



 sharethis

Unearthing the Hidden Gems in Private Sharing

Table of Contents

| | | |
|---------------------|-----------|---|
| INTRODUCTION | 04 | The Second Era of Social Sharing |
| | 07 | Executive Summary |
| INSIGHTS | 08 | Who We Are and What We Care About: Category Sentiment and Brand Affinities |
| | 11 | What the Hype is All About: Major Events for Sharing |
| | 12 | From Local to Global: Domestic and Global Trends |
| | 14 | Picking The Right Device for Sharing: Variance in Behaviors by Device |
| | 16 | Engaging Readers in the Right Channel and Moment: Sharing Trends Throughout the Week |
| CONCLUSION | 18 | Finding and Treasuring the Hidden Gems |
| | 19 | The Right Tool for Actionable Insights |

INTRODUCTION

The Second Era of Social Sharing

We've been stuck in an age of oversharing.

Everything from your high school yearbook photo to your home address can be found online. While some people don't mind broadcasting their lives to the world, others have started to push back.

It's not that people don't want to share their favorite stories; they just want to share them with a few social connections instead of millions of social media users.

This has shepherded in a new age of social sharing, where people prefer one-to-one or one-to-few sharing instead of one-to-many. According to a report from [Warc](#), a marketing research firm, private messaging has already eclipsed open sharing, making up more than 80% of all social activity. And [Pew Research](#) found that millennials have embraced private sharing even more than other age groups, some 'opting out of the online public square' completely.

At first glance, this isn't a huge challenge for publishers. After all, they can use social share buttons to track how their users share in two main ways:

- **Open social sharing:** Trackable buttons users click to share posts on open social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.
- **Closed social sharing:** Trackable buttons users click to share posts on closed social platforms like WhatsApp, email, and SMS text.

The problem is, there's another piece to this puzzle that many are missing:

People don't just want to share in private; they also don't want publishers tracking them.

That's where dark social sharing comes in — a scary term for shares that go undetected. Dark social sharing happens when people copy and paste links to a social platform instead of using share buttons. Meaning, these shares fly under the radar from publishers' tracking systems.

When you add dark social to the mix, social sharing categories now look like this:

- **Open social sharing:** Using trackable buttons to share posts on open social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.
- **Private Social Sharing**
 - **Closed social sharing:** Using trackable buttons to share posts on closed social platforms like WhatsApp, email, and SMS text.
 - **Dark social sharing:** Copying and pasting links to any platform.

Dark social sharing can happen on any platform — open ones like

Facebook or closed ones like email, but it's grouped under private sharing because publishers can't track this data. [Studies show](#) that dark social occurs most often on closed one-to-one or one-to-few social channels.

Alas, this poses a measurement challenge for publishers. How can they possibly track these dark social shares? How do they fill in a huge chunk of missing data, especially when some don't even know this data is missing in the first place?

That's what this report aims to clarify.

**// DARK SOCIAL
A SCARY TERM FOR SHARES
THAT GO UNDETECTED. //**

Through our javascript code, which is embedded on millions of publishers' websites, ShareThis can track both open and private sharing.

We dug into 113 million shares across open and private social channels between August 2016 and July 2017 to unearth insights

into the when, where, what, and how readers share content across these channels. Along with this data, we will also provide recommendations for improving audience development, maximizing social shares, and reaching new audiences.

With the right tools and insights, publishers can tap into the many hidden opportunities presented in private sharing to engage existing audiences and attract new readers.



Open Sharing

Share a post on open social platforms like Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter using the Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter share buttons on the site.

50M SHARES ANALYZED



Private Sharing includes the following two types:

Closed Social

Share a post on closed social platforms like WhatsApp, Email, or SMS using the WhatsApp, Email, or SMS share buttons on the site.

3.6M SHARES ANALYZED



Dark Social

Share a post by copying and pasting links to share to any platform, especially emails, instant messages, or text messages, or sometimes on open social platforms like Facebook. It's grouped under Private Sharing because publishers can't track this behavior without the right tools.

59M SHARES ANALYZED

Executive Summary

Private sharing is too big to ignore. This report analyzed 11 million shares across open, closed, and dark social channels to shed light on these spaces. Here are some key takeaways:

CONTENT CATEGORIES:

- Content on private sharing channels generally reflects internal monologue, whereas content on open social resembles watercooler discussions:
 - Content with sensitive, intimate words such as God, Lord, love, mental illness and gender identity were often shared on dark social. Conversely, professional topics related to work, finance, higher education and global non-profits also index highly on closed social channels.
 - Politics, sports, celebrities, film, TV awards, and major seasonal events are the most shared topics on open social.

SENTIMENT:

- Private sharers display the highest positive sentiment towards aspirational content, high-end luxury goods, party and holiday supplies, flowers, gifts, spas and beauty services, as well as gyms and health clubs.
- For open social, positive sentiment is reserved largely for social topics and collective activities, such as bars and clubs, politics and continuing education.

REGIONAL:

- In the US, the East Coast/New England states are more likely to share privately, while people from Wyoming, Missouri, New Mexico and Nevada are more likely share on open social channels.
- Broadly, we see a pattern in which states with a higher population density tend to share more content privately, whereas those with lower density tend to share more openly.

GLOBAL:

- In the UK, content around political discussions as well as pastimes and hobbies skew more towards private sharing than in other countries.
- Meanwhile, in India, people tend to share work and professional content more openly than in other countries.

DEVICE:

- **The majority of sharing on mobile devices (71%) is through open social networks.** And this trend is reflected even more strongly on tablet (79%).
- On the other hand, **desktop is dominated by private sharing (63%), with the majority of content shared via dark social (59%),** suggesting the need for social sharing buttons specific to services like WhatsApp.



Who We Are and What We Care About: Category Sentiment and Brand Affinities

We'd like to think that what we choose to share is a reflection of who we are, but it's not as simple as it sounds.

In fact, we found interesting insights from our data that seem to suggest a discrepancy between the persona we present to the world on open social vs. our real conditions and deeper desires reserved for private sharing.

