIn to recruit audience engagement professionals for the study. Four responded and ultimately just one was interviewed.

An email with a sample of the interview questions were distributed to study participants ahead of time. Some of the questions required them to recall specific

instances of strategies or examples of social media posts, so it was reasonable to give participants more time to form sufficient answers.

Chapter 3: Results 1

QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSES

RQ1:

Which categories of news stories are accessed the most on social networks?

Stories on law, government & politics and health & fitness generated the most views on Facebook; law, government & politics and sports do the best on Twitter; food & drink and style & fashion dominate Pinterest; business and technology & computing drive the most traffic on LinkedIn; and style & fashion and health & fitness stories perform a little better on Instagram. Based on the data collected in the fourth time period alone, stories on law, government & politics and technology & computing are clicked most frequently on Reddit.

Facebook

Table 1. Rankings of news categories by popularity over time on Facebook

	Period 1 Sept 25 – Oct 15	Period 2 Oct 17 – Nov 5	Period 3 Nov 6 – Nov 26	Period 4 Nov 27 – Dec 17
1	Law, Gov't & Politics	Law, Gov't & Politics	Law, Gov't & Politics	Law, Gov't & Politics
2	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness
3	Sports	Food & Drink	News (media outlets)	Food & Drink
4	Food & Drink	Sports	Food & Drink	Business
5	Business	News (media outlets)	Business	Science

Articles on law, government & politics by far generated the most views on Facebook than any other category of news—between 82 and 100 million views during each three-week time period. These stories made up over one-third of the page views out of Facebook’s total 20 categories during each time period. Health & fitness is the second most popular category on the platform, generating about a third of the number of views as political stories, ranging between 25 and 30 million views per time period. Compared to all of the other categories of news on Facebook, health & fitness consistently made up at least 10 percent of the page views. Stories on sports, food & drink, business and the news media also do well on Facebook, generating between 9 and 15 million views each.

Twitter

Table 2. Rankings of categories by popularity over time on Twitter

	Period 1 Sept 25 – Oct 15	Period 2 Oct 17 – Nov 5	Period 3 Nov 6 – Nov 26	Period 4 Nov 27 – Dec 17
1	Law, Gov’t & Politics	Law, Gov’t & Politics	Law, Gov’t & Politics	Law, Gov’t & Politics
2	Sports	Sports	Sports	Sports
3	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness	News (media outlets)	Health & Fitness
4	News (media outlets)	News (media outlets)	Health & Fitness	Business
5	Business	Business	Science	News (media outlets)

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Twitter, the second most popular social media platform for news, also drives the most traffic to law, government & politics stories. This category made up over one-third of the page views during each time period. However, it reached 15 million

views during the first time period, compared to nearly 13 million views in the second, third and fourth time periods, which was likely due to the Kavanaugh hearings leading the news cycle at the beginning of this study. Sport stories were the second most consumed category of news on Twitter, generating a little over a million views per week on average, consistently making up 10 percent of the overall page views on the platform. Health & fitness articles, in addition to stories about news outlets, each drove between 2 and 2.5 million views every three weeks on Twitter.

Pinterest

Table 3. Rankings of categories by popularity over time on Pinterest

	Period 1 Sept 25 – Oct 15	Period 2 Oct 17 – Nov 5	Period 3 Nov 6 – Nov 26	Period 4 Nov 27 – Dec 17
1	Food & Drink	Food & Drink	Food & Drink	Food & Drink
2	Style & Fashion	Style & Fashion	Style & Fashion	Style & Fashion
3	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness
4	Arts & Entertainment	Arts & Entertainment	Arts & Entertainment	Arts & Entertainment
5	Society>Weddings	Society>Weddings	Society>Weddings	Business

Pinterest users are very focused on food & drink, style & fashion and health & fitness articles. Nearly all of the top 20 categories of news on Pinterest were a subcategory of one of those three categories. Yet food & drink and its subcategories lead in clicks, consistently generating more than one-half of all of Pinterest's page views. More specifically, food & drink, and its subcategory of desserts & baking,

made up more than 50 percent of page views in the first two time periods, 68 percent during the third period, and 65 percent during the fourth. To provide perspective on how much traffic Pinterest drives compared to other platforms, all 20 categories combined generated between 5 and 6 million views per time period.

LinkedIn

Table 4. Rankings of categories by popularity over time on LinkedIn

	Period 1 Sept 25 – Oct 15	Period 2 Oct 17 – Nov 5	Period 3 Nov 6 – Nov 26	Period 4 Nov 27 – Dec 17
1	Business	Business	Business	Business
2	Technology & Computing	Technology & Computing	Technology & Computing	Technology & Computing
3	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness
4	Law, Gov't & Politics	Law, Gov't & Politics	Education	Law, Gov't & Politics
5	Education	Education	Law, Gov't & Politics	Education

Business stories by far outdid any other category of news on LinkedIn. It was the only category to consistently generate over a million views per time period on the professional networking site, which translated into consistently making up one-fourth of the overall page views. However, technology & computing stories generated at least half a million views over each three-week time period. Health & fitness, law government & politics, and education stories also drove traffic on the social network.

Instagram

Table 5. Rankings of categories by popularity over time on Instagram

	Period 1 Sept 25 – Oct 15	Period 2 Oct 17 – Nov 5	Period 3 Nov 6 – Nov 26	Period 4 Nov 27 – Dec 17
1	Health & Fitness	Style & Fashion	Style & Fashion	Style & Fashion
2	Sports	Technology & Computing	Health & Fitness	Health & Fitness
3	Style & Fashion	Business	Shopping	Society > Weddings
4	Food & Drink	Health & Fitness	Technology & Computing	Business
5	Society>Weddings	Shopping	Food & Drink	Food & Drink

Two of the same categories that drove views on Pinterest were also the most popular on Instagram—style & fashion and health & fitness. Both platforms place more emphasis on image over text, which is likely why these categories of news tend to drive more traffic. Both platforms also generated close to the same number of views every three weeks. The page views on Instagram’s top 20 categories combined were less than 5 million during each time period. However, during the final period of data collection, Reddit surpassed Instagram in page views, becoming the fifth most utilized social media platform for news consumption.

RQ2:

Are certain categories of news accessed more consistently than others on social networks over time?

The top four social media platforms consistently had the same top two categories of news generate the most page views, with Instagram as the exception. LinkedIn and Pinterest users proved to be the most consistent in their category of news choice compared to other platforms. With one exception for each platform, LinkedIn and Pinterest had the same top five categories for each time period. Pinterest's categories held the exact same spots over the study when its subcategories were removed from the data for clarity. Furthermore, the subcategories of news on Pinterest held the same order in reference to each other with desserts & baking, vegetarian, and cocktails & beer respectively driving the most views as subcategories of food & drink.

LinkedIn was the second most consistent social media platform by news category. Business, technology & computing, and health & fitness respectively received the most views across all four time periods. In the third time period, articles on education drove slightly more traffic than law, government & politics. Yet based on the data available, including the top 50 topics on LinkedIn during the study, it is unclear if LinkedIn users were reading about the Kavanaugh hearings and midterm elections.

Law, government & politics was consistently the top news category by far for Facebook and Twitter, showing that those topics drive the news cycle even on social media. Each of these platforms' second most popular categories were also consistent over the course of the study—with Facebook driving views to health & fitness articles

and Twitter connecting users to sports stories. Articles on sports, media outlets and business consistently placed third, fourth and fifth on Facebook, just in various orders each time period. On Twitter, health & fitness, news, and business categories were respectively consistent during the first six weeks of the study. Yet science stories slightly outdid business in the third period, with trending topics showing a focus on stories about outer space.

Traffic on Instagram was the least consistent over the twelve-week study. Style & fashion stories were the most popular during the second and third time periods, and health & fitness always made at least the top four categories. But besides those consistencies, there was no pattern to page views generated from Instagram. These inconsistencies were likely due to Instagram having a smaller amount of traffic compared to other platforms. Each time period, the “other” category calculated for comparison made up over 50 percent of its page views.

Chapter 4: Discussion 1

QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALAYSES

One of the biggest takeaways of this study is that law, government & politics stories by far generate the most traffic on social media because they make up the most page views on the top two platforms — Facebook and Twitter. The current news cycle tends to focus heavily on stories related to President Donald Trump, which is also playing out in the social media sphere. “Donald Trump” was the top topic across social media for three of the four time periods. On average, his name generates 24 million article views from social media clicks every three weeks. However, during the first time period in September, articles on Brett Kavanaugh generated 16 million more clicks on social media than the president — totaling 38 million. Other topics

related to the Kavanaugh hearings were also very popular during that period, including the Supreme Court, Christine Blasey Ford, the FBI, and the United States Senate. This high-profile news event may have inflated the number of views for law, government & politics stories. The midterm elections appear to have had the same effect. During the second and third time periods which were immediately before and after election day, the Democratic and Republican parties were the second and third top topics on all of social media after the president. In contrast, the political parties were four to five spots below Donald Trump during the first and last time periods.

After law, government & politics, sports was by far the most consumed type of news story on Twitter. Yet out of the top 50 topics on Twitter during each time period, only a few sport topics ever made the list—consisting of the word quarterback, the Boston Red Sox and the Houston Astros. Those teams played against each other during the MLB playoffs; however, it was odd that the Los Angeles Dodgers—who opposed the Red Sox in the World Series during the second time period—did not make Parse.ly's list of top topics. It is not clear why this occurred; perhaps Dodgers fans are less engaged on Twitter compared to Astros fans. This lack of sport topics further demonstrates how articles on law, government & politics dominate the news cycle on social media.

Pinterest users primarily used the platform to access articles on food & drink. That category made up half of its page views in the first two time periods, then increased up to two-thirds of its page views in the two latter time periods. This jump was likely due to Thanksgiving and December holidays. Therefore, it is not surprising that nearly all of the top 50 topics on Pinterest were terms related to food and cooking across all four time periods. The exceptions were hairstyle, ponytail, cosmetics,

Catherine the Duchess of Cambridge, Santa Claus, Cruella De Vil, and terms related to sex.

Big companies like Amazon, Google, Facebook, IBM, Microsoft, Uber and Apple were consistently the top topics for business stories accessed on LinkedIn. However, there were many vague terms that also made LinkedIn's lists of top topics. Words like leadership and problem solving were more concrete, but there were also abstract terms such as thought, reason and question. Other categories of news that were popular on LinkedIn include technology & computing, health & fitness, law, government & politics, and education.

Since Instagram was the most inconsistent platform for categories of news, it made sense that its top topics were the most diverse. Yet unlike other platforms, several celebrities' names were among the most clicked topics on Instagram, including singers like Ariana Grande and Kanye West, and royal celebrities like Prince Harry and his wife Meghan Markle. Some political figures also made the lists: Michelle Obama, Hilary Clinton, Maxine Waters, George W. Bush, George H.W. Bush, and Brett Kavanaugh. Terms related to shopping, social media and food generated page views as well. The subcategory of society < weddings appeared more than once on both Pinterest's and Instagram's top categories. This trend indicates a niche audience for wedding coverage.

This study focused on the five social media platforms that generate the most page views according to Parse.ly. News was most consistently accessed on the same five networks — except for the fourth time period when Reddit generated about 687,000 more page views compared to Instagram. While Reddit's page views stayed fairly consistent over the course of the study — fluctuating between 3.8 and 4.9

million — Instagram’s article views steadily declined. In period one, the platform generated nearly eight million page views in total, yet dropped to less than half of that in period four. All six platforms declined in traffic over the three-month time period. It is unclear if this trend is specific to the end of 2018 or part of a bigger overall decline in social referral traffic.

The only data on categories and topics for Reddit were collected during the fourth period. Law, government & politics with its subcategories were by far the most popular categories of news on the platform. Articles on technology & computing, media outlets, business, and health & fitness followed in page views. Like other platforms in which law, government & politics articles were most read, the top topics were Donald Trump, and the two political parties. Michael Cohen, Robert Mueller and the special counsel investigation were also popular topics for Reddit, Facebook and Twitter during the fourth time period, which is likely a result of the focus of the news cycle. Because data for Reddit had not previously been collected, it is not clear if its top categories and topics are consistent.

Chapter 5: Results 2

QUALTATIVE INTERVIEWS

RQ3: *How has social media impacted U.S. newsrooms?*

RQ4: *Do U.S. newsrooms’ social media strategies align with nationwide trends of news accessed on social networks?*

Digital strategists who were interviewed for this study work at the following media organizations. Some organizations chose to stay anonymous, so they will be referred to as Organization A,B,C and D based on the following descriptions:

Organization A: *The Virginian-Pilot*, the largest local newspaper in Virginia, with 2 million monthly users

Organization B: one of the five largest publishers in the United States with over 600 local publications around the country attracting 50 million monthly unique visitors

Organization C: a nonprofit, international news service based in Washington D.C. with wires in more than 40 languages

Organization D: USA Today Network, based in Virginia, oversees more than 100 local newspapers around the country

Participant answers on social media strategy have been edited down for clarity. Some questions were skipped during the interviews because of limited time, the question may not have been applicable to the organization, or their answer overlapped with their answer to another question. Two digital strategist representatives from Organization A participated in the interview. If both strategists supplied sufficient but different answers to a question, they are referred to by Strategist 1 and 2. Researcher notes are included in italics to provide clarity.

Q1: How would you describe the culture surrounding analytics in your newsroom?

Organization A: Everyone in the newsroom has access to the platform so they can see whatever they want to – how certain stories are doing, how their own stories are doing, what stories are most popular among subscribers, what stories are most popular with local users in Hampton Road, and what stories are most popular from social media. It's very open – is how I would describe it. We have the live screens in our newsroom displaying what stories are doing well right now, what's the top social media post in our market. One of our senior editors has been doing [analytics] trainings for a couple of years now. He just did a week's worth of training on various days for all reporters and editors. I definitely think people have been trained up and if they want to know how all of that works, we're pretty open with that.

Organization C: Starting around 2014, a new office was established here to fully support digital strategy, that's the office I was with. We started getting aggressive with establishing benchmarks and baselines for everyone. We've acquired analytics

and metrics for our website, then for social media in 2016 we procured CrowdTangle. At the time they were their own platform before they were bought by Facebook. We used CrowdTangle for monitoring metrics and we still do for monitoring Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. They took out YouTube, so for YouTube we use their native analytics. For day-to-day monitoring in all the newsrooms we use CrowdTangle, and a couple of years ago purchased Chartbeat to measure engagement on the website. We have multiple trainings a year to educate our social media managers, editors and reporters on how to improve performance, what their best and overperforming posts are and use that to drive content strategy.

Organization D: We use CrowdTangle really heavily, and have integrated it with Slack, so every day when we have a viral hit, we see it in our Slack notifications. The producers understand for the most part that Facebook's algorithm change really values interactions. So really going for the engagement play is important. When we're writing the chatter and all that, we're really striving for the like, comment, and share over just the click through. The goal ultimately is the click through. But we're trying to have a really expansive view of the key metrics being first of the engagement, and then that will lead to a click.

Q2: What do you consider to be most important to your organization's social media strategies?

Organization A: Strategist 1: The best content we produce on social media is the stuff that people really interact with at the best rate they can't get anywhere else. What we're producing is unique and exclusive. That's something that we have championed with the newsroom at least – producing content that no one else is doing exclusively. Let's say everyone is covering something, but we can cover it a little bit different. I think that's something we have been pretty successful with exporting not just on the digital or social team, but getting that up on a higher level, incorporating that with the rest of the newsroom. Team leaders are figuring out that the best way to boost content is doing it in way that can't be duplicated by the TV stations that are our competition.

Strategist 2: One strategy that I think is very important, developed probably as a result of algorithm change, is to put more of a human behind the Facebook and Twitter accounts so that people who are reading those posts know that it's somebody typing out those posts and responding to comments, and it's not just some robot that's making these posts. There is encouragement to jump into the comments and interact with some of our users when appropriate. That's important too. There's a concerted effort to focus locally on our communities.

Organization B: I work with newsrooms in small and large markets on best practices. What I would consider to be most important to social media strategies would be a couple of things: responding to readers' questions on social media and customer service issues. This is such a huge thing now where newspapers have Facebook pages and people will comment, 'Oh I didn't get my paper today,' or, 'I have question about the e-edition,' or a question about how you did this story. Not only do we need to share content on social media to drive traffic, but we need respond to readers who are increasingly using social media as their primary way of interacting with us. The days of someone picking up the phone and calling the newsroom are gone. People are using the platform they spend the most time on to talk to a brand. That's really important.

Another piece is not being boring: We can't have most of the content we share on social media be a regurgitation of what's on our website. Our newsroom really takes a lot of time to craft interesting share texts. Emojis are super engaging when sharing content, having some kind of personal tone behind the content that we share, so that it's not straight up a regurgitation of the headline.

A third piece is using social media for data and crowdsourcing. There are a lot of third-party tools out there now that will mine Twitter and Facebook for information. There is a company called CrowdTangle – they have basically indexed all the newspapers in the country. They also have local lists for local content like police departments, school pages, and the same on Twitter too. We really need to make sure we're on the pulse of what's being shared on social media in our local communities.

Organization C: Our trainings get people exposed to monitor their performance, and be aware that they can measure these things and can use the tools to improve on their performance. Also following through after training we have coaching one-on-one. I sit down with managers or a service chief to go over and create lists on how to do searches, alerts, dashboards and so forth. Following up after training is very important to make sure that they keep using these tools and increase the adoption rate of these tools.

Organization D: Our mission as a news organization is to make our communities better. On social I really push our producers, and then also try to spread the gospel to the newsrooms that we work with, that Facebook and its algorithm is easy to think of as a machine; but really what social is, is people, it's our readers in a pure form. There's a large amount of readers there. So when we're thinking about, 'Okay, how do I take my content and help it reach an audience on social media – how do you reach people?' Sometimes we get a little stuck there. When we say we value engagement, really humanizing our content is where we're seeing the most success, making it more approachable. In our approach, being as human as possible to drive engagement, not just putting things on social that lead to a toxic discussion. Our goal is to have quality interactions around our content that really lead to growth on our social platforms, growth in our engagement, growth in the click throughs – our referrals. If you just want to put content out there to get the click back, it's not enough.

Q3: When do you consider a social media post to be successful?

Organization A: Strategist 1: I think it comes down to just comments in general. For me, comments are the purest example of an interaction because you're creating something that someone wants to type out a response on. I think that's a higher level than just double tapping on Instagram or hitting the like button on Facebook. When someone writes out a particularly long comment on whatever platform that means you're creating a good culture. To generalize, I think comments are a good way to measure.

Strategist 2: I'll make a post on Twitter and think it would do well and it just falls flat, same thing on Facebook. But then another story that posts a few minutes later really takes off and you can see it climbing on Chartbeat, watching the likes and the shares and reactions come in. It's surprising. I think looking at a post 24 hours after it's made and then seeing where it landed is a decent gauge. Then we also have the monthly report to look deeper into that and maybe see if why it drew people in. Maybe it was just a really strong story.

Organization B: We do a couple of things to measure what's performing well. In the past few years, the number of times it's been shared on Facebook has been an increasing metric of importance. So, the fact that a reader will take your content and re-share it. Facebook has changed algorithms to emphasize engagement instead of just click throughs. The fact that readers are sharing content beyond just seeing it on our page is really important. On Twitter it's hard to say, retweets are important but it's not huge for us. With Twitter, it's not necessarily a metric, but a key part of identifying what's working well. We found being first on Twitter drives traffic, or breaking news on Twitter drives traffic more than Facebook. A few years ago there was a knife attack at [REDACTED] State University. It was pretty small, but it was big news in [REDACTED CITY] and we own that paper. Looking at the data afterwards, we found our [REDACTED NEWSPAPER] was one of the first outlets to share anything on Twitter and that drove the story. So that's something we try to drive early. On Facebook, the algorithm filters out most recent posts more; whereas on Twitter things spread quickly when it's out there public.

Organization C: Because of the variety of newsrooms that Organization C strategist oversees around the world, she emphasized that success is individualized to each newsroom: We have what we call digital report cards or progress reports. Every year we look at the baseline of last year and have a projection of how much they could improve in the next year. These reports are being updated by our digital office every quarter.

Organization D: Each newsroom is different in how big their following is. I think we define success on social in two ways really: 1) Did it overperform the CrowdTangle reports? Did it do well on engagement? 2) Did it drive the clicks? What were our top referrals? Strong engagement is going to lead to more reach, more eyeballs, and a further reach, which leads to more social growth, and that's why social is so important to us from a strategy point of view. I don't know if you're aware of the audience engagement funnel, but social is key to us bringing in new readers at the top of the funnel. New audiences especially, are kind of fickle. It's hard to get them to come back. But what we see with some of our local newsrooms, [who] have a very loyal following on social, they're coming back again and again, and our ultimate goal is to get them to subscribe. That's the challenge. How do you take this broad and fickle audience and create a local following that will pay for their content? That's what we're shifting to right now.

Q4: Have you found that particular categories of news tend to be more successful on certain social platforms?

Organization A: *Strategist 1:* Sports news definitely lives on twitter; we've had some success Instagram – one high school focused sports account that does okay. We have two separate accounts for sport news based on area code and we have a high school sports account that has almost as many followers as our main *Virginian-Pilot* account on Twitter. We did a search a couple of years ago and it's one of the biggest high school focused accounts on the country. Then we have a whole *Virginian-Pilot* sports account that does okay as well.

Strategist 2: It was surprising to me our food posts do really well on Facebook – food and restaurant views and taste tests.

Organization B: Sports does well on Twitter in some of our markets where we have college football or major league teams. In [REDACTED STATE], we have the [REDACTED CITY] market and we have found that they have a decent amount of Twitter referrals from their [REDACTED COLLEGE FOOTBALL TEAM] coverage so that's big. For Facebook on the local side, we do mostly local news in all of our

markets. A lot more stuff on small businesses does super well. Also, on CrowdTangle, I'll sort data related to all of our Facebook pages on one list. I can see what's trending, outperforming content, say, in the last few days. And across the board, things like small businesses opening and closing, restaurants, that kind of stuff just does super well. It's things that people know, they like to hear about, they like to see it. So that's definitely something we encourage folks to look at. Anything related to local development. That's a big area for us. In more common news vernacular we say human interest, but stories like that really resonate with people [on Facebook.]

Organization C: I feel that for breaking news Twitter is the go-to platform, but it really depends on the region itself – again, we're covering a very global reach. In terms of topical we haven't really noticed if one performs better than others. Each platform has its own strengths; for visuals of course, Instagram would be the go-to platform; articles are doing well on Facebook although there is a slight decline in recent years; and for longer explainers then YouTube is the platform is the best for us.

Organization D: On the whole, some of the universal themes I've found are sports and politics on Twitter, especially election stuff, breaking news as well. Twitter is there. Facebook it's more of the heartwarming stories that tend to do extremely well. Some of our loyal following on Facebook for a lot these local newsrooms is that they want to know what's happening in our community and want to feel connected to what's happening. When we move beyond the what's happening to how this impacts me or why it's happening — the how and the why — that drives more than just the what. And then on Reddit, you can't just drop a link, you have to be part of the community there. The true crime we're finding that's popular, some of the politics stuff, but we're still figuring out what resonates there. On Instagram there's really only one real reaction that you can have there, it's the love reaction (*Comments are another reaction*). We're finding more that uplifting content does well, and breaking new does very well, but we haven't found anything that really resonates beyond that – because you can only have the one reaction, the love reaction, so it's kind of a tough platform. Video on Instagram is where it's all at. It's huge.

Q5: If your team strategizes about pushing specific content on different social media platforms, what are those strategies?

Organization A: Strategist 1: Every morning we have a meeting where we go over our plans for that day and budget them to go online. One of the things we do at that meeting is go over what we think could do well on various social platforms. Mostly not so much talking about Facebook or Twitter, because those are very general accounts that are not very specified. Mainly what we look at in those morning meetings is Instagram, LinkedIn, and Nextdoor. Every morning we talk about what could we target at those social networks. Obviously on LinkedIn there is a little bit more of a business focus. We have a business team so most of their stories get shared on LinkedIn. We also focus on Reddit. There are several local state and subreddits that we'll be active in. We post when appropriate. If it's a story about one of our local cities that we think would do well there we'll post on that platform. A state politics story, we might share that on the Virginia subreddit. I try to be active as I can be on that account considering my schedule. We don't want to just post our stories. I think it's important to interact generally on those subreddits when possible. I might react to what someone may have said or chip in with some knowledge when appropriate. I think it's important that news organizations are seen as 'I'm an actual person here, I'm not a robot, I'm not a giant monolith that you can't know anything about us.' That's a big problem for media organizations, especially legacy newspapers, have had for a long time. They are just seen as this block of steel that people can't really understand.

Strategist 2: Nextdoor lets you target neighborhoods. Something affecting the entire region, we would send that out to all of the subscribers [or target just one city]. One thing I'm still developing, Nextdoor folks don't like hard news, newsy-newsy type stuff. So we kind of stay away from that. The polls do well on there. (*The strategist is referring to polls in which users vote on story ideas.*) We also place the poll on Facebook and Twitter, but we get the most bang for the buck on Nextdoor. I've talked over with our editor on different ways of presenting it on Twitter – with gift cards, actual Twitter polls – so we're still looking at that. But Nextdoor has been great. Even so much that in the comment section of the poll people are suggesting even further things for our reporters to look into.

Organization B: The biggest shift for us has been focusing more on shares as a result of the algorithm change. In Q1 of 2018, Facebook made an update saying, ‘Hey we’re going to be focusing on friends and family content in a person’s immediate network which might deemphasize news pages’ and everyone sort of panicked. One of the pieces that they said was not just click throughs, like a crime story may get a lot of click throughs on Facebook, but it’s not going to have lot of comments or engagement on the post. That’s when we really started shifting to shares and what’s getting the most engagement there. We adjusted some of internal reporting for that as well.

Organization D: Yes, for the day-to-day content that’s mostly going on Facebook and Twitter. But it when it comes to our bigger enterprise or investigative projects we create social plans. We try to strategize from the beginning any content we should have, [like] if we need to create a video for Instagram. We talk about that at the beginning of the project, not at the end and reverse engineer it. Sometimes we don’t have time for that. But in a perfect world, we try to have a social plan from the beginning. Like, ‘Oh we know that we’re going to need vertical video for a story on Facebook and Instagram.’ You can reverse engineer that at the end, but it’s not going to be as powerful as letting the reporter know, ‘Hey, when you’re out at that funeral, get some vertical shots and show the emotion.’ Instagram doesn’t want overly polished things. They want that raw in-the-moment feel – that’s what tends to do better. When you start from the beginning you can make stronger content choices and have stronger content on social.

Q6: Can you recall an example of when your team shifted its strategy based on analytical data and why? If so, was the shift in strategy successful?

