Dark Social: how analytics are getting 'linked out' -
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You might remember previous discussions here about the so-called Darknet or the Dark Web, namely the layer of the Internet that can only be accessed by specialized private means, such as encrypted peer to peer applications and secure, anonymous Tor network connections. While these 'dark' activities bear a similar name, they differ from Dark Social in how they function. While the Darknet is concerned with secure connections and file transfers, Dark Social (also called direct social), is a term coined by *Atlantic* writer Alexis Madrigal to describe the traffic generated by Internet-based sharing applications that do not pass on data about themselves.

This may not sound very exciting at first, but there is a lot of value tied up in this data. Many organizations rely on getting a clear understanding of how their online information is being shared, in order to tailor their content to best serve their customers. This type of monitoring is known, in part, as web analytics, and typically measures referrals from other websites. This works well if users are navigating to those sites by clicking on links from other websites, or from social media sources that are publically and openly shared, like Facebook and Twitter. In the current moment, this paradigm is sadly lacking. The technique dates back to the salad days of the Internet, when most site references were based on embedded URL hyperlinks in pages. With the appearance of 'Web 2.0,' analytical practices were simply extended to social media sites.

Today, the understanding and use of the Internet is vastly different. While old-school web browsing is still very much alive, more proprietary activity, like direct messaging and mobile apps do not share the same data that traditional web browsers do in terms of where the link reference is coming from. If you click a link in a typical web browser, it shares information about the webpage that the referring link is located on, browser type, etc. Dark Social sources, on the other hand, do not pass this information, leaving the managers of websites completely unaware if the traffic they are receiving is from apps like Snapchat, links shared in email messages, or from secured browsing networks like Tor. This unknown sourcing is becoming an increasing portion of web referrals, taking almost 18% of referred links, just under the traditional browser percentage of 21.5%.

So what are web content managers to do to get an accurate reflection of their traffic? Brewster Stanislaw of the analytic firm Simply Measured suggests attaching custom Urchin Traffic Monitor (UTM) parameters to links. These parameters are supported natively by Google analytics, and although they may not tell you what particular app

referred your link, they can help differentiate between a mobile app and a link send via email, for example.

Alexis Madrigal makes a broader claim that our narratives for standard social platforms like Twitter are wrong. Although these sites are commonly thought of as means for sharing information, he claims what they actually do is less like the sharing, and more like public publishing and archiving. He warns that optimizing for Facebook and Twitter is not enough. Until analytical tools are developed that better reflect the current situation, Madrigal advises that the best metric for dark social is the content itself, pure and simple. In other words, if you want to be shared, be good.

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