In open social, we seem to be limited by our social conventions and thus striving to portray ourselves as part of a community by participating in group activities. But within private channels, where some of these limitations are lifted, we're able to express our true fears and cravings freely.

Categories

Open social: Top categories are more entertainment-related or around group activities:

- Rock music, gaming systems, entertainment news, bars and nightclubs, American football, and local news.
- Positive sentiment is reserved largely for social topics and collective activities, such as bars and clubs, politics and continuing education.



Private Sharing

Closed social: Top categories are more personal and more likely to be shared across a closed network.

- Fraternal and service clubs, bankruptcy, bodybuilding, funds, religious study, troubled relationships, and developmental disabilities.
- Positive sentiment towards fashion modeling, vehicle specs, baked goods, promotional items, charities, and government grants.



Dark social: Similar to closed social, top categories are also more personal:

- Business education, counseling services, self help, religion, and medical conditions.
- Highest positive sentiment towards aspirational content, particularly high-end luxury goods, party and holiday supplies, flowers, gifts, spas and beauty services, as well as gyms and health clubs.



Category Groups

We also took a deeper dive into the data for three category groups:

People and Society

- **Open social:** People are more likely to openly share content about ethics and same-sex marriage.
- **Private sharing:** People are more likely to privately share content about religious study, human rights, and self-help.

Jobs and Education

- **Open social:** People are more likely to openly share content about colleges, universities, and study abroad programs.
- **Private sharing:** People are more likely to privately share content about standardized tests and admissions tests, job listings, as well as resumes and portfolios.

Law and Government

- **Open social:** People are more likely to openly share content about law enforcement, counter-terrorism, and visas and immigration.
- **Private sharing:** People are more likely to privately share content about bankruptcy, unemployment, counseling, and social services.

Keywords

Keywords are similar to categories, but they signify that people shared content containing certain exact terms. As with the category data, these findings suggest that people are willing to share openly about politics, news, and entertainment. However, they are more comfortable sharing privately about personal topics such as finance, health, and religion.

Open Social

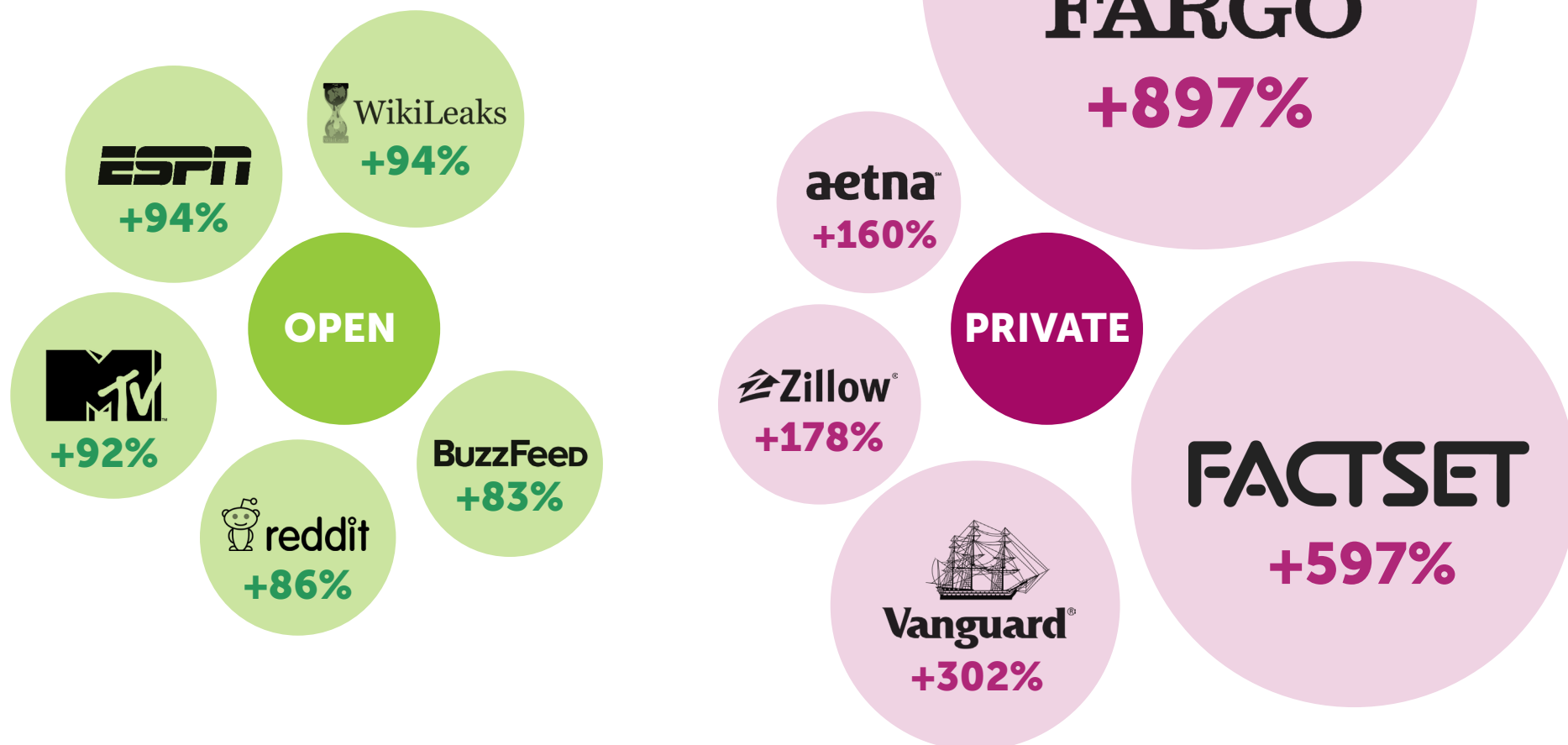
- *Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, entertainment stories, Super Bowl, entertainment news, favorite celebrities, Golden Globes, breaking news, original music, immersive journey, and highly anticipated season.*

Private Sharing

- **Closed social:** *Global non-profit, higher education, high school sports, U.S. government, and Federal Medicare.*
- **Dark social:** *God, life, special offers, healthcare, real estate, love, Lord, mental illness, family, job search, Jesus Christ, skin, and death.*

Brand Affinities

When it comes to brand affinity, readers tend to share content around finance-related brands more privately such as Wells Fargo (+897%)*, Dow Jones (+702%)*, and JP Morgan Chase (+325%)*. On open sharing platforms, we see stronger affinities for entertainment, automotive, and sports broadcasting brands such as Volkswagen (+103%)*, AMC (+102%)*, and ESPN (+94%)*.