Organization A: Strategist 2: Sometimes when a food story hits our site at like 10 in the morning, I would automatically post [on Facebook] at 10 or 10:30. So when we looked at the data, we shifted the time.

Strategist 1: We assumed that people wanted food articles in the morning when they start getting hungry or maybe around lunch time. But what the data has shown so far is that people have liked our stories in the early afternoon a little bit more. We’re still

going through that.

Organization C: I guess in general, we started seeing a decline in engagement on Facebook and we've seen a mass growth on Instagram. So at the beginning of last year we really did not have a lot of language services on that platform. We did have a quite a few, but I would probably say it was 50-50. We encourage our other language services to also be on that platform because that's where our biggest growth was coming from, and we also purchased scheduling tools to simplify the workload for the social media manager so they can better manage these different platforms. With Instagram stories able to direct content onto your website, we have found that to be productive for us to grow traffic. Speaking of a shift, we also started noticing that longer form content have been doing well increasingly on YouTube. At the moment we have different language services really starting to create a YouTube strategy. In the past it's been about Facebook, but now people are starting to realize they shouldn't put all of their eggs in one basket so to speak. They need to diversify and YouTube has been really good. Actually, we just launched a collaboration with other international news networks to create a YouTube channel for the audience in Turkey. Because of the increasing censorship of the news in Turkey by the regime, we decided to join forces and create this YouTube channel to provide news, explainers, and also a forum for debate for a young Turkish audience. That might expand to other languages as well.

Organization D: Yes, two examples: 1) we came up with an initiative called the hot hour where we put some of our best content when there is the largest amount of people on Facebook. The times that are most engaged are when we would drive more clicks. We found that it did work for our top stories, but it was inconsistent for what wasn't our best content of the day. So, we actually said, 'We're still going to put our content at the best times, but for the rest it doesn't really matter. Just keep a steady flow of content throughout the day.' We didn't have to be as strict as we thought we did. There is an audience all the time and we want to keep bringing the content to them on a consistent basis. But for the top stories – the most quality content that was

driving a lot of interactions – it did make a difference when we put it at peak times of social.

2) The other thing we tried recently was using more emotional language. We thought that it got more interaction but fewer click throughs, so we're reexamining our approach to see if we can still drive the interactions but get more click throughs. That's the test we're doing right now.

Q7: When else would you potentially shift your strategy based on analytical data?

Organization B: We're constantly doing that. A big thing we actually have been focusing on based on the data [is news beats.] You know how news reporters typically have beats – cops, fire, education – these sort of basic beats that have been around for generations. We started to take a hard look at every story a beat reporter was writing, and if they weren't getting a lot of traffic on that story, we would sort of wonder, 'Why would we cover that?' Instead of just saying the education reporter always needs to write about the board of education, what if we actually looked at that content and saw that the board of education stories didn't get a lot of page views and interest in the community. So, we would shift that beat reporter's coverage to something that was driving a lot of traffic. Something higher up on school lunches, for example. We would spend more time focusing on that topic that really drove traffic and less time on the topic that wasn't. That has been an implication across all beats. But usually it means editors reviewing that data weekly, monthly, annually with a reporter and saying you need to shift your coverage away from this because readers aren't really looking at that.

Organization D: Right now, we're doing a test in a market where we're looking at consistently underperforming topics and seeing if we just need to eliminate posting about those topics on Facebook. It's been about figuring out if it's a different social platform, or if it's just not a social story, it's just a push alert, or pinning or a newsletter play. We're doing that test right now and then we'll see what the results are. Using CrowdTangle underperforming data to do fewer things better really. The other thing we're looking at closely is that Facebook just redesigned their app to

focus on groups and events and we're watching closely to see what impact that has. We've been posting content in groups for a while – for a year – it does very well for us. But with this change we're watching the data very closely to see if there is a decline in social referrals, if we need to be more aggressive about seeking out groups, putting out content, having our journalists be more active in groups. We just don't know yet it's too early. We're watching that very closely.

Q8: What are the biggest challenges for your audience engagement team when it comes to pushing content on social media?

Organization A: Right now, we have accounts that are brand accounts that we're trying to close some of them. We used to have Facebook accounts for all of the various cities. *The Pilot* covered five cities: Virginia Beach, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Chesapeake and Norfolk. We used to have Facebook pages for all of those cities, but they still just weren't growing fast enough, so we stopped posting and we're slowly closing them. The main problem is that sometimes we get spread too thin. We're trying to post to all of these various pages. There are pages like that on Twitter. We used to have a *Pilot* military page, specifically dedicated just to military coverage. We don't have that much coverage any more. We have too many pages. One of the biggest things we're struggling with is to scale back and focus on the pages that we want to focus on. Sometimes we started something and it didn't work, so we've got to say let's change strategy and focus on pages that do work. That's similar to how any newspaper would experiment. We've been experimenting on Reddit, it's really just a big experiment, or LinkedIn. Those experiments are still ongoing. Some of these Facebook and Twitter accounts [we should] just let them go on and focus on what is working for us.

Organization B: One challenge is sharing across pages. We have like 500 Facebook pages, probably 25 in [STATE REDACTED] as an example. It's tough to share content across Facebook pages. Just the volume of our size makes it hard. Facebook does very well as a product for one-to-one like the *New York Times*, that's easy to manage as one brand. For us, we have hundreds of local brands across the country, so it's really hard to manage that infrastructure. That's a big challenge. Along those

lines, the integration between Facebook and Instagram as a product is still a little wonky. A lot of things we want to do on Facebook we can't do on Instagram. Even though Facebook owns Instagram they're not really rolling a lot of the business and media features there, so that's a challenge as well.

Organization C: For the individual language services, it's not so much a barrier in publishing content, it's finding their niche. I usually tell them to focus on two to five things that perform the best on your platforms because you can't cover everything. Finding your niche, it's a very crowded space and you need to have something to stand out.

Organization D: The only constant with social is that it's always changing. The biggest challenge is understanding what that changing ecosystem means for our journalists and for our content. Like with this latest one, sometimes it takes a couple of weeks of data to really see the impact and we don't want to lose the audience. We want to use this as a way to bring in new readers and that's our ongoing challenge. It's not something I get discouraged by; it's a puzzle that brings out the best in us and forces us to use the data to push for really great storytelling. Honestly, on social if you have great content that really speaks to the human experience, it's going to do pretty well. At the end of the day, I think that journalism will always have a place on social. It's just that if we can push ourselves to have a conversation with our readers and have content that reflects the human experience, that's how we're going to keep having a good relationship with social media and getting the most out of it that we can.

Q9: Can you think of a specific tweet or post that performed particularly well in the past year? Why do you think it was so successful?

Organization A: *Strategists commented on two posts. The first story was about the Virginia governor wearing blackface in a college yearbook. This event garnered national news coverage and he was pressured to resign. The Virginian-Pilot was the first to confirm the story.*

Strategist 2: That's one of those things you know, it hit Twitter and you can sit back and watch the numbers climb on Chartbeat. Everyone knew that since it was coming from us it was solid. It did really well. Another story that did really well on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter was an interview with Pharrell Williams. He's from Virginia Beach and he has a pretty healthy following on Twitter. We made sure to tweet at him and of course a lot of his followers commented or retweeted the story. The story was kind of the first mention of this festival that he wanted to bring to Virginia Beach, which is actually happening this weekend (*of the interview*), The story had a very nice photo taken by one of our photographers, and that did really well on Instagram. On Instagram, the insights show that most of our followers are in Virginia Beach where he's from, and on Facebook and Twitter that did well.

Strategist 1: In general, the thing with any of our stories that really drives whether it does really well for us or not depends on how exclusive it is for us. If it's a normal national politics story it will do fine. But it won't stand out like a way that a story is exclusive and exclusively local. At the base of it we're a local newspaper. We cover a lot of state stuff, but we cover a lot of local news in Hampton Roads. I think that blackface story had more than 11,000 retweets. But we were the first to confirm it so I'm not surprised that one stood out.

Organization B: This was viral about a year ago out of [CITY REDACTED] Florida beach resort area. The reporter actually wasn't on the scene and this is how she used social media to identify the story and write something about it. It was a Sunday at the beach and someone got caught in rip tide out in ocean. People on shore noticed and then they formed human chain from the beach all the way out to where the person was caught to rescue this person and bring them back in. This is something that ended up blowing up on social media because the local EMS was involved and police and fire. The person didn't die, but probably needed medical assistance. The reporter saw this content blowing up on social media. She called, got in touch with the family of the person who was caught in the rip current and interviewed them, pulled the stories from Facebook, found some video coverage and then wrote up a story. It was hugely viral, it was like a national story. It was picked up as one of those feel good stories on NBC or whatever. It became a huge story and that was really based on identifying

something that was happening in the community by paying attention to social media.

Organization C: Something we produced for the Turkish service, at least a few years ago, but it was shot by one of our journalists. It was an incident with one of Erdogan's body guards that was filmed right here in D.C. in front of their embassy. That one got a lot of attention from the national networks and it was shown on the nightly news. That's the example I can think of right off the bat. Facebook was the most accessed platform [for the story].

Organization D: I love this example. A couple of years ago we had a story of a one-armed catcher in high school or middle school, can't remember his age, but it went crazy. It was a video with a 'read more' link. What was so amazing was that yes it started on our page, but it went so far beyond that. When you have content that is really human, and is uplifting and speaks to pulling those heart strings – like wow – it goes so far. That kid got invited to throw a pitch at a major league game, he got to meet celebrities, he was on The Today Show. That started with our local newsroom creating that story and posting it on Facebook. It changed that kid's life and gave him some opportunities.

Other types of viral things tend to be more like the really tough news that we cover every day: the mass shootings, fires, the breaking news still consistently goes really far. It's usually those two buckets. And then in between, it's like that quirky [content]. It's such a crowded and competitive space you really have to be unique. And that's really hard to do with local news sometimes. Communities are small and there's not always a lot happening so you can get stuck in writing police briefs all day. But it's when we create unique content of stories of people who are like, 'Oh they're like me,' or 'Oh this impacts me,' that tends to go really far.

Q10: Facebook has undergone multiple algorithm changes within the last year which has been challenging for many newsrooms. How has your team handled those changes?

Organization A: Strategist 1: We have done a lot of research on how it has really impacted us. A few years ago, before they changed it, Facebook was driving a lot of

our traffic. And since those changes, our numbers on Facebook are really not all that different for us. I know for a lot of other newsrooms traffic died for them. I don't know why. It hasn't had that much of an impact for us. We do focus on posting local and on encouraging engagement.

Organization C: We encourage everyone to not focus solely on Facebook but start thinking about other platforms. Also focusing on our own platform – our website – the platform that we own and have full control over. It used to be that people put Facebook first and overlooked their own platform. The trend is now changing for sure, there's more attention given to other platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

There has been a decline in traffic and engagement, we have also experimented with other things like Facebook Watch and groups, but they have not been giving us back what we lost. The decline really varies depending on the region. In Africa, for instance, it's still doing very well, but for other markets, Southeast Asia for example, we have noticed a decline. The more sophisticated the market is the more noticeable the Facebook decline. *What do you mean by a sophisticated market?* By more sophisticated meaning that there other emerging platforms in the region, and they have moved on to other, more handy platforms.

Organization D: We watch the data, and then we do tests. Like an emotional chatter test, that's one of the ones we're doing right now. That's really the only way you can stay ahead of it, is to be really disciplined, looking at your data and trying things. Learning from what works and equally learning what doesn't work. Sometimes the what-doesn't-work tells you more, a lot more, than what does. If you don't look at the data and keep doing what you've always been doing, it's not enough to find success on social.

Q11: Does someone on your team regularly read social media comments on news stories to gather audience feedback? Why or why not?

Organization A: We try to be appropriately engaging. We read every single comment that comes over to us on Facebook. We receive fewer comments on Twitter, but we read those as well and jump in when appropriate. Today, I was on Reddit and

a guy is having a problem with an ad blocker and he commented on a story of ours – on Reddit – and said, ‘Hey why are you guys blocking this with an ad blocker?’ I went to one of our developers and asked if we were blocking it and he was like ‘no.’ So we actually downloaded the ad blocker that this guy was complaining about and installed it and we weren’t seeing a problem. [I responded] ‘We are aware that our website is blocking ad blockers so if you want to get in touch with our developer he is offering to help you out. Here, send him an email.’

We try to have fun. If someone posts a particularly funny comment on Facebook we will respond with an appropriately funny gif. We try to have as much fun as we can on Facebook, and where appropriate on Twitter.

I do think in general though it’s important that – I will hammer this home – it’s important that newspapers and other media companies try to be as human as we can be. TV stations have for so long had an advantage on newspapers that they have anchors every morning all through commercials for your favorite television show. The anchors show up and say, ‘Hey we’re working for you’ or whatever it is. And newspapers don’t really have that. Like an anchor that at 6 a.m. we’re there every morning with our face. No, the newspaper says ‘We are in a giant granite building’ and that’s all that people can see of us. So I think it’s important to be as human as we can be.

Organization C: In certain newsrooms we do, but not all, the size of these newsroom really varies. For instance, at the Indonesian service we have 47 people, which is one of the top five largest services. But we also have very small services with only five people, so there could be one person doing digital, or digital and radio. Some people wear many hats here. But for the larger services, I’m planning on hiring a community manager to really look at comments and interact with the audience instead of having people engage and then we don’t do anything about it. [The goal is] to really build a community on digital.

Organization D: We really encourage the newsrooms we work with to be very active there, and have the reporters be active on the stories. Sometimes my team will come in and see stuff and work with the newsroom to respond. On breaking news we’re

more active on that front because reporters are in the field tied up with the story. But on the day-to-day, we really encourage the newsroom to take the lead there. What we have seen is that when reporters are really active in the comments that really positive things happen. The comments tend to turn a little bit more positive in tone, we see greater click through, sometimes we even see stronger follower growth. My team could jump in, but it's so interesting in these local communities that we are covering, they are really are invested in who the journalists are and wanting to get to know them. Replying to a comment on Facebook is a great way to build trust and transparency, and build a relationship with your readers. It's super powerful coming from that reporter so that's what we encourage them to do.

Q12: Do you use social media as a tool to crowdsource content from your audience? If so, in what ways?

Organization A: *Strategist 1:* We get a lot of feedback from polls on what stories people want from us. When we post that content to Twitter and Facebook especially, along with Nextdoor, people will respond with what they want us to look into. And we can get those posts to our reporting team leader who directs that coverage.

Strategist 2: I think it's important to follow up as well. 'Hey you asked why are the tolls so high on this particular bridge: here is the answer.' It shows that you directly asked us to look into something and the decision was made to 'let's go after this.' It's good with Nextdoor because you can actually see the votes received on the questions to see what would do well. It's important to circle back around and let your audience know that we heard what you said.

Organization B: I mentioned CrowdTangle, that's a big thing for crowdsourcing now. Everyone is using that tool. It's another company owned by Facebook, and they do a lot of trainings and providing data as well. CrowdTangle is the primary way that we're crowdsourcing content. Some of our larger markets use a tool called Data Miner that does early detection of breaking news tweets or Facebook posts. When there was a bomber in [CITY REDACTED] a year ago, the [NEWSPAPER REDACTED] – we own that paper – was actually able to find out that early information by alerts on Data Miner. That's another way we have used social media

to crowdsource, but it's mostly third-party tools. You can sort of get some stuff from Facebook, but you really need a third-party tool to look into their data network to extract things go for you.

Organization C: We do, although for that we caution everyone to make sure to verify the content before using it for any of our news coverage. [The verification process consists of] the standard of reversing the search, but we also encourage reporters to use our network and doublecheck everything. The reporters here in D.C. have very extensive networks back home where they are from. We have stringers and correspondents that can help verify if this photo is really coming from where it was said to. So, it's a combination of technology and personal networks.

Organization D: Oh yeah. During Hurricane Michael, my team got photos and videos and helped create content – a lot of what was regenerated. During breaking news people want to feel like they're there and live it and experience it and the regeneration is powerful. My team has a huge role there that drives incredible results. You have to be careful to make sure that it's real, to verify, and give credit. We have policies and procedures in place to make sure that we're being ethical and we have standards that we're not spreading misinformation or anything.

Q13: Describe any other ways in which your news organization interacts with its followers on social media.

Organization A: Strategist 2: Some of our reporters are pretty savvy on Twitter, down to our education and city hall reporters. I seem them going as far as live tweeting the various city council meetings or school board meetings, or tweeting during a school tour. Our *Pilot's* main account can draw attention to those individual reporters as they're doing it through a retweet or a mention – again that puts a more human face on the *Pilot* itself. 'Here's reporter Sarah Gregory taking a tour at the local high school.' Or, here is this reporter covering a city council meeting that they may not have access to, but the reader can quickly see what's going on at city council. But it really does put a human face onto this organization. Our education team started

a Facebook group just for education. They're able to post questions in there and interact with those group members.

Strategist 1: That's a good point, we haven't really talked about groups at all. We have two others, one of which isn't really active, we'll probably see it go away soon. We have found success with a Facebook group about targeting parents and people who are interested in education in Hampton Roads. And we're seeing some interactions there between parents on various things they want to bring up. We have one that's focused on sea level rise in Hampton Roads. It's a partnership with a group looking at various high tides in Hampton Roads and what's called the King Tide. But that Facebook group was started by us; and it's linked to our page. We have one for military. It hasn't gone the way we thought it would that one will be unfortunately going away.

Organization B: There is a shift in the industry as how to how we choose to interact with folks. Of course, you're familiar with pay walls, and meters and everyone sort of putting up some sort of pay for news experience. Whether it's a few free articles a month and then you have to pay, or a monthly fee, or whatever. We've had a meter in place for most of markets for a couple of years now. It's adjusted over the years, and it's gotten tighter: It used to be seven [free articles,] and now it's down to three. We're basically asking people to subscribe. This is the shift in the industry. Digital advertising isn't really that lucrative, digital subscriptions is really where it's at: We need to get people to pay for online news. They paid for the print newspaper for hundreds of years. We need to pay for online news. As you can imagine, when clicking through an article on Facebook and getting hit with 'subscribe' or 'this is your last free article give us your email or choose to subscribe' people get really upset about it. You get a lot of comments on Facebook, 'Why do you charge?' Or, 'I'm not sure if this is worth my money. Why can't I read this for free?' Just all sorts of pushback on the concept of actually paying for news. A lot of newsrooms have been caught off guard having to respond to this. Journalists are used to telling other people's stories. We're not used to articulating our journey and our story and why it's important. We're used to just putting the facts out there. What I have helped newsrooms do is develop canned responses, a simple framework that you can copy

and paste and maybe tweak a few of the phrases to make it sound more personal and address it to that specific reader. But just language that they can use to adopt and respond to readers. They get overwhelmed and most editors are not typically good at this type of customer service on ‘How do we tell our story better?’ So that’s something I’ve worked on: gathering best practices in the industry, putting them in a doc and writing those concepts up. That’s been a big shift. How do we tell our story better and encourage people to pay for journalism?

Organization C: Since we’re also broadcasting, we have a lot of shows where we do call-ins from people. One of the largest Facebook groups that we have here is centered around this personality that we have for the French to Africa service. He has really popular call-in show, and he really worked on having this community on Facebook. That’s another way we interact directly with audience on social media.

We also use some paid campaigns on certain platforms. (*Also known as sponsored content.*) This is common in a lot of newsrooms also. We pick out stories that are high-profile, that we deem very important editorially, and also the best performing posts. Usually you if you could put some money behind something that has done well organically, it will do even better. That’s an add-on, it’s not the main strategy. We always tell people to focus on your organic posts and then the advertising comes later as an extra boost. But it shouldn’t be the main strategy. We can’t keep paying for engagement. That’s not very sustainable. *On what platforms are you paying for sponsored content?* Mainly now on Facebook, some on Twitter, but not very many I can think of less than a handful, and some on Google ads for search campaigns.

Organization D: Most of the Facebook groups we’re interacting in are created by communities, but we have a handful of our own newsrooms that actually have their own Facebook groups. We just started to dive into that. We don’t have that many. That has been really successful for those newsrooms to have their reporters or editors take the lead there. But we have been a little involved as well. It’s just that not many newspapers have groups that they own. We’ll see kind of what these next set of changes for Facebook mean and if more of our newsrooms need to be there. But the

ones that have been there for a couple of years are way ahead, and they're seeing really good results.

On Reddit we're doing a lot to figure out how we can be there in a meaningful way to drive referrals but also not get banned. They've relaxed the rules a lot, but we're still learning what content to put there. And then on Instagram there is a lot of growth happening there, but it's hard to bring people back from there. Facebook stories go so much further than Instagram stories, but we're seeing really great reactions and engagement. It's just early for Instagram, it will continue to be valuable. It will be interesting to see as Facebook brings its messaging together what impact that has and if that helps Instagram get better reach for publishers. I'm interested to see how that plays out. I know the users have been skeptical, but I think it might end up being helpful. It's such an interesting ecosystem, and I continue to watch the trend of more and more people, including myself, are moving to private messaging. How as a publisher can we be in that space in a meaningful way, that informs and to be a part of the conversation? Ultimately though, we want to bring people back to our website and our brand. We want people to subscribe. It starts with a relationship, but we want that relationship to ultimately benefit us – just being on that platform we want to bring them back. It's just early there. How local can we be in a meaningful way in that space and be sustainable? That's something I keep asking questions about and don't yet have answers on.

Q14: What is your outlook on the future role of social media platforms in news dissemination?

Organization A: Strategist 1: Honestly it changes so much that things could be far different by the time this publishes. Hopefully my comments will be accurate still.

Strategist 2: I think we're on the right track with this engagement, with providing local news that our audience can use and needs and wants. It's important to try to figure out, and it's something we have been trying to figure out for years – help the audience understand the value of the product they're consuming by encouraging subscription either through our digital product or printed product. They need to understand that it costs money to even have someone sitting in these chairs posting on

these platforms. The news is not free. It costs money to have that reporter out there getting that information. It's hard for us to understand on this side I guess that people don't understand that. So, by encouraging them on that, by giving them news that they value, providing them with a trustworthy news source which we work very hard at, and to battle against the forces that say we are not.

Organization B: There has been a lot of coverage on the Russian data and how easy it is for fake news to get through. I am concerned about that, but as of now social media is still where a lot of people spend time. We need to be where our readers are, and as long as they're still on social media we'll be there as well.

Organization C: It's hard to predict because algorithms change all the time. We always have new platforms emerging, just really knowing your audience and where they are is key, and being able to come up with new ways to reach them. For instance, we haven't really used email all that much. We do have some newsletters, but there are so many ways that we could be better. Being agile and being able to diversify your platforms, focusing on how you can keep your website thriving – not overlooking your own operated channels and sacrifice that for social media platforms owned by companies that we don't have control over. Our situation is unique: since we are not revenue driven we don't have that added pressure to monetize. This gives a creative space to try new things and think of new ways to reach your audience without fear of losing your income or worrying about a paywall like other news organizations.

Organization D: Social plays a huge role in our society and what is truth and the spread of misinformation. As journalists we have to be in the conversation, present and very aggressive, and making sure that we're being transparent with our readers about the information we have and how we got it. That starts at the relationship with our readers and social is one of the best ways for us to have those meaningful conversations and build those relationships. But it requires a lot of all of us. I think social is an incredible tool, it just requires a lot of journalists in newsrooms, and we have to continue to put our focus there.

Chapter 6: Discussion 2

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

The purpose of this study to create a snapshot of current trends of social media within newsrooms. Major themes that emerged from interviews include being humanizing content, shifting coverage based on referral data, training reporters and editors on how to use social media analytics, social media as a customer service channel, encouraging subscriptions, and categories of news on social media. Other themes fall under emerging tools and platform trends.

Emerging Themes

Being Human

Organizations A, B and D supported previous literature that social media posts – especially on Facebook – which evoke emotion spread at a higher rate. “On Facebook it’s more of the heartwarming stories that tend to do extremely well,” said Organization D strategist. Her team is testing a strategy to incorporate more emotional language into their posts. “We thought that it got more interactions but fewer click throughs, so we’re reexamining our approach to see if we can still drive the interactions but get more click throughs,” she explained. The use of emoticons or emojis to add emotion to a post was noted in previous studies as well as these interviews. “Emojis are super engaging when sharing content,” Organization B strategist said.

Along the theme of showing emotion, being human, or humanizing posts, was emphasized by more than one strategist. “I will hammer this home – it’s important that newspapers and other media companies try to be as human as we can be,” said Strategist 1 at Organization A. Organization D has found that humanizing posts helps

significantly drive traffic. “When we say we value engagement, really humanizing our content is where we’re seeing the most success,” she explained. “Our goal is to have quality interactions around our content that really lead to growth on our social platforms.” Elaborating on the need to include emotion on social media posts, the strategist from Organization D gave an example of instructing a reporter to gather emotional video for Facebook and Instagram stories. “Hey, when you’re out at that funeral, get some vertical shots and show the emotion,” she said.

When asked for an example of a recent and particularly successful social media post, Organizations B and D recalled stories that went viral on Facebook because they resonated with their audience on a human level. Organization B described a news story in which people at a Florida beach formed a human chain to save someone caught in a rip tide. The local reporter published the story, which went viral on Facebook and garnered national news attention. “It was hugely viral, it was like a national story. It was picked up as one of those feel-good stories,” she said. Strategist from Organization D told a story about a one-armed kid who played catcher for a baseball team. Once the video of him went viral on Facebook, he became a celebrity overnight. “What was so amazing was that – yes it started on our page – but it went so far beyond that,” she explained. “When you have content that is really human, and is uplifting and speaks to pulling those heart strings – like wow – it goes so far.” These examples highlight that human-interest stories posted to Facebook are more likely to go viral.

Organization A repeatedly brought up their strategy to appear as human as possible in posts. “One strategy that I think is very important, developed probably as a result of the algorithm change, is to put more of a human behind the Facebook and

Twitter accounts so that people who are reading those posts on the platforms know that it's somebody typing out those posts and responding to comments. It's not just some robot that's making these posts," said Organization A's Strategist 2. His colleague, Strategist 1, said that local TV stations have historically had an advantage over their competition of local newspapers because of the connection to a face and personality in your living room. "It's important that news organizations are not just seen as a robot, [or] a giant monolith that you can't know anything about. That's a big problem [that] media organizations, especially legacy newspapers, have had for a long time," he said. "They are just seen as this block of steel that people can't really understand."

