THE AUTHORITY REPORT

Exploring the Success of Post Formats

In this Authority Report, the Parse.ly team takes a closer look at the success of various media formats to see if the overall impact of a piece of content is connected in any way to its layout. For the purposes of this report, we categorized content into long-form posts, short-form posts, videos, and slideshows.

Video appears to be the least engaging post format

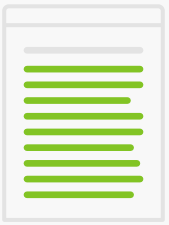
Video has long been hyped as "the next big thing," guaranteed to drive revenue to struggling online media sites. But, putting out video with no strategy, and assuming it will work, is not smart or sustainable.

To get an understanding of the success of video, we dissected engaged time performance for a variety of post formats to compare alongside each other. On the next page, we see that long-form and slideshow posts tend to have higher engaged time than normal posts, whereas short-form and video posts have lower engaged time. Specifically, when comparing across all four formats, video posts have 30 percent less engaged time than a normal post; we would have expected video posts to have higher engaged time.

Common topics for each post format

Long-form posts

Donald Trump
Business
Movies
Books
Hillary Clinton
Housing
Terrorism

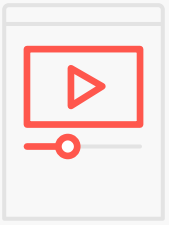


Short-form posts

Election
Fashion
Business
Christmas
Weather
Instagram
Twitter

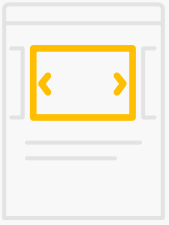
Video posts

Funny
Music video
Entertainment
Animals
Viral videos
Movies
Fashion

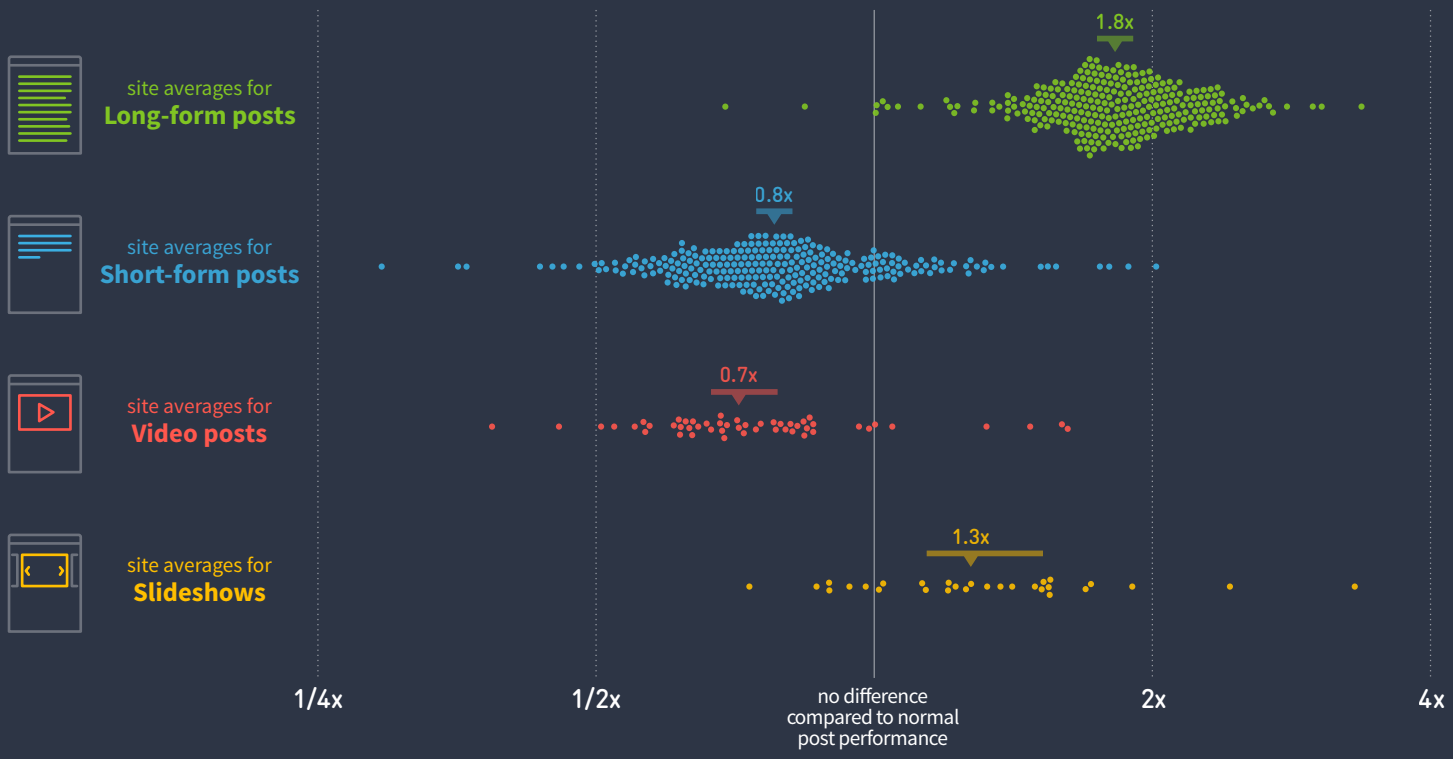


Slideshow posts

Art
Fashion
Travel
Sports
Model
Entertainment
Actress



Average engaged time performance for different post formats



There are multiple possible causes for video's lower engaged time:

- **Auto-play**: Visitors expecting to read a text article might click the back button when a video starts playing on the page (possibly creating disruptive noise in a quiet environment).
- **Slow load**: Video players can take a long time to load, especially on mobile devices. This delay may cause visitors to bounce.
- **Incomplete integration**: It is possible that sites in this study have an incomplete Parse.ly integration, making their engaged time less accurate for posts with video. While we don't think this is the case, we always encourage clients to ensure their integration is complete when testing a variety of formats. Learn more about video tracking integration here: parsely.com/help/integration/time-engaged/#pages-that-contain-audiovideo

A Question for the Industry

As video programs continue to grow, has the hype (and the excitement of higher CPMs) trumped the online media industry's concern for user experience?

A note about how Parse.ly tracks engaged time:

At Parse.ly, we track when readers are actively engaged with content—when they not only have a page open, but they have also recently interacted with it (via scrolling or clicking, for example). Visitors are also considered actively engaged if they are watching a video. If a visitor leaves a page open in their browser (but does not scroll, click, play a video, or otherwise interact with the page), then we do not count them as engaged. We precisely track engagement by sending "heartbeats" to our servers every few seconds.