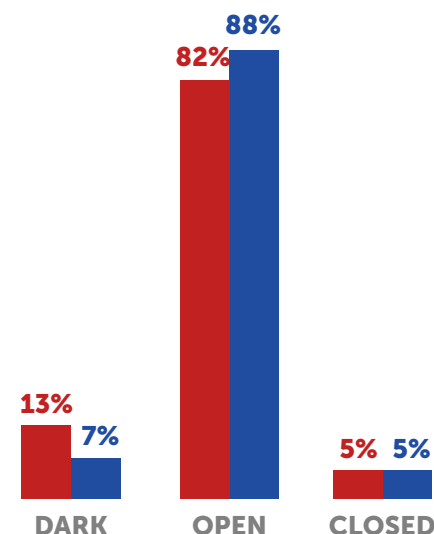
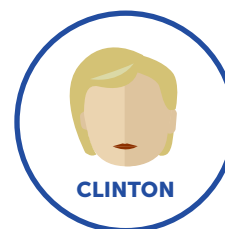
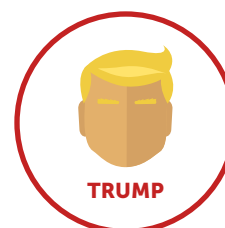
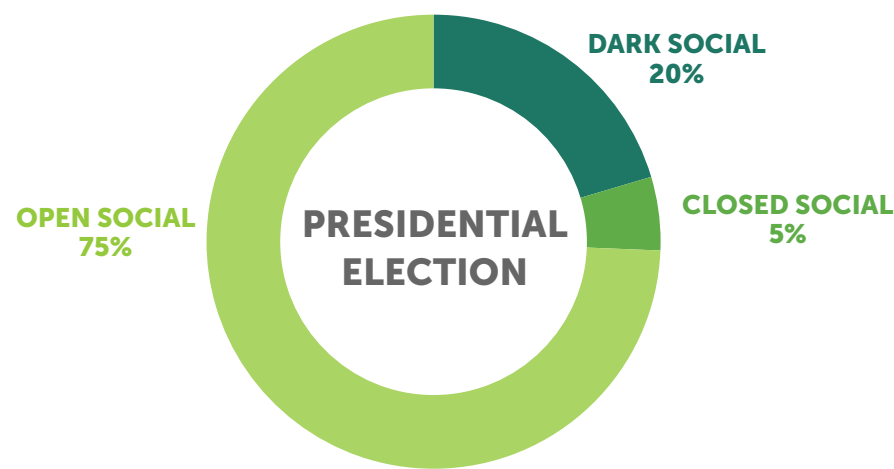


* An index number is calculated based on the ShareThis network average and measures a specific audience's behavior against our general audience. A higher index indicates that a specific audience is more likely to share content related to a chosen topic than our general network, whereas a lower index indicates the opposite.

What the Hype is All About: Major Events for Sharing

Major sporting events, festivals, film, and music award ceremonies are all huge fixtures in the annual TV schedule. Although we have seen in the last few years a [major shift towards on-demand viewing](#), these types of events still command a considerable amount of attention and social chatter online several months before the event. Since they are essentially massive, shared group experiences, it's little surprise to see that the vast majority of social buzz around such events happens in open social.

More intriguing, perhaps, are the trends around another recent nationwide spectacle – the 2016 U.S. election. [Here, people were more likely to share openly about Clinton than Trump](#), but we will leave you to draw your own conclusions or meaning.



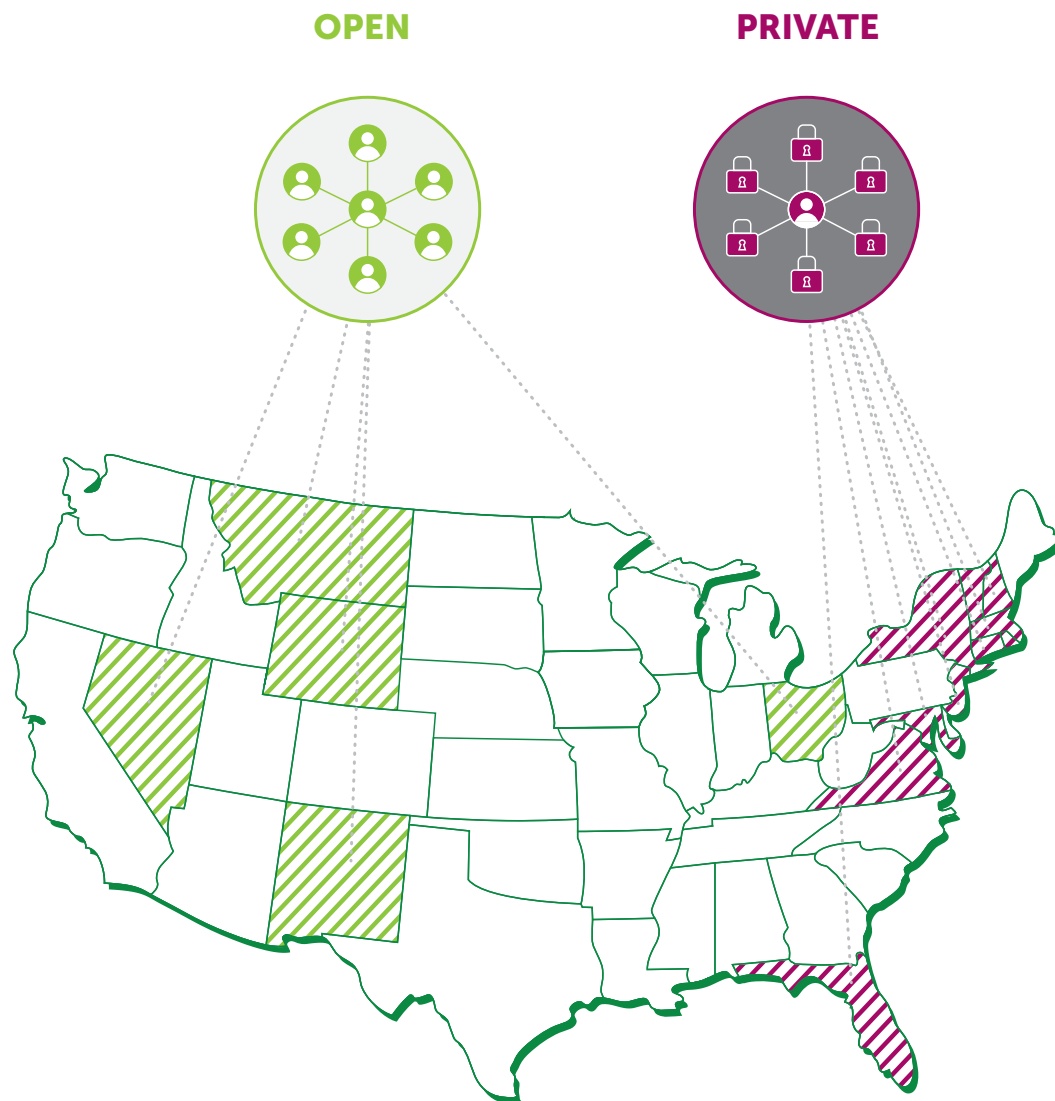
From Local to Global: Geo-Location Trends

