

# THE AUTHORITY REPORT



## Understanding Traffic Patterns from the Top News Topics of 2015

REPORT PERIOD  
JANUARY–OCTOBER 2015

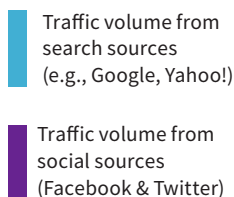
The top news stories of 2015 ran the gamut from popular to scandalous, to tragic. And while we won't be able to control the stories that capture the public's attention in 2016 any more than we can today, we can examine how readers are finding these stories to help us understand what drives readership.

As distribution becomes central to successful news and content organizations, Parse.ly wondered: **How did readers discover the top news topics of 2015?**

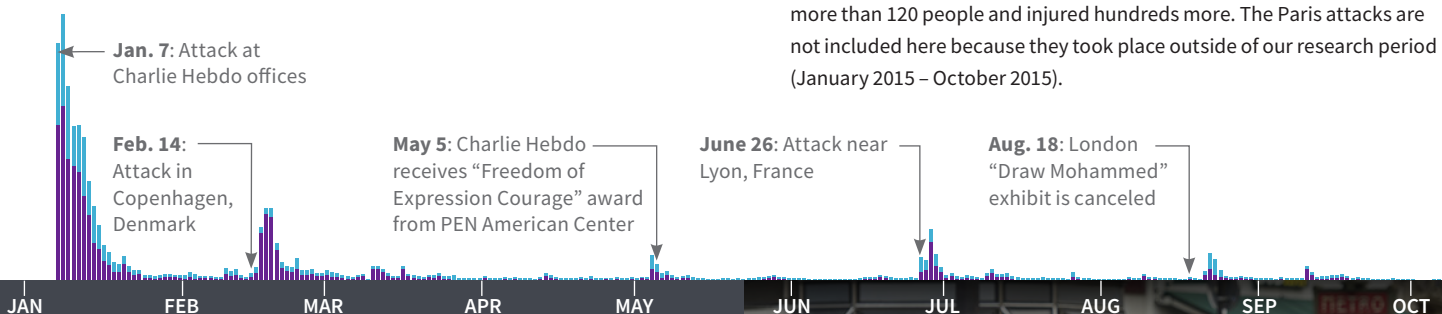
In this Authority Report, we examined the two largest external referral sources—search and social (as dominated by Google and Facebook, respectively)—to help publishers better understand how, and where, their news is circulating.

While some of the topics we studied were centered around a single event, others were updated by publishers several times over the course of the year. Some news stories received a lot of interest from readers, while others experienced a drop in social and search traffic as readers lost interest over time. Read on to learn more.

### Charlie Hebdo



Vertical scale of all topic charts are relative to each other. (Higher bars = greater traffic for that day)



