

Navigating the New Traffic Landscape

What's Really Happening with
Search, Dark Social, and AI

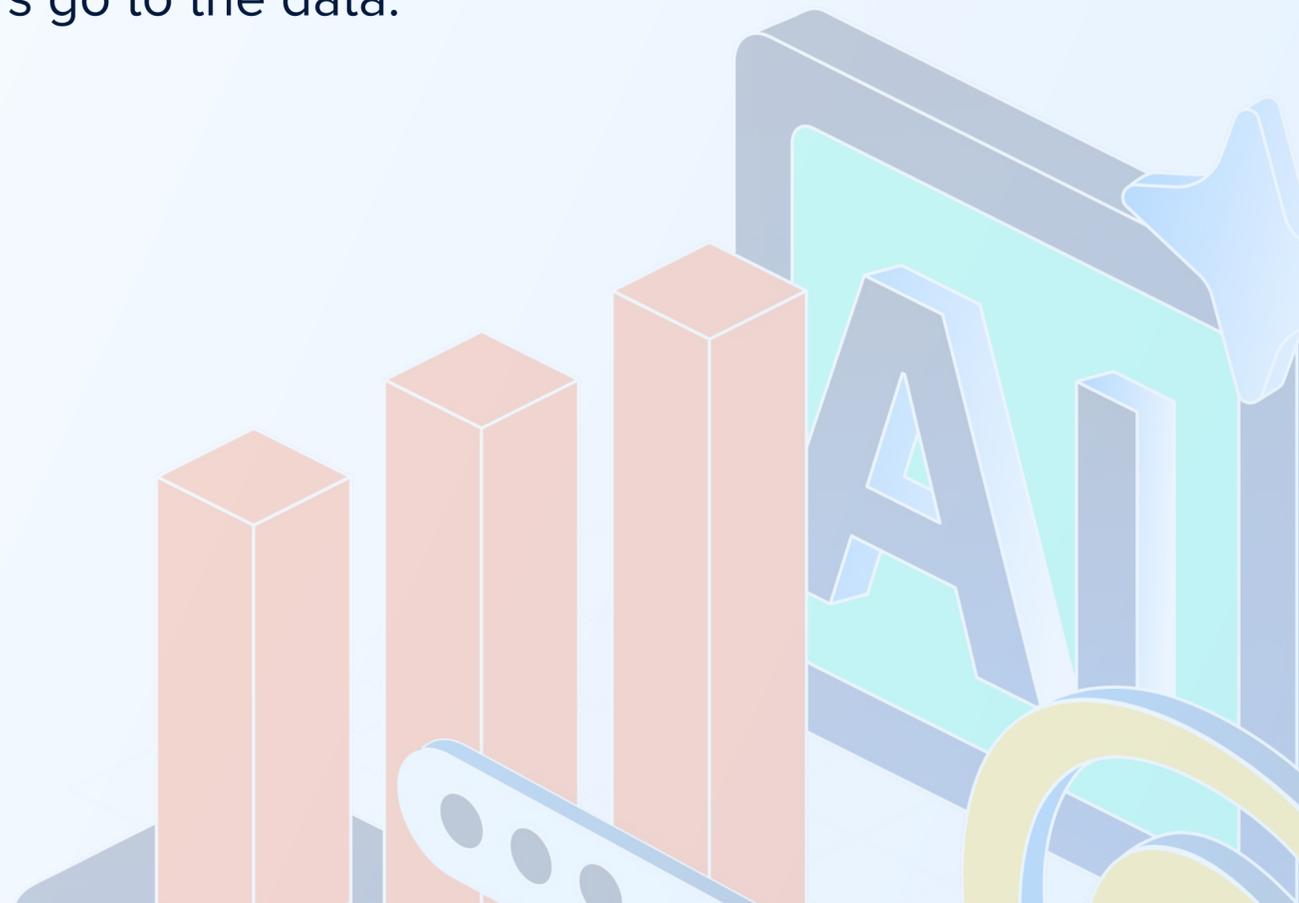


As AI becomes more and more intertwined with our daily routines, every industry is wondering how this will affect business, and digital media is no exception. Recent headlines suggest that AI is siphoning traffic from publishers, but the real picture is more nuanced.