But now social media has given print journalists an opportunity to connect with their audience on a more personal level. Strategist 2 elaborated on ways that help his organization achieve this. Reporters already appear human through their own personal Twitter accounts, and then connect to the community through that medium by live tweeting local events. "Our main account can draw attention to those individual reporters through a retweet or a mention – again that puts a more human face on the *Pilot* itself," he said. Strategist 2 also noted that individual reporters actively engaging in Facebook groups has added to their strategy to improve the human connection. The Strategist from Organization D echoed that individual reporters actively engaging with the audience on social media drives traffic. "When reporters are really active in the comments, really positive things happen," she said. "The comments tend to turn a little bit more positive in tone, we see greater click through, sometimes we even see stronger follower growth. It's so interesting in these local communities that we are covering, they are really invested in who the journalists

are and wanting to get to know them.” These examples display an emerging strategy of using a reporter’s personal brand to increase engagement.

However, including emotion in posts may pose problems when it comes to journalists’ transparency, and appears to be resulting in a shift away from the traditional journalistic norm of objectivity. One media scholar commented on this concept, stating: “by being open about their intentions, journalists appear more transparent in social media, thus strengthening their ethos” (Benestad Hågvær, 2019, 18). Organization D noted that engagement from individual reporters on social media helps to build transparency. “Replying to a comment on Facebook is a great way to build trust and transparency, and build a relationship with your readers,” she said. “It’s super powerful coming from that reporter, so that’s what we encourage them to do.” Yet the question of transparency and objectivity in emotional posts should still be furthered researched. Asking journalists – and their audiences – if they think posts with emotion endanger their transparency and objectivity should be a key question moving forward. Exploring the appropriateness of emotional appeals in posts could be another avenue for research. Nevertheless, previous studies and this study indicate an industry trend of including emoticons and emotion in posts as a new journalistic norm.

Shifting Coverage

All participants in this study said they have advised reporters to shift their coverage based on social media referral data, but in various ways. Strategist from Organization C does this by telling her newsrooms to find their niche on social media by covering topics that their audiences are engaging with the most. “I usually tell them to focus on two to five things that perform the best on your platforms because

you can't cover everything," she said. "Find your niche, it's a very crowded space and you need to have something to stand out." Organization B explained that her newsrooms shift their coverage based on each beat. "We started to take a hard look at every story a beat reporter was writing, and if they weren't getting a lot of traffic on that story, we would sort of wonder, 'Why would we cover that?'" She gave the example of an education reporter spending less time covering the board of education if those articles are not driving engagement, and more time on a topic like school lunches if that's what drives more traffic. Organization D strategist said that when a topic is not driving traffic on social media, her strategy is to find which platform that topic would be most well-received on. "It's been about figuring out if it's a different social platform or if it's just not a social story; it's just a push alert, or pinning, or a newsletter play," she explained. While shifting coverage based on the social media referral data was a reoccurring theme in interviews, each strategist had a different tactic.

On one hand, shifting coverage based on engagement data means that newsrooms are delivering a product more tailored to their audiences' desires. The consequences for this shift in the industry remain unclear. Covering school lunches or more human-interest stories based on the data could result in a tradeoff from covering other, potentially more impactful stories, and disrupt their role as a watchdog. "Newsrooms need to strike a balance between news that is understood to be important, and news that answers the wishes of their increasingly interactive and demanding readers" (Bastos, 2015, 321). A question to ask strategists in future studies could be: If your newsroom shifts its coverage based on which stories your audience is clicking on, do you think you may be marginalizing more important

stories? More research is needed to find out if compromising coverage for more human-interest stories are impeding on journalists' role as a watchdog to inform their readers.

Training

All organizations described social media training for staff to learn how to use analytics to strengthen content and drive more traffic, at a greater extent than what could be found in recent literature. Interviewees noted that training sessions are held multiple times a year to provide flexibility to attend, and are continuously updated with new information on platforms. Organization C strategist conducts social media training herself, and then follows up with newsroom leaders on how to best implement strategies on a case-by-case basis. "Following up after training is very important to make sure that they keep using these tools and increase the adoption rate of these tools," she said. Not only are social media training sessions within newsrooms becoming more common, but social media and analytics companies are also holding trainings for journalists. The strategists mentioned trainings that their reporters have participated in with Metrics for News, Reddit and CrowdTangle.

Customer Service Channels

Using social media as a communications channel to lodge and respond to customer service issues was a reoccurring theme in previous literature and in this study. "The days of someone picking up the phone and calling the newsroom are gone. People are using the platform they spend the most time on to talk to a brand," said Organization B strategist. Organization A gave a recent example of how a Reddit user complained about an ad blocker, and the strategist put the user in touch with one

of their web developers for assistance. Strategist from Organization C described her plan to hire a community manager at one of the larger newsrooms to better engage with the audience's comments. "I'm planning on hiring a community manager to really look at comments and interact with the audience instead of having people engage and then we don't do anything about it. [The goal is] to really build a community on digital." Newsrooms are building a relationship with their audience by engaging in social media comments, including responding to customer service requests. This is becoming a norm for newsrooms in the digital age.

Encouraging Subscriptions

All of the organizations interviewed for this study, except for nonprofit Organization C, said that an end goal is getting their audience to pay for digital subscriptions. "Our ultimate goal is to get them to subscribe. That's the challenge," said Organization D strategist. "How do you take this broad and fickle audience and create a local following that will pay for their content? That's what we're shifting to right now." The Organization B strategist concurred on this industry shift. "Digital advertising isn't really that lucrative, digital subscriptions is really where it's at. We need to get people to pay for online news. They paid for the print newspaper for hundreds of years."

Not only did three strategists describe this challenge of encouraging their audience to pay for news – but two brought up that they had been challenged to explain to their audience *why* they should pay for news and why it costs money to produce news. The digital strategist from Organization B saw these challenges as a reoccurring theme with many newspapers that she works with across the country. There was "just all sorts of pushback on the concept of actually paying for news," she

said. In the fall of 2018, she organized trainings for newsrooms on how to best respond to these types of comments over social media. She researched the best practices in the industry, developed canned responses, and held trainings for editors. In her carefully researched messaging, Organization B leader tells editors to focus on how their newsroom staff lives in the same communities that they're covering. "We're local. We're here. Our kids attend your schools. We eat at the same restaurants as you do. We drive on the same roads every day. We talk about that we're local and we're here. We're not some national media outlet that's far away," she said. She also talks about the cost and business side of gathering news, and suggests in her strategy to describe the manhours that go into an investigative piece. She also points out the low cost to subscribe – rates are usually comparable to a Netflix subscription or a couple of cups of coffee. "It's really not that much. If you can afford to pay for these other things, you should consider paying for news," she said.

Organization A also expressed frustration over this challenge. "That's definitely a battle that we see all the time," said Strategist 1. Strategist 2 pointed out that this has been an ongoing challenge for the industry. "Something we [the industry] have been trying to figure out for years is to help the audience understand the value of the product they're consuming," he said. "Encouraging subscription either through our digital product or printed product. They need to understand that it costs money to even have someone sitting in these chairs posting on these platforms. The news is not free. It costs money to have that reporter out there getting that information. It's hard for us to understand on this side that people don't understand that." However, he pointed out that his colleague "has a very nice way of letting people know how they

can subscribe.” Furthermore, Strategist 2 said that sometimes other users step in to defend their news organization, and encourage other readers to pay for news. “That’s always cool to see. I’m always grateful for other people jumping in,” he said. These anecdotes highlight the industry shift toward reader subscriptions.

Research Question 4:

Quantitative Data vs. Qualitative Data on Categories of News

Research question four of this study asked: Do U.S. newsrooms’ social media strategies align with nationwide trends of news accessed on social networks? The quantitative part of this study demonstrated that law, government & politics stories were the most successful on Facebook and across social media. However, none of the strategists mentioned that trend, and three out of the four emphasized that human-interest stories produce the most engagement on the platform. “On Facebook it’s more of the heartwarming stories that tend to do extremely well,” said Organization D strategist. This difference in results between the two related studies might be based in that Parse.ly looks at the big picture of national coverage, whereas study participants were more focused on the success of their individual newsrooms in local markets. Moreover, Parse.ly does not have a human-interest category, but it should consider adding one. In addition, two strategists separately pointed out that stories about local restaurants and businesses tend to do extremely well on Facebook. “It’s things that people know, they like to hear about, they like to see it. That’s definitely something we encourage folks to look at – anything related to local development,” said Organization B’s strategist. Nationally and quantitatively, law, government & politics stories perform the best on Facebook; locally and qualitatively, human-interest and local development stories drive traffic on the platform.

The quantitative and qualitative data aligned more for Twitter than Facebook. Three strategists backed up Parse.ly's data that sports coverage does well on Twitter; the fourth organization does not cover sports. "Sports news definitely lives on Twitter," said Strategist 1 from Organization A. He also pointed out his organization's success of sport news on Instagram. Organization D strategist noted that election coverage is big on Twitter, which falls into Parse.ly's top category. All four strategists said that Twitter is the place for breaking news, but that is not a Parse.ly category. To summarize, Twitter's niche is sports and breaking news.

Strategists only slightly touched on two other platforms analyzed in the quantitative part of the study. Organization A, the only media outlet to discuss their LinkedIn account, said that is where they focus on posting business news which aligns with nationwide trends. Organizations A and D noted the popularity of politics stories on Reddit, and Organization D also mentioned that crime stories tend to do well on the platform. These statements aligned with the single period of data collected on Reddit that showed law, government & politics stories are clicked most frequently.

Emerging Tools

Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing content, and then verifying that content, was a common theme in previous literature, and the concept appears to be becoming more ubiquitous in newsrooms. The strategist at Organization D said that her team constantly crowdsources content to tell stories of breaking news. "During breaking news, people want to feel like they're there and live it and experience it, and the regeneration is powerful," she said. "My team has a huge role there that drives incredible results. You have to be careful to make sure that it's real, to verify, and give credit."

Organization C also uses crowdsourcing to gather content, and emphasized the dedication they put into verifying it. “[The verification process consists of] the standard of reversing the search, but we also encourage reporters to use our network and doublecheck everything. The reporters here in D.C. have very extensive networks back home where they are from. We have stringers and correspondents that can help verify if this photo is really coming from where it was said to,” she explained. “So it’s a combination of technology and personal networks.”

Organization A primarily utilizes crowdsourcing for story ideas. Staff post polls on social media for their audience to vote on which stories they should cover, but end up receiving even more suggestions from the comment sections of the polls. “We place the poll on Facebook and Twitter, but we get the most bang for the buck on Nextdoor,” said Strategist 2. However, there are instances in which organizations still prefer to use their own resources and content. For example, Organization A used to take user submissions on one of their Instagram pages; in fact, their Instagram bio still says that they do. When asked about this during the interview, representatives responded that they have moved away from the practice because they feel that they should showcase their professional photographers’ work. Overall, crowdsourcing content and strengthening the verification process of that content will continue to be a practicing theme in the industry.

Third-Party Tools

Every organization interviewed for this study mentioned that they utilize Google Analytics and CrowdTangle in the newsroom. CrowdTangle helps news organizations not only monitor their own engagement, but also the engagement of their competition. The company was bought by Facebook in 2016. Two of the four

newsrooms mentioned that they use Chartbeat to monitor real-time metrics in their newsrooms. Both Organizations B and C described specific third-party programs that help them monitor information and conversations on social media. “We really need to make sure we’re on the pulse of what’s being shared on social media in our local communities,” explained Organization B strategist. Her company uses Data Miner to detect breaking news on Twitter and Facebook. “When there was a bomber in [CITY REDACTED] a year ago, the [NEWSPAPER REDACTED] – we own that paper – was actually able to find out that early information by alerts on Data Miner,” she said. “That’s another way we have used social media to crowdsource, but it’s mostly third-party tools. You can sort of get some stuff from Facebook, but you really need a third-party tool to look into their data network to extract things go for you.”

Organization C uses a similar tool called Synthesio, that allows them to monitor conversations on social media. They use it to listen to what’s being said about the topics that they cover, and their news organization. Additional research on how these third-party tools – like CrowdTangle, Chartbeat, Data Miner, Synthesio and Parse.ly – are impacting the industry would be useful to the field. This study shows that organizations are tailoring their news coverage based on data coming from these platforms. How this data is presented and emphasized to journalists, could have lasting effects on the news cycle in the U.S.

Platform Trends

Facebook Groups

Facebook groups appear to be a powerful, underutilized way to increase engagement among audiences that newsrooms are still experimenting with.

Organizations A, C and D all separately brought up Facebook groups as a powerful

tool to increase engagement. “We’ve been posting content in groups for awhile, for a year, it does very well for us,” said Organization D. “But with this change, we’re watching the data very closely to see if there is a decline in social referrals, if we need to be more aggressive about seeking out groups, putting out content, or having our journalists be more active in groups. We just don’t know yet, it’s too early. We’re watching that very closely.” She noted that her newsrooms which have been active in Facebook groups for awhile are now ahead of the curve.

Organization A has experimented with different types of Facebook groups for niche audiences. One group that was created for local military families was not as successful as they anticipated, so they plan on taking it down. However, another Facebook group about education proved to be very successful, igniting debates between parents in the community that spurred story ideas. A third Facebook group they created on rising sea levels serves a local and steady niche audience. “Both of the groups are rather new. We are still trying different strategies and different ways to grow them,” explained Strategist 1.

When asked about other ways that Organization C engages with their audience on social media, the study participant noted that one of their most engaged spaces is a Facebook group created by a talk show host. “One of the largest Facebook groups that we have here is centered around this personality that we have for the French to Africa service. He has really popular call-in show and he really worked on having this community on Facebook,” she said. She also noted that her organization has been actively experimenting with Facebook groups and Facebook Watch, but those experiments have not given them back the traffic that they lost after the major algorithm change last year. Yet, based on the qualitative data from this study,

Facebook groups have shown to increase engagement and is another trend to watch for in the industry.

Facebook (Algorithm Changes)

After Facebook announced that its algorithm shift to focus on friends and family could result in deemphasizing news pages, “everyone sort of panicked,” said Organization B’s strategist. In response to the change, her team shifted their strategy to focus more on shares. The strategist from Organization C encourages her newsrooms to focus more on their own websites, and other platforms like YouTube and Instagram. “In the past it’s been about Facebook, but now people are starting to realize they shouldn’t put all of their eggs in one basket so to speak. They need to diversify,” she said. She also noted that there has been a decline of Facebook traffic worldwide since the algorithm changes, but that the decline varied by region. “In Africa, for instance, it’s still doing very well. But for other markets, Southeast Asia for example, we have noticed a decline. The more sophisticated the market is the more noticeable the Facebook decline.” Asked for a further description of a sophisticated market, she explained: “the more sophisticated meaning that there other emerging platforms in the region, and they have moved on to [those] other, more handy platforms.”

Organization A noticed no change in their traffic. “Our numbers on Facebook are really not all that different for us,” said Strategist 1. “I know for a lot of other newsrooms traffic died for them. It hasn’t had that much of an impact for us.” This might be because the algorithm changes were designed to emphasize local news, and engagement between friends and family, which played into the strengths of Organization A’s strategies.

Organization D said that instead of focusing on Facebook's algorithms, she encourages her colleagues to keep posting human content. "On social I really push our producers, and then also try to spread the gospel to the newsrooms that we work with, that Facebook and its algorithm is easy to think of as a machine," she said. "But really what social is, is people, it's our readers in a pure form." Last year's algorithm changes likely will not be the last to directly impact newsrooms. This qualitative data on how social media strategists handled 2018's updates could be useful to the field.

Twitter

The most universal theme regarding Twitter that emerged from this study is that it's the hot platform for breaking news. "We have found being first on Twitter really drives the traffic, or breaking news on Twitter drives traffic more than on Facebook," said Organization B's strategist. Two strategists gave examples of when being first to announce a story on Twitter helped to significantly drive engagement. These results have encouraged their organizations to consistently strive for that traditional journalistic norm of being first to a story, just on a new medium. This practice aligns with previous literature that being first to break news on Twitter is an adaptive journalistic practice. Organization A said that being first to confirm on Twitter that the Virginia governor wore blackface in college helped their story go viral. The strategist from Organization B related a similar narrative about a knife attack at an university. "Looking at a data analysis afterwards, we found that our [REDACTED NEWSPAPER] was one of the first news outlets to share anything on Twitter and that really drove the story. So that's really something we try to drive early," she said. "Now on Facebook, the algorithm sort of filters out the most recent posts a little bit more; whereas on Twitter things can spread a lot more quickly just

when it's out there public." Organization C's strategist agreed that Twitter is the platform for breaking news, but noted that it depends on the region of the world. Live tweeting coverage of events was mentioned in previous literature, and is still a popular and successfully engaging practice among journalists, according to the results from this study.

Instagram

Organization C's strategist said that there has been a "mass growth" on Instagram in the last year, and that it is the "go-to" platform for visuals. At the beginning of 2018, she estimates that 50 percent of their news wires had an Instagram account. "We encourage our other language services to also be on that platform because that's where our biggest growth was coming from," she said. She attributes this to the Instagram story feature becoming more popular. "With Instagram stories able to direct content onto your website, we have found that to be productive for us to grow traffic," she explained. However, Organization D strategist has found more success with Facebook stories. "Facebook stories go so much further than Instagram stories, but we're seeing really great reactions and engagement," she said. "It's just early for Instagram, it will continue to be valuable." She added that shooting aesthetically raw videos is how to be most engaging on the platform. "Video on Instagram is where it's all at. It's huge," she said. "Instagram doesn't want overly polished things. They want that raw in-the-moment feel. That's what tends to do better." More trends and niche audiences will emerge on Instagram as it continues to grow its userbase.

Reddit

Three out of the four digital strategists interviewed for this study talked about their organization's recent experiments on Reddit as a growing platform to reach audiences. Organization A is active in several city and state subreddits. They consistently post local stories to individual city subreddits and state political stories to the Virginia state subreddit. "I think it's important to interact generally on those subreddits when possible," added Strategist 1. "I might react to what someone may have said or chip in with some knowledge when appropriate." Strategist from Organization D echoed that it's important to engage with the audience on the platform. "On Reddit, you can't just drop a link, you have to be part of the community there," she said. However, she says that "we're still figuring out what resonates," and "how we can be there in a meaningful way to drive referrals but also not get banned. They've relaxed the rules a lot, but we're still learning what content to put there." Organization B strategist said that they have been increasing engagement on Reddit because the platform recently expanded its media relations. "They now do trainings for reporters, and encourage reporters to do 'ask me anything' just to drive engagement and storytelling on the platform," she explained. "That's been a big area that we've moved into." Reddit appears to require reporters to be more engaged with the community than other platforms, since its design is based around engaging discussion. How reporters continue experimenting with that platform could be key to the industry's strategies to increase engagement.

Other Platforms

It appeared that news organizations had fewer strategies when it came to less mainstream platforms like LinkedIn, Snapchat and Nextdoor, potentially because there is less traffic and therefore less data to work with. For example, Organization A has more consistent strategies in place for Facebook and Twitter, but at their daily meetings they strategize what to target on Instagram, LinkedIn and Nextdoor. “It’s really just a big experiment,” said Strategist 1. “Those experiments are still ongoing.”

Organization B was the only media company to bring up Snapchat. “We do a little bit of Snapchat, not as much, because it’s harder to be discovered if you’re a local publisher,” she said, referring to Snapchat’s public discover feature. “We do have a reporter experimenting on that. But that’s not a huge traffic driver for us.” However, Organization B utilizes YouTube at all of their 600-in-something publications. “We have an official media contract with them and we’re a verified publisher. We use the players on our site so that’s another platform that we have expanded into,” she said. Strategist from Organization C was the only one to talk about YouTube in-depth, claiming that it’s the best platform for explainers, and that it drives so much traffic they’re in the process of creating additional channels. “We also started noticing that longer form content has been doing well increasingly on YouTube, so we have different language services starting to really create a YouTube strategy.” However, because Organization C is broadcast focused, they produce much more video content than the other organizations that were interviewed for this study. Therefore, YouTube is naturally more relevant to their newsrooms. Lastly, the strategist from Organization C noted that she works with many different types of

social media platforms that are specific to certain countries and regions, including Line in Indonesia and Telegram in Iran and Afghanistan.

The Shift to Private Messaging

In March 2019, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced his plans to merge Facebook messaging with other platforms the company owns – Instagram and WhatsApp – in addition to shifting Facebook’s focus to private messaging. “As I think about the future of the internet, I believe a privacy-focused communications platform will become even more important than today’s open platforms. Privacy gives people the freedom to be themselves and connect more naturally, which is why we build social networks,” wrote Zuckerberg on his blog (Zuckerberg, 2019). Two strategists interviewed for this study brought up this new shift to private messaging, and addressed ways for publishers to be in that space. “It will be interesting to see as Facebook brings its messaging together, what impact that has and if that helps Instagram get better reach for publishers. I’m interested to see how that plays out,” said Organization D strategist. “I know the users have been skeptical, but I think it might end up being helpful. It’s such an interesting ecosystem, and I continue to watch the trend of more and more people, including myself, are moving to private messaging. How as a publisher can we be in that space in a meaningful way that informs, and to be a part of the conversation?” The strategist from Organization C noted that platforms are always changing, and private messaging may be an untapped resource. “We always have new platforms emerging, just really knowing your audience and where they are is key, and being able to come up with new ways to reach them,” she said. “For instance, we haven’t really used email all that much. We do have some newsletters, but there are so many ways that we could

be better.” At the time of publication of this study, Facebook had not yet announced a timeline of their shift to private messaging.

The Power of Silicon Valley

The challenging and evolving relationship that publishers have with social media companies was a reoccurring theme in this study. For example, the strategist from Organization B expressed concern over the problem of fake news on social media. When asked about how her organization tries to stand apart from that, she elaborated on Facebook’s, Google’s and YouTube’s new verification features for news organizations. “We’re just working with social media companies to abide by their rules and continue to be recognized as a legit publisher,” she said. Because these social media companies are always changing their rules and algorithms, the strategist at Organization C encourages her newsrooms to focus on their own platform – their website. “This is the platform that we own and have full control over,” she explained. “It used to be that people put Facebook first and overlooked their own platform. The trend is now changing for sure. Don’t overlook your own operated channels and sacrifice that for social media platforms owned by companies that we don’t have control over.” Publishers’ evolving relationship with Silicon Valley-based social media companies, and the power that those companies have over how we consume information, will be important to pay attention to moving forward.

Chapter 7: Research Limitations

Quantitatively, the majority of the limitations of this study were due to the design of Parse.ly's website. The second time period was 20 days long compared to

the other periods that were 21 days. At the time of data collection for the second period, Parse.ly's website had bugs and the data was not downloadable. In addition, Parse.ly has a 30-day limit of collecting historical data. YouTube is a main source of news for adults and millennials according to previous research. However, Parse.ly does not monitor analytics of YouTube.

Even though the data collected through Parse.ly showed the top categories of news on social media and that they were consistent, effectively answering the research questions, the results would have been more dependable if Parse.ly's categories were constructed differently. According to a Parse.ly representative who the researcher spoke with on the phone, page views of articles could fall into categories and their subcategories, including more than one category. Because of this design, it is difficult to gauge the full accuracy of the results. For example, an article about the civil suit between CNN and the Trump administration in November could have generated page views for law, government & politics, the subcategory of law, government & politics>legal issues, and the category of news (media outlets). However, this does not detract from the fact that those are the types of stories that are being most viewed. Furthermore, since the analysis is looking at millions of page views, a little bit of overlap may not have had much of an impact on the results.

Yet a series of category and sub-category changes could be recommended to Parse.ly so that their data could be better analyzed. For example, the subcategory of law, government & politics>politics does not make sense. Subcategories of style & fashion, like style & fashion>clothing and style & fashion>fashion also became repetitive. However, other categories of news could be better analyzed with additional subcategories. For example, health & fitness was a popular category on all of the top

five social media platforms that were analyzed in this study, but that category is too broad. Are these stories about diseases, healthcare or gym routines? Most of the top topics on Pinterest that fell under this category were terms related to sex. But because law, government & politics stories dominated the top topics for Facebook and Twitter, it is unclear what types of health & fitness stories were popular on those platforms. Were they also related to sex, or were they more government focused such as articles on healthcare policy? Lastly, business news consistently made up the largest chunk of page views for LinkedIn, but there were no subcategories of business news.

Outside events also may have impacted the results of this study. As previously mentioned, President Donald Trump, the Kavanaugh hearings and the midterm elections likely contributed to a higher number of page views for law, government & politics stories than usual. The World Series may have also had an effect on sports news.

Qualitatively, this study interviewed only a small sample of professionals. Future studies could include a larger variety of media organizations. Furthermore, the design for recruiting interviewees could have been more random. For time purposes, the researcher first recruited audience engagement experts in which she had academic and professional connections with in the Washington D.C. area. LinkedIn's algorithm also made the recruitment less random because it prioritizes connections between users. Finally, three of the four media organizations in this study were located on the East Coast.

Chapter 8: Directions for Future Research

Future research could expand the sampling period of the quantitative study. A full year of data divided into four time periods spanning three months each would provide a more comprehensive look at what types of news stories do best on which social media platforms and how consistent that is. This would also help to gauge if outside events really had an impact on the number of page views. However, Parse.ly currently only allows up to 90 days of historical data collection for a fee.

The data downloaded in this study also included the total number of articles that were clicked on for categories and topics. While this data is not as useful in comparison to the number of page views, and since there is no way of knowing the distribution of clicks to article totals, the number of articles could perhaps be compared across time or by platform in a separate study. Finally, future research could also compare additional traffic referrals like search engines – the biggest driver of traffic – to provide insight into whether the same types of stories on social media are popular in comparison. Or, studying dark social traffic referrals could provide insight on the upcoming shift to private messaging.

Because the qualitative section of this study was designed to create a snapshot of trends on social media within newsrooms, future studies could test if these trends continue or change. Platforms are always evolving, and the next big shift for future research will be to analyze how the industry experiments with private messaging. Another area to consider is whether or not focusing on coverage that drives the most engagement is shifting newsrooms' attention away from their watchdog role and from

reporting harder, investigative news. Another key question is whether or not the shift to emotional posts endangers journalists' transparency and objectivity.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Social media is becoming an increasingly significant medium for news consumption in the U.S. A growing number of Americans are reading news on these platforms as journalists are experimenting with and honing strategies to increase engagement. Nationwide trends show that articles on topics of law, government & politics are most consumed on both Facebook and Twitter. Health and fitness stories are the second most clicked stories on Facebook, and sports are the second most popular category on Twitter. Americans utilize Pinterest to access articles on food & drink and style & fashion. Business news dominates LinkedIn, while Instagram is still a growing platform that has not found a nationwide niche, besides its video and image-focused format. In local newsrooms, human-interest stories are most successful on Facebook, followed by local development stories, according to interviews with social media strategists.

Social media is impacting newsrooms in a variety of ways. Programs that analyze metrics and monitor social media conversations are becoming an integral part of how newsrooms function. Most notably, digital teams are using social referral data to make editorial decisions, such as shifting their coverage to topics that their audience is more engaged with. Trainings for reporters and editors on how to utilize metrics is now a common practice among newsrooms. One of the industry's largest challenges is encouraging their audience to pay for digital subscriptions, and explain via social media why it costs money to produce news. Crowdsourcing content from

the audience is an innovative practice that is becoming common among journalists. However, quickly verifying that collected content is an ongoing challenge in the field.