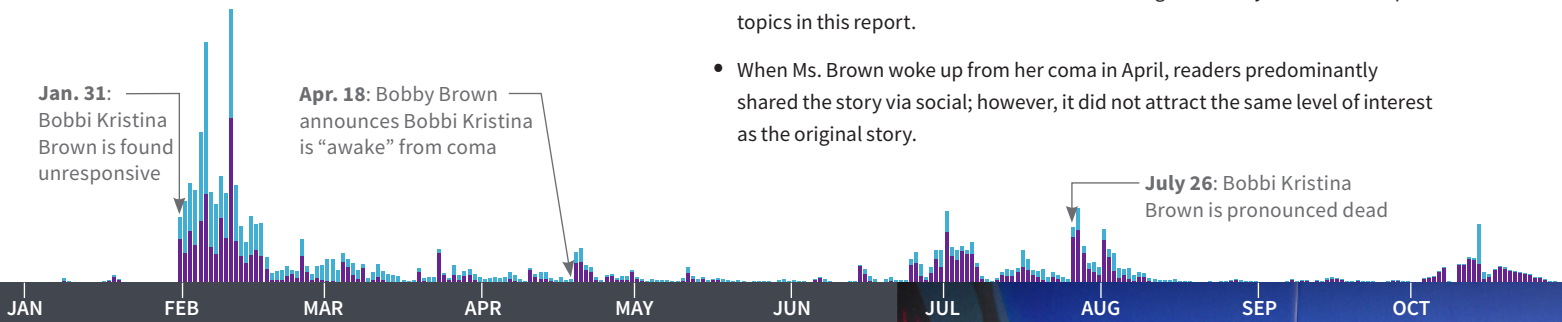
- This was one of the most covered news topics of the year. At its peak, our network published more than 1,300 posts in one day on the subject.
- Readers chose to navigate directly to breaking news on publisher websites about this topic more than any other we examined. Searching and sharing increased as the story developed.
- The second spike in interest coincided with an attack in Denmark, and was primarily driven by social media. In the month following this attack, social referrals brought in 53% more traffic than search.
- Though coverage continued throughout the year, social and search traffic didn't contribute to the readership as much as it did during the initial event.
- A series of related terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 killed more than 120 people and injured hundreds more. The Paris attacks are not included here because they took place outside of our research period (January 2015 – October 2015).

On January 7, 2015, **Charlie Hebdo**, a weekly satire magazine based in France, was the target of a terrorist attack that resulted in the deaths of 12 people, including Stéphane Charbonnier, the newspaper's editor, and several contributors.



# Bobbi Kristina Brown

- The main source of traffic for this topic flipped slightly from search engines to social networks over the course of the year. Search engines generated a majority of traffic initially, but the strong performance of social traffic at the end of the summer gave social the edge with 54.9% of referral traffic overall.
- Reader interest continued for a full month—longer than any of the other top topics in this report.
- When Ms. Brown woke up from her coma in April, readers predominantly shared the story via social; however, it did not attract the same level of interest as the original story.