At Chartbeat, we track billions of pageviews every month, and while this shows us that the traffic outlook isn't as dire as other reports would have you believe, the landscape is undeniably shifting, and publishers need to prepare to move with it.

To do so, the right question isn't "Is AI killing traffic?" but rather:
What's actually happening to your traffic, and how should you adapt?

To answer these questions, let's go to the data.



What's Inside

Why overall traffic has not experienced the catastrophic drop you might expect

Which content categories are winning AI referrals

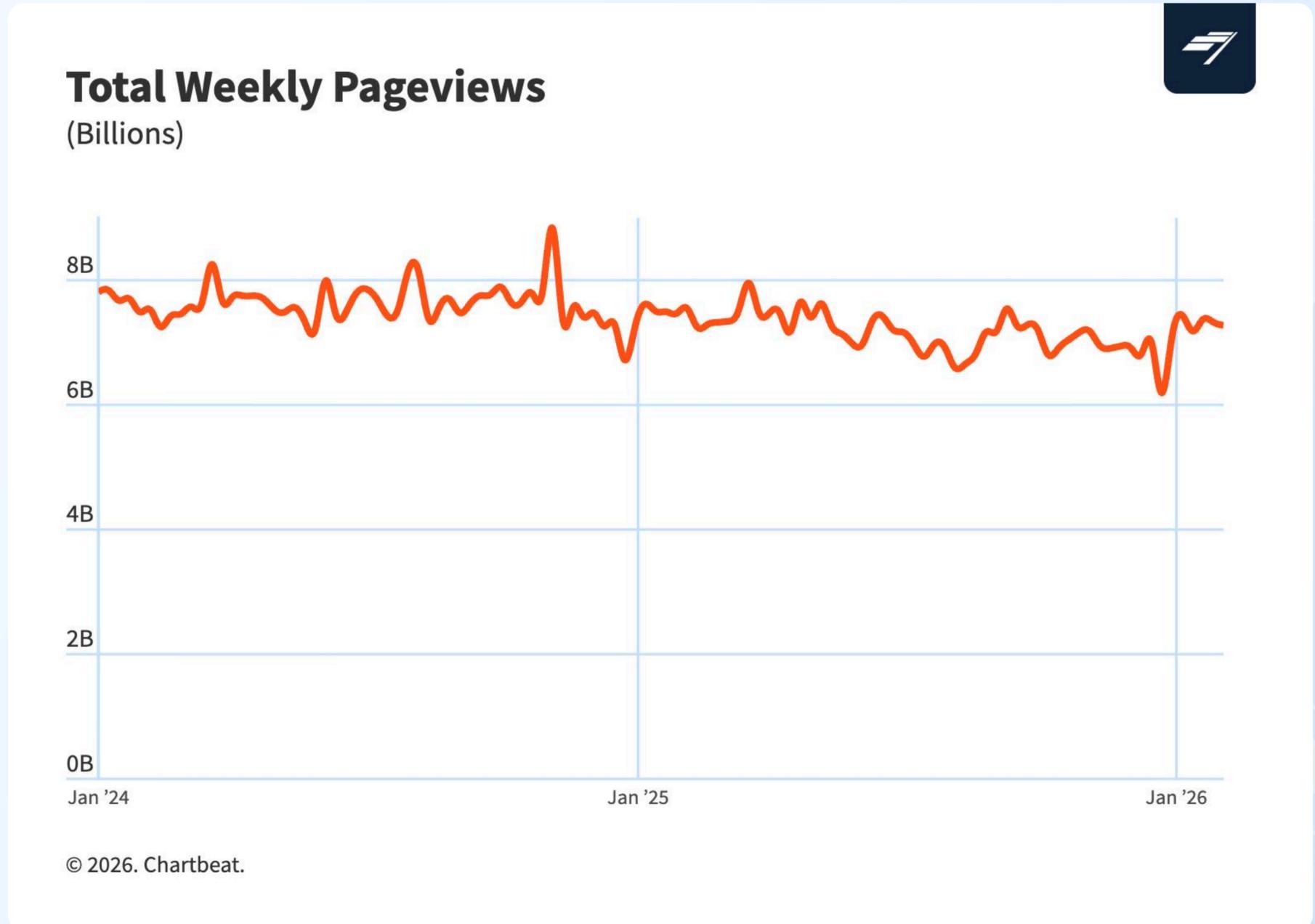
Which traffic sources are quietly filling the search gap and what to do about it

Overall Traffic Trends

At first glance, total weekly pageviews in the Chartbeat network do appear to be trending downward over the past two years. If we compare 2024 to 2025, the math confirms what you're seeing — average weekly total pageviews dropped from approximately 7.64 billion in 2024 to 7.19 billion in 2025, a decrease of 5.89%.

