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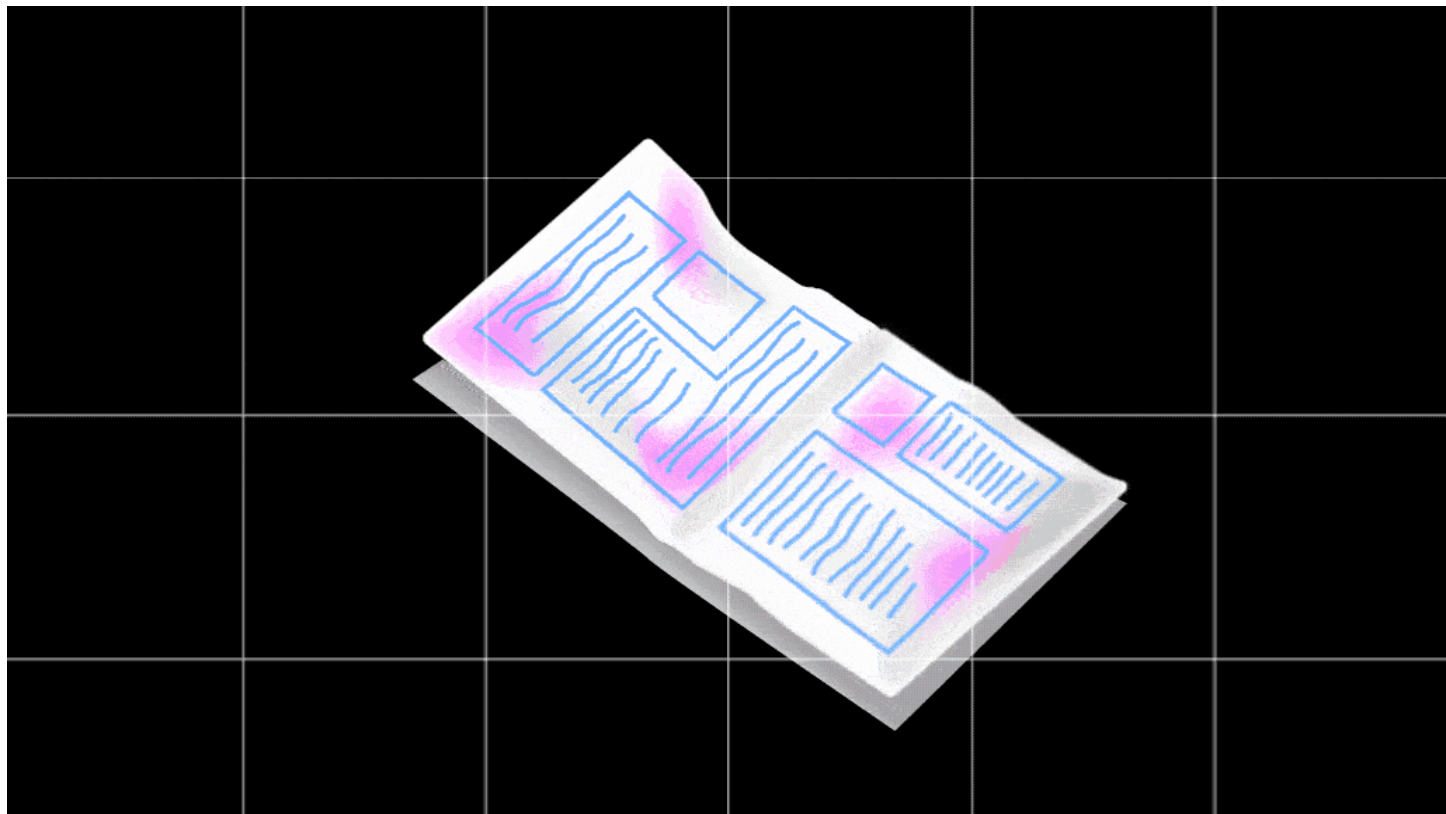
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SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION

## Publishers move past seeing social media platforms as traffic drivers

By [Sara Guaglione](#) • March 10, 2023 • 6 min read •



Ivy Liu

*This story is part of an eight-article editorial series that explores the ramifications of a fragmented social marketplace.*

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promoting and distributing their content. But the influx of social media platforms and video formats entering the scene have forced publishers to weigh how to treat those readers: build an audience that stays on the platform — or funnel them back to their owned and operated properties, according to conversations with heads of audience development and social at Bustle Digital Group, Vice Media Group and The Washington Post.

This comes at a time when Twitter's role as a traffic driver has declined significantly, but social platforms remain the primary place where people are consuming information.

“We want to drive traffic. [But] not every platform is a natural traffic driver,” said The Washington Post’s deputy director of social media Travis Lyles. “We don’t expect a platform like Instagram to be sending a ton of people to our website, but we see platforms like Instagram as natural brand builders and places where we can really interact with an audience that doesn’t really interact with us in other places.”