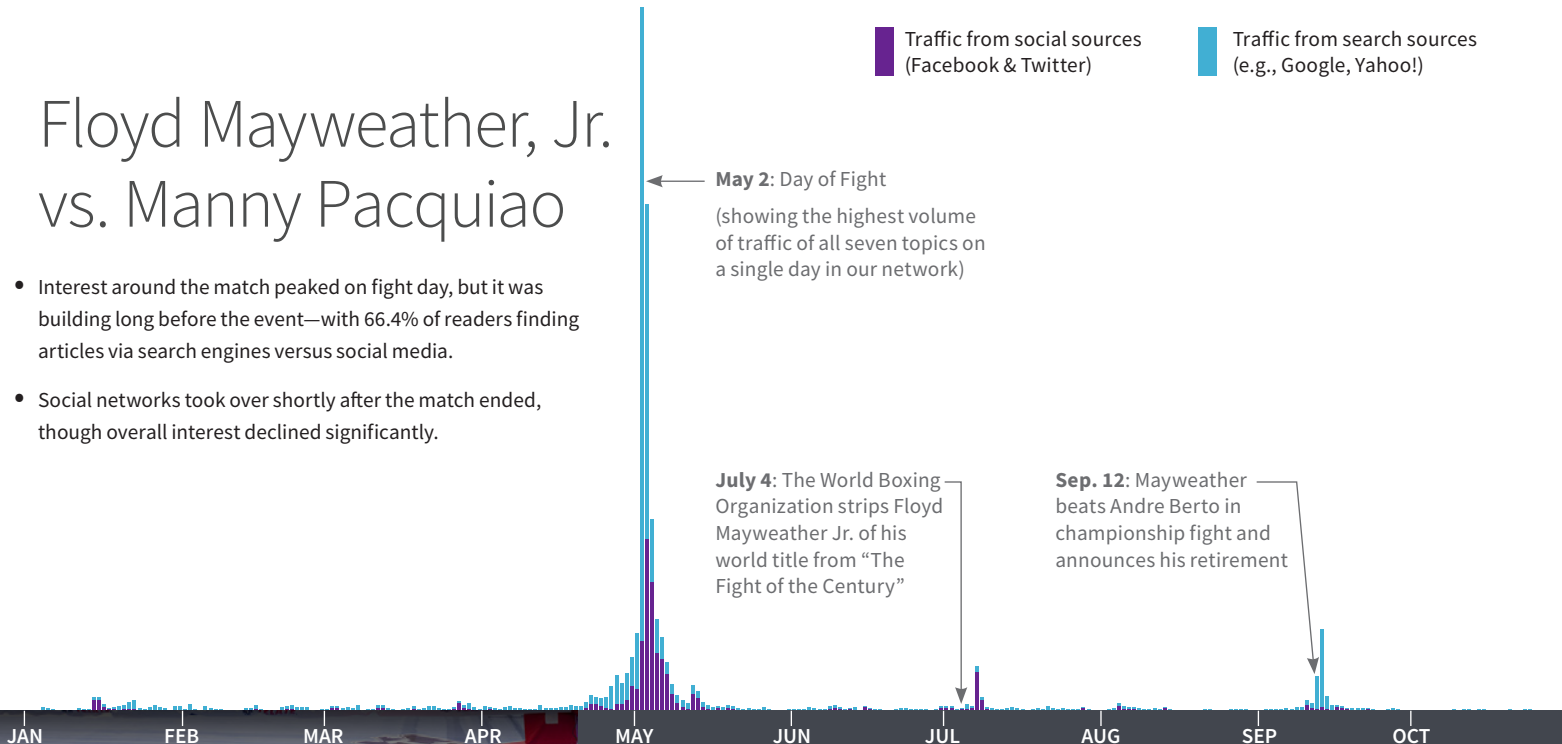


**Bobbi Kristina Brown**, the daughter of performers Bobby Brown and Whitney Houston, was found unresponsive in a bathtub on January 31, 2015. She was kept in a medically induced coma for several months, but died in hospice care on July 26, 2015 at the age of 22.



# Floyd Mayweather, Jr. vs. Manny Pacquiao

- Interest around the match peaked on fight day, but it was building long before the event—with 66.4% of readers finding articles via search engines versus social media.
- Social networks took over shortly after the match ended, though overall interest declined significantly.



**Floyd Mayweather, Jr. and Manny Pacquiao** fought in a much anticipated professional boxing match on May 2, 2015, at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas. It was hyped as “The Fight of the Century,” but left many fans disappointed. Mayweather, an undefeated five-division world champion, won the contest.



# Rachel Dolezal

- Readership was largely driven by social media traffic, with 71.1% of referral traffic to publisher sites coming in from social sites and only 28.9% coming in from search.
- The story initially caused a spike in page views when Ms. Dolezal’s parents confirmed that she was a white woman. Two days passed, then there was a second spike in page views as Ms. Dolezal participated in several interviews and issued a statement trying to clarify her position.
- Increases in both search and social traffic after the initial coverage of Ms. Dolezal are not associated with later indications of search or social traffic.