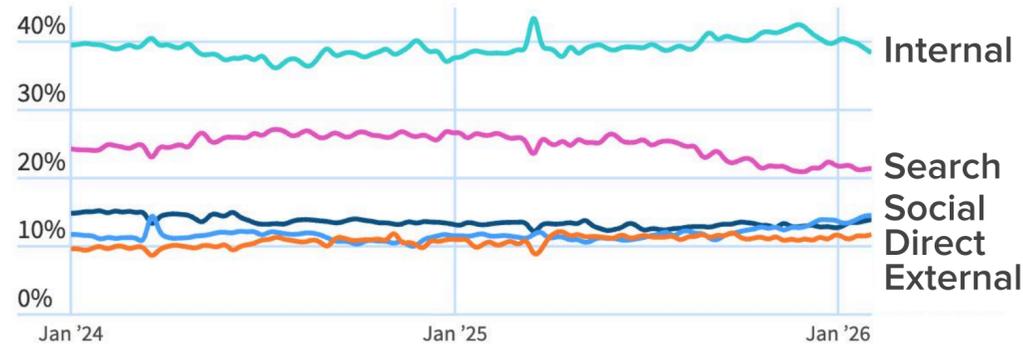
No publisher likes to see a decline, but a 6% drop is well within the range of normal year-to-year fluctuation. Traffic fluctuates with global event cycles. This is not new. 2024 was a huge year for global events — with more than one billion people globally electing leaders, including in major media markets like the US, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the UK. While 2025 was comparatively quieter from a political standpoint, 2026 is poised to capture global audiences with at least three major events — the Winter Olympics, the World Cup, and US midterm elections.

If overall traffic isn't raising a red flag, what is?



What's causing traffic concerns?

Share of Traffic by Referral Type



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When we break down traffic by channel, the majority have seen stable traffic levels over the past two years with the exception of one: **search**.

Looking closer, it's clear that the two major referrers within search — Google Search and Google Discover — have both declined, especially since the midpoint of 2025. Pageviews from Google Search fell 34% from December 2024 to December 2025 and pageviews from Google Discover fell 16% during the same timeframe.

Share of Search Traffic by Platform



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Is the decline in search volume affecting all sites equally?

Site Size 👁️ DAILY AVERAGE PAGEVIEWS	YoY Change in Search
Large 👁️ 100,000+	-22%
Medium 👁️ 10,000 – 100,000	-47%
Small 👁️ 1000 - 10,000	-60%

We see that small publishers are bearing the brunt of this decline while larger publishers weather the storm, indicating that brand recognition and direct relationships are becoming essential survival tools. For small publishers this shift means they can no longer rely on SEO alone, but must build direct audience relationships through newsletters, branded recognition, and authority in a specific niche.