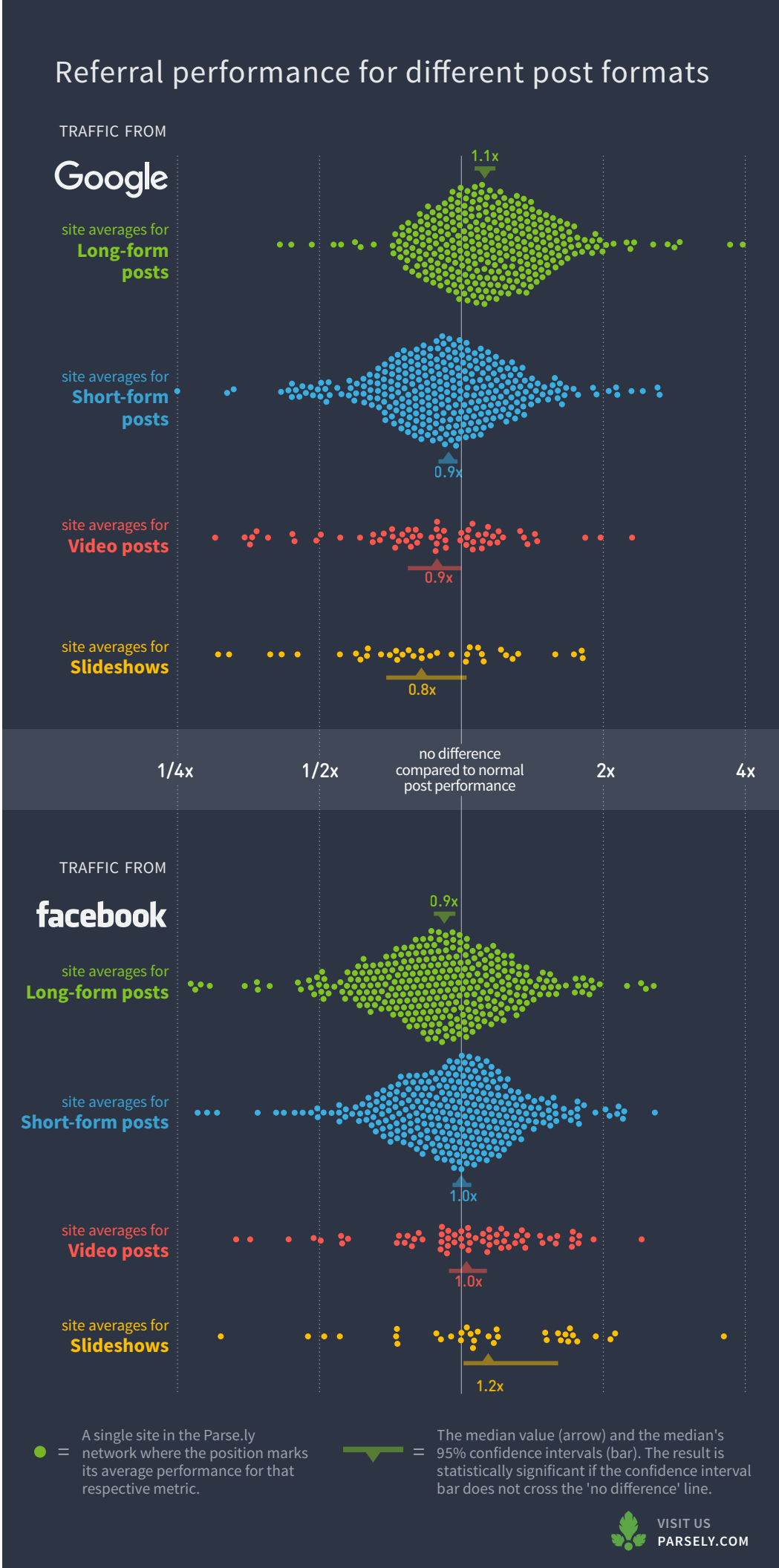
Referral Performance for Google and Facebook

Let's examine two closely related topics: referral sources and new vs. returning visitors.