## Traffic driver or brand builder?

The Washington Post’s social team puts platforms into two buckets when determining how to invest in social platforms: those that drive traffic (typically, the platforms that prioritize news links, such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) and those that build its brand, Lyles said.

At Vice Media Group, social media platforms are key to reaching its target audience of 18- to 35-year-olds who aren’t coming to Vice’s websites. Original vertical video is created specifically for TikTok, YouTube Shorts and Instagram.

“We’re not trying to refer [audiences] back somewhere,” said Katie Drummond, senior vp global news and global editor-in-chief at Vice.

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“We’re trying to deliver coverage to them that is bespoke for that platform that will reach them on that platform. We’re not assuming that they will go from TikTok to the website. We’re assuming that

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TikTok and Instagram Reels has grown in the last six months, as a result of Vice “really pursuing that sponsored and custom model for those vertical platforms,” Drummond said anecdotally, declining to provide figures to support this claim. Vice News did a custom series with Robinhood recently for TikTok, for example.

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For BDG, followers on Facebook and Instagram represent 60% of the company’s total social following, said Wesley Bonner, head of social and audience development at BDG. Facebook is the largest onsite traffic driver for BDG, and accounted for 18% of overall traffic in February, Bonner said, citing internal figures.

“Continuing to use that platform for traffic is of the utmost importance in strategy for us,” Bonner said. Facebook’s ad products are also the most sold social ad product for BDG as well, such as link posts to branded articles and videos.

However, the most social following growth is happening on Instagram, as the company recently began producing more original photography and videos created by its network of over 100 social creators.

“A Facebook user is very used to scrolling through the feed, seeing an article link, clicking it, reading it and going back to Facebook. An Instagram user doesn’t really want to do that the same way, or at least a majority of them don’t,” Bonner said. While users do click on the link

in bio or links in stickers and stories on Instagram, “those are just a little bit of bigger hurdles than Facebook, where you just click the link on the post,” Bonner said.

## How publishers balance resources going to social

Creating vertical video isn’t cheap. Publishers are doing a lot of this work with relatively small teams, the execs said.

Bonner oversees a “very lean” team of 10 people. “It’s still very much a prioritization of resources... Resources are not unlimited. We still are a publisher who’s striving to be profitable. That trickles down into content creation and into every team that we have,” he said.

The Washington Post has about 16 people on its social team, which is split into two sub teams: its Instagram team and its “core social” team, which focuses on all the other platforms. The Instagram team, founded by Lyles [in 2021](#), has just under 10 people, including social editors, a video producer, designers and a copy editor. Though the TikTok team collaborates with the Post’s social team, it lives within the larger video team at the Post. Video reporter David Jorgenson was part of the video team when he began creating the Post’s first TikToks in 2019.

Vice has multiplatform teams for each Vice brand that act as “pods” within the newsroom to promote stories across social platforms and create and curate original vertical video with Vice’s journalists, Drummond said. But because of the efforts Vice is putting into original video production, fewer resources are going toward producing content for the website.

“We make less for the website than we used to,” Drummond said. “We just are trying to make fewer, smarter bets on the website, which then allows us to have the resources and the brain space to think about, ‘How do we take that reporting and make it work on a different platform where we are not necessarily trying to refer audiences back to the website?’”

For example, Vice reporter Emily Green was on the ground in the Darién Gap and recently wrote [a story for the Vice News website](#) as well as [created a video for TikTok](#), Drummond said.

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The “meat” of a social video produced by BDG typically gets repackaged and shared across different platforms, changing details like text or fonts that are native to each platform, Bonner said.

“We have to do it that way. Video is expensive. We want to be fair to the creators that we’re paying to create content. We can’t pay platform by platform, by platform and keep the same scale and volume that we need to operate 80-plus social channels,” Bonner said.

But what of the age-old worry publishers have about putting too many resources and money into a platform they don’t own?

“Even the platform that’s benefiting us today, we should be skeptical of tomorrow. The con of social media in general is that we don’t own any of it. We’re playing a game that we don’t control in a sense,” Lyles said. “When anything [new] emerges, we look at it and you say... Does it make sense [to invest in], taking into account team size? Would it be worth it, return on investment-wise, to have someone even focus part of their day on this?”

However, Drummond is confident in Vice’s investment in vertical video, regardless of which platforms rise and fall. Going forward, Vice is planning to experiment with more livestreams, longer-form, docu-style videos and covering more current events on TikTok, as its role as a search engine for news grows (it tested this with a video on the recent news of an alleged Chinese spy balloon flying over the U.S, which now has over 308,000 views).

“Platforms might change, but vertical video and consumption via smartphone isn’t going anywhere,” Drummond said.



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