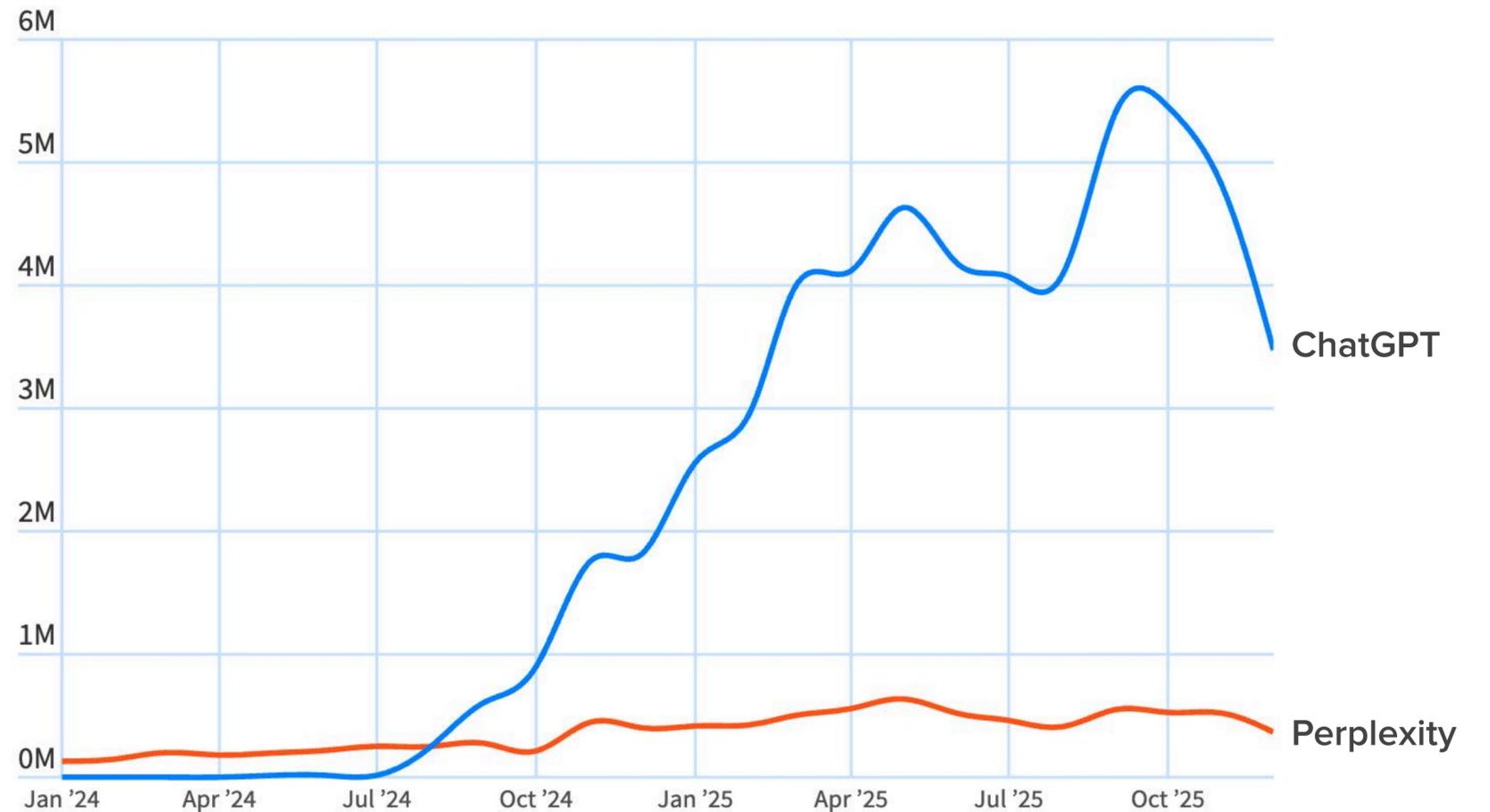
AI referrals skyrocket, but on a smaller scale

Could AI sources like ChatGPT and Perplexity be making up the referral traffic search is losing? Not yet.

ChatGPT has increased more than 200% in pageviews year-over-year, but when we look at the percentage of pageviews coming from AI platforms in the Chartbeat network, we see that chatbots still account for less than 1% of pageviews. Even so, there's no doubt that generative AI and large language models (LLMs) have quickly become part of the media ecosystem, and they're changing how audiences discover information as well as how platforms surface it.

Though it's a small piece of the overall traffic picture, what do we know about the types of content generating referral traffic from AI?

