

What every PR  
needs to know about

# Dark Social



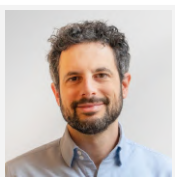
How dark social represents the biggest shift in  
communications since the digital revolution.

# Introduction

Dark social can at first seem like a fringe issue. It is perceived by many as a technical concept that is irrelevant to the day-to-day workings of a typical PR professional.

But the facts are hard to ignore. Over eight in ten content shares globally occur on dark social platforms. Many stories that seemed to have fallen flat will have gone wildly viral behind closed doors.

In 2020, the Barcelona Principles 3.0 laid down a challenge to PRs: focus on business outcomes and long term impacts. As we'll see, dark social's role in this mission cannot be underestimated.



**Richard Benson**  
Co-Founder, Releasd

# What is dark social?

Some platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit share data relating to how people are engaging with content on their platforms.

In contrast, dark social media channels do not share this information. Activity takes place behind closed doors, amongst carefully chosen groups of friends, family and colleagues.

If you've ever shared or received content on WhatsApp, Slack, Skype, WeChat or Facebook Messenger for example, you have used a dark social platform. And don't forget email and text messaging too.

In fact you've probably used a dark social platform in the last 15 minutes.



## The power of the dark side

The controversy that can be sparked by posting on open platforms like Facebook and Twitter has led to a fundamental shift in the way many of us are sharing content. We've all seen seemingly innocuous posts that have engendered furious reactions. Meanwhile, the level of influence a person has publicly can be closely linked to their sense of self-worth. [Plenty of studies](#) have shown the impact these factors can have on mental health.

This reluctance to invite public criticism and judgement has been responsible, in large part, for the rise of private sharing tools like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. And the mass migration to these dark social channels is a trend that is set to continue.

**“We continue to see a rise in the use of messaging apps for news as consumers look for more private (and less confrontational) spaces to communicate.”**

Antonis Kalogeropoulos, Research Fellow, Reuters Institute,  
[Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018](#)

Many seem to prefer the intimacy of sharing carefully curated content with trusted companions, away from the prying eyes of others. There's less risk involved and often more reward as we strengthen relationships with those we care about the most.



*"Multi-faceted"*  
*"Ego-centric"*  
*"Creepy"*  
*"Uncool uncle"*  
*"Mid-life crisis"*  
*"Clean"* *"Generic"*



*"Best friend"*  
*"FUN"*  
*"Brings people together"*  
*"Straightforward"*  
*"Honest"* *"Reliable"*  
*"Discrete"*

Source: Focus group participants aged 20-45 in US, UK, Brazil, Germany. Conducted Feb 2018

[Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#)

Even Mark Zuckerberg, whose platform has been at the epicentre of open communication, conceded that the shift towards dark social is inevitable:

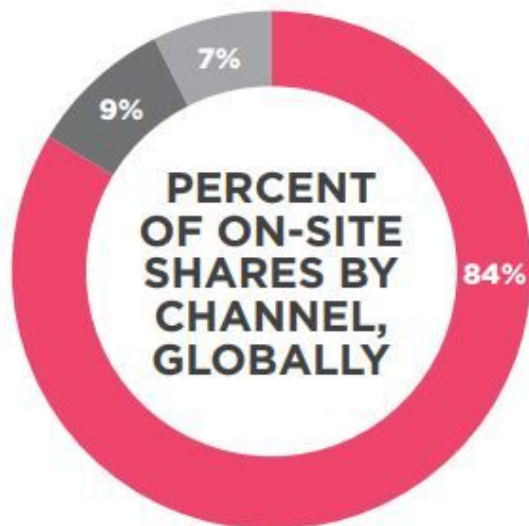
“I believe the future of communication will increasingly shift to private, encrypted services where people can be confident that what they say to each other stays secure and their messages and content won’t stick around forever. This is the future I hope we will help bring about.”

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, [A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking](#)

# PR content is swallowed whole

The scale of activity that is taking place behind closed doors is staggering.

According to RadiumOne, a whopping [84%](#) of content shares take place on dark social platforms.