Domestic Sharing

Within the U.S., there is a fascinating dichotomy in open versus private sharing by region. Broadly, we see a pattern emerging where densely populated areas share more content privately, whereas more rural areas share more openly.

According to the data, **East Coast and New England states tend to show more private sharing, while Wyoming, Missouri, New Mexico and Nevada share more often on open social.**

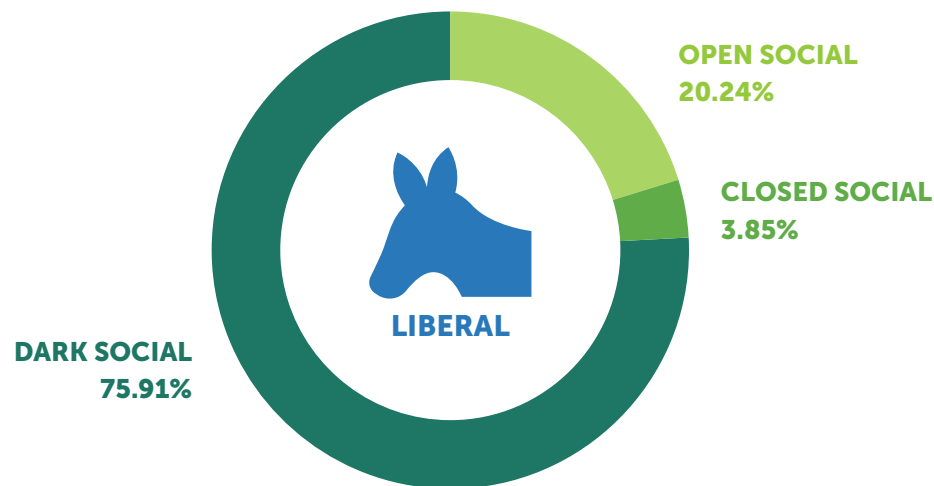
This may provide a useful distinction for local news publishers, or for any site whose offering includes local content. Equally, if your aim as a publisher is to go where the action is, it would also suggest the importance of including private sharing buttons on your properties.



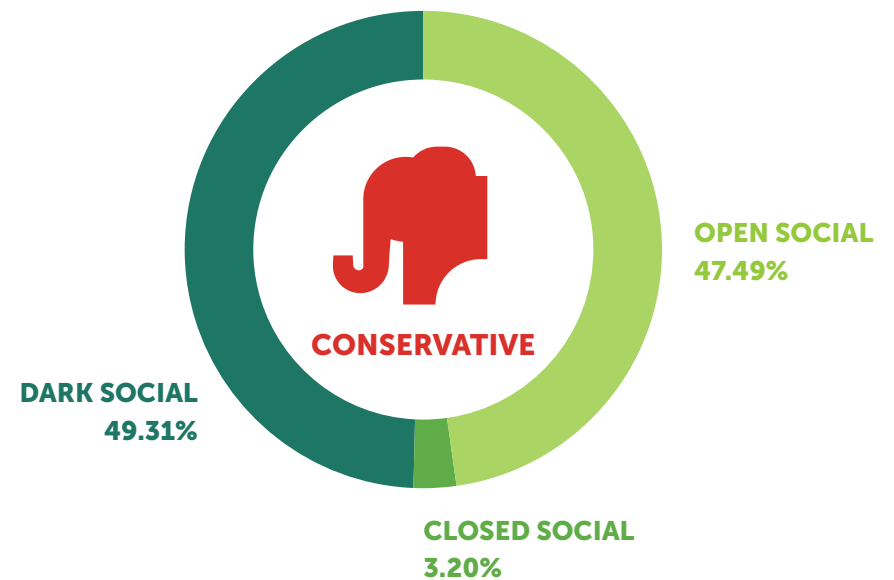
Local Sharing

Going deeper, we isolated our U.S. data by historically liberal university towns and traditionally conservative cities.