Humanizing content on social media to drive engagement is one of the more prominent themes that emerged from this research. Strategists interviewed for this study concurred that human-interest stories perform the best on Facebook, the most utilized platform. They also said that they have shifted their coverage based on social referral data, including a shift to more humanizing content. Political divisiveness has been prevalent on social media in recent years, leading some to believe that consuming political news on these platforms can be toxic. Yet this push for human-interest focused content counters that notion. Sharing and engaging with human-interest stories on social media is a way to bring people together on a human, emotional level in various geographical locations instantaneously. But the long-term implications of a human-interest focused social media strategy remain unclear. A shift toward sharing feel-good videos on social media instead of hard-hitting stories on political candidates could seriously impact our democracy. Political misinformation is already a huge problem on social media, based on news reports following the 2016 and 2018 elections. To exacerbate that problem, Americans are not only using social media as a medium to consume news, but are increasingly relying on platforms as their only source of news due to news-finds-me perception. More than ever media organizations need to inform the electorate by promoting well-researched, accurate and in-depth political stories on social media instead of fishing for clicks from humanizing content. However, these factors are also in part due to the industry's business model, in which clicks often equal survival. News organizations' business models, as well as their social media content strategies, need to be reexamined.

In addition to news organizations' content strategies, the control that tech companies like Facebook have on news dissemination can significantly affect our civil sphere and democracy. This became apparent in the last presidential election, when fake news stories on candidates went viral and debatably impacted its outcome. "The election result has highlighted how mainstream media and polling systems underestimated the power of alt-right news sources and smaller conservative sites that largely rely on Facebook to reach an audience," (Solon, 2016). This is just one example of how news on social media influenced voters.

It is unclear to what extent similar effects played out in the 2018 midterm elections. This study analyzed categories of news on social media six weeks before and six weeks after election day. Law, government & politics stories were consistently the most frequently clicked on the two biggest platforms – Facebook and Twitter – throughout the course of the study. However, articles on the two political parties were more popular than usual right before and after elections, according to Parse.ly, showing that news consumption about Democrats and Republicans on social media is still directly related to elections. News reports indicated there were large amounts of misinformation on Facebook and Twitter leading up to election day (Newton, 2018).

Due to the apparent ways that news on social media is influencing the political and civil sphere, the government is starting to take action to regulate these tech companies, including the introduction of legislation. In April of 2018, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified in front of Congress and took responsibility for his platform not doing enough to prevent fake news, foreign interference in elections, and hate speech. Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes called for a government break-up of

Facebook about a year later, claiming that the company, and Zuckerberg himself, has too much power on how we consume information (Hughes, 2019). In April 2019, Congress introduced the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act which would allow “news publishers to collectively negotiate with Facebook and Google for better business arrangements” (News Media Alliance, 2019). At the time of publication, the bill had been referred to the House Judiciary Committee. This legislation stemmed from platforms’ imbalanced relationships with publishers regarding regulation of content and advertising revenue. This study’s analysis on the shift of newsrooms encouraging subscribers as their main source of revenue, based on interviews with working industry experts, is evidence that publishers have struggled financially at the expense of these multi-billion-dollar tech companies. In addition, strategists described challenges keeping up with these companies’ control over news dissemination. For example, through a simple algorithm change, Facebook can affect a news organization’s traffic literally overnight. Participants in this study noted that newsrooms panicked at January 2018’s changes. Any government regulations that are imposed on powerful tech companies like Google and Facebook in the coming years will dictate how we consume information in the digital age.

Appendices

Figure 1.A

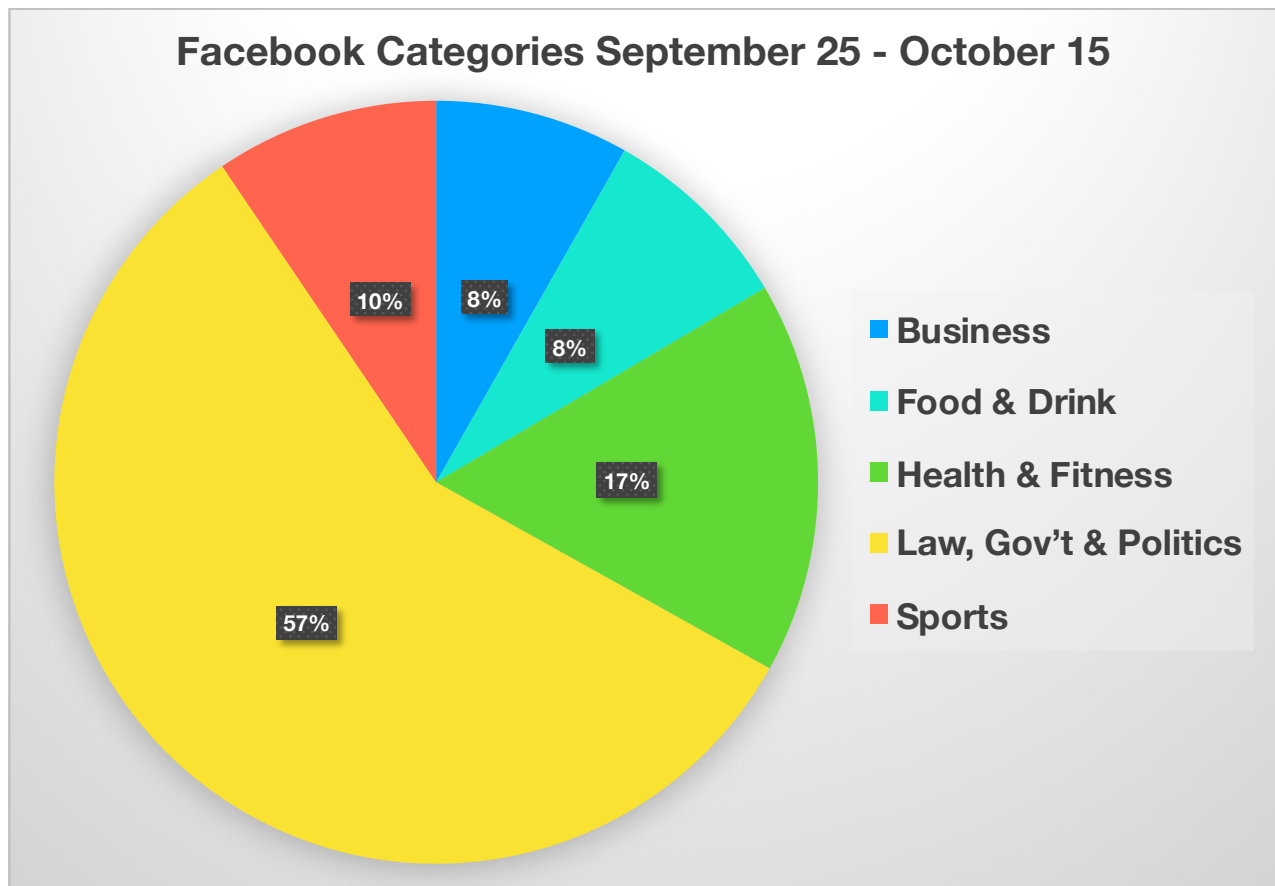


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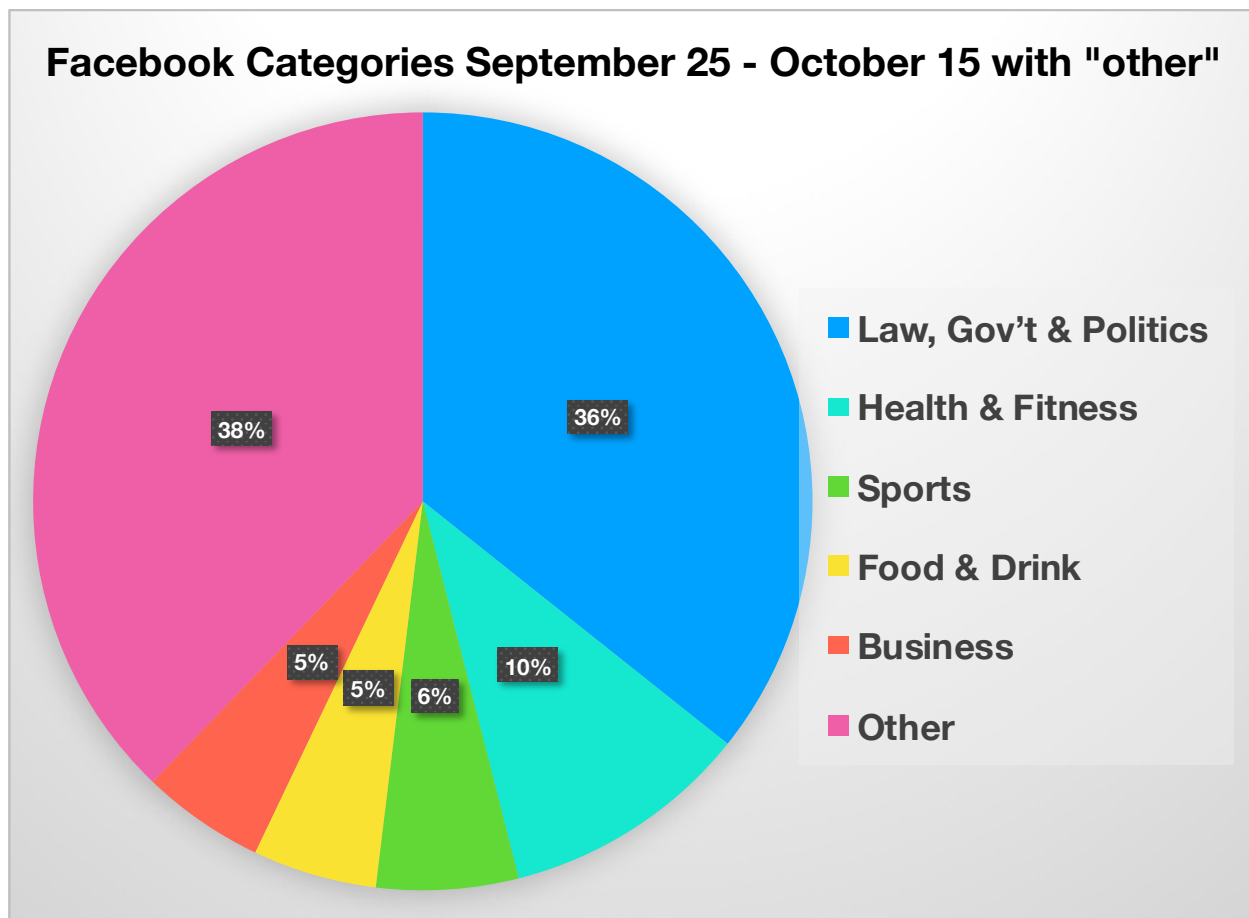


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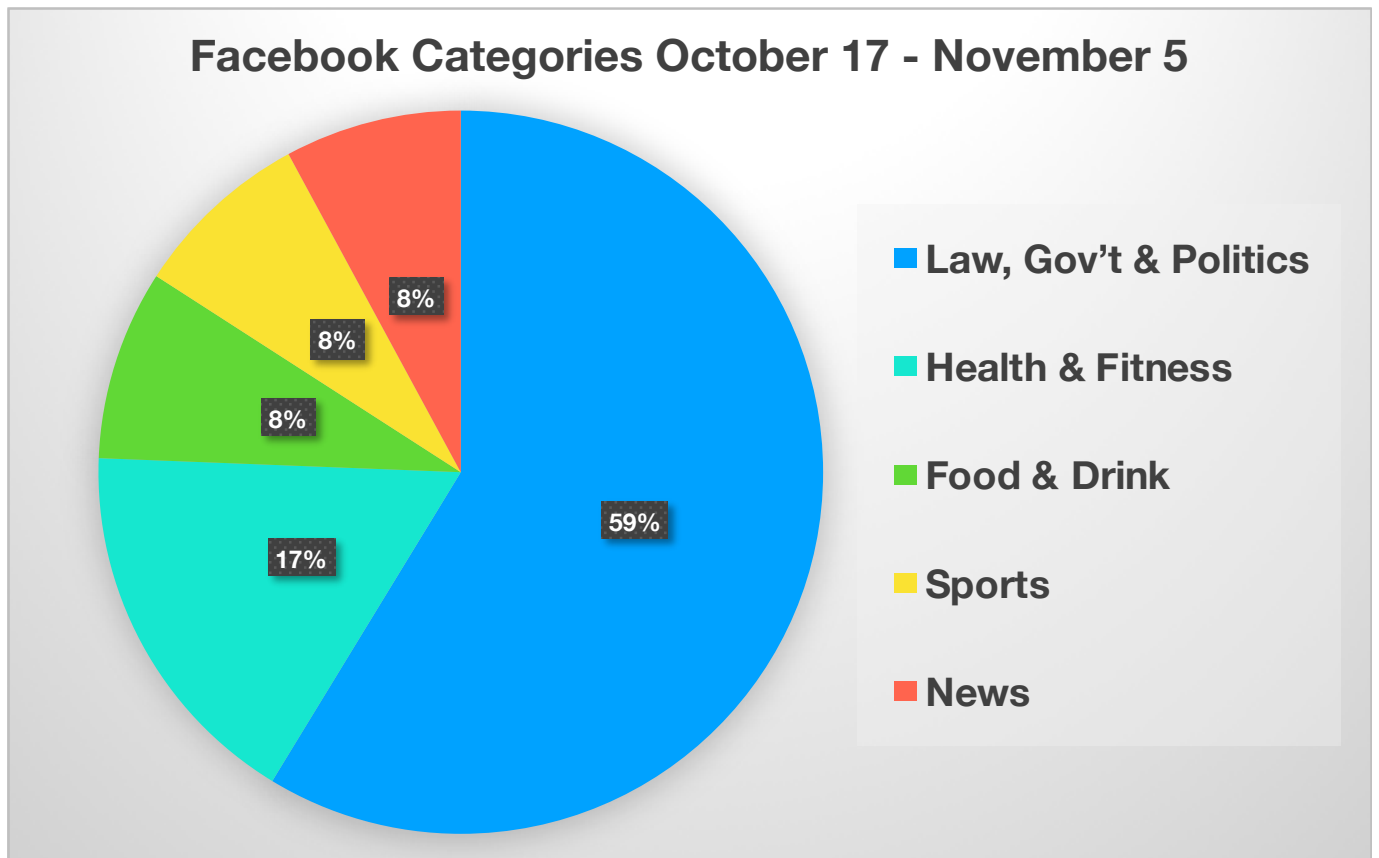


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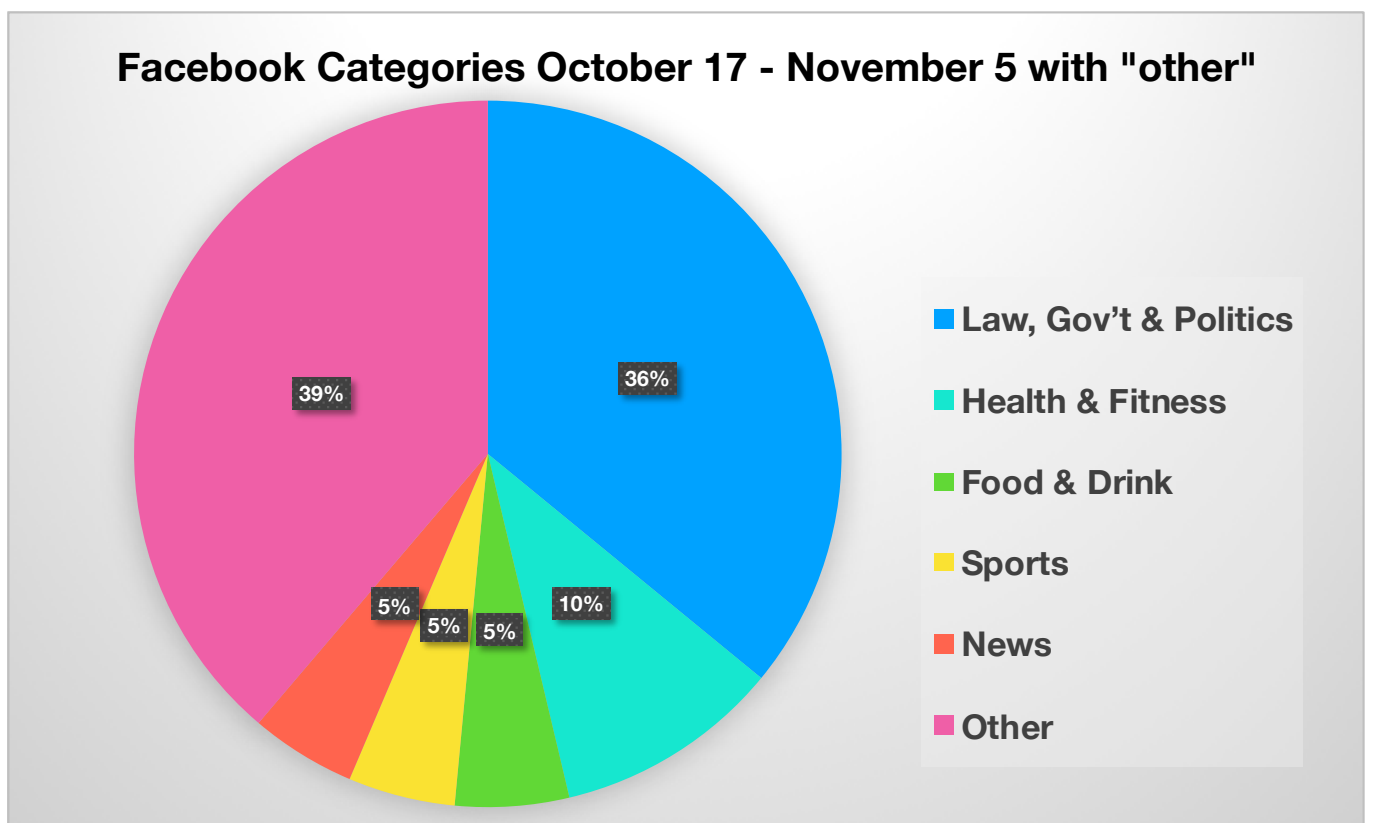


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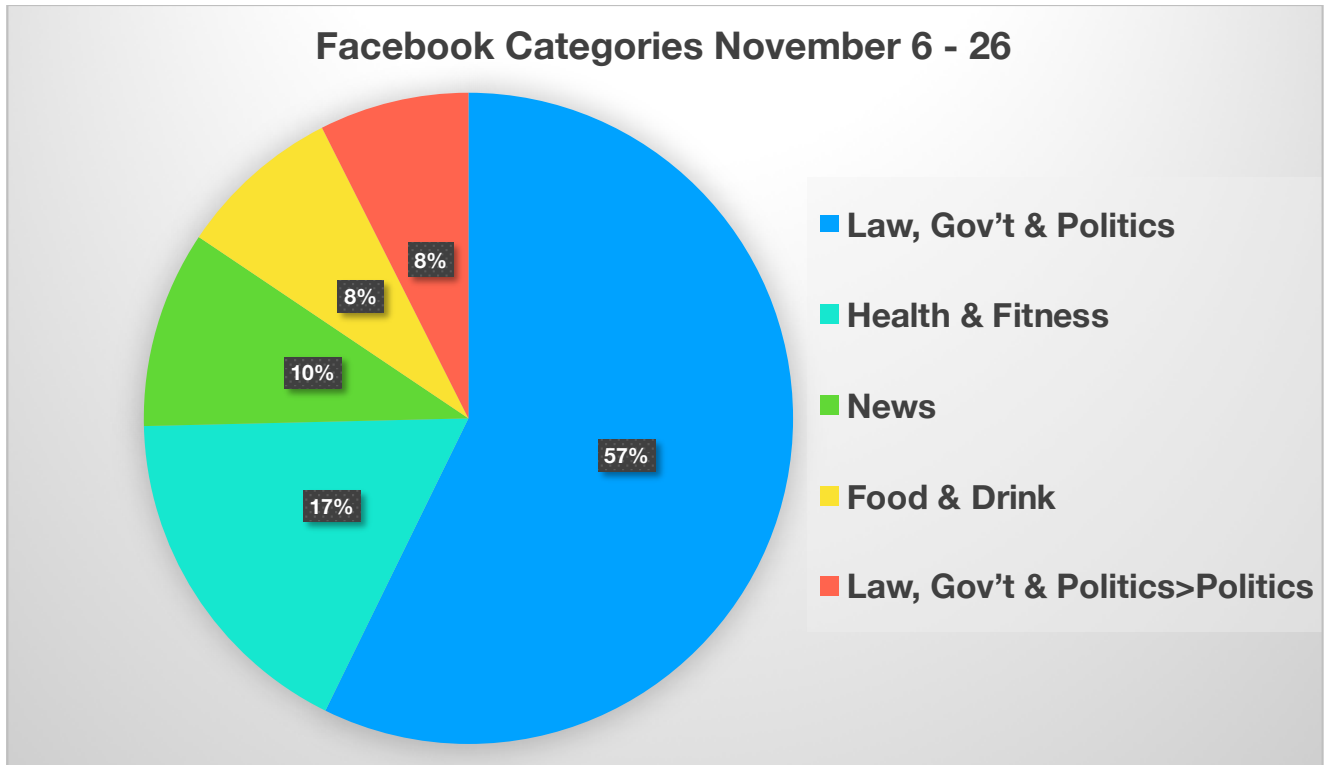


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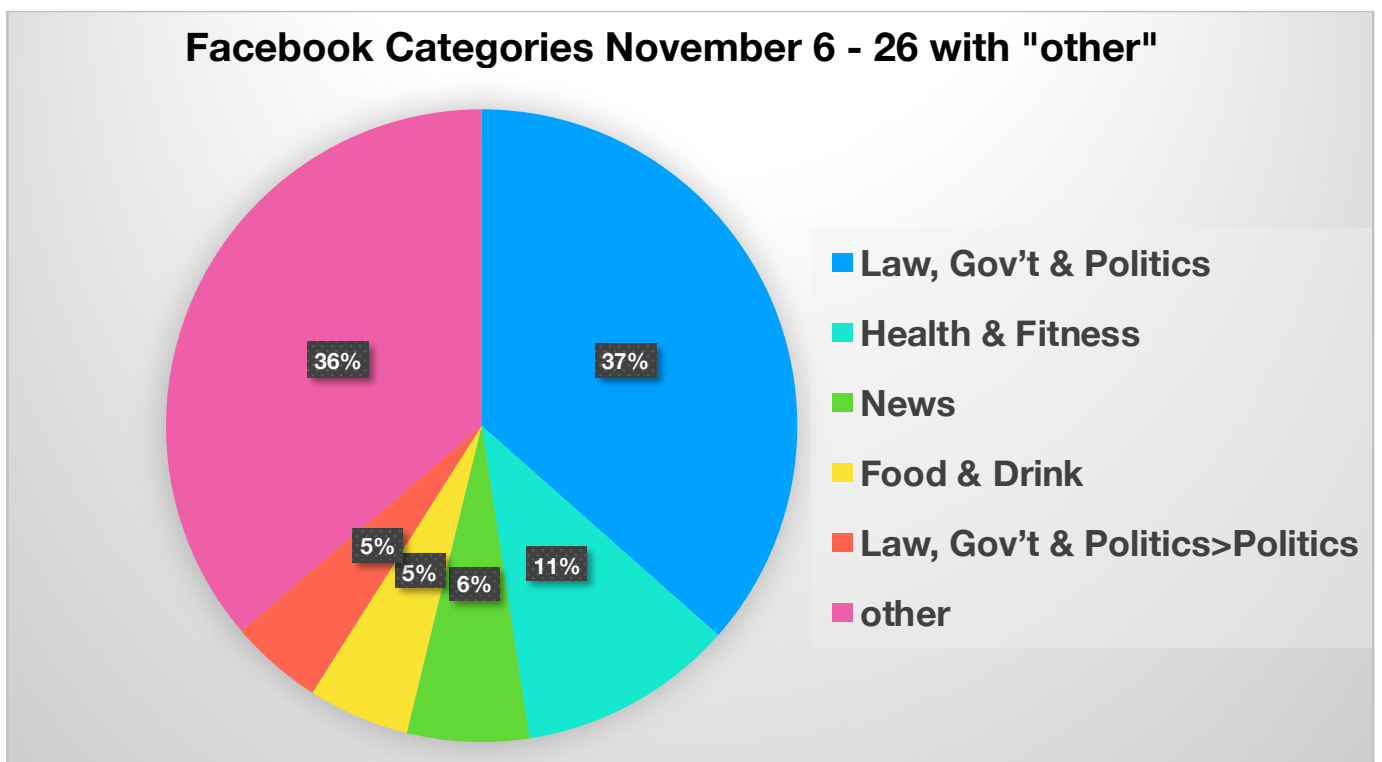


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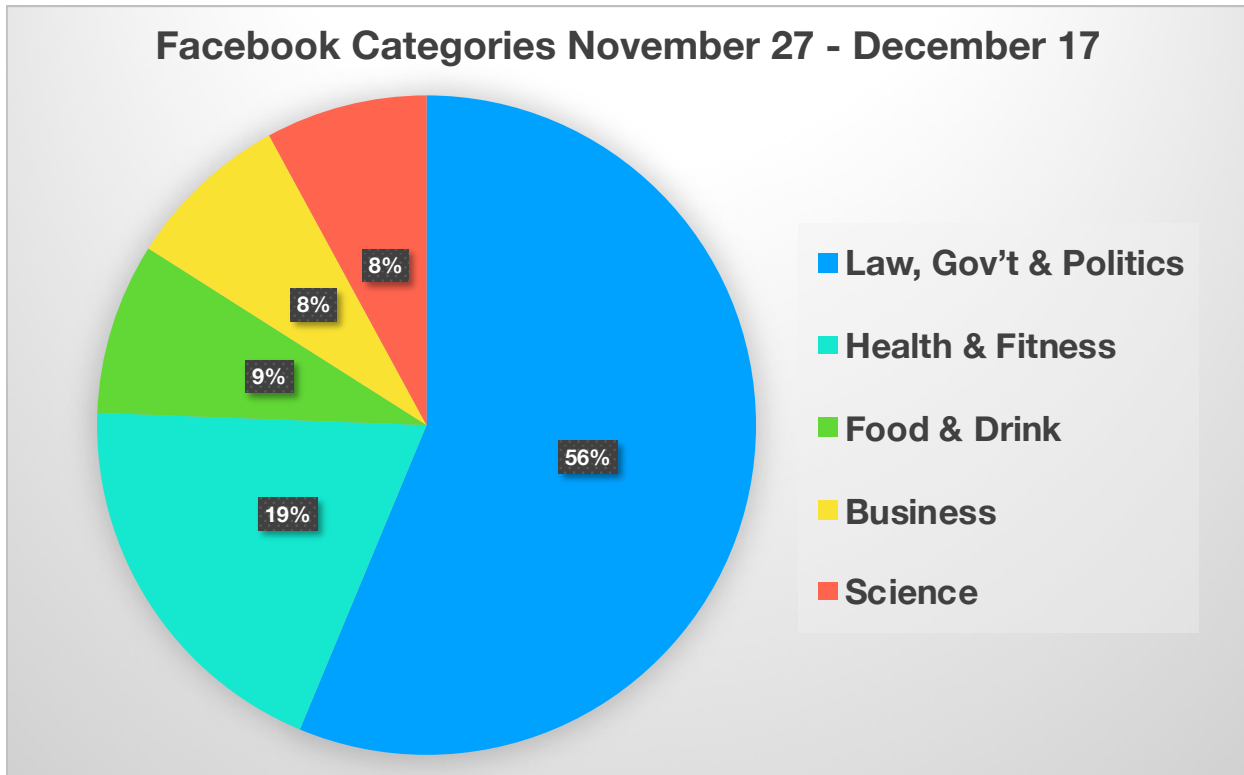