**DARK  
SOCIAL  
DOMINATES  
SHARING  
ACTIVITY**

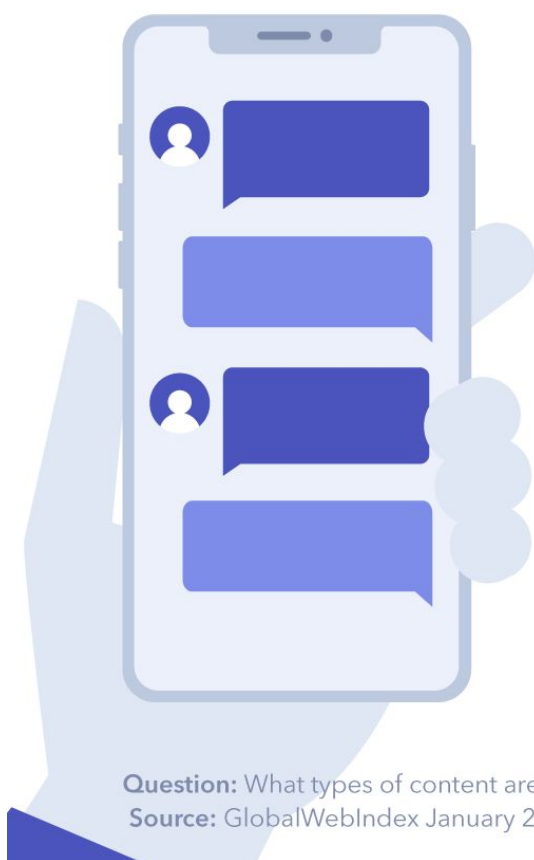


Source: RadiumOne social analytics data, February 1-29, 2016

The penny should drop for the PR industry when examining the [types](#) of content being shared.

## What's being shared via dark social platforms?

% who are most likely to share the following via private messaging apps



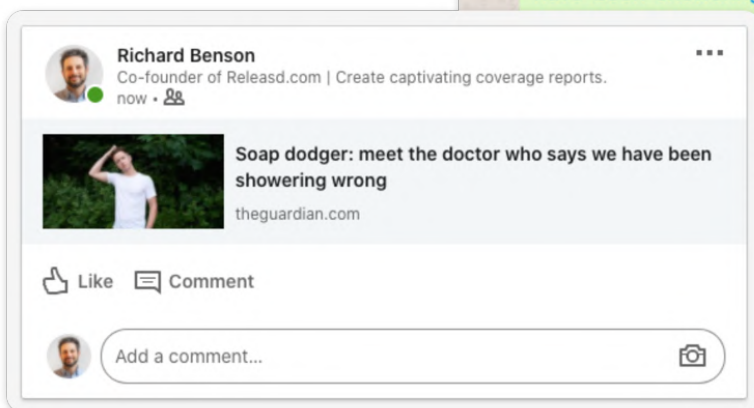
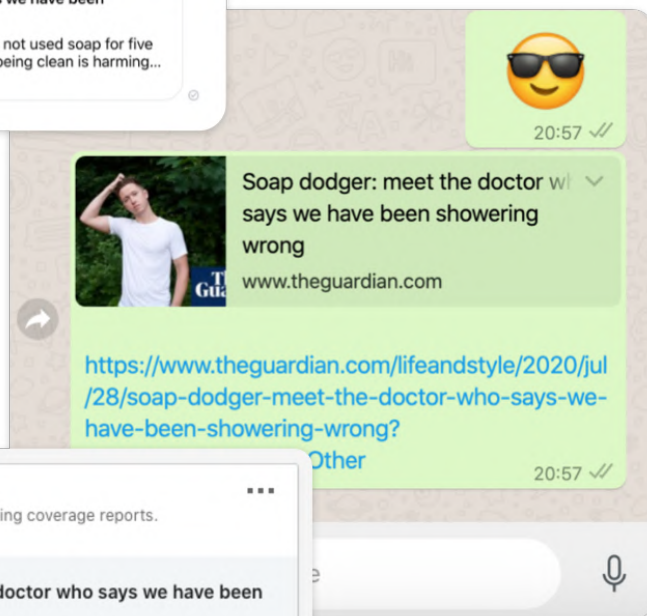
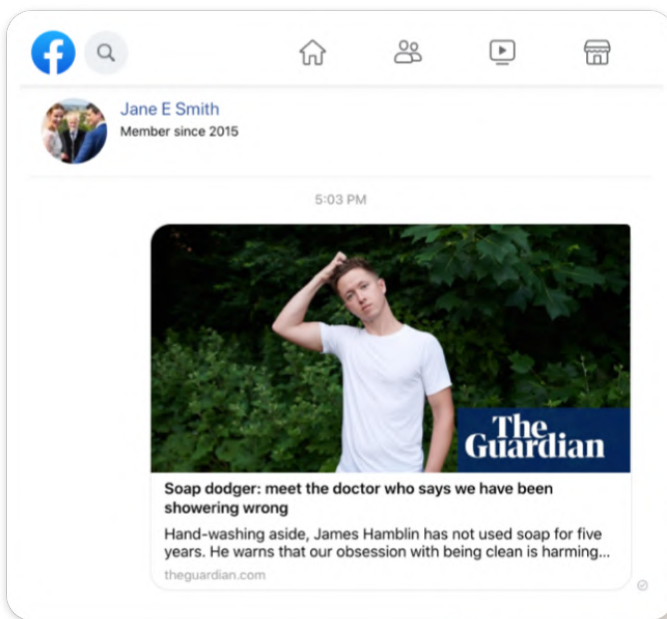
Personal photos	<b>72%</b>
Entertaining photos or videos	<b>70%</b>
Links to websites	<b>50%</b>
Good deals or discounts	<b>49%</b>
Links to social media posts	<b>48%</b>
Links to/pictures of a product	<b>45%</b>
Links to news articles	<b>44%</b>
Links to blog posts	<b>34%</b>
My location	<b>32%</b>