We found that people in university towns like **Cambridge, Berkeley, and Ann Arbor** are more likely to utilize dark social sharing. In fact, here's the breakdown of shares from these towns:



On the other hand, people in more conservative cities like **Jacksonville and Oklahoma City** are more likely to share openly:



International Sharing

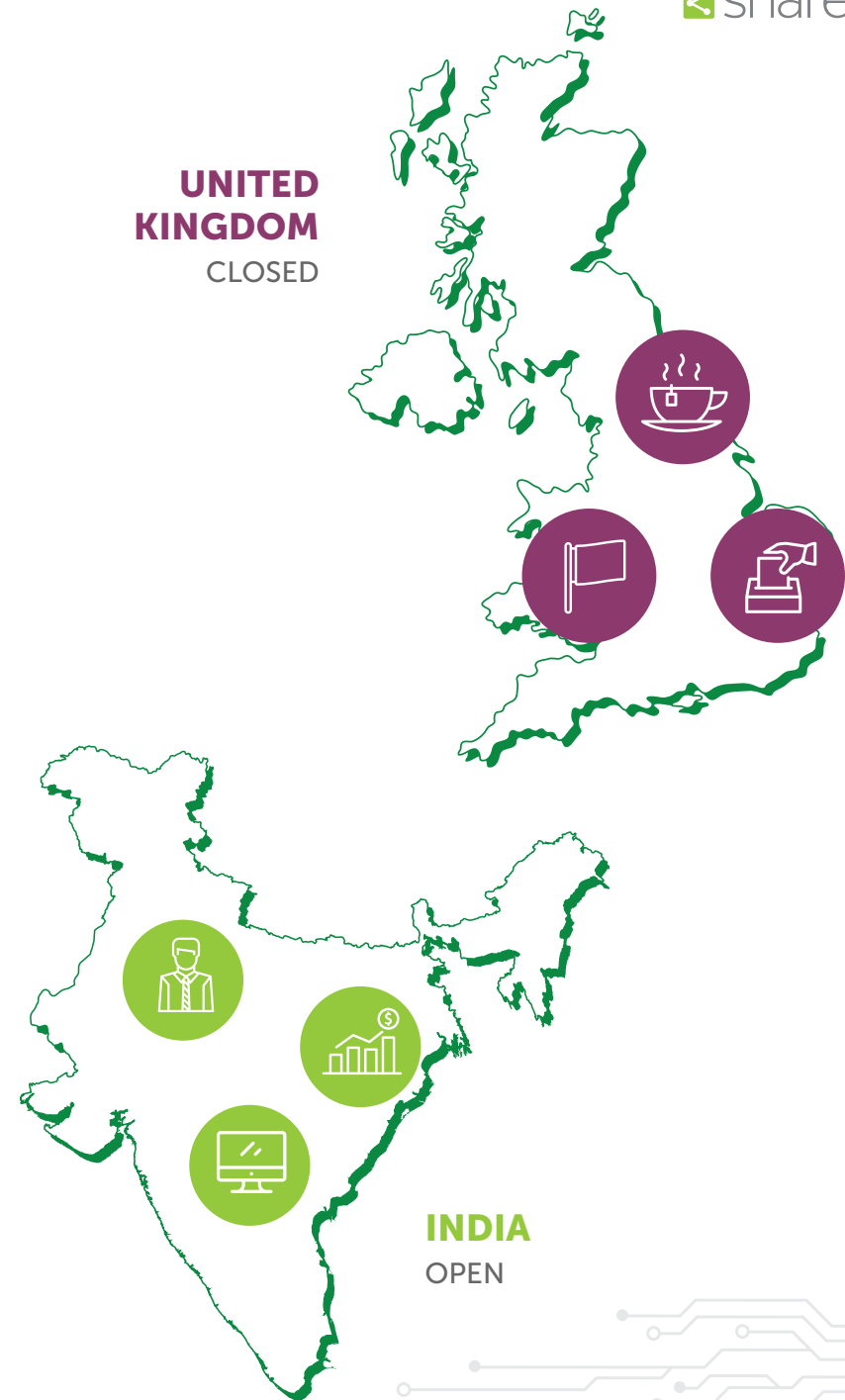
Looking at content sharing trends internationally, here are some interesting insights for publishers to consider:

In the UK, politics, pastimes and hobbies all rank highly in private sharing – noteworthy because for other English-speaking countries, all three categories rank highly in open sharing.

Does this trend confirm the common perception of the British 'stiff upper lip'? We can only guess, but what we can say with some certainty is that publishers who hope to build or keep growing UK audiences, and who cover these areas, should consider whether all sharing options are covered on their sites and apps.

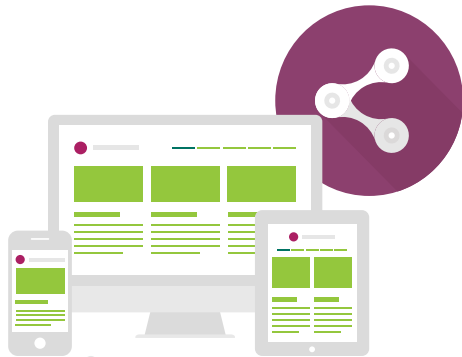
Meanwhile, in India, work and professional topics index highly in open channels, which is unusual because these topics skew towards private sharing in most other countries. This may reflect the fact that India is modernizing and increasing its focus on office-based work.

Publishers, particularly those in the B2B space, should certainly bear this in mind.



Picking The Right Device for Sharing: Variances in Behaviors by Device

We live in a mobile-first world. Private social apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat are mostly, if not entirely, mobile. Meanwhile, in the world of open social, [80% of Facebook's audience](#) is on smartphones. But does market-wide behavioral data on private versus open social reflect these trends?



Activities on Mobile

Looking first at mobile activity, we see that the majority of content is shared via open social (71%), meaning destinations such as Facebook and Twitter still make up the majority of activity.

People may lean towards open sharing when on smartphones out of convenience, and they seem to enjoy engaging with and openly sharing content around politics, news, and entertainment when killing time on the phone.

Even though copying and pasting on the mobile device is a difficult task, **dark social surprisingly makes up 26% of mobile sharing.** This suggests that many people still prefer to share content with their private networks through mobile messaging apps. Therefore, publishers who deploy mobile-friendly [share buttons](#) for messaging apps like [WhatsApp](#) will likely bring more of that darkness to light.

