

A person is walking on a modern staircase with a large circular graphic overlay. The graphic consists of several concentric circles in shades of blue and green, creating a tunnel-like effect. The background is a blurred view of the staircase and its railings, with a color palette of blues, greens, and yellows.

Being Brand Brave in a World of Bots, Trolls and Toxic Conversations

Deploying Allison Advanced Issues Monitor

Allison

Contents

Introduction

The State of Play for Brands

Social Snapshot: Social Media's Dominance On Society

Misinformation in Focus

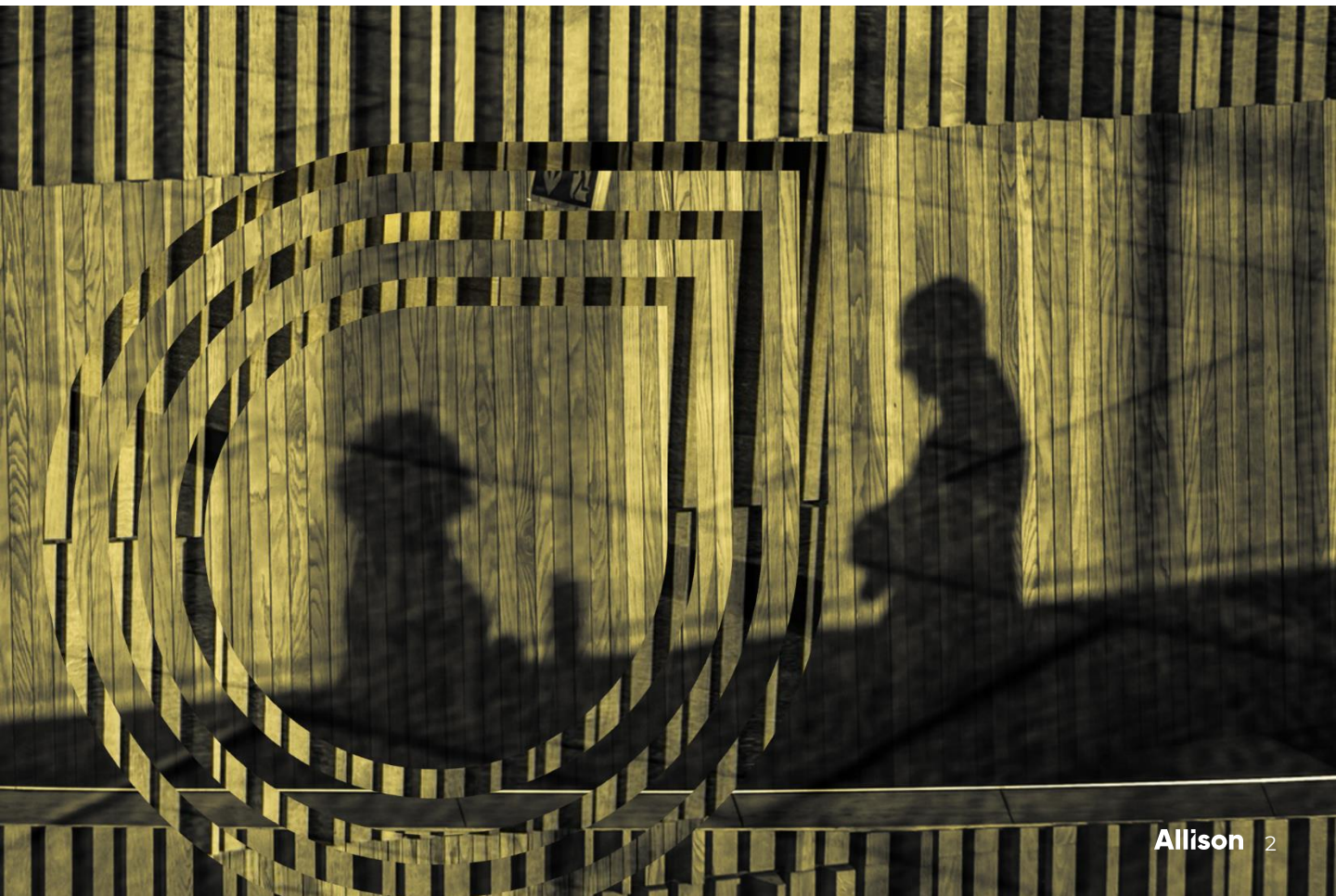
The Allison AIM Study: Seeking Truth in an Opaque World

Introducing Allison AIM

Case Study: The Scholastic 'Book Bans' – A Brand-Centric Analysis

Case Study: Gender & Sports – Tracking a Developing Issue

In Conclusion



Introduction

Social media is undeniable. It is prevalent. It is rampant. It is good, and it is bad. Social media connects. Social media divides. It educates. It lies.