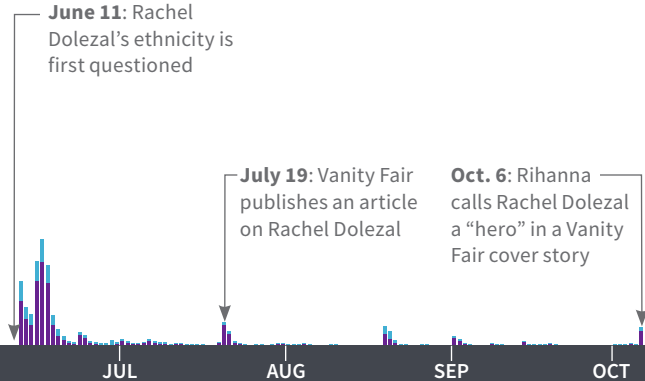


Photo credit: Aaron Robert Kathman, CC-BY-SA-4.0

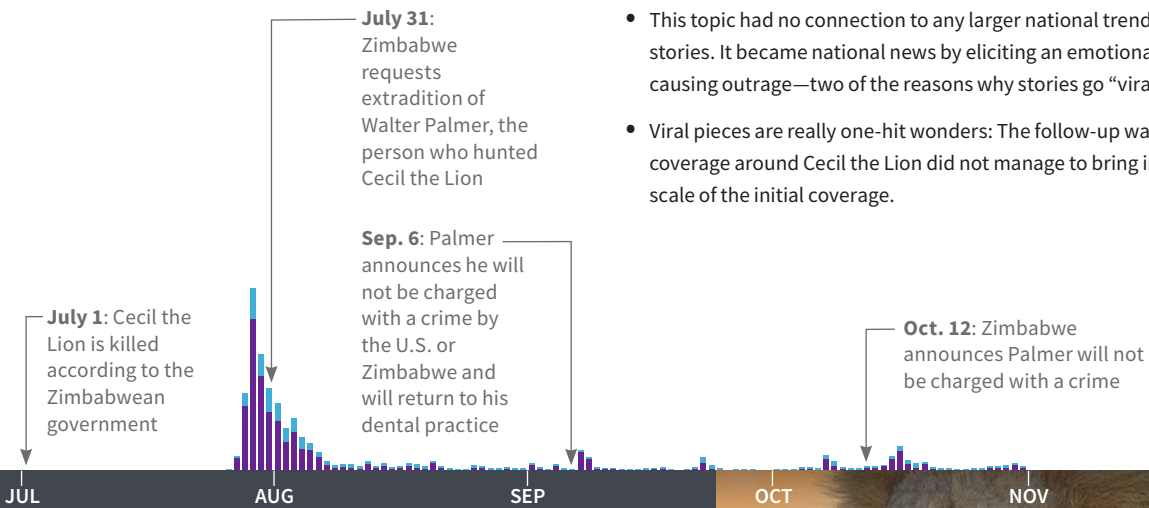
In June 2015, **Rachel Dolezal** resigned from her position as president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Spokane, Washington after her white parents announced that their daughter was a white woman passing as black.

Traffic from social sources (Facebook & Twitter)

Traffic from search sources (e.g., Google, Yahoo!)

# Cecil the Lion

- The “Cecil the Lion” story attracted readers through social media—and heavy interest lasted around 20 days.
- This topic had no connection to any larger national trends or breaking news stories. It became national news by eliciting an emotional reaction and causing outrage—two of the reasons why stories go “viral.”
- Viral pieces are really one-hit wonders: The follow-up wave of media coverage around Cecil the Lion did not manage to bring in readers at the scale of the initial coverage.



On July 1, 2015, **Cecil the Lion**, a Southwest African lion living in Zimbabwe, was killed by an American hunter named Walter Palmer. Although Palmer had a permit, the killing drew international media attention and sparked outrage among animal conservationists.