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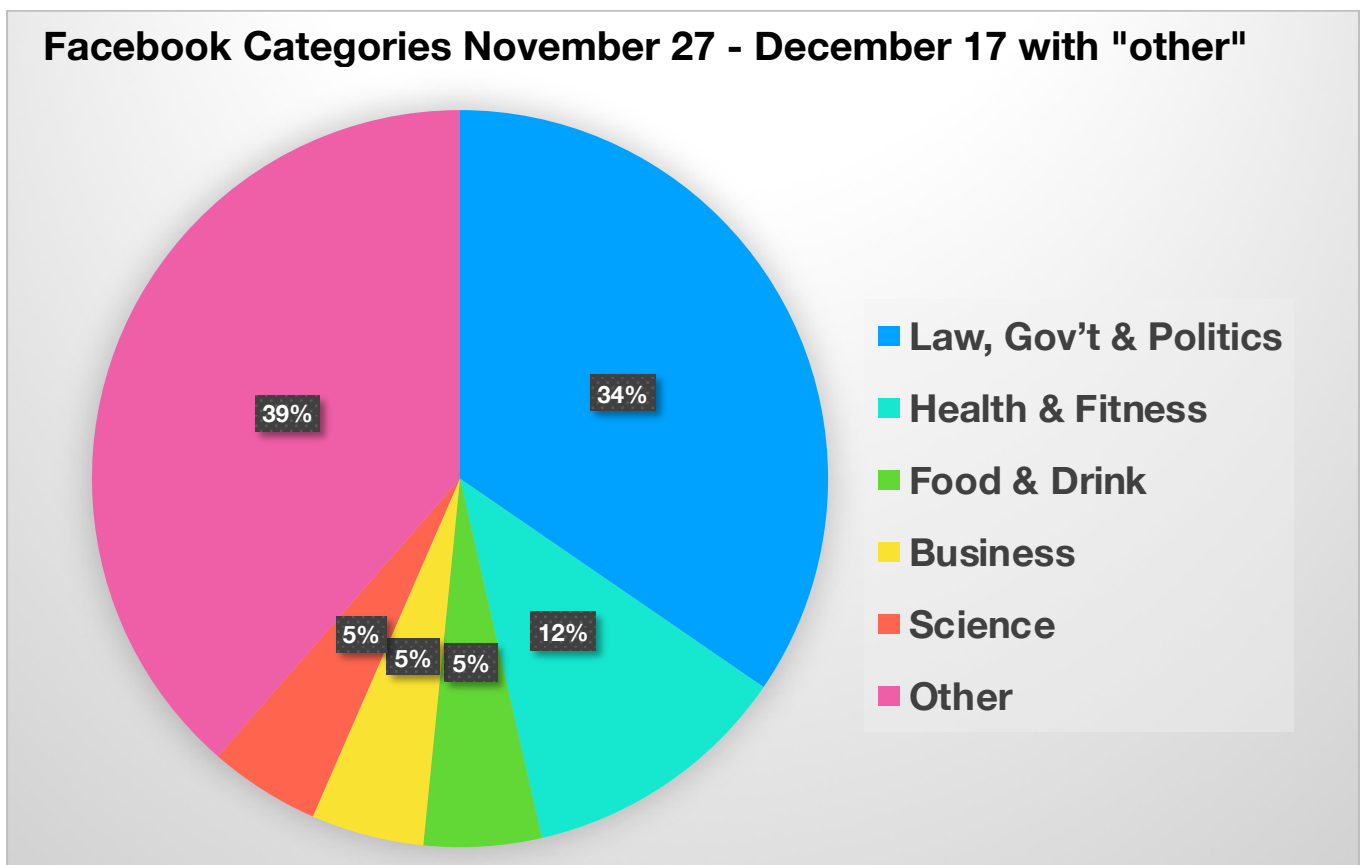


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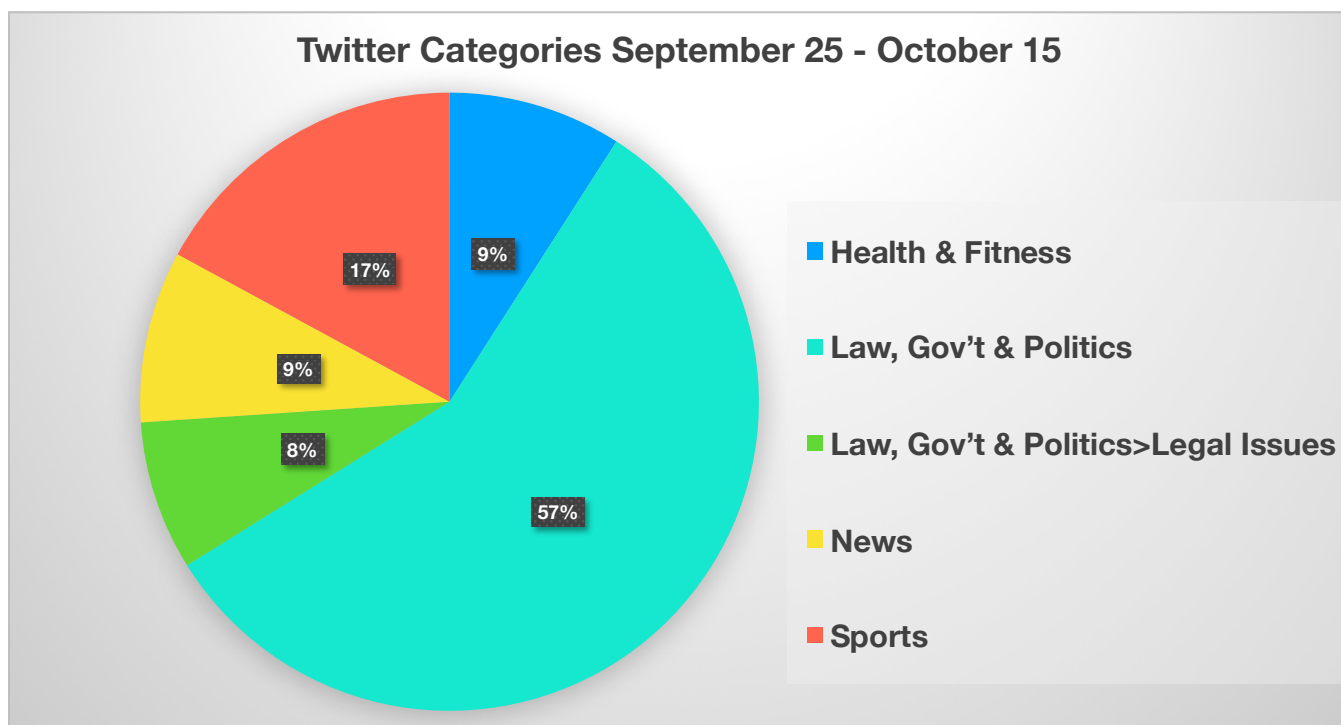


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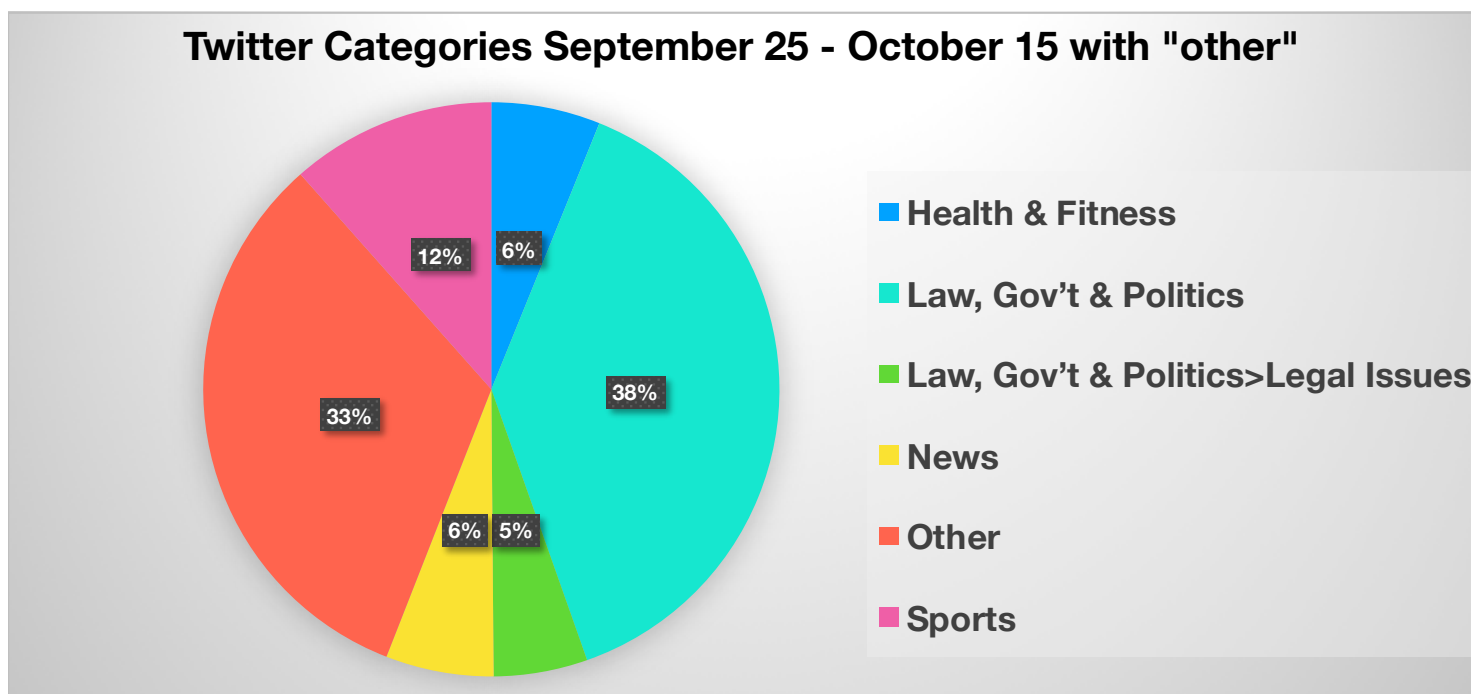


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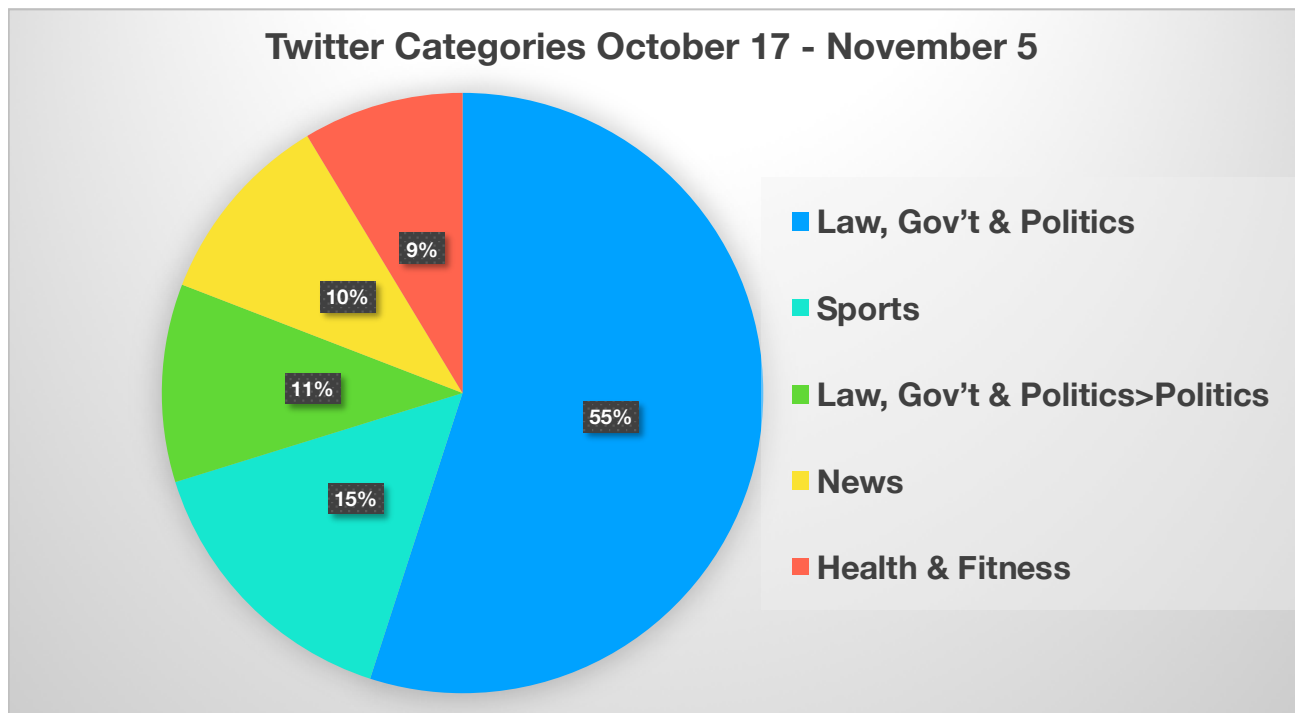


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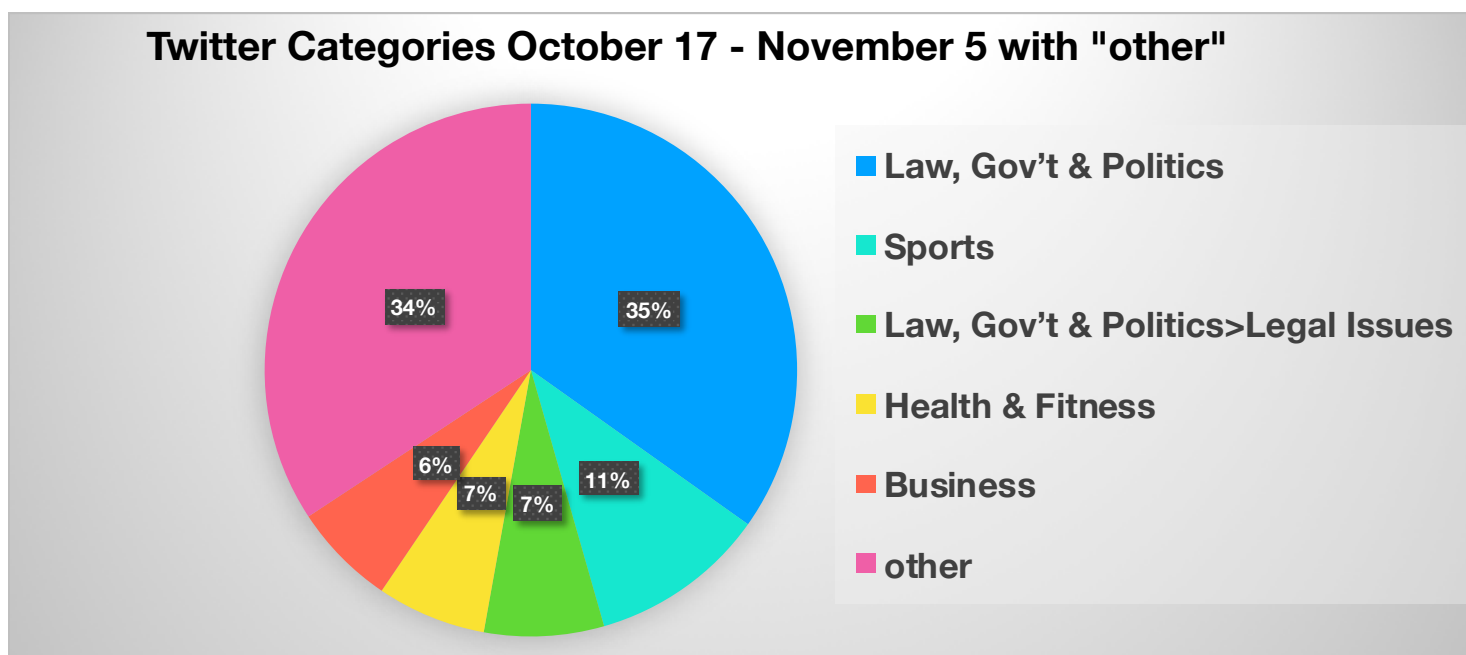


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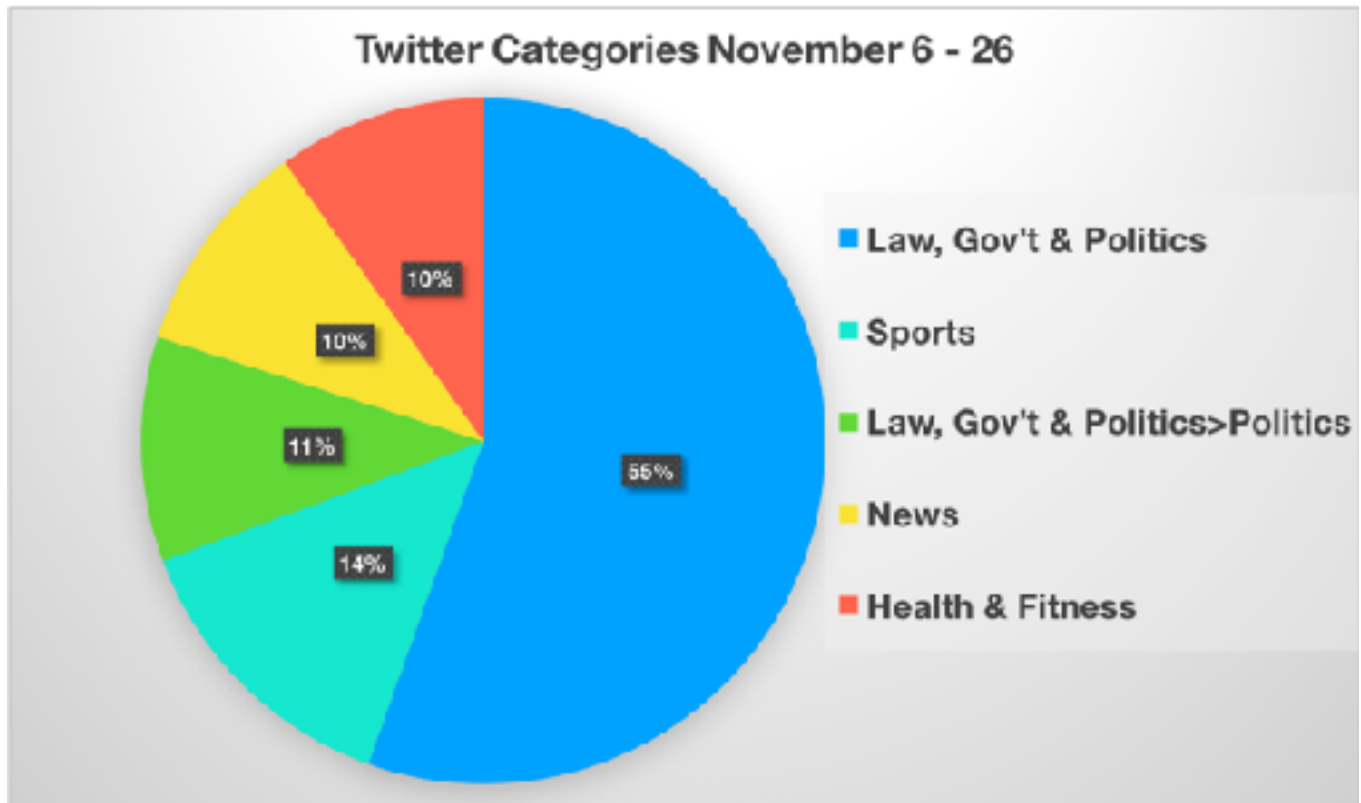


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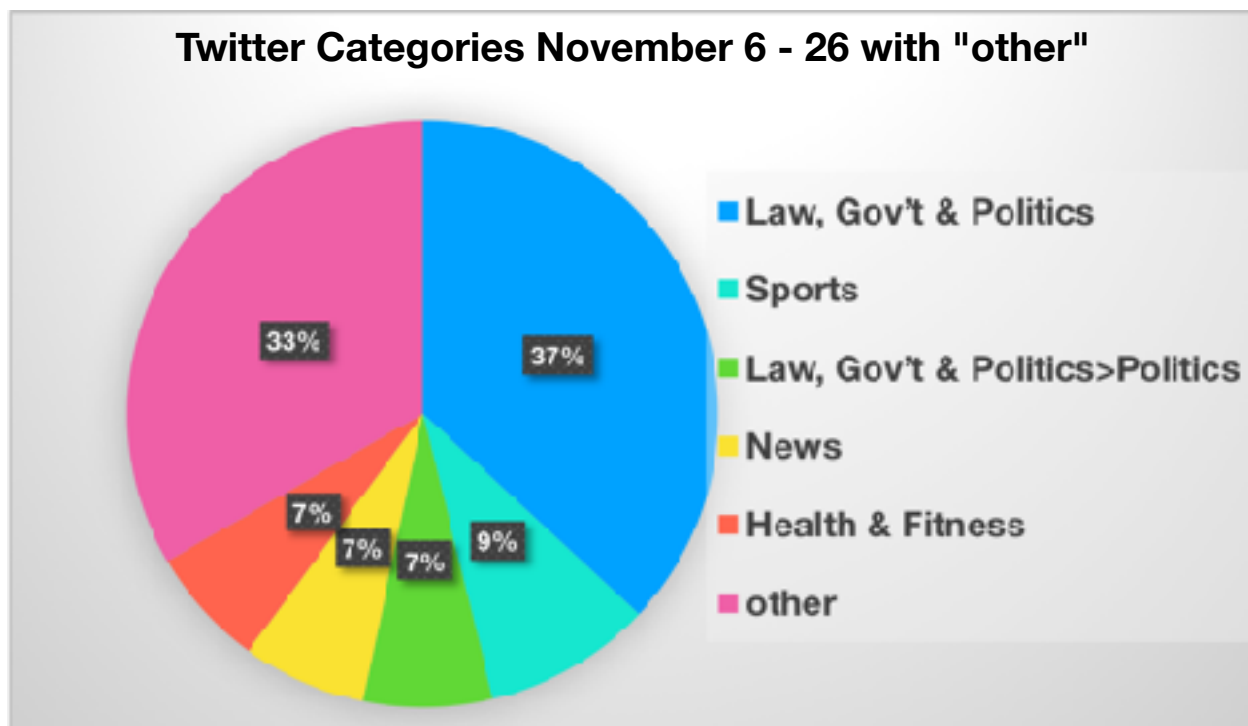


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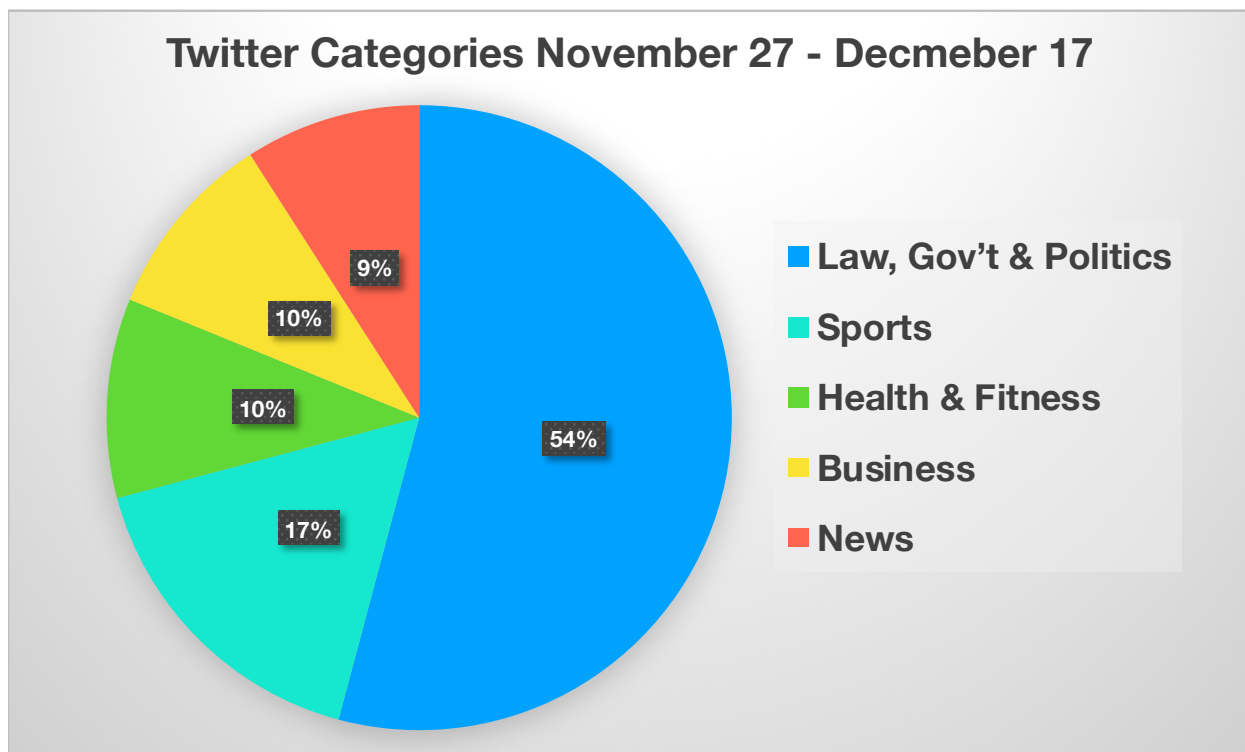