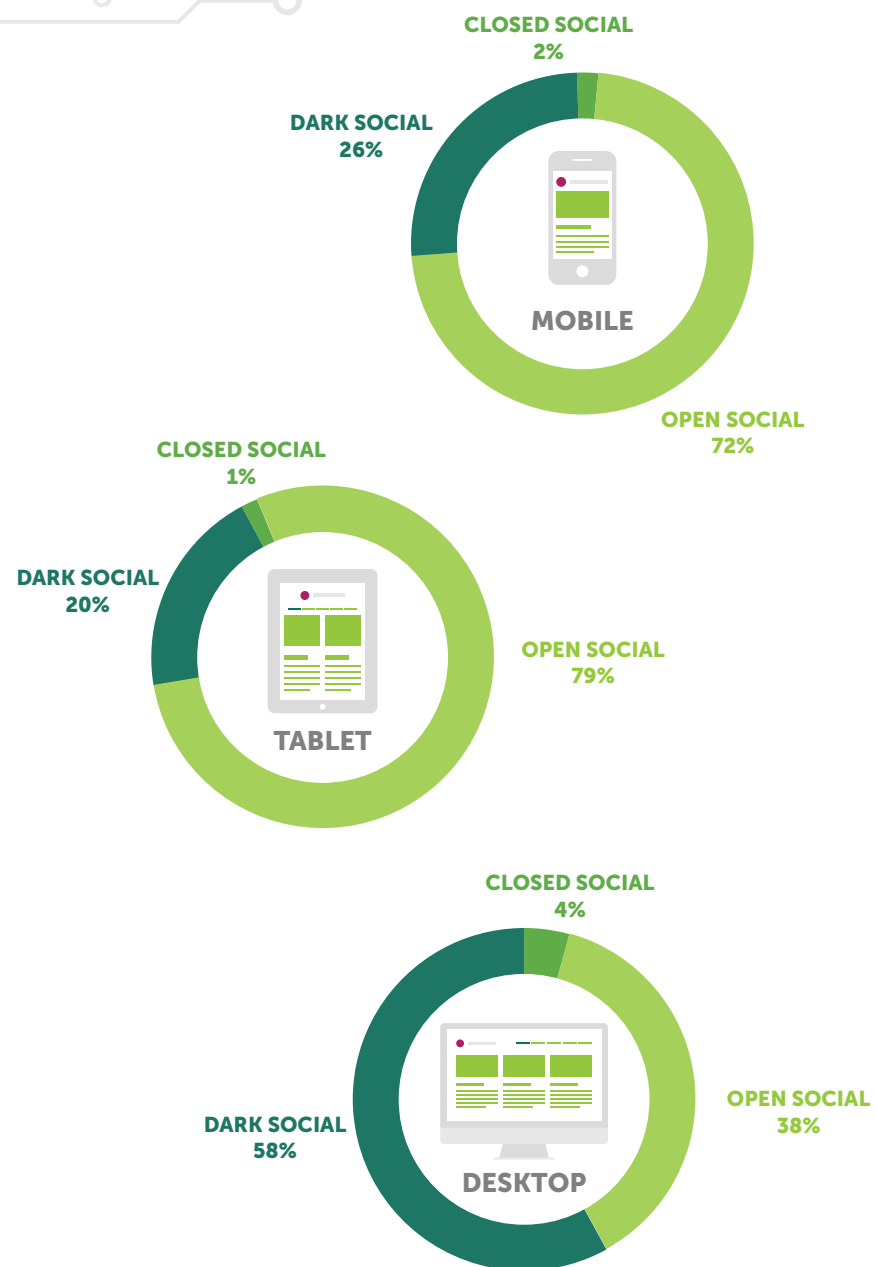
Activities on Tablet

Among all the sharing activities that take place on tablet devices, 79% occurs on open channels. Tablets are often associated with casual browsing, in which case sharing content openly would be the main choice for tablet users. Again, like mobile, copying is not easy or convenient on tablets, yet still contributes to 20% of dark social sharing. In order to capture traffic from this channel, publishers should install share buttons specifically for private messaging apps.

Activities on Desktop

Even more so than on mobile or tablet, dark social comprises 58% of all desktop sharing, as email (which is one of the top dark social channels) is heavily used on desktops at work. This demonstrates the predominance of PC usage at work, where access to Facebook and Twitter may be limited, not allowed, or frowned upon.

Again, publishers should bridge this gap by including additional user options around [WhatsApp](#) and [email](#) to encourage sharing on private channels in a desktop environment.



Engaging Readers in the Right Channel and Moment: Sharing Trends Throughout the Week