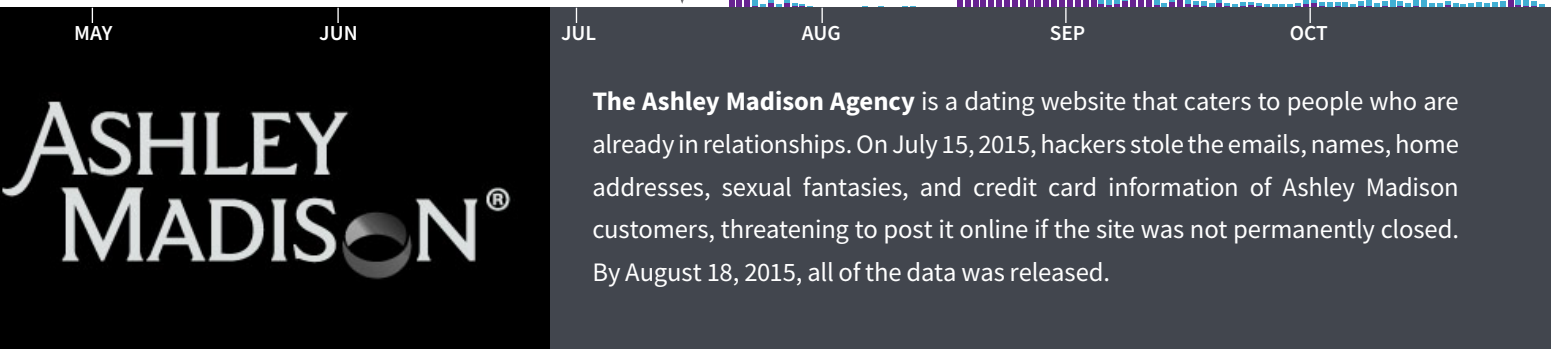


# Ashley Madison Data Breach

- While the topic did attract a significant fraction of social referrers, the majority of traffic came from search engines.
- Our hypothesis is that the elicited, and possibly amoral, subject matter was something that people wanted to read about, yet didn't want to show their social networks publicly. If this is the case, it's a good example of how psychology plays a role in shaping media traffic.

**July 15:** Hackers named "The Impact Team" announce they have breached Ashley Madison and threaten to release identities of its users

**Aug. 18:** Confirmation that user data has been released



**The Ashley Madison Agency** is a dating website that caters to people who are already in relationships. On July 15, 2015, hackers stole the emails, names, home addresses, sexual fantasies, and credit card information of Ashley Madison customers, threatening to post it online if the site was not permanently closed. By August 18, 2015, all of the data was released.

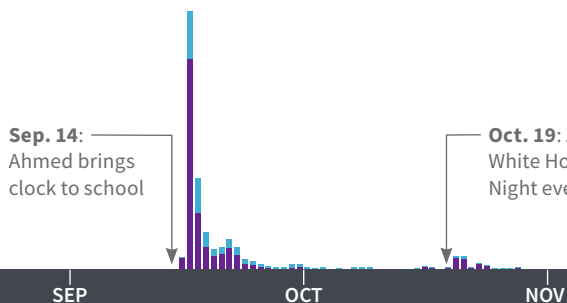
■ Traffic from social sources (Facebook & Twitter)
 ■ Traffic from search sources (e.g., Google, Yahoo!)

# Ahmed Mohamed

- The news caused social outrage, triggering this local story to attract national attention and go "viral." There was virtually no organic traffic coming from search engines about this topic.
- Of the popular topics in 2015, this one experienced the shortest lifespan, with almost all media coverage dropping off in November.

**Sep. 14:** Ahmed brings clock to school

**Oct. 19:** Ahmed attends White House Astronomy Night event



Fourteen-year-old **Ahmed Mohamed** was arrested at MacArthur High School in Irving, Texas for allegedly bringing a bomb to school on September 14, 2015. The "bomb" turned out to be an electronic clock that he had built himself, yet Mohamed was suspended from school for three days.



Photo credit: Harrison Jones, CC-BY-SA-4.0

## How Did Parse.ly Determine the Most Popular Topics of 2015?

In order to surface the most popular news topics of 2015, Parse.ly looked at the top 100 stories, each, from the top 100 digital publishers in our network.