Monthly Pageviews for ChatGPT and Perplexity



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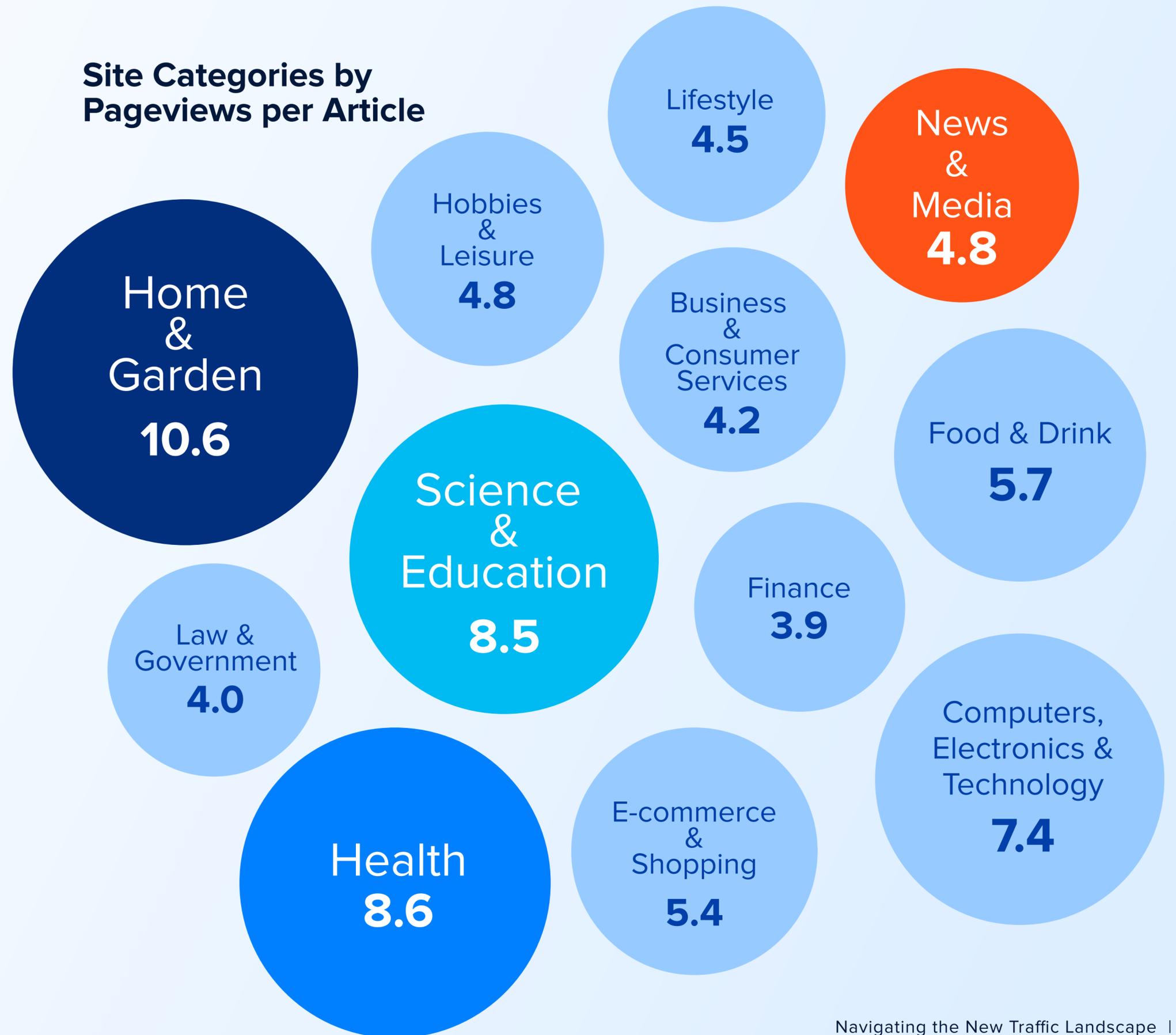
The most popular topics according to AI

Traffic is changing. Readers are turning to ChatGPT and its competitors in cases where search used to be the only option. And while exploratory sessions can end there, for some types of content, it's now the beginning of the journey. Let's look at what types of content and sites those journeys most often lead to.