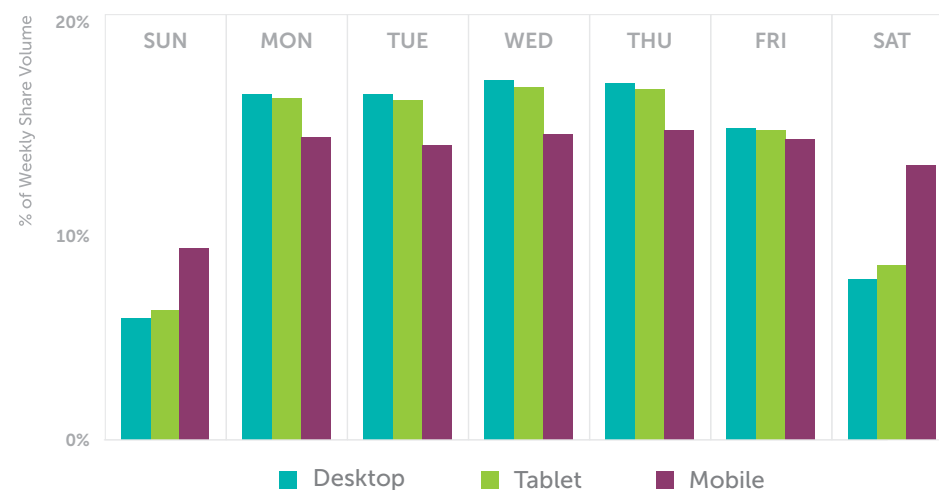
Weekdays

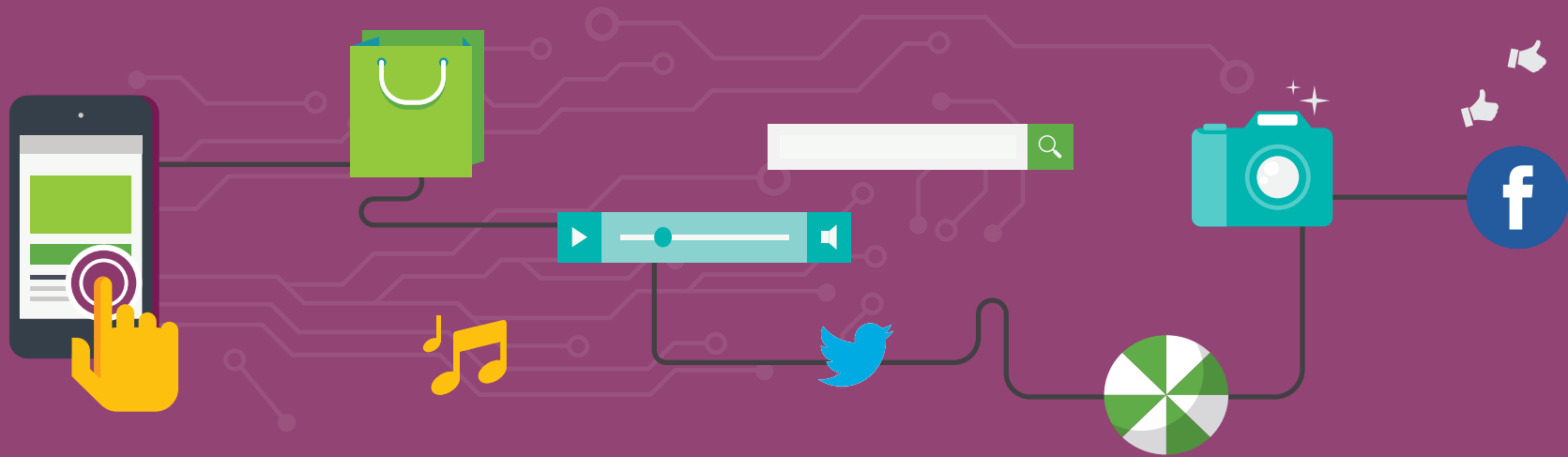
On weekdays, private sharing dominates people's schedules.

This could be due to two reasons:

1. As we saw with device usage, people tend to be more active on desktop computers to check emails during the work week, which causes them to lean towards private sharing on desktop computers at work
2. In the office, there is a greater tendency towards consuming more professional and career-related content, which generates more activities in a closed network.

Weekdays (Private Sharing)



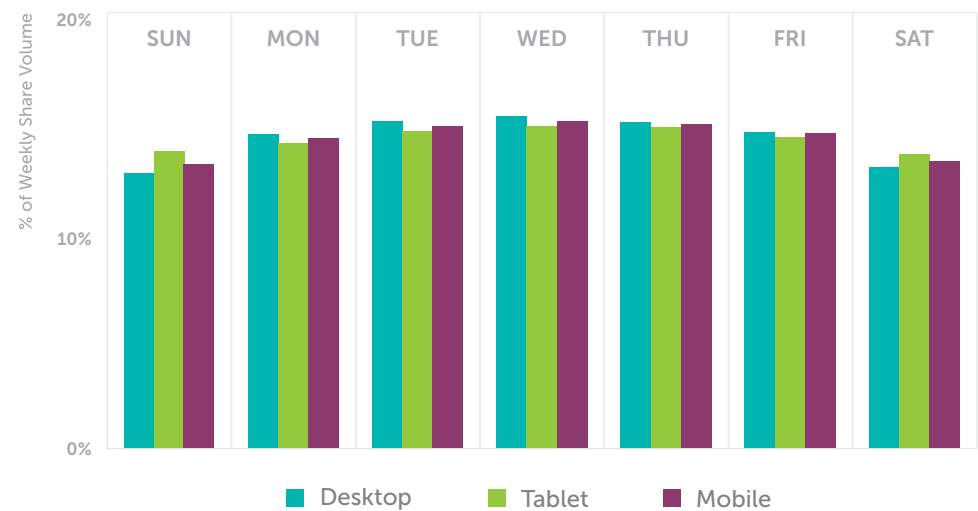


Weekend

In contrast, weekends are all about open sharing — celebrity, sports, and entertainment, you name it. This is the time when users are more likely to share and engage in open conversation with a broader network, such as Facebook or Twitter.

In fact, people tend to share less content on desktop and tablet devices and more on mobile phones over the weekend. For publishers seeking to maximize weekend sharing, there is a clear imperative to find more and better ways to engage with mobile readers.

Weekend (Open Sharing)



Daily and Hourly Trends

Narrowing this down even further, we found the most popular days and times for each type of social sharing:



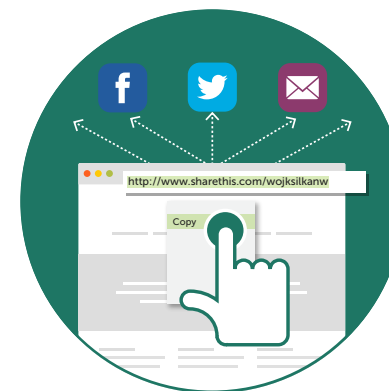
Open Social:

Wednesdays,
11AM and 9PM



Closed Social:

Wednesdays,
11AM



Dark Social:

Wednesdays,
3PM

Private Sharing

The takeaway here is that a great deal of sharing happens on Wednesdays, with a tendency to share on both private and social channels at 11AM. Perhaps people are slowing down from the start of the work week and finding time to catch up on content and share their favorite stories. Dark social sharers, however, wait until 3PM, suggesting that this is the best time to reach people with more personal and private content types.

CONCLUSION

Finding and Treasuring the Hidden Gems

In the world of business, publishers are often the first to feel the impact of any new technology or audience behavior. For instance, [algorithm changes](#) on open social networks like Facebook can wreak havoc on social traffic and audience engagement for publishers. Just because you have 100,000 followers, that doesn't mean 100,000 people will see each of your posts. In fact, [organic reach dropped by 52% for publishers' Facebook Pages in 2016](#). Facebook also has a history of releasing frequent and unpredictable algorithm changes that can cause traffic to drop overnight.