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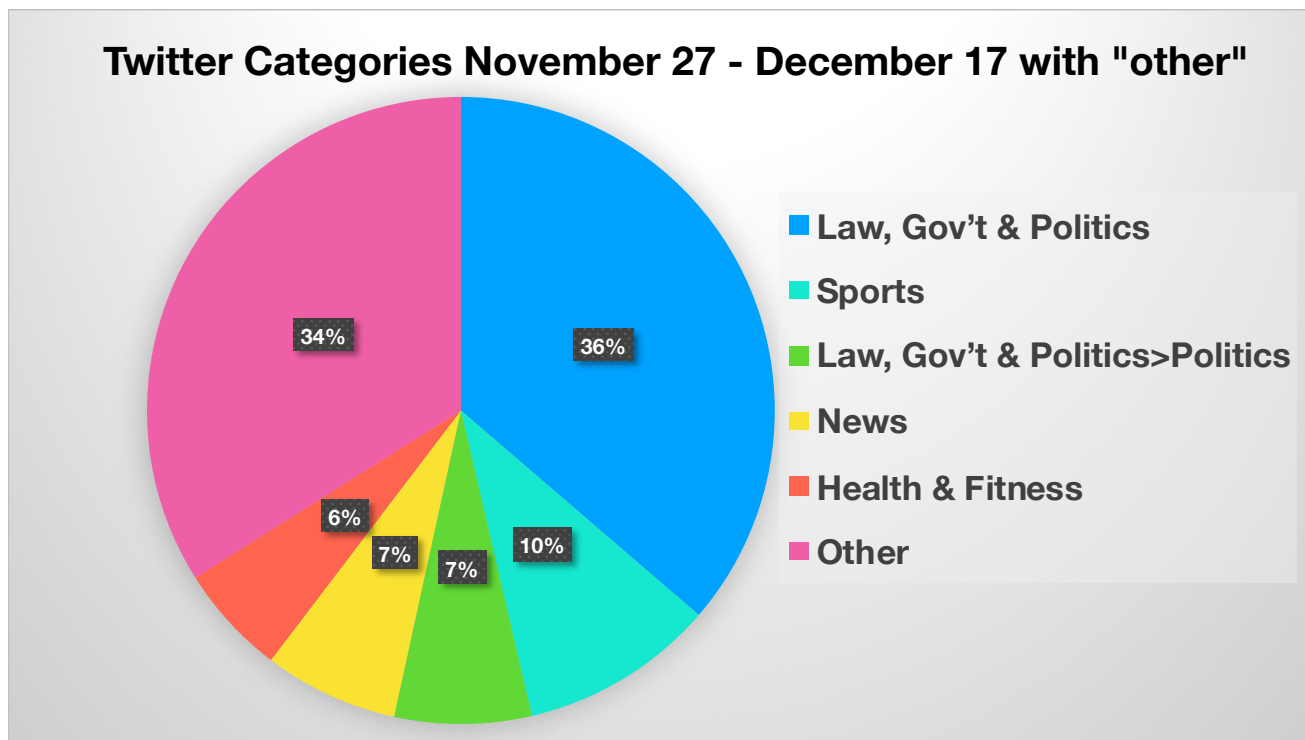


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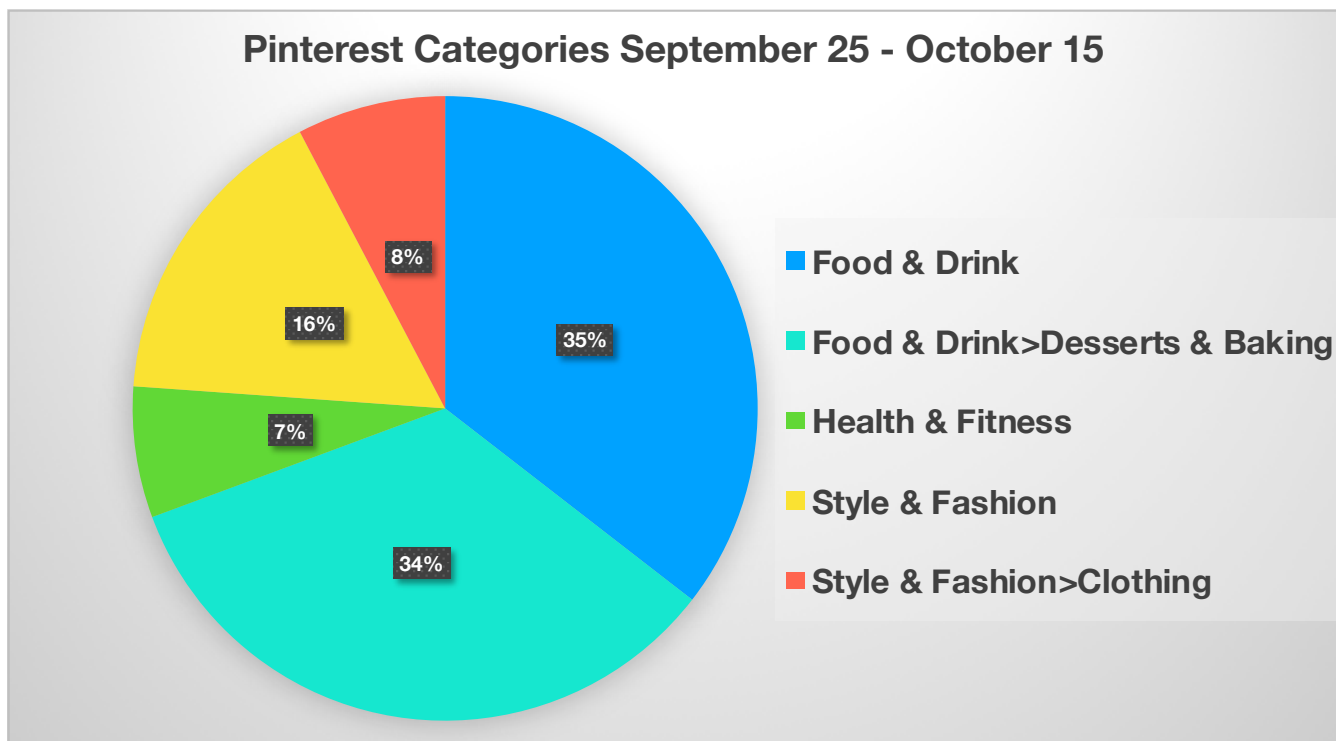


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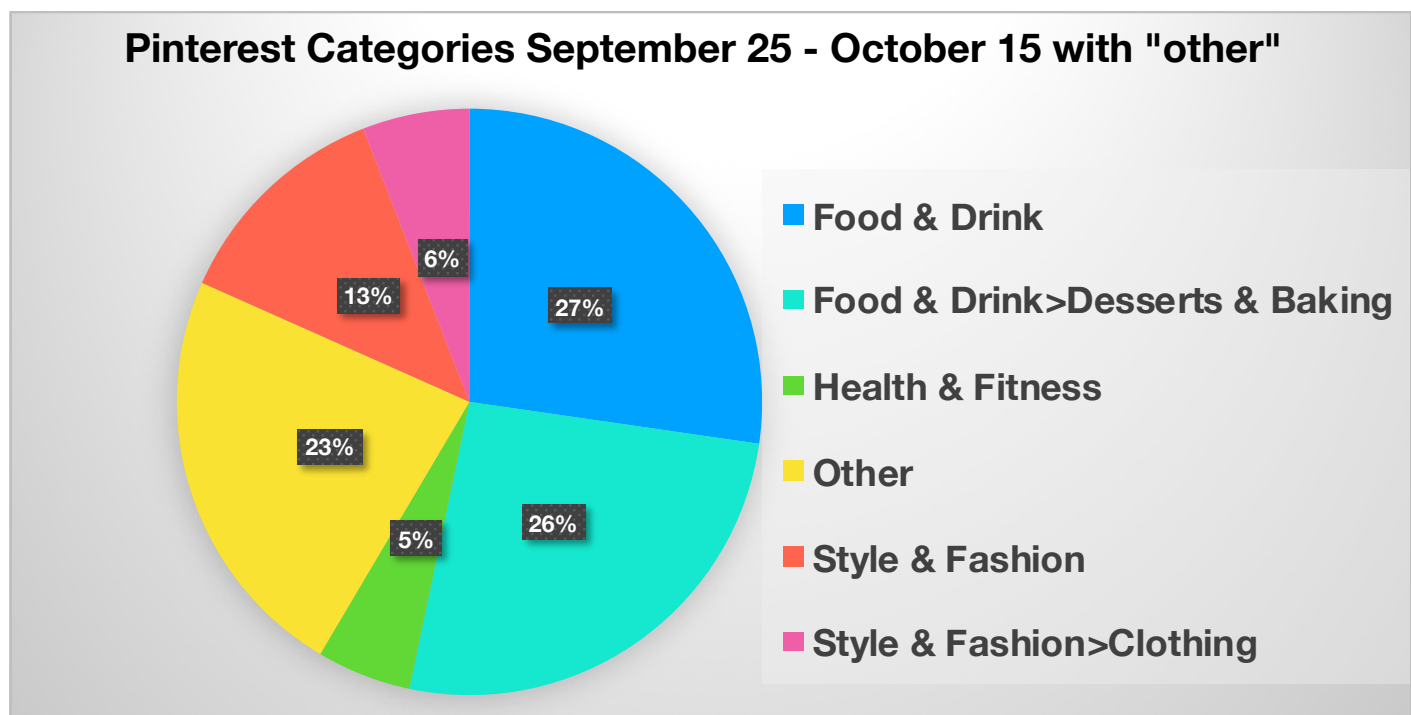


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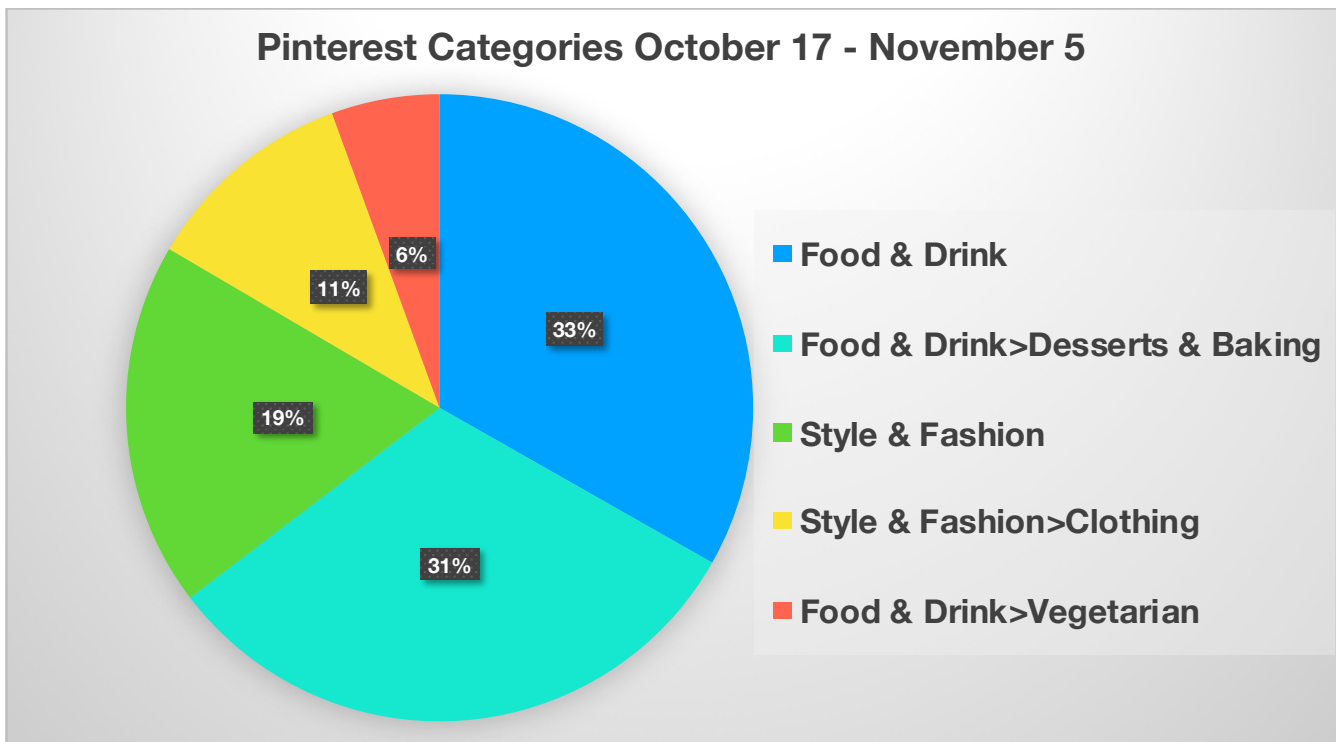


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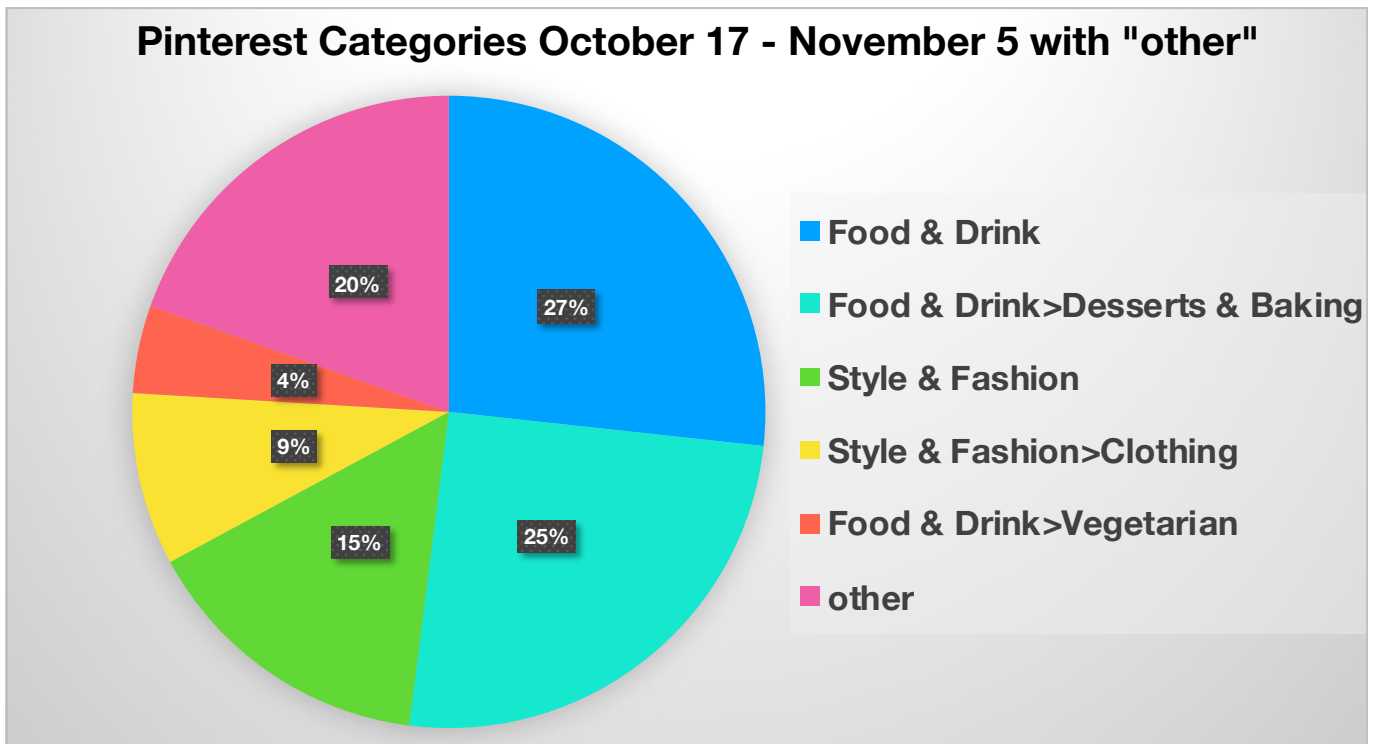


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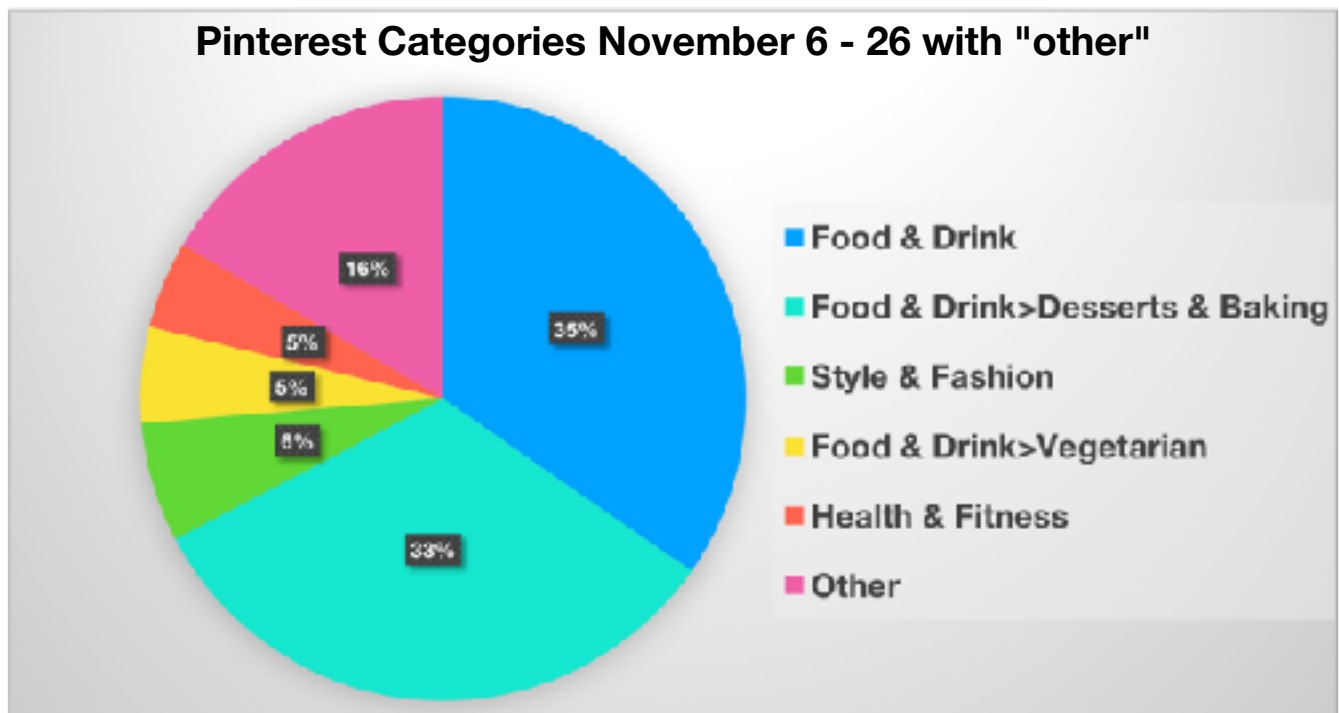


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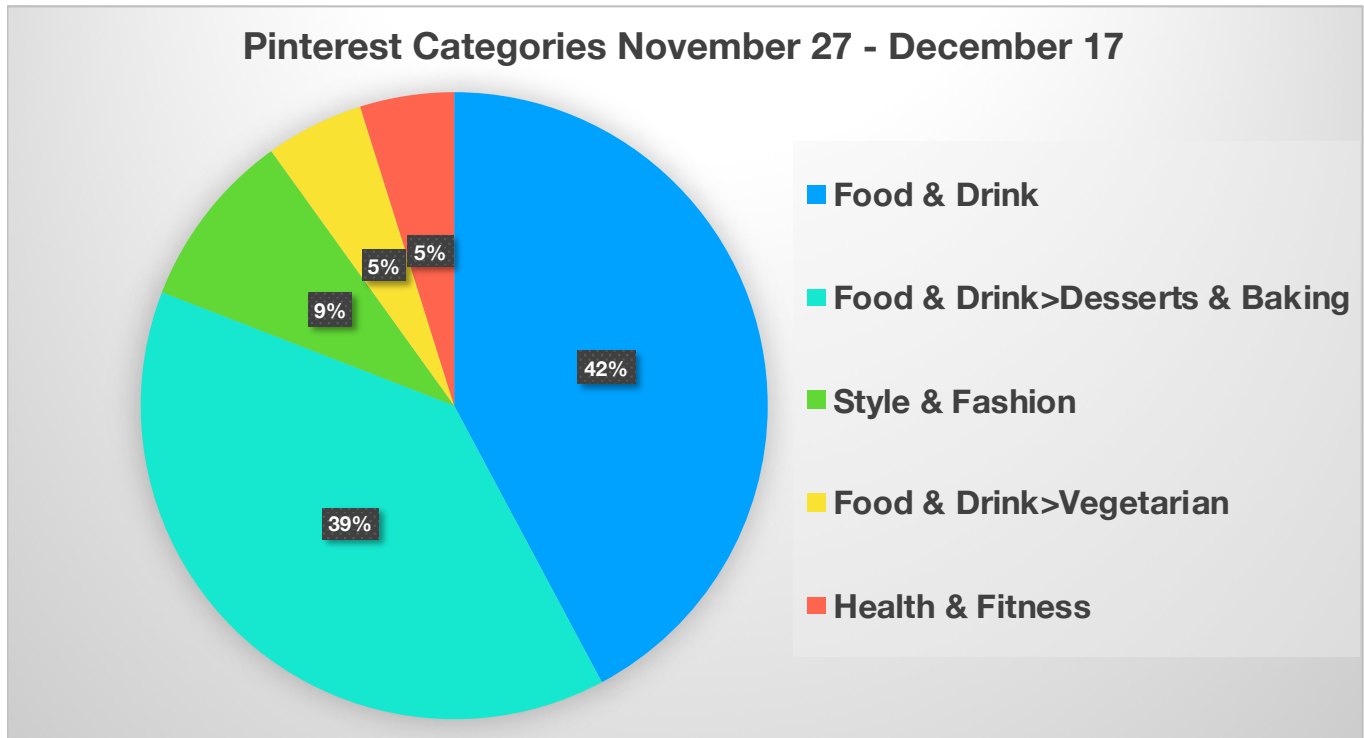


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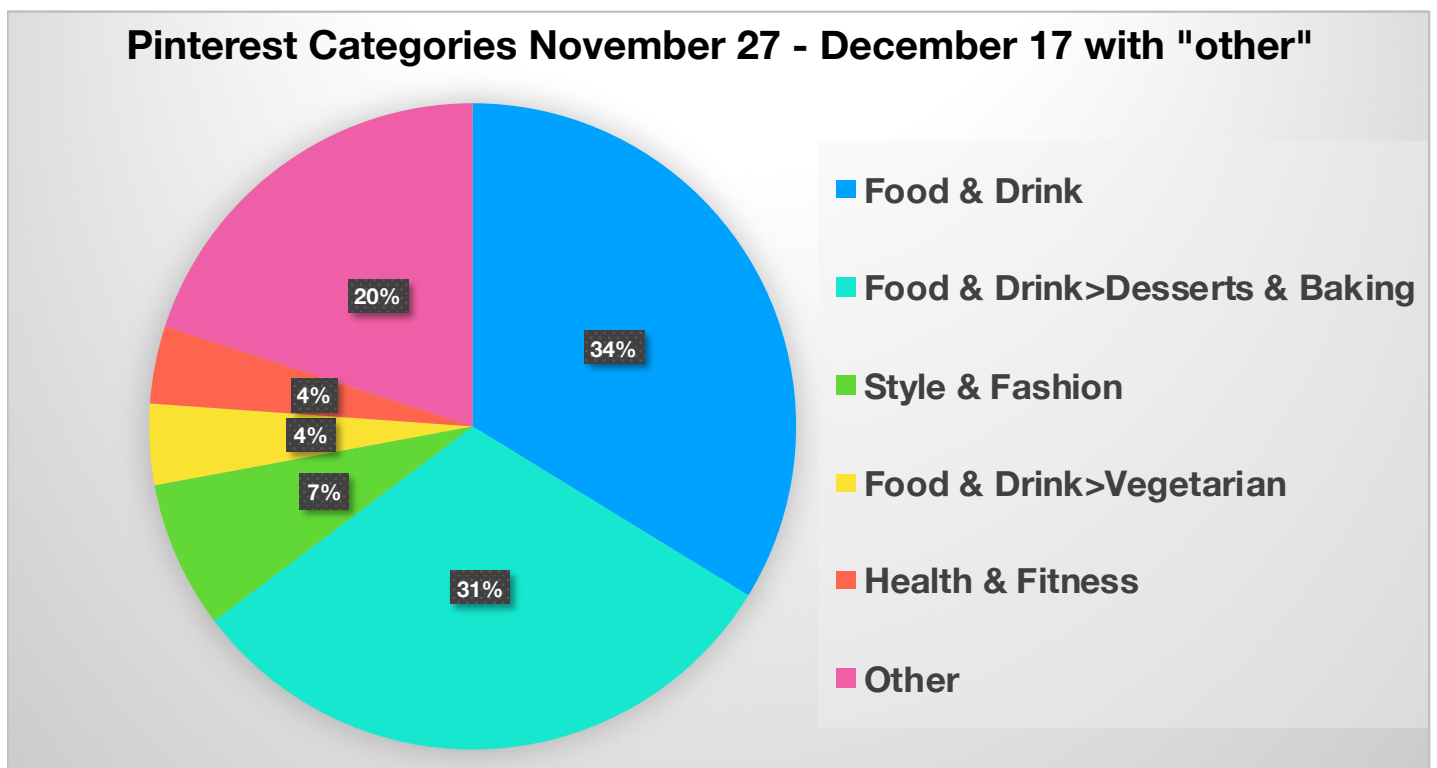