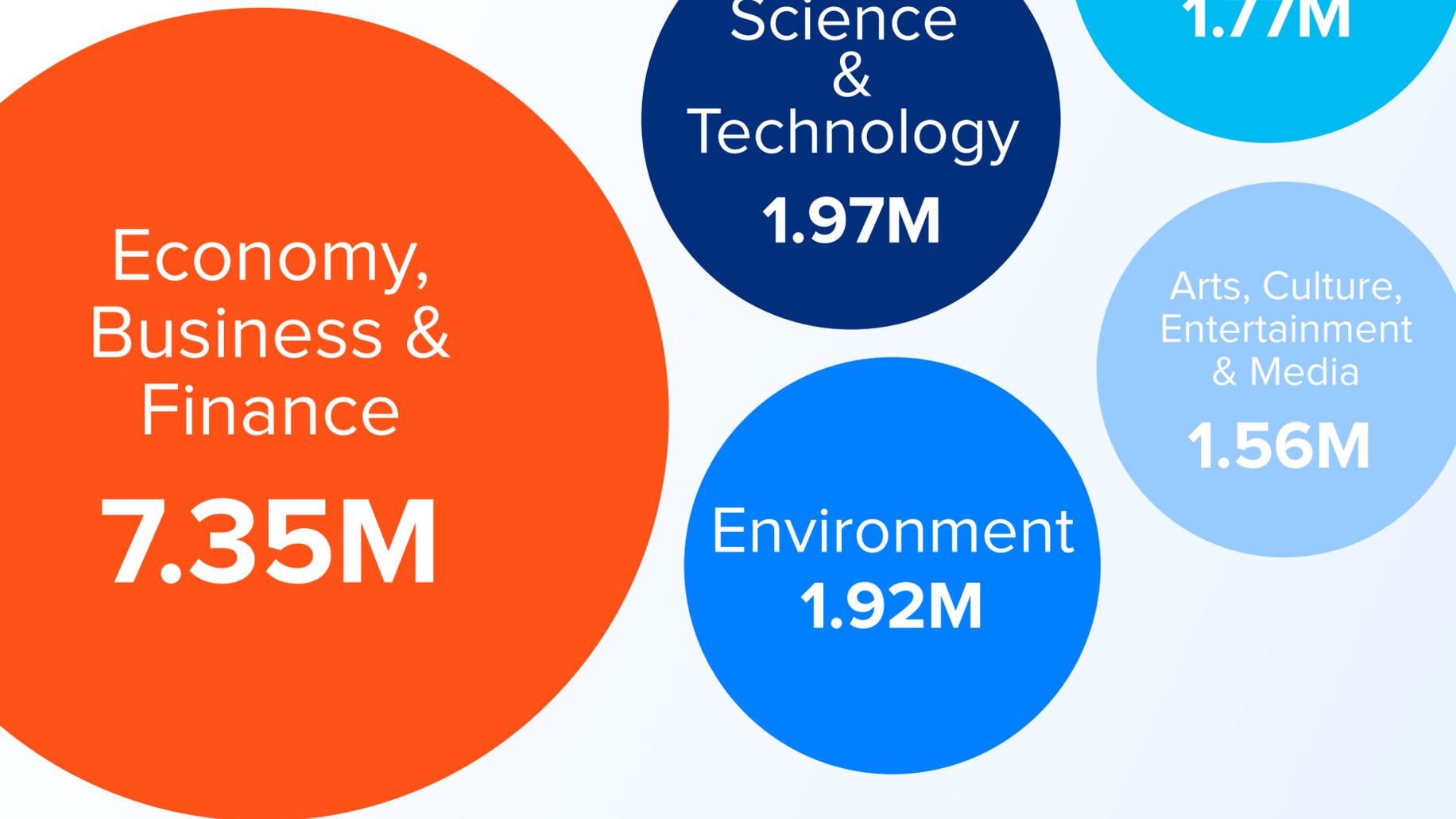
From a pageview perspective, News and Media sites get the most attention from LLMs. Other types of sites, however, see more pageviews per article from these sources. While News and Media sites average 4.8 pageviews per article, Home and Garden sites average 10.6, Health sites average 8.6, and Science and Education sites average 8.5.

This data is based on traffic to websites in the CB network from 1/1/24 - 2/9/26

Site Categories by Pageviews per Article



Article Categories by Pageviews



When we look at the categories of the articles generating traffic, Economy, Business, and Finance articles lead the way with more than 7 million pageviews while Science and Technology and then Environment are the next most popular categories with nearly 2 million pageviews each.

What this means for you and your website

Practical, evergreen content drives deeper AI engagement.