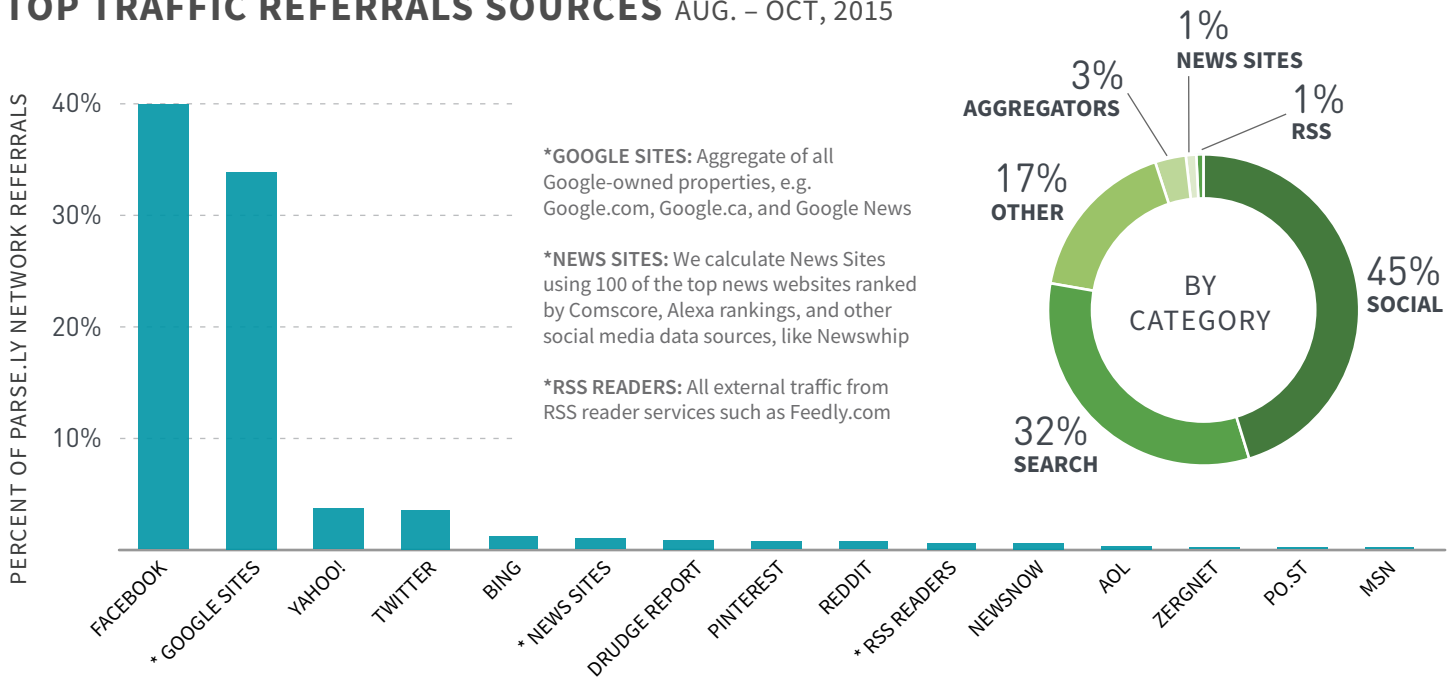
From this collection of posts, we compiled a list of the most popular topics of the year by the frequency of keywords in the title and text of each post. We then ranked each of the topics using a custom “popularity score” that looked at both the total number of page views (normalized by the size of each publisher) and the frequency of the topic across all of the publishers in our network.

Essentially, we wanted to know if a certain topic was covered equally across all categories of publishers within our network. This information helped us to eliminate niche topics, or topics that were popular on only a few specific publisher sites, before we arrived at the final list of top topics from 2015.

Of note:

“Social referrals” include Facebook and Twitter only.

### TOP TRAFFIC REFERRALS SOURCES AUG. – OCT, 2015



In each Authority Report, we show the top referral sources to our network. Each of these shows a snapshot of the traffic to our network in time and reflects both industry trends and shifts in our publishing clients.

In July 2015, Facebook pulled ahead of Google as the top source of referral traffic to Parse.ly’s network of nearly 400 digital publishers. The trend has continued, and today Facebook remains a top referring site to the publishers in Parse.ly’s network, claiming 39.3% of referral traffic versus Google’s share of 34.0%.

#### 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.