**Question:** What types of content are you most likely to share via private messaging apps?

**Source:** GlobalWebIndex January 2019 **Base:** 2,155 internet users aged 16-64 in the UK/U.S.



Aside from personal pics and locations, this content represents the bread and butter of the PR industry: news articles, videos, product shots, blog posts and more. Indeed, when a story is shared, its essence is still communicated thanks to the link augmenting technology commonly used by dark platforms.



In many cases, users are discovering news stories on open social platforms, then pulling them into private networks where true feelings can be discussed.

“Facebook is most likely to be used for reading or discovering news, either by glancing at headlines or clicking to read a full story. On WhatsApp, users are more likely to take part in a private discussion about news.”

Antonis Kalogeropoulos, Research Fellow, Reuters Institute,  
[Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018](#)

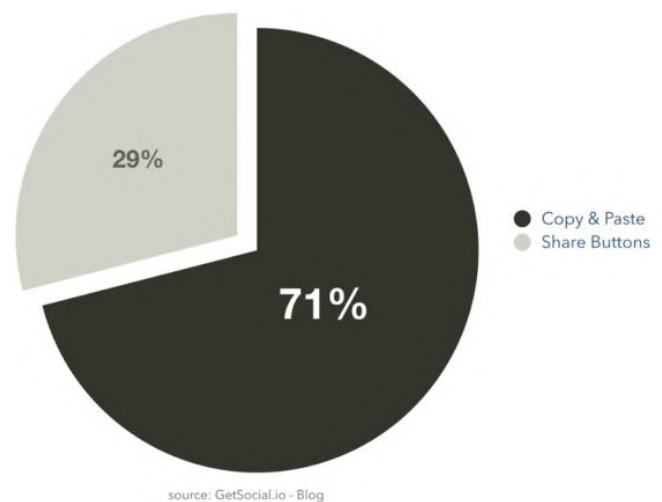
In other words, the activity we can track on open social platforms is merely the very tip of the iceberg. The real action is happening under the water line. Furthermore, the nature of the commentary we are able to see on open platforms is likely to be quite different from the more respectful and honest conversation going on behind closed doors.

# Measuring the unmeasurable

The problem is, by definition, that dark social can seem impenetrable. This is going to prove frustrating for PRs with their measuring sticks out. But are there ways to at least get a sense of the activity taking place behind closed doors? Let's explore some options.

We've all seen the familiar embedded 'share' icons found adjacent to online articles. Could they indicate engagement? Unfortunately, it turns out

that only [29% of shares](#) occur via these buttons. These days, users tend to simply copy and paste the URL into their chosen channel. Other research states that, on mobile, only [0.2% of users](#) click on a sharing button.