AI chatbots are functioning like research assistants, directing users to how-to guides, explainers, and authoritative references where they can dig deeper.

News sites get traffic breadth, not depth.

News and Media sites receive the highest total pageviews from AI platforms, but the lowest engagement per individual article. This suggests AI is surfacing many different news articles for fact-checking and context, but readers aren't staying to explore — they're getting their answer and leaving.

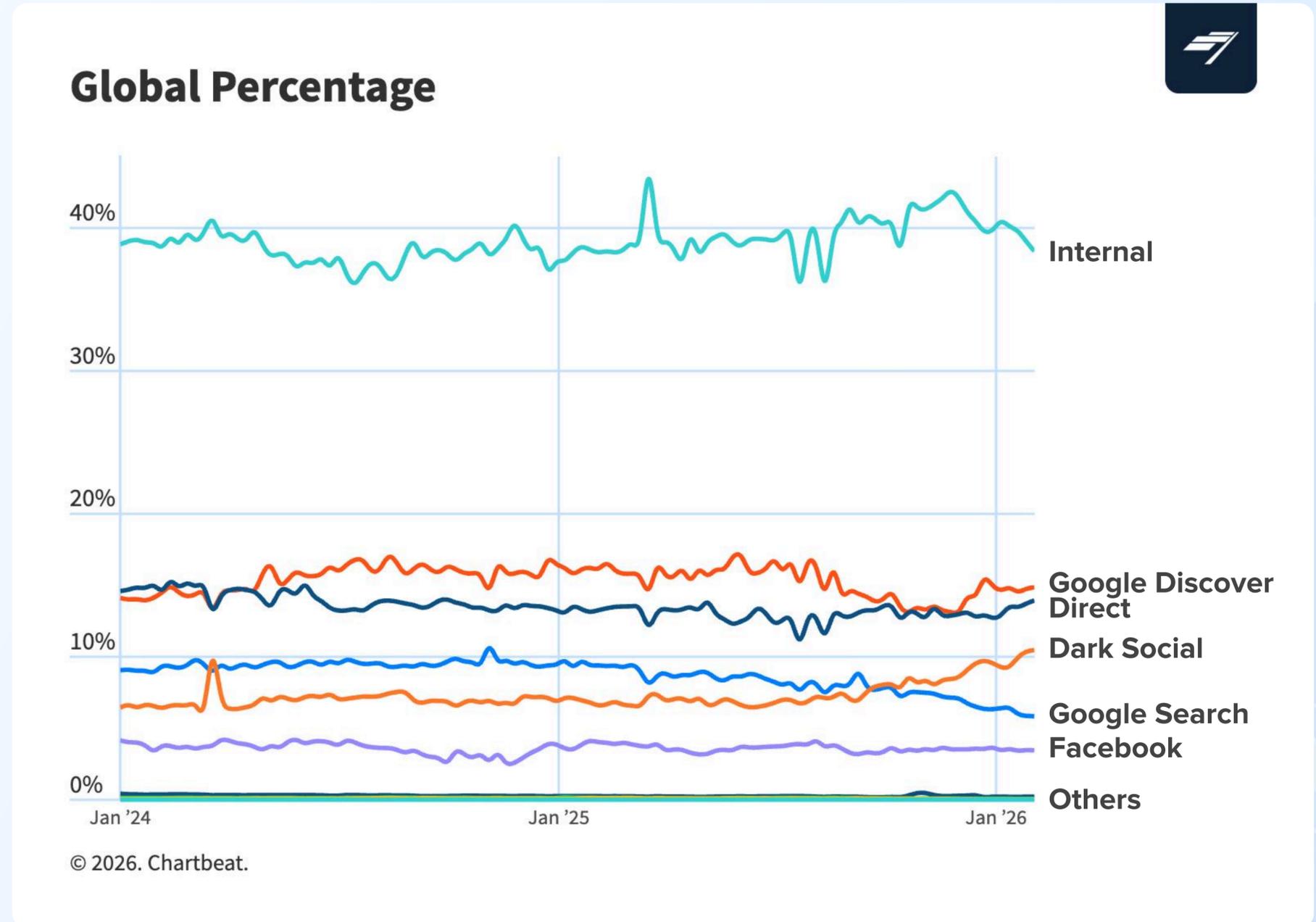
The shift favors publishers who solve problems, not just report news.