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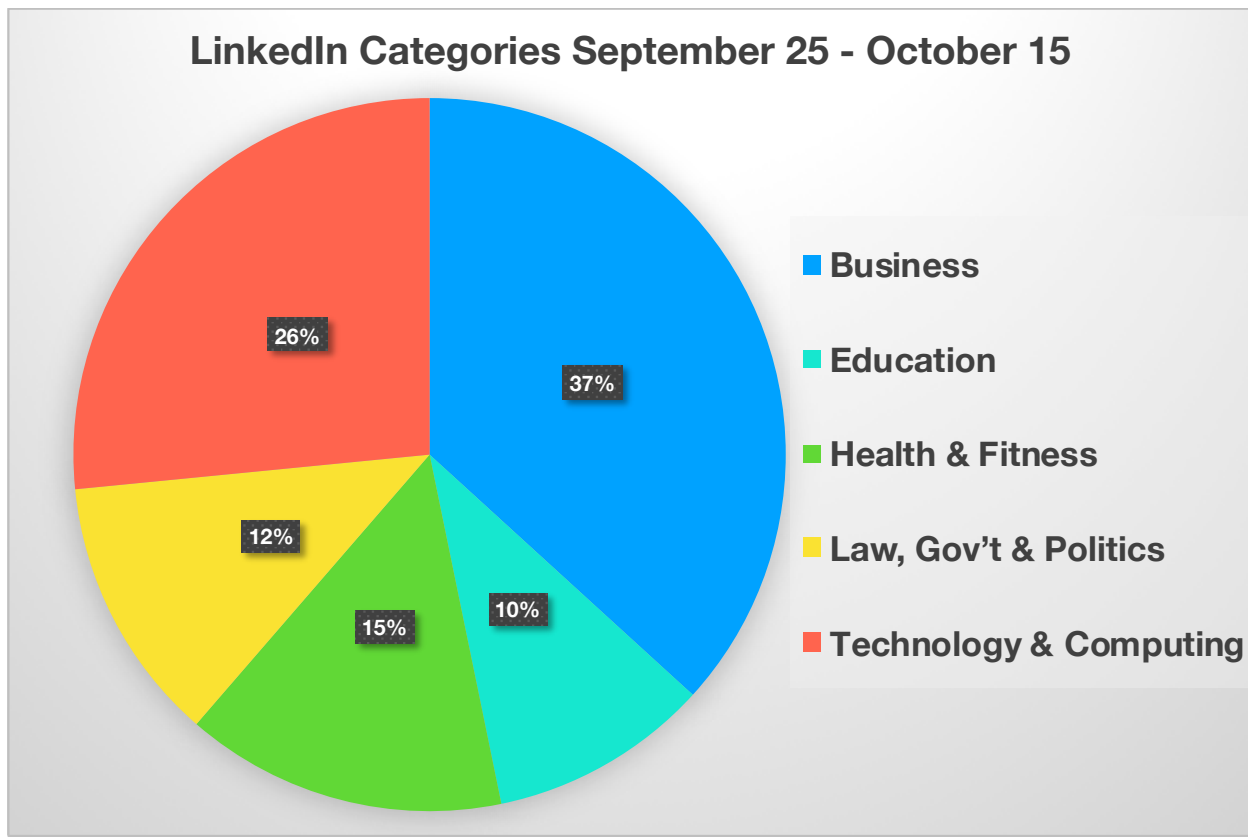


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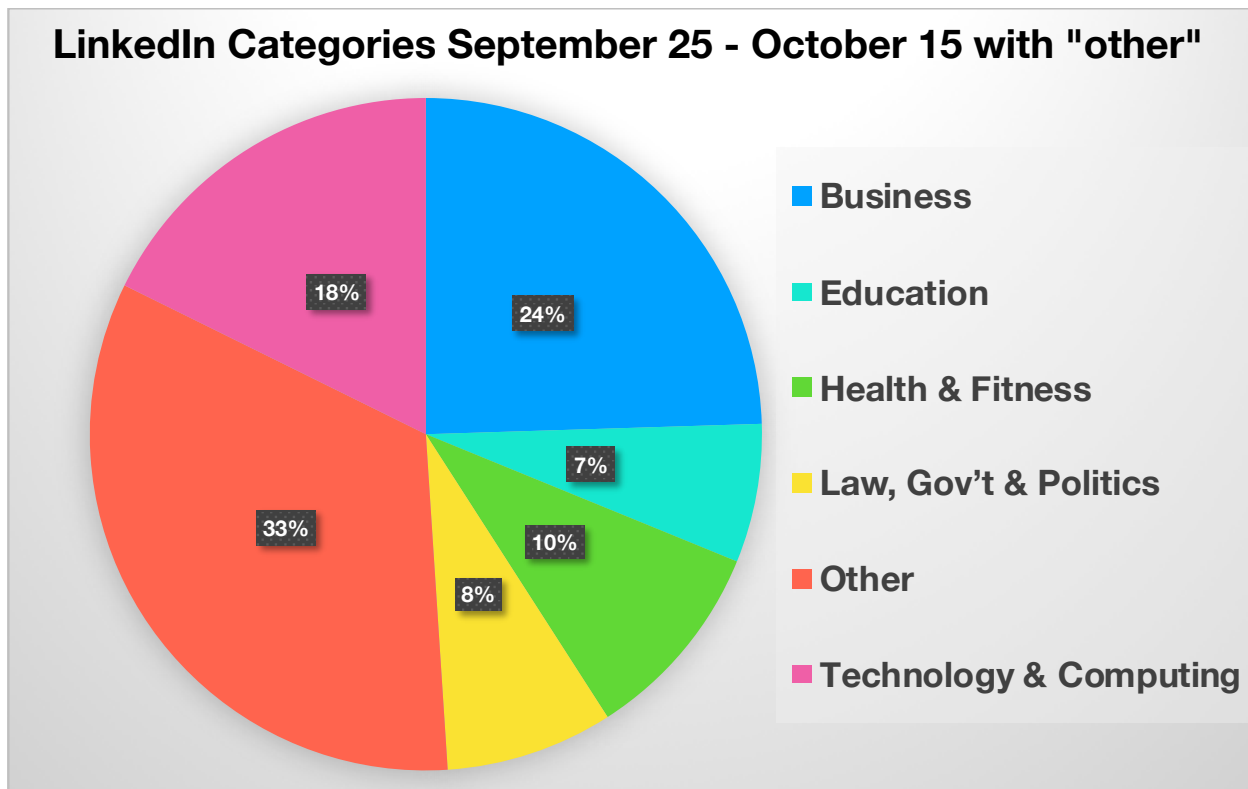


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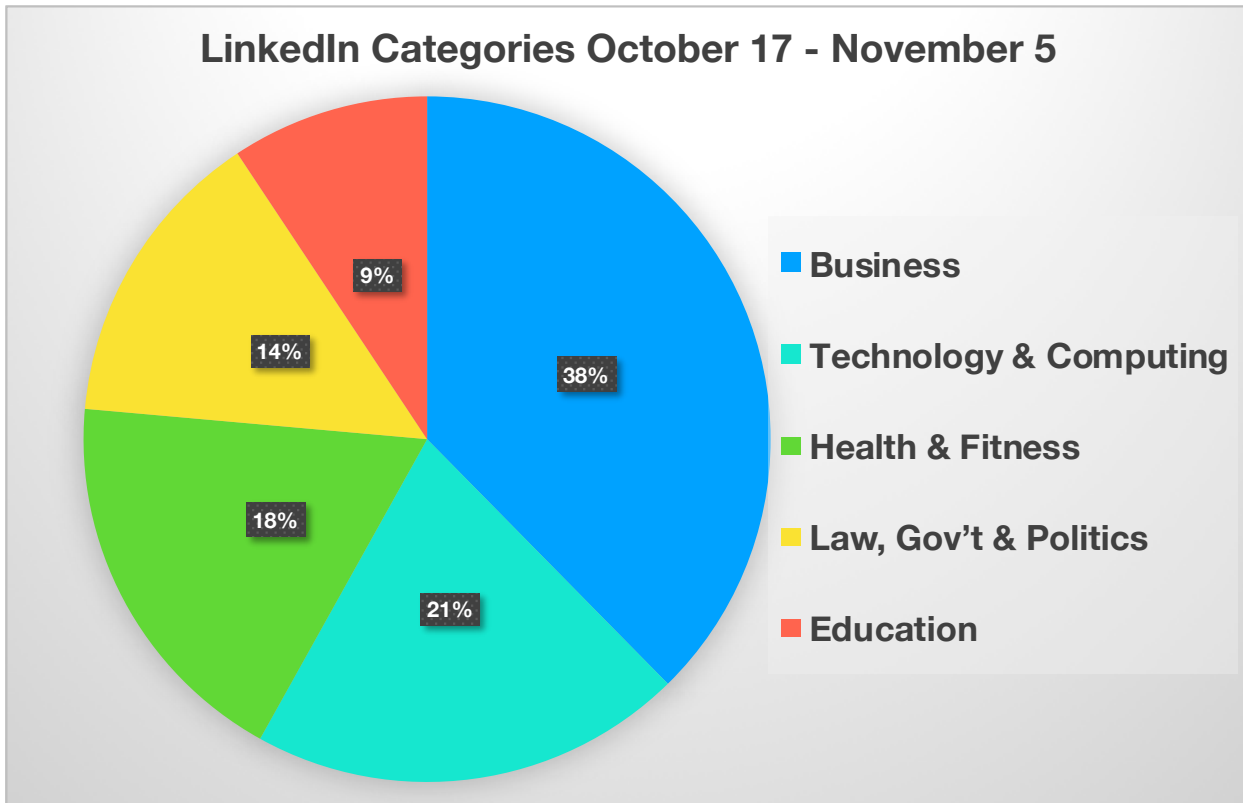


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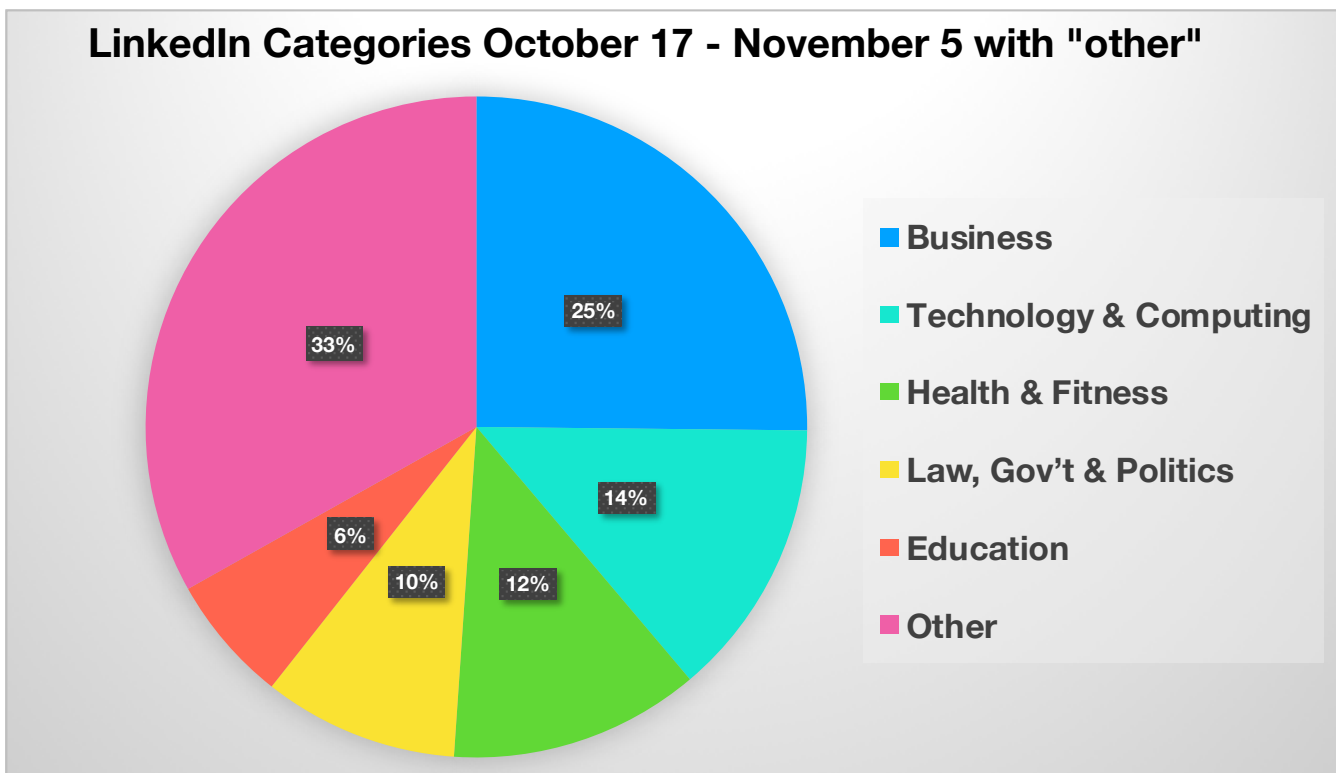


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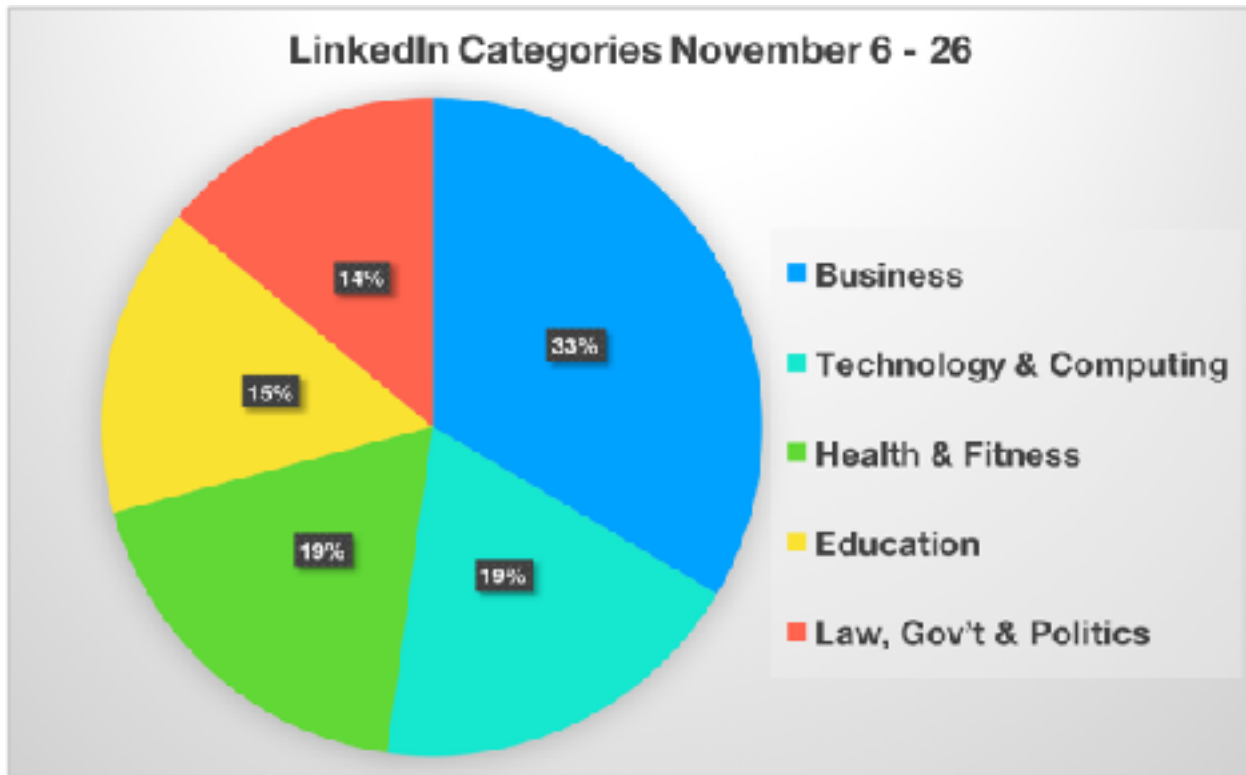


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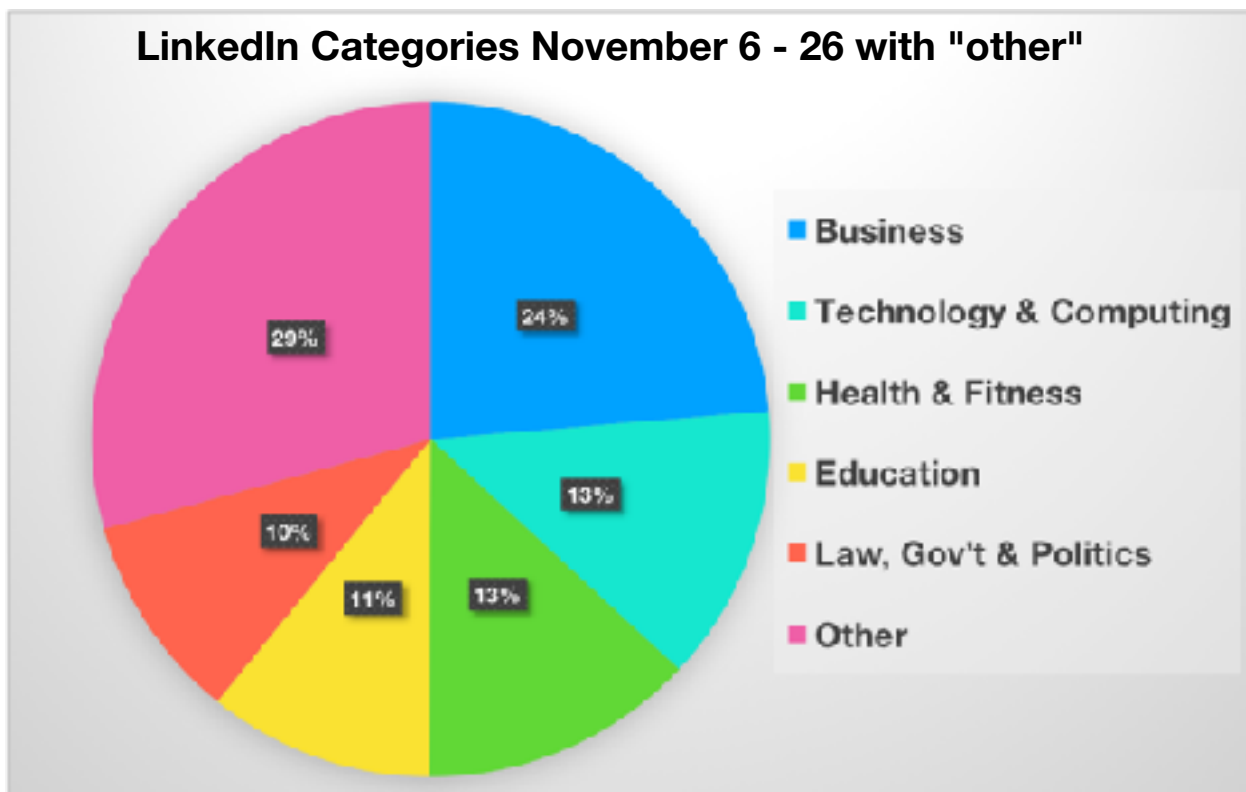


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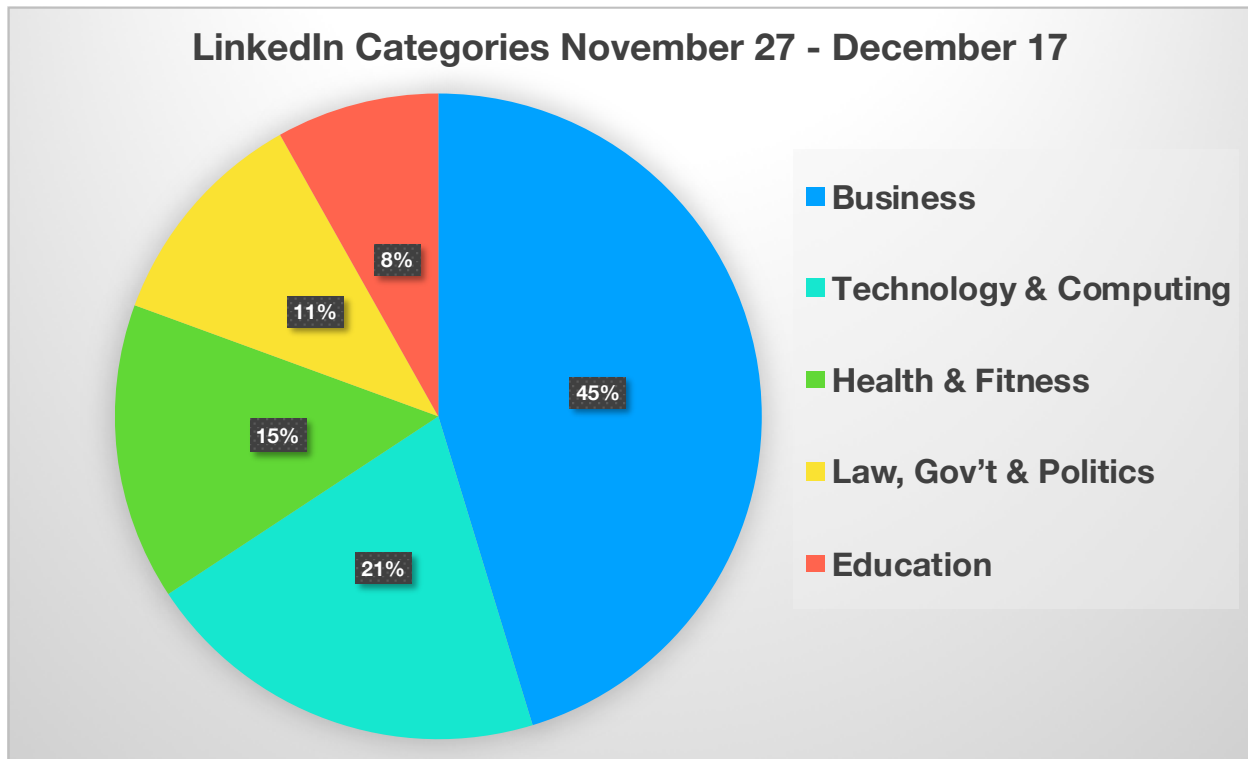


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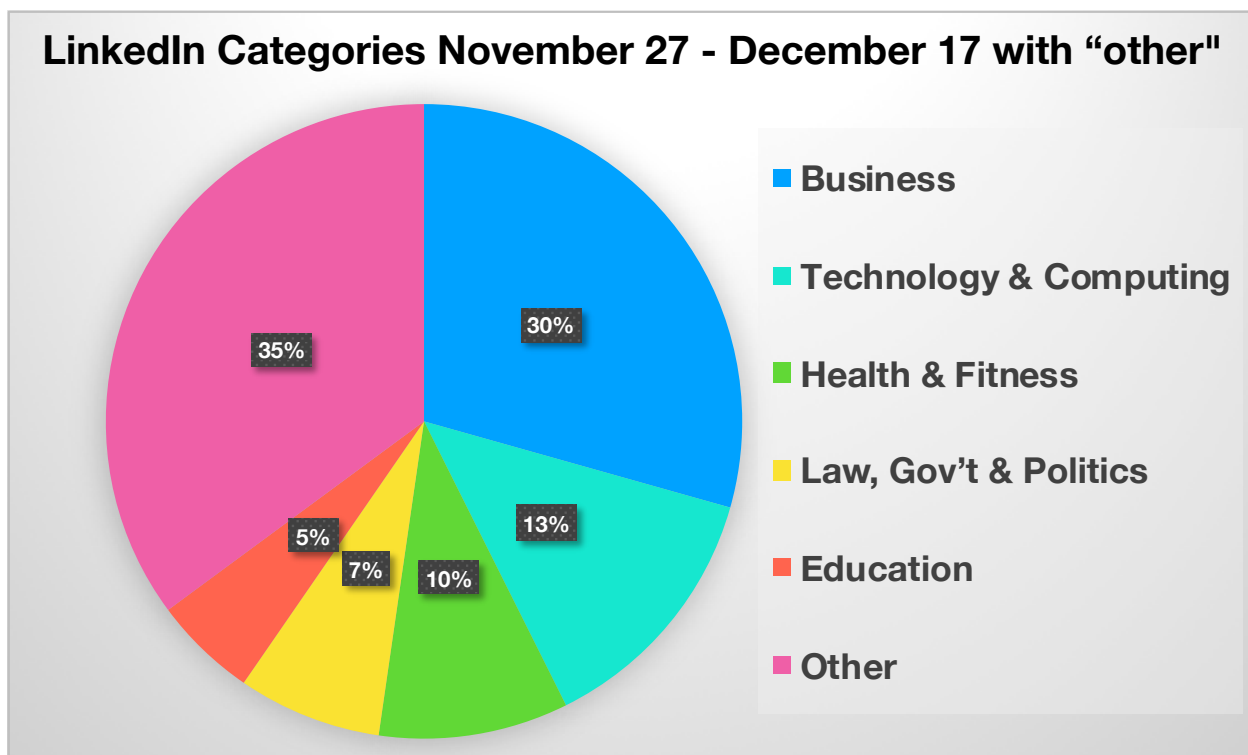


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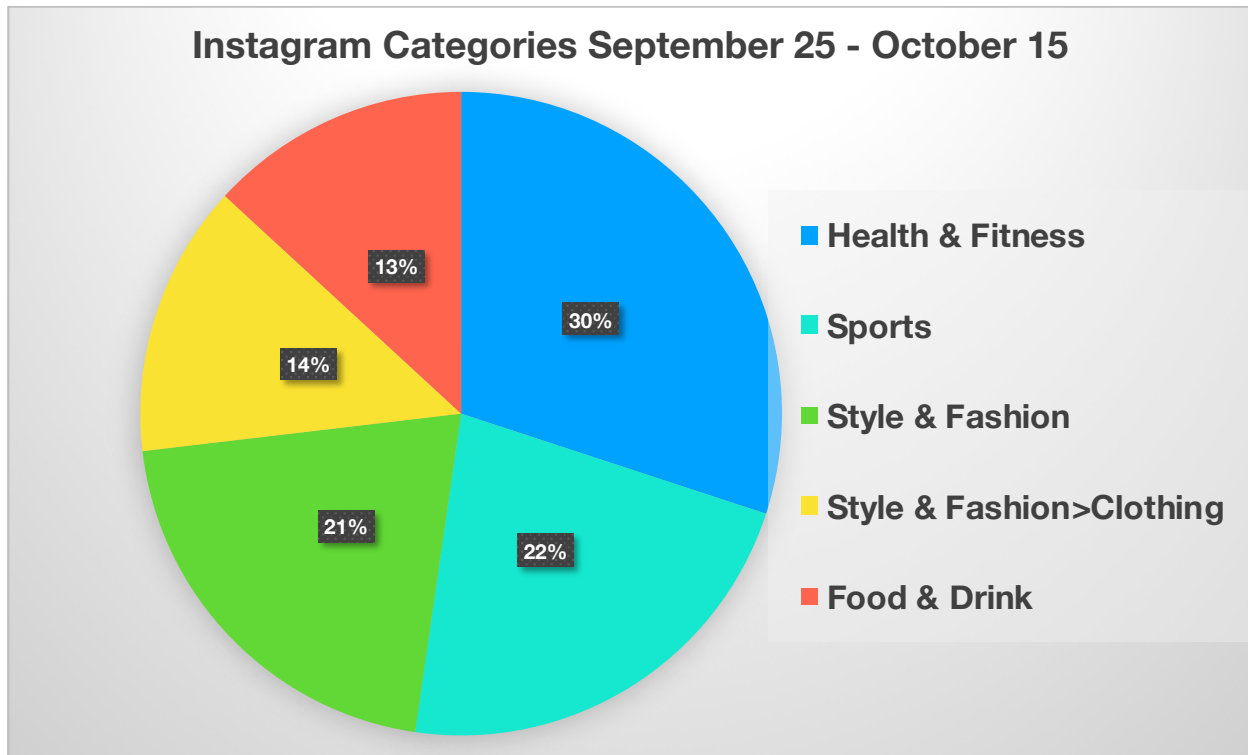


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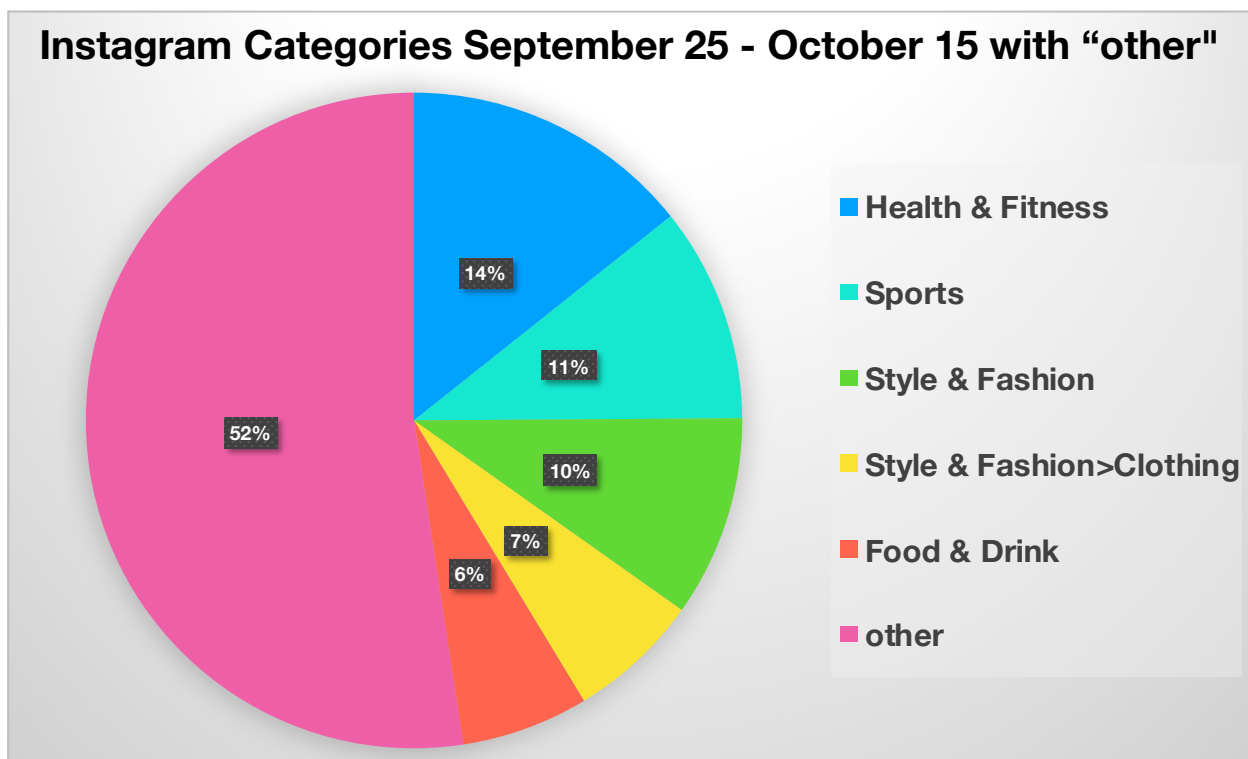


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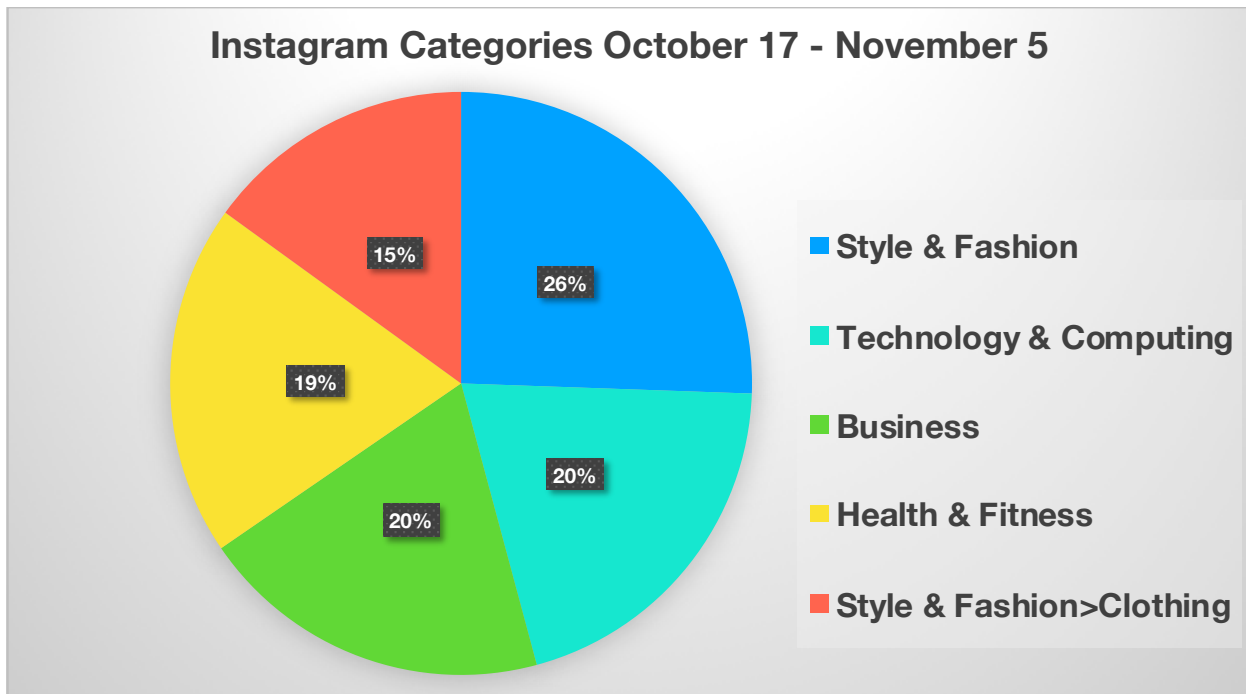


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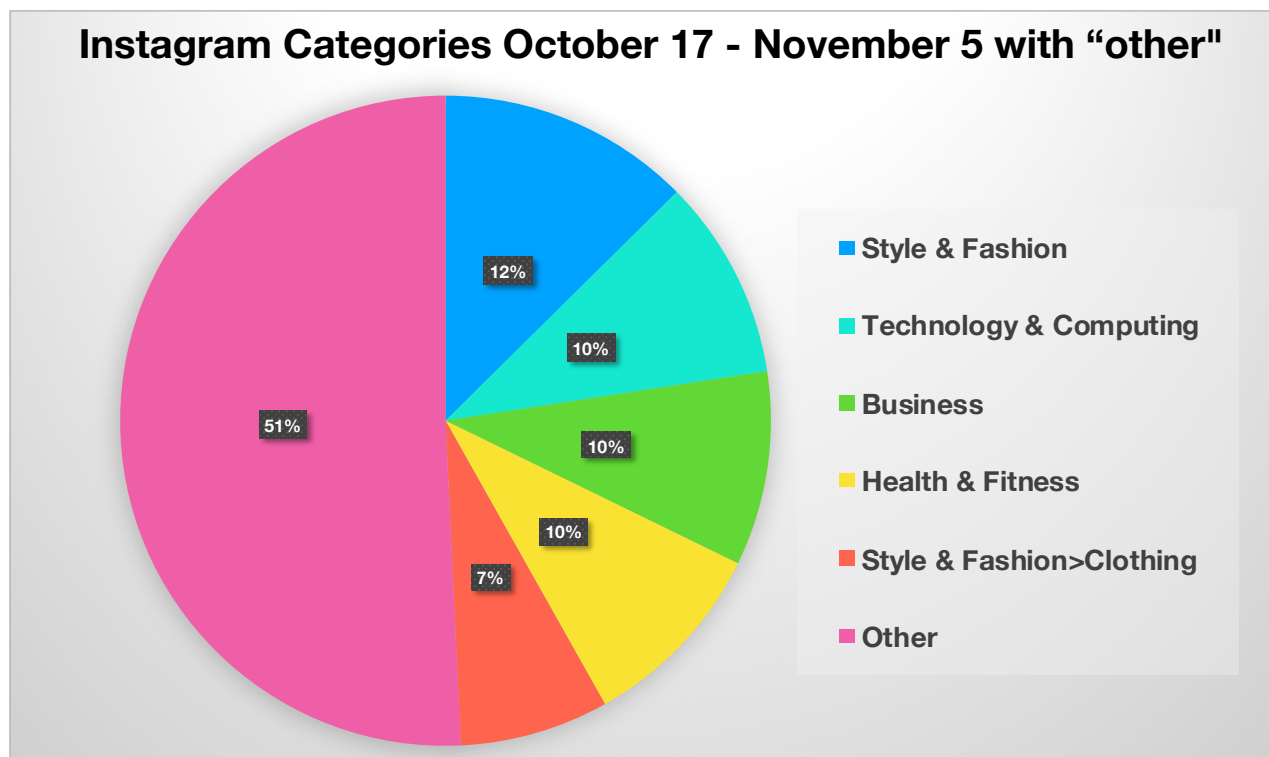


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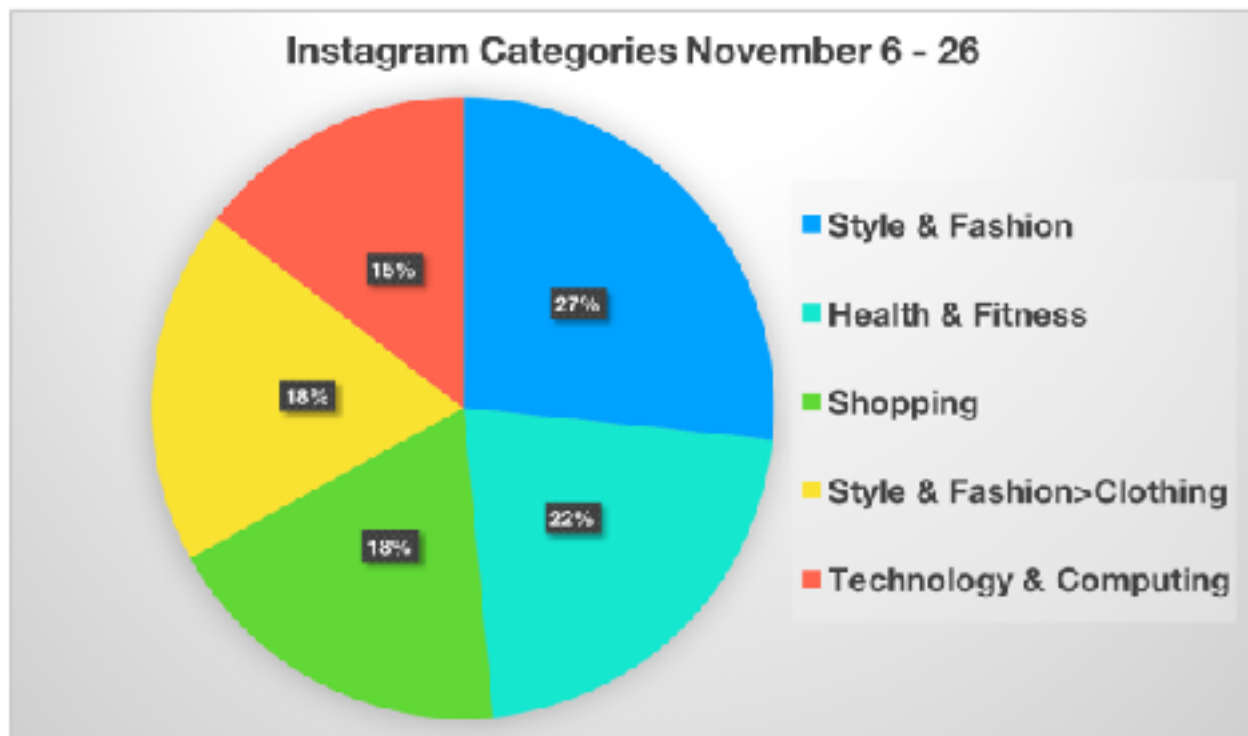


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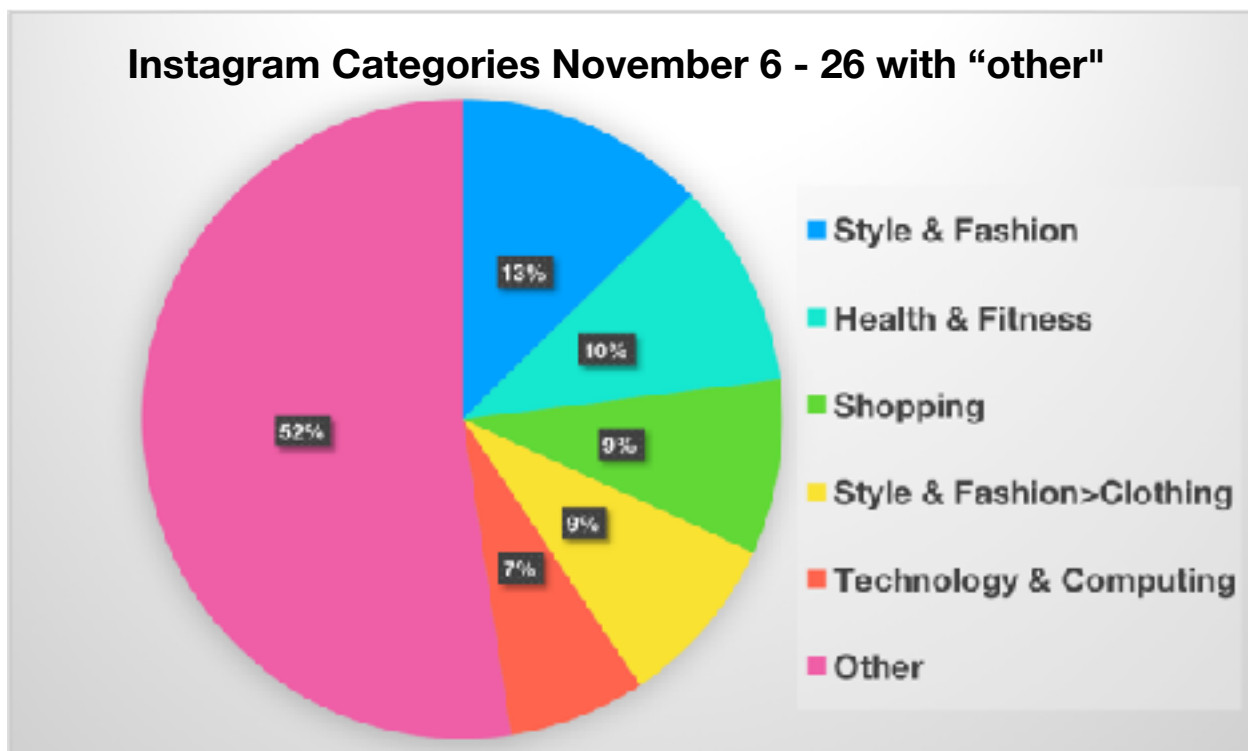


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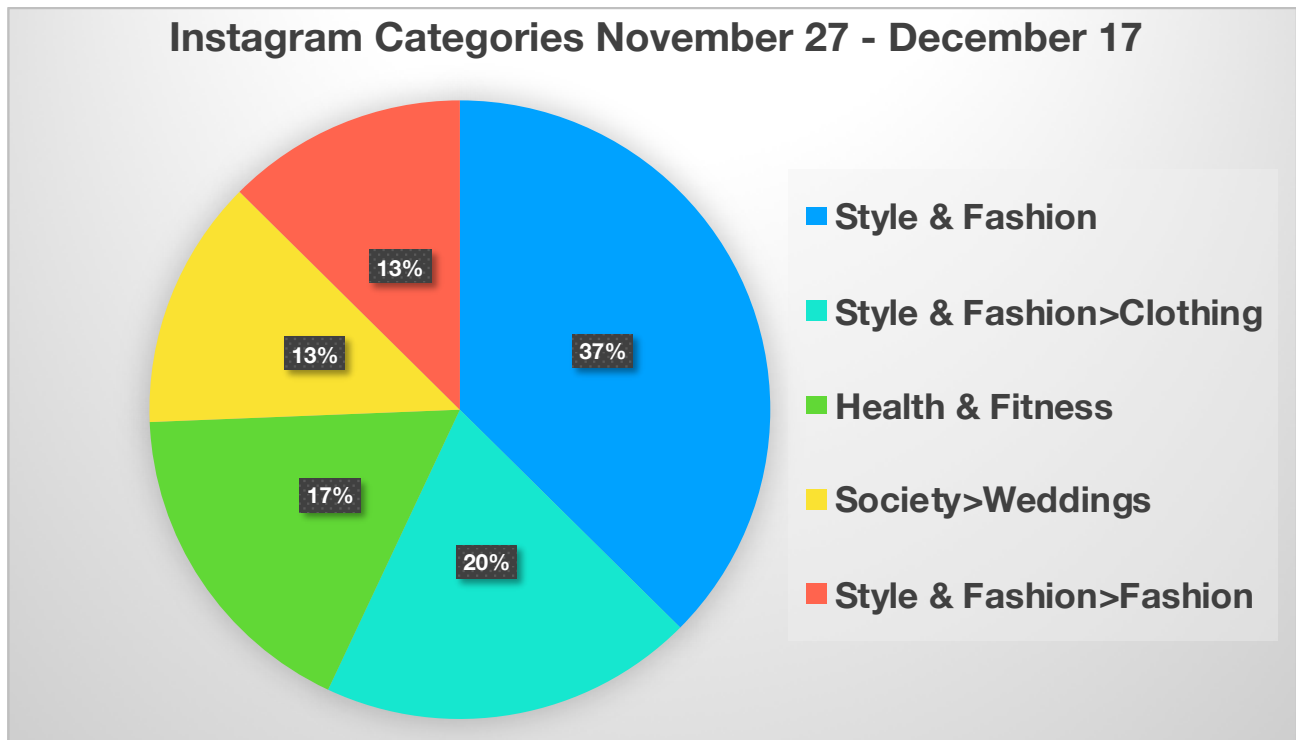


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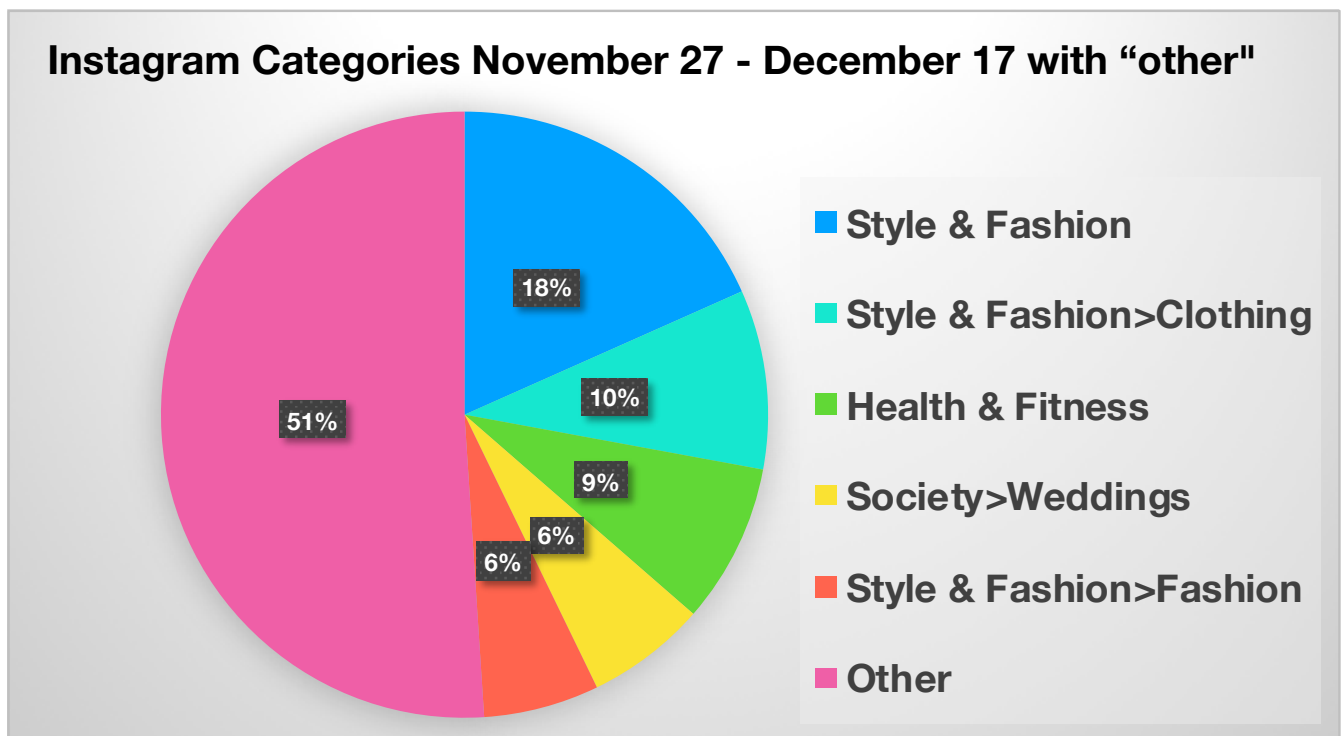


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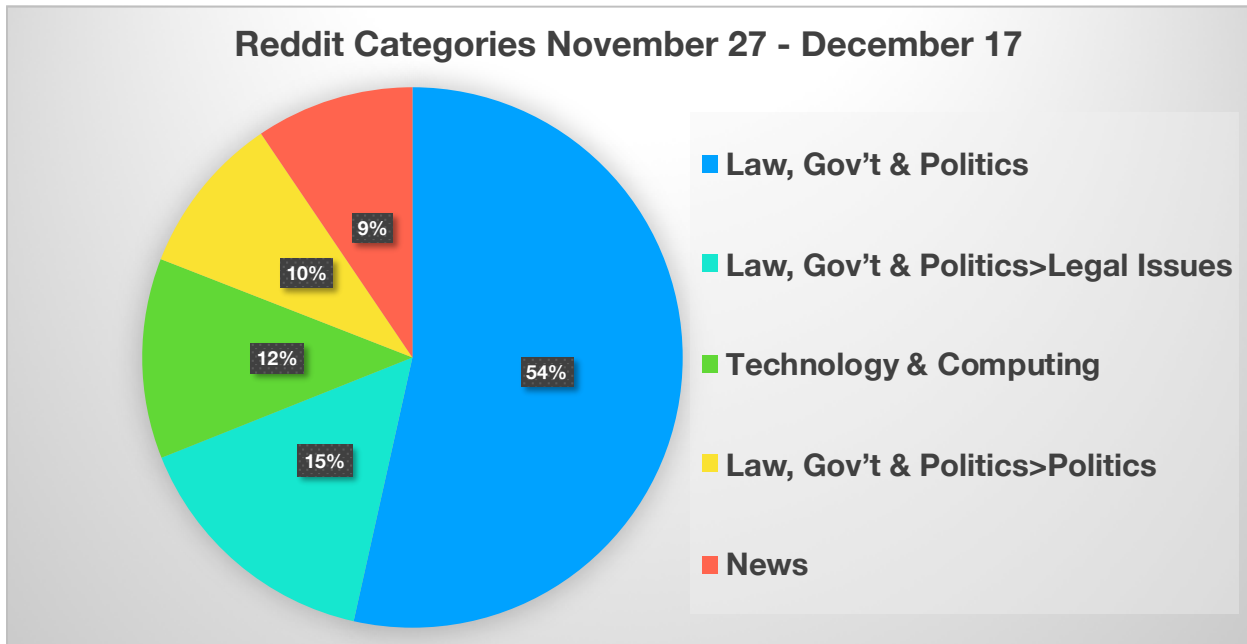
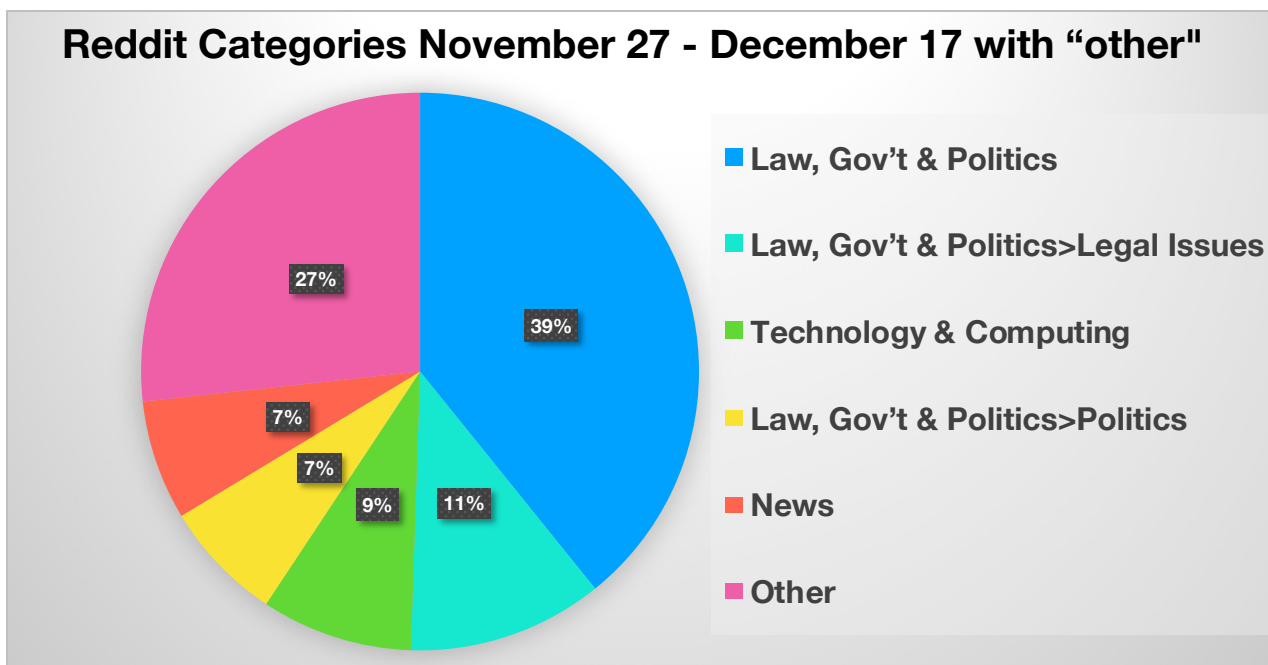


Figure 6.B



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