That's why it's important for publishers to be able to track all social shares — across both open and private channels. And it's crucial to remember that private sharing can be divided into two groups: trackable sharing on one-to-one channels, and dark social sharing on any channel.

Those dark social shares may have once eluded publishers, but with the right tools, they don't have to be left in the shadows anymore. They can find those hidden gems of social sharing and be one step closer to building even more sustainable audiences.

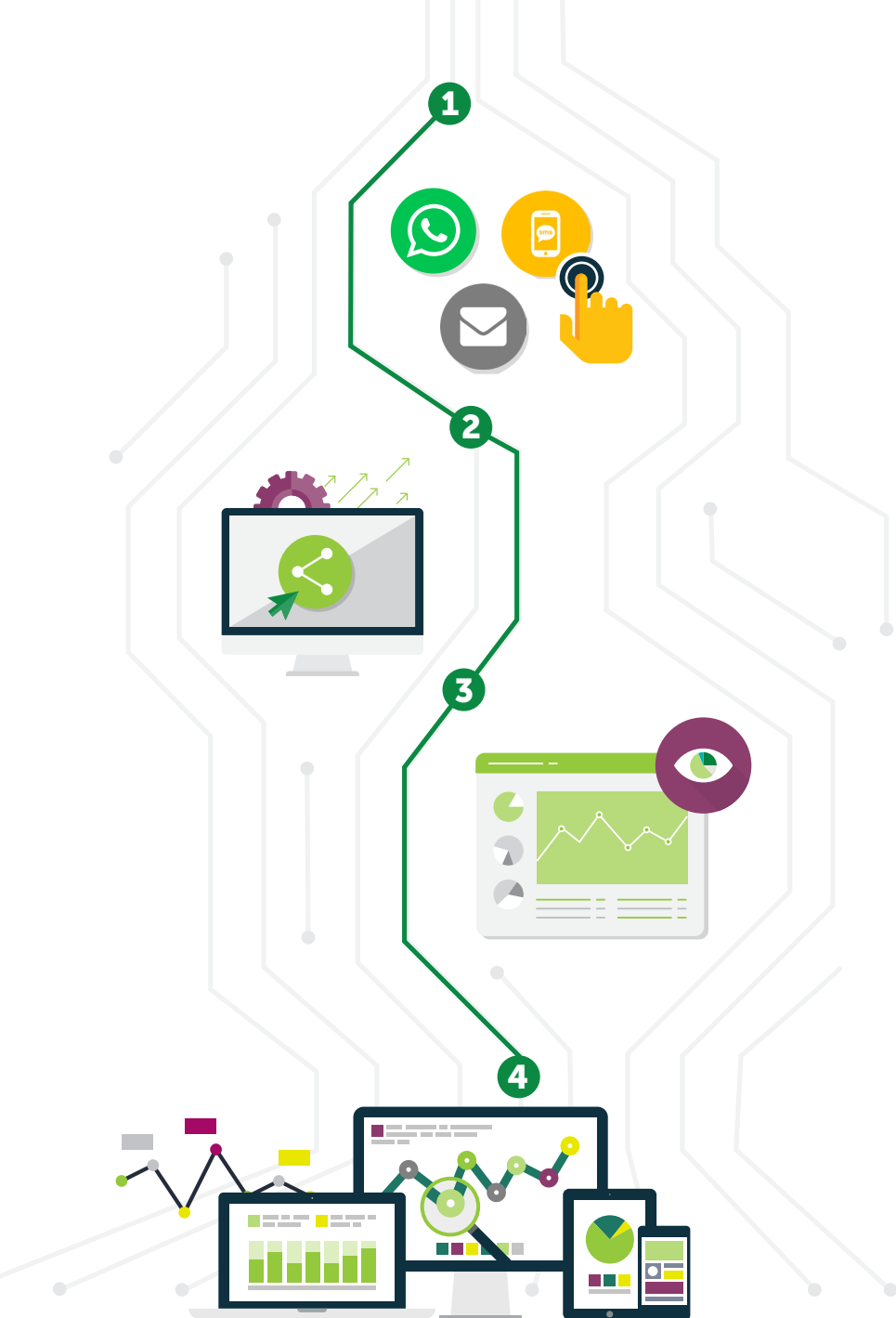


Actionable Insights

In addition to reading the findings of our research, you can optimize and monetize for content shared in private channels by carrying out the following 4-step plan:

1. Make sharing on closed social channels super easy so readers don't have to skip this step and go dark — you can quickly create and customize private [sharing buttons](#) ([WhatsApp](#), [email](#), [SMS](#) etc.) and make them easy to spot and use on your website.
2. If specific closed [social buttons](#) have already been installed around your content, you still need to understand what types of content appeal to which types of sharing. In this way, you can modify your distribution strategy on and off-site to maximize engagement and social traffic.
3. Start to track private sharing activities to uncover insights into audience behaviors and preferences. ShareThis will include a publisher-dedicated solution to capture insights into dark social and private sharing in our upcoming Social Analytics Dashboard.
4. After setting up the dashboard to improve private sharing intelligence, the next step is to look at this data in a more granular way — whether it's by cross-referencing it with sharing volume across regions and devices, or comparing with other industry benchmarks and reports for the same markets.

Best of luck!





About ShareThis

ShareThis, the Sharing Intelligence™ Company, has been collecting and synthesizing social share data since 2007. We are the trusted pioneer of sharing data that spans the social platform walled gardens, transforming authentic human sharing behavior into actionable data outputs at scale for marketers and publishers. Our [Social Optimization Platform](#) provides free tools that enable 3 million global publishers to maximize traffic, increase audience engagement, and optimize content in order to grow readership and drive revenue. Learn more about our [sharing tools](#).



Paul Lentz

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Paul Lentz is the SVP of Publisher & Business Operations at ShareThis. He is responsible for all aspects of growing and sustaining the Publisher Network. Prior to ShareThis, he was a product and business development lead at CNET and CBS Interactive. His expertise lies in helping publishers drive innovation and increase engagement with their readers through social media.

Feel free to reach out to marketing@sharethis.com or support@sharethis.com if you have any questions!