Content that answers questions, solves problems, or provides actionable guidance generates more engagement from AI referrals than time-sensitive reporting. Consider balancing breaking news with evergreen, solution-oriented content to maximize AI-driven traffic potential.

The traffic sources gaining traction

As search declines, a few traffic sources have risen in its place. Internal traffic, or traffic that arrived to a page via another page on the same site, was already the largest source of pageviews for News and Media sites, and it's slowly taking a larger piece of the pie, climbing from about 38% of pageviews in 2024 to about 41% since November 2025.

Dark social, or non-direct traffic that comes to a site without referrer data (think emails, apps, and IMs), has also increased its share of traffic. In 2024, it accounted for about 7% of total traffic. In 2025, this increased to about 8%, and in January of 2026, it increased again to 10% of traffic across the Chartbeat network.



What this means for you and your website

Internal traffic is your most controllable growth lever.

As internal traffic climbs from 38% to 41% of total pageviews, the message is clear: your ability to keep readers engaged once they arrive matters more than ever. Invest in recirculation strategies like related content modules, compelling homepage curation, and newsletter sign-ups that bring readers back to your site directly.

Dark social is the new discovery engine.

Growing from 7% to 10% of traffic in just two years, dark social represents how people actually share content today — through texts, messaging apps, emails, and private channels. This traffic is harder to track but signals genuine reader enthusiasm. Focus on creating highly shareable content and make sharing frictionless with clear social share buttons and compelling headlines that work out of context.

Build for retention, not just acquisition.

With internal traffic becoming the dominant source, the quality of your on-site experience directly impacts your traffic sustainability. Strong internal navigation, fast load times, and content depth that encourages multi-page visits are now table stakes for traffic growth.

Expert Analysis

“What we’re seeing is a meaningful redistribution of how audiences discover and return to content. Channels will continue to rise and fall, but attention, trust, and habit remain the core drivers of a healthy media business.

This is a moment for sustained, intentional execution. Publishers that strengthen direct relationships, improve the on-site experience, and build brands audiences actively seek out will not just adapt, but grow. The environment is evolving, and the fundamentals still reward focus, discipline, and long-term thinking.”

John Saroff
CEO
Chartbeat, Inc.



Learn more about how [Chartbeat, Inc.](#) is shaping the future of media strategy and revenue

Key Findings

Already thinking of ways to incorporate this information in your newsroom? Here’s a recap of the 4 most important findings.

1

Traffic isn’t disappearing — it’s redistributing.

Overall pageviews declined just 6% year-over-year, well within normal fluctuation. While search referrals have dropped significantly, internal traffic and dark social are rising to fill the gap. The sky isn't falling, but the ground is shifting beneath your feet.

2

Size matters in the age of AI.

Small publishers face a 60% decline in search traffic compared to just 22% for large sites, revealing that brand recognition and direct audience relationships are becoming essential survival tools. If you're a smaller publisher, doubling down on SEO won't save you — building loyalty, newsletters, and niche authority will.

3

AI rewards depth and utility over timeliness.

With less than 1% of total traffic but 200% year-over-year growth, AI referrals favor evergreen, problem-solving content like health advice (8.6 pageviews per article) and home improvement guides (10.6) over breaking news (4.8). The future belongs to publishers who can balance the news cycle with timeless value.

4

Your internal traffic strategy is now your growth strategy.

As the largest and fastest-growing traffic source, internal referrals are the channel you control most. The quality of your on-site experience — related content, site speed, and content depth — directly determines whether you grow or decline in this new landscape.

Know where your audience comes from – and where they'll go next.

[Request a Demo](#)

 **Chartbeat**

Chartbeat, the leading content intelligence platform for media, delivers simple, reliable analytics and optimization tools that show your editorial team how people are engaging with content across your site and empower you to keep them engaged even longer.

Tracking more than 50 billion monthly pageviews across more than 70 countries, our real-time and historical dashboards, in-page optimization tools, and robust reporting help the world's leading media organizations understand, measure, and build value from their content.

Discover more at chartbeat.com.