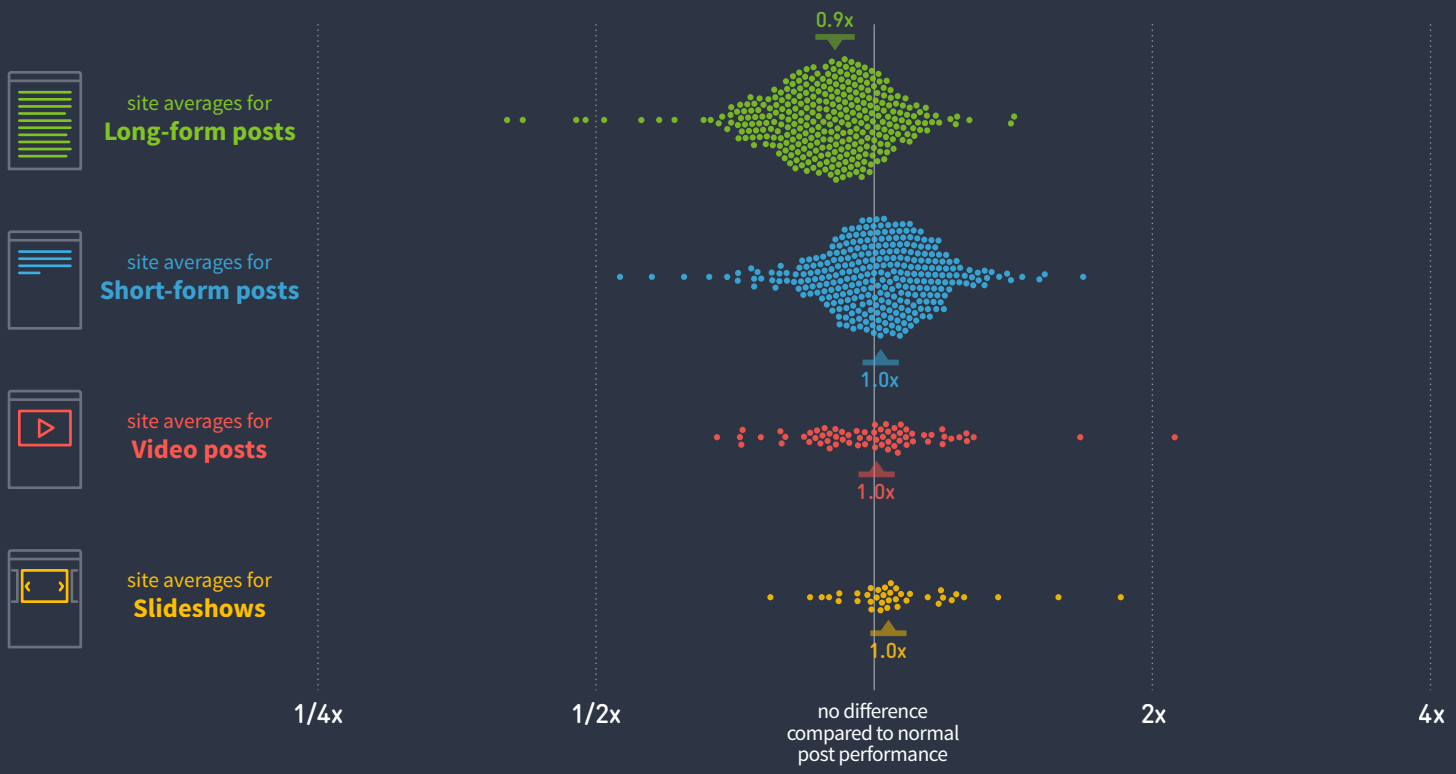
As shown on the Google and Facebook traffic plots on the right, we see that as a format receives more of its external referrers from Google, it tends to receive a smaller proportion of its referrals from Facebook. This comes as no surprise; Parse.ly has long reported that Facebook and Google are the most significant sources of external referral traffic for digital publishers. As a result, when a post receives a higher proportion of referrals from one of these sites, it gets a lower proportion from the other.

These plots also show that long-form content does particularly well on Google, whereas slideshows perform poorly on the search engine. Perhaps this is because long-form articles tend to contain authoritative answers to search queries, whereas short-form posts do not. Video and images are also inherently more difficult to search for in a largely text-based search engine like Google; on the other hand, their visual nature may make them stand out on Facebook's news feed.

On the following page we see that long-form posts draw in around 10 percent more new visitors than normal posts, suggesting that long-form content attracts new readers. Comparing the returning visitor plot with the Google plot leads us to believe that these new readers likely arrive at the content via their search activity on Google.



Returning visitor performance for different post formats



Summary

Long-form content drives engagement and appears to be a good source of growth. It attracts new readers to online media sites via Google and keeps them engaged nearly twice as long as normal articles. Digital publishers looking for new visitors can invest in developing long-form content to attract, and engage, readers.

Slideshows are also quite engaging and tend to bring in more Facebook traffic, but less Google traffic. As the production costs of a slideshow are typically lower than those of a video, our findings here suggest that slideshows are a cost-effective alternative to video for publishers looking to expand beyond text-only content.

Methodology

For the purpose of this report, Parse.ly looked at engaged time, number of returning visitors, and referral traffic across five formats of content in our network of 700+ content publishers. We analyzed data from December 1, 2014 through December 1, 2016. We defined each format as follows:

Normal:	Content that is not part of a video or slideshow with between 200 and 600 words.
Long-form:	Content that is not a video or slideshow post with more than 1,000 words.
Short-form:	Content that is not a video or slideshow post with 200 words or less.
Video:	Content that includes a tag like “video” with fewer than 200 words.
Slideshow:	Content that includes a tag like “slide” or “gallery” with fewer than 200 words.