## How about a different approach?

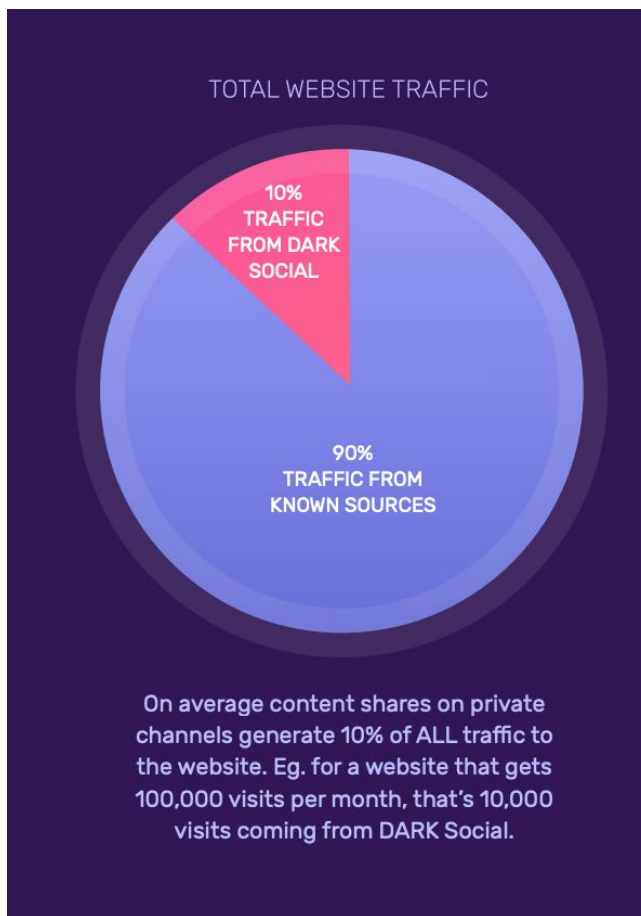
Let's say one objective of a PR campaign is to direct traffic to a particular webpage. If we had access to Google Analytics or similar, we could make an educated guess as to how much traffic came from dark social sources. This is because there's often a segment of traffic that is defined as 'Direct'.

Direct traffic implies that a group of users were not sent from anywhere - they just magically found the page in question, typing the URL into the browser. But how likely is that in reality? In fact, some 'Direct' visitors will have clicked on a link which was hidden and untrackable. In other words, a link within dark social channels.

Research from GetSocial showed that, on average, [10% of a website's total traffic](#) is generated from dark social.

This approach relies on a PR team having access to Google Analytics and there being no other marketing activity taking place. It also does not provide insights into the engagement taking place before users found themselves on the website. Was this the result of one dark share or one million for example?

And to complicate issues further, recent findings show that some 'Direct' traffic can originate from [mobile apps](#) rather than dark social.



We believe it's crucial that PRs are able to measure the true success of their work. To do this, they must have a full picture of how their content is being engaged with, wherever that happens to be. This includes the website that originally published it, plus any open social platforms it was shared to, plus the dark social channels where most of the action is taking place.

To tackle the issue, Releasd partnered with SimilarWeb, the world's leading third party website data platform, to analyse visits to over **11,000 individual pieces of coverage**. We then worked with the team at GetSocial, an analytics & publishing platform which specialises in tracking dark social activity. They provided us with data relating to **26 million open social shares, 153 million dark social shares**, plus related referrals. This, together with integrations with open social APIs, enabled us to create a proprietary algorithm which can estimate the following information for any given piece of coverage:

- *The number of views the article received within the publishing website*
- *The number of open social shares*
- *The number of views on open social platforms*
- **The number of dark social shares**
- **The number of views on dark social platforms**

We call the total number of views an article received across all channels 'Coverage Impressions'. You can read more about how we do this [here](#).

## The opportunity for PRs

Communicators have long accepted that the appearance of media coverage is merely the beginning of a story, not the end. PRs have become adept at tracking its reaction across social media, under the impression that they're seeing the full picture.

As we have shown, this is far from the case.

A vast majority of the action is happening out of view. In fact, some of the stories that have seemingly failed to get traction may have gone viral amongst niche groups of highly engaged peers. We've also seen that there's likely to be a significant discrepancy between the sentiment of public vs private conversations.

But the opportunity in the context of communications is potentially huge.

The PR industry is built on the concept that editorial is more influential and consequential than advertising. We can assume that, when friends share curated stories with one another in a safe environment, the impact is greater still.

“Many brands see a higher conversion rate with dark-social traffic. The reason behind this is quite simple. On dark-social channels, content is shared between friends who know each other’s likes and preferences. It’s a level of hyper-personalization most companies can only hope to attain.”

David Cohn, Co-founder and Chief Strategy Officer of Pigeon, [Marketing To A Dark-Social World](#)

And here, finally, we get to the core of the issue.

The [Barcelona Principles 3.0](#) encourage communicators to focus on the business outcomes and impacts of their work. Given its unparalleled potential to spark engagement and drive action, the role of dark social clearly cannot be underestimated.

# Who are we?

Releasd is a platform for PR professionals looking to showcase their activity and results in the most visually engaging way possible.

## What can be included in a Releasd report?

- **Media coverage:**  
online, print, standout quotes
- **Live social media:**  
posts and feeds
- **Automated metrics:**  
including estimated dark social shares and views
- **Custom KPIs**
- **Supporting activities:**  
strategy, plans, meetings
- **Supporting content**  
images, video, documents
- **Much more**

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