In a world where an estimated 4.9 billion people use social media platforms – expected to jump to 5.85 billion by 2027 – social media is omnipresent in the lives of a vast majority of the globe.

With the irrefutable prevalence of social media comes new challenges for society. Among which is the rampant growth of misinformation, disinformation, toxic conversations and its associates – bots, trolls and nefarious forces backed by state entities. With the simple click of a button, a mistruth can be deployed. In a matter of minutes, it has the potential to reach millions, even billions of individuals. These conversations, often stemming from social corners and discrete online communities, can make their way into the popular narrative. They can influence the masses and shape false perceptions.

Misinformation isn't just conjecture. The spread of false or misinformed content, even unintentionally, can quickly turn into perceptions of the truth, causing reputable and well-informed individuals to believe in false rhetoric. It causes people to think and act differently, altering their version of reality. This has myriad consequences across individuals and organizations – and of course, for brands that can be the target (or accidental victim) of misinformation campaigns. And the impact can be significant if a brand finds itself on the wrong side of an online firestorm.

This is what we're here to unpack. **In the world of bots, trolls and deepfakes, where issues and narratives can run rampant in a matter of minutes, how can brands continue to engage, act authentically and boldly?**

The State of Play for Brands

Today, consumers expect the brands they engage with to be real, to align on values and engage in a way that goes far deeper than price or performance. Companies face growing pressure from employees, shareholders, stakeholder groups and customers to live out their brand values and speak out—and often act—on economic, social and sometimes even political issues. Yet, the risk remains real.

In a polarized world, deciding when to act, what to say and who to tell is increasingly complex and fraught with risk. Social media's amplified rhetoric fuels powerful waves of controversy, leading to false or misleading narratives that sway public opinion. These viral, toxic narratives can lead to severe reputational and financial harm to the business community. Companies can risk saying or doing the “wrong thing” or, conversely, say or do nothing, which can have its own reputational consequences.

Without precise and informed knowledge, many leaders have paused initiatives or cut them entirely based on the risk—perceived or actual—of being dragged into reputational battlefields, be it greenwashing, woke-washing, anti-ESG, anti-DE&I or others yet to emerge.

While some social media-fueled discourse and debate are genuine, many are distorted and proliferated by bots, trolls, and detractors, creating pressure from the fringes rather than key stakeholders. **For brands, the challenge is knowing what is what.**



SOCIAL SNAPSHOT

Social Media's
Dominance On Society

4.9

BILLION PEOPLE

Use social media across the world, this number is expected to jump to approximately **5.85 billion users by 2027.**

(DemandSage - [Forbes Advisor: Top Social Media Statistics And Trends Of 2024](#))



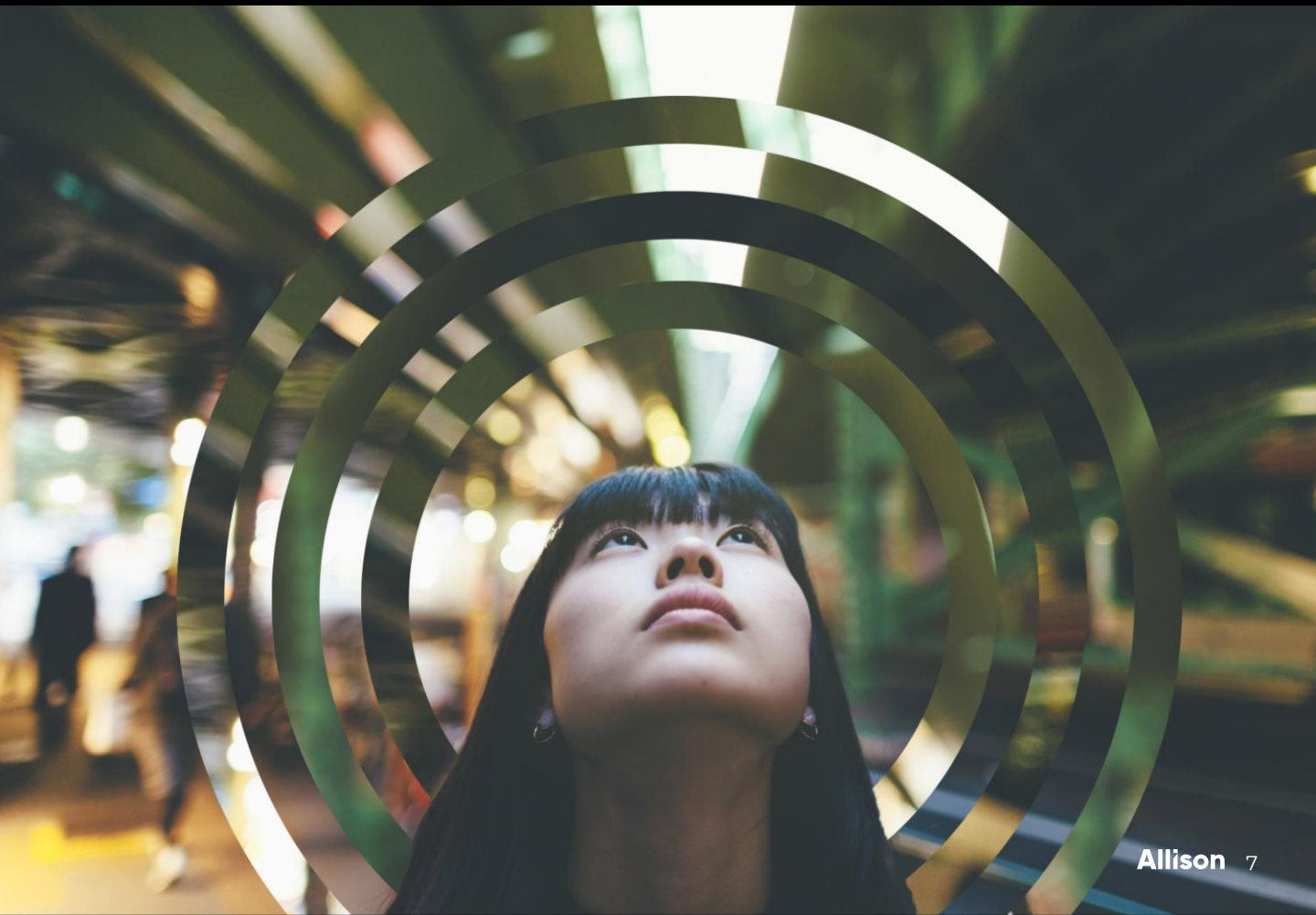
Allison

People in the U.S.
have an average of

7.1

SOCIAL MEDIA
ACCOUNTS

(DemandSage - **Forbes Advisor:** [Top Social Media Statistics And Trends Of 2024](#))



The average American spends

2.2

HOURS MINUTES

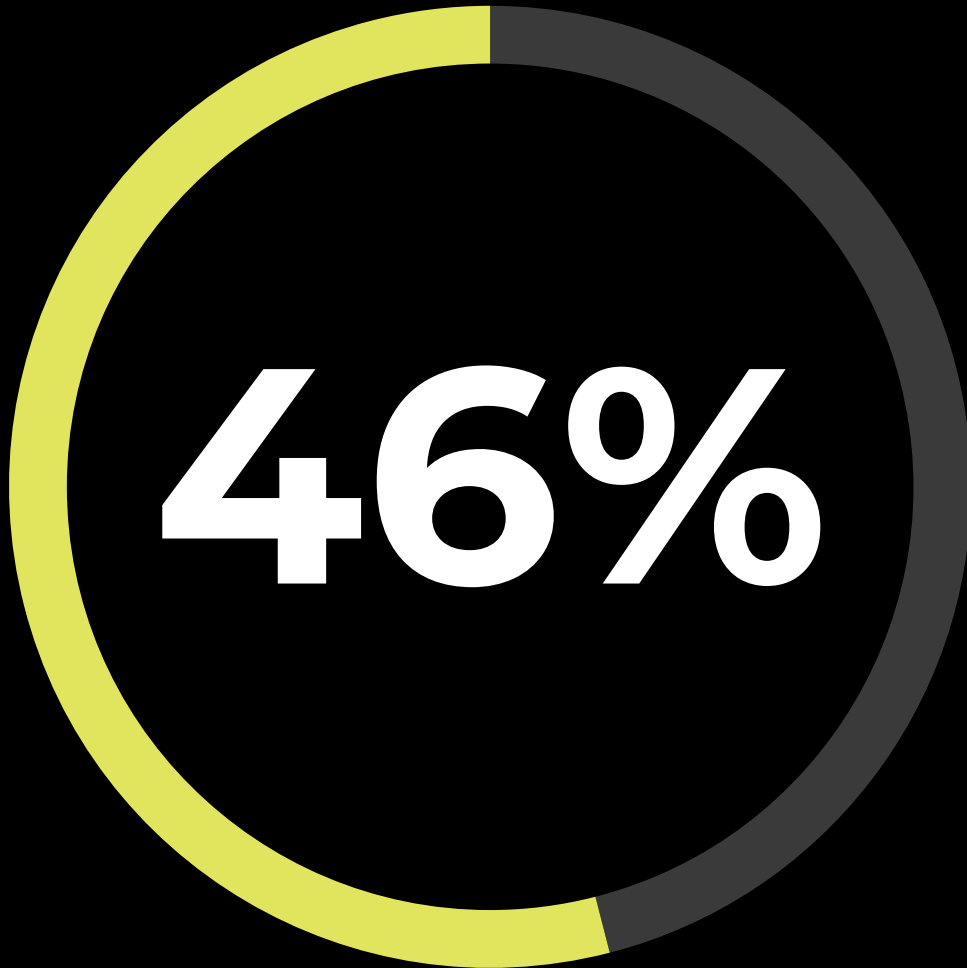
on social media every day

and they check their mobile device

159

TIMES A DAY

(Exploding Topics: [Worldwide Daily Social Media Usage \(New 2024 Data\)](#))



of Americans say they watch more user-generated content on social media than they watch movies and television on streaming services.

(Exploding Topics: [Worldwide Daily Social Media Usage \(New 2024 Data\)](#))



The most used social media platform in the world is Facebook, with

2.9 **BILLION MONTHLY ACTIVE USERS ACROSS THE WORLD**

(Forbes Advisor: [Top Social Media Statistics And Trends Of 2024](#))

As of April 2023, the fastest-growing social media platform is BeReal with a

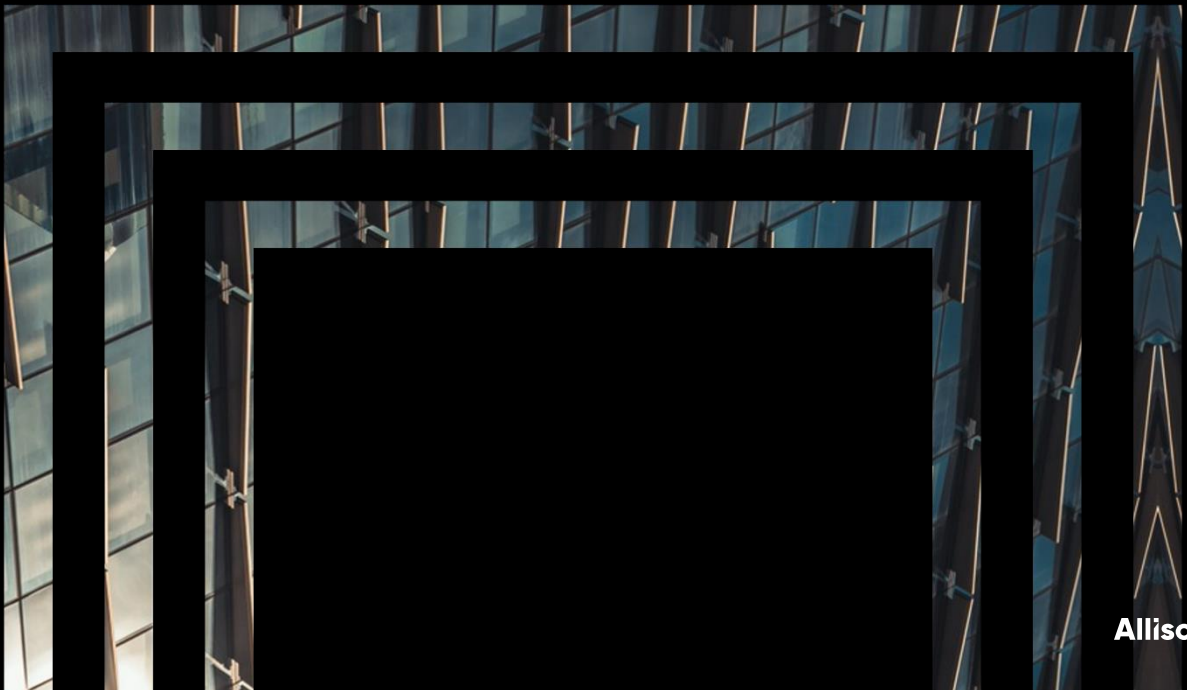
313%

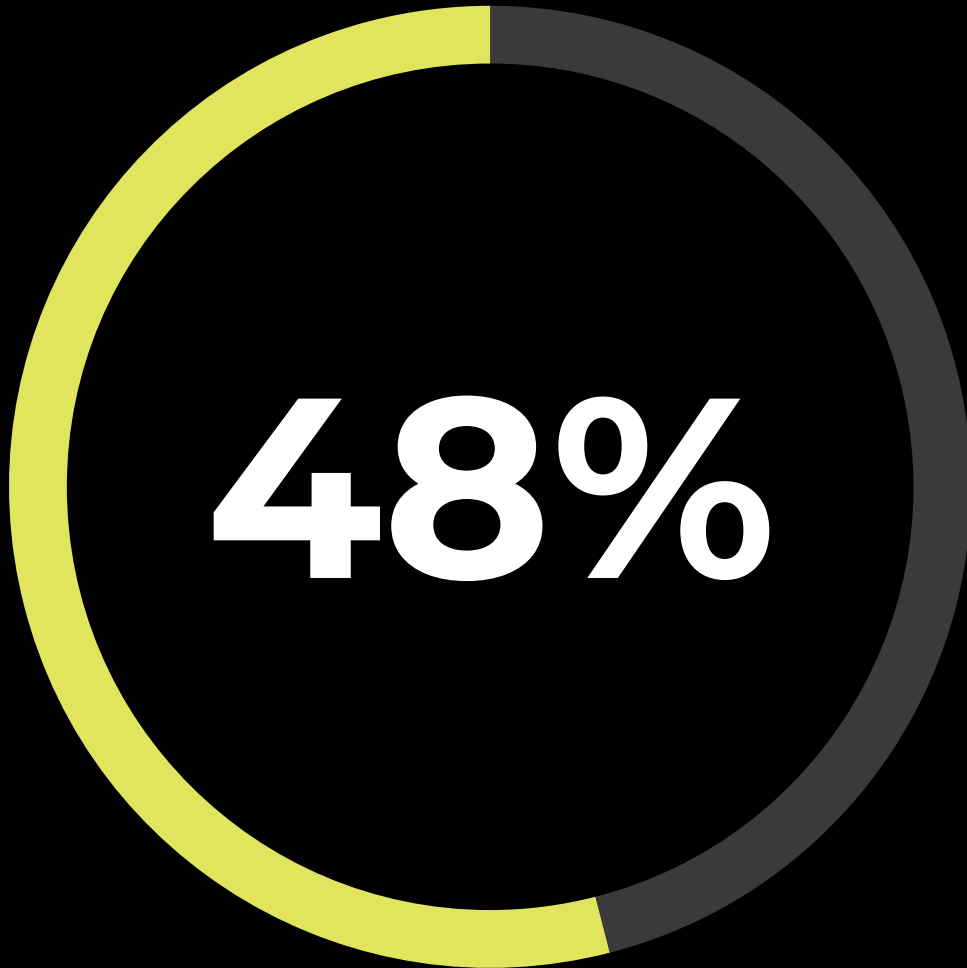
SURGE IN USER INTEREST

reflecting a rapid climb from

0.7% —————→ 2.8% usage.

(Forbes Advisor: [Top Social Media Statistics And Trends Of 2024](#))





of children found it difficult or very difficult to determine whether a news story on social media was true.

(**Statista:** [Misinformation on social media - statistics & facts](#))



Misinformation Comes to Focus

Misinformation and disinformation are certainly not new topics – they’ve just been given a new playground with the influx of social media’s hold on society and its ability to reach masses quickly.

According to a 2019 article in [The Guardian](#), “disinformation” – possibly derived from the Russian word *dezinformacija* – finds its origins during the Cold War and was defined as “sowing falsehoods among one’s enemies in order to confuse them about one’s own capabilities or intentions.” While “misinformation” – defined as spreading untruths – has a much longer history, dating back to the late 16th century.

Mis- and disinformation as we know it today were given rocket-fuel at the time of the 2016 presidential election in part due to what the [BBC](#) describes as “a unique marriage between social media algorithms, advertising systems, people prepared to make stuff up to earn some easy cash and an election that gripped a nation and much of the world.” And from there, the rest is history.



4 Simple Reasons Misinformation is On the Rise:

01 Fake News Spreads Faster than the Truth.

This is due in part to the fact that social media algorithms can create echo chambers that enable that fake news to spread at a faster pace. In fact, a study conducted by MIT published by the journal [Science](#) found “tweets containing falsehoods reach 1,500 people on Twitter [now X] six times faster than truthful tweets.”

02 Bots Increasingly Look Human.

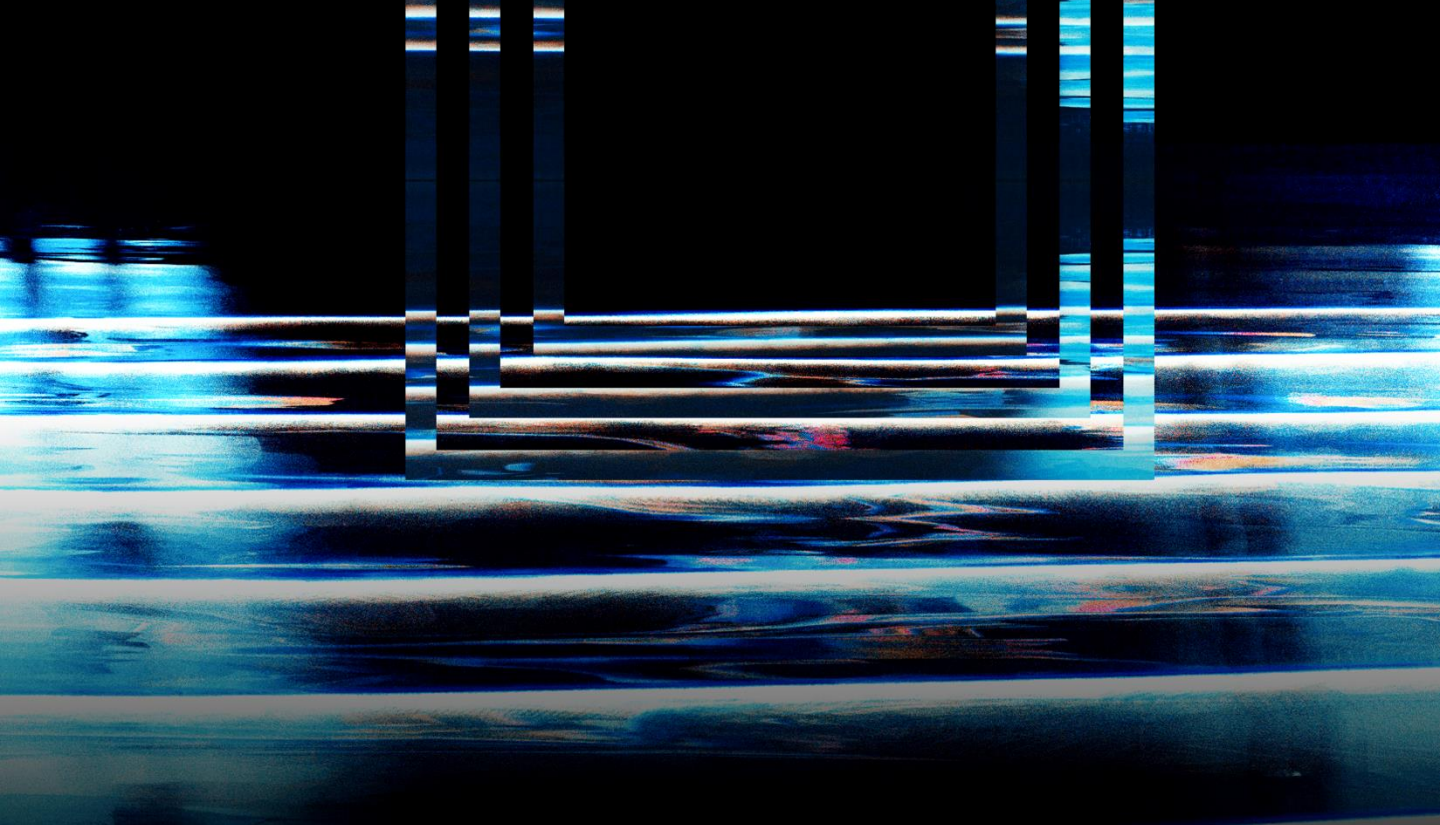
It’s harder today to detect a bot because these accounts work hard to look real—thanks to the influx of AI—with realistic profile pictures, images and information that make them harder to distinguish from the truth. And of course, malinformation has come into play. This is when certain actors “twist the truth” by manipulating theoretically true information by intentionally cutting and snipping critical information.

03 By the Time Misinformation is Spotted, It’s Too Late.

Given the incredible velocity of misinformation, it’s difficult to detect ahead of time. By the time a toxic thread is spotted, oftentimes, the damage is done.

04 Misinformation Doesn’t Start out in Mainstream Arenas, but it Finds its Way There.

Misinformation often starts its life on the unregulated internet where little or no moderation or checks and balances take place – such as the anonymous web and fringe networks. The problem is, it doesn’t always stay there. These conversations grow in size and velocity until they spread into mainstream platforms and even news media. This makes it even more difficult for the average individual to decipher fact from lies.

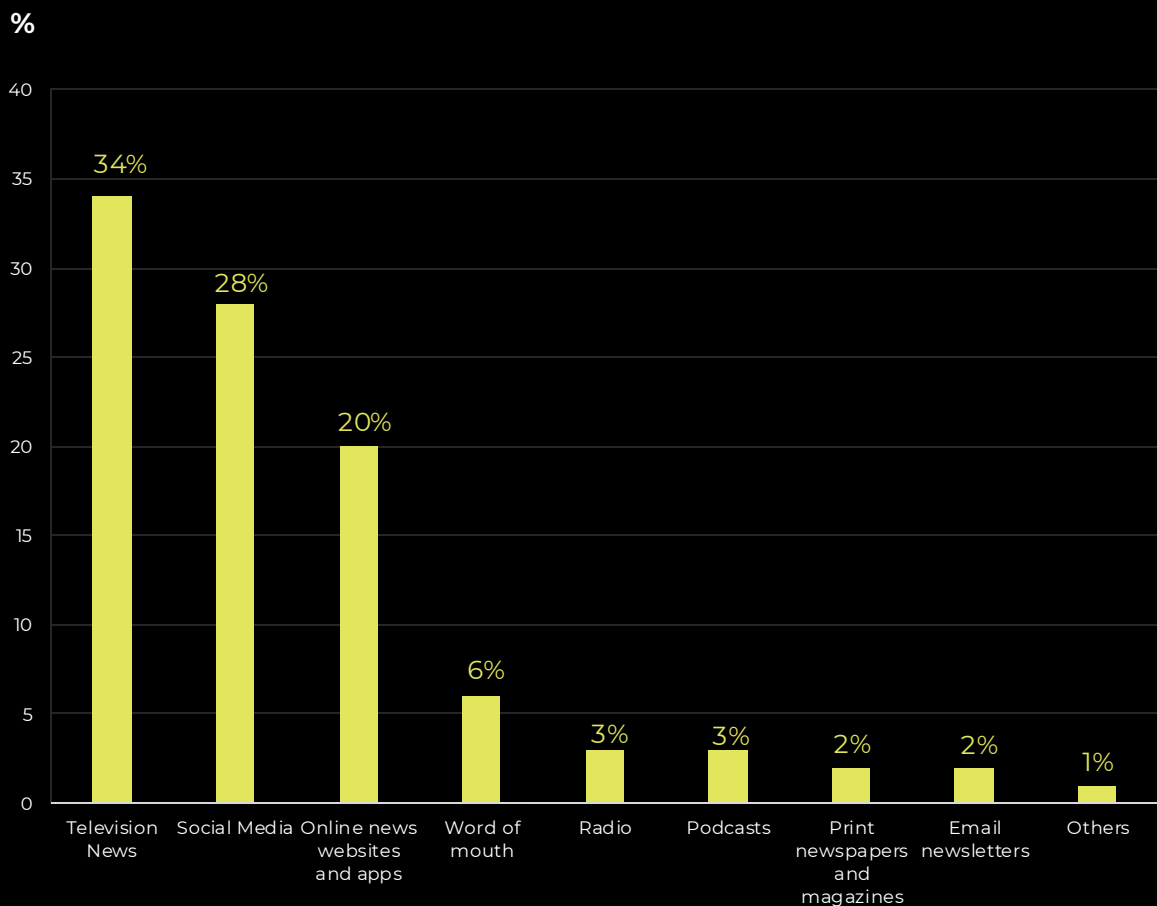


THE ALLISON AIM STUDY: SEEKING TRUTH IN AN OPAQUE WORLD

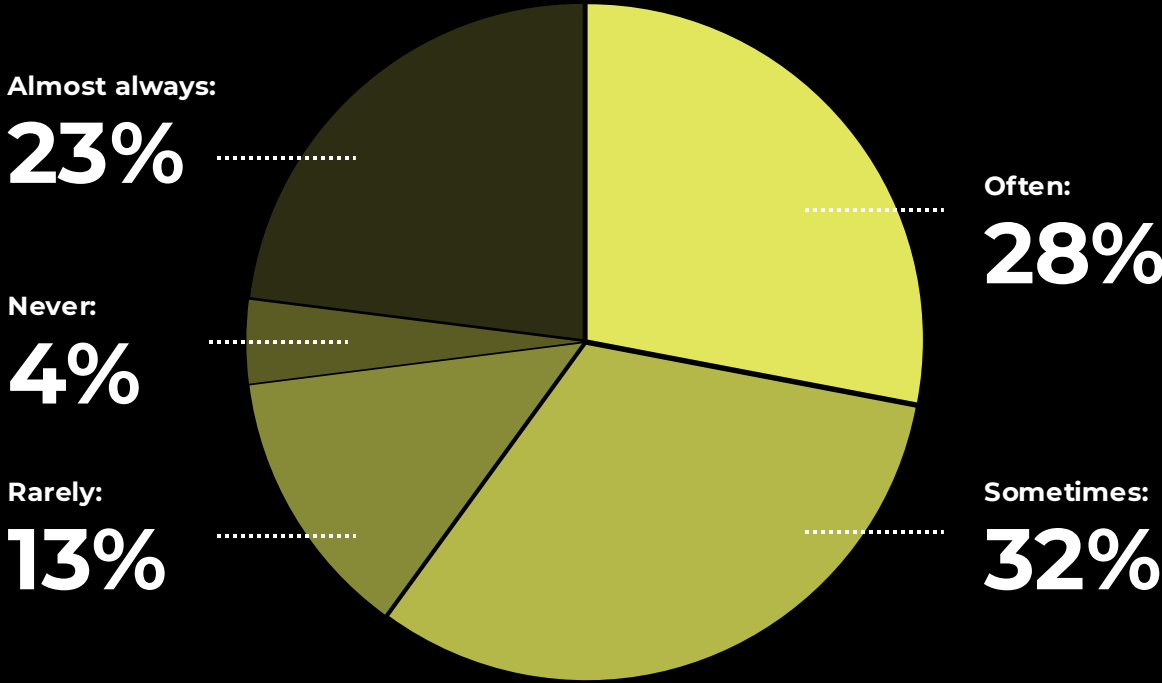
Given the explosion of mis- and disinformation on social media channels, we explored the attitudes and understanding of the average American in this area. We conducted a survey of 1,000 Americans to unpack thoughts, feelings and insights – and better arm brands with this data. Here's what we found:

Methodology: Allison surveyed 1,000 individuals age 18 and older in the US. The survey was fielded using Forsta and panel was sourced by RepData. Fielding took place September 2024.

Social media is the second most-popular source for information about current events or issues:

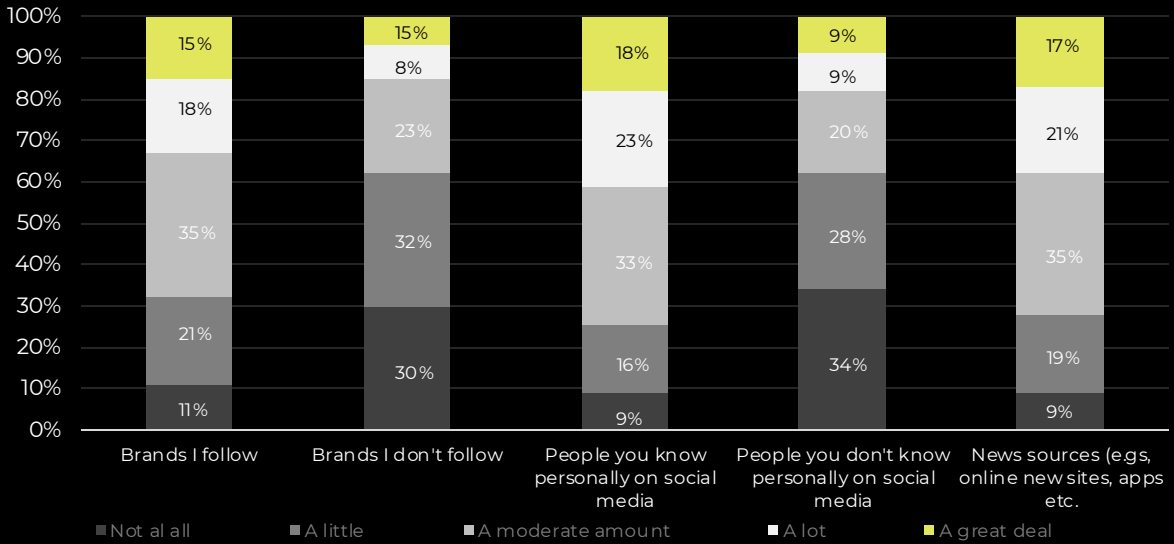