Methodology (continued)

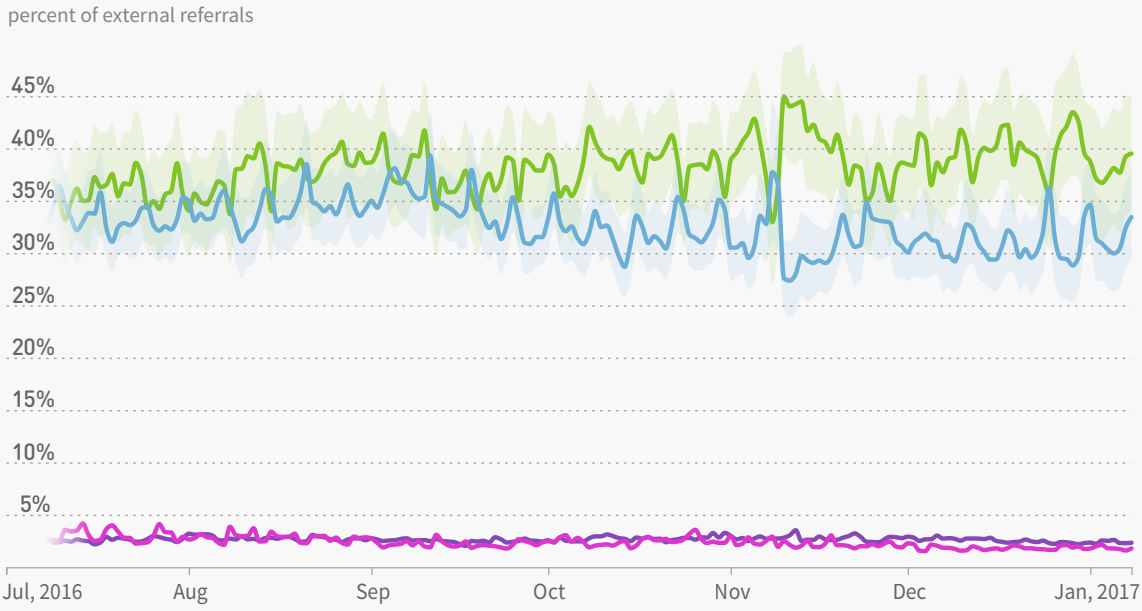
For each publisher, we first created a sample of up to 2,000 randomly selected normal posts. Next, for each other format, we also created a sample up to 2,000 randomly selected posts. We then compared that publisher's sample of normal posts to each format's sample of posts. We made this comparison for each of our metrics of interest: engaged time, new vs. returning visitor proportion, and referral source.

Thus, if a publisher's normal posts had an average engaged time of 40 seconds, whereas its long-form posts had an engaged time of 80 seconds, a dot was added to the average engaged time plot on page 2 at the "2x" line. If, on the other hand, both its long-form and normal articles had an average engaged time of 40 seconds, we added a dot at the "no difference" line.

We excluded a publisher from contributing to a format's statistics if it had fewer than 30 posts in that format. Thus, if a publisher had fewer than 30 posts tagged with a tag like "video," then it would not be included in the video plots. This explains why the video and slideshow visualizations above have considerably fewer data points: many publishers did not consistently tag video and slideshow posts with the tags we used in this analysis.

Top referrers in the Parse.ly network

Parse.ly's referral dashboard allows you to compare the biggest referrers, like Facebook and Google, but also allows you to track and compare other meaningful sources of traffic that don't get as much attention.



Top referrers by external referral contribution on January 10, 2017

- **Facebook** (40%)
- **Google Search** (33%)
- **Twitter** (2.3%)
- **Yahoo!** (1.8%)

The confidence range associated with a referral source depicts the percentage of potential referral traffic across the entire online publishing industry. This helps account for the changing makeup of Parse.ly's customers over time.

View more referrers and dive into more detail at: **http://parsely.com/referrer-dashboard**

About Parse.ly

Thousands of writers, editors, site managers, and technologists already use Parse.ly to understand what content draws in website visitors, and why. Using our powerful dashboards and APIs, customers build successful digital strategies that allow them to grow and engage a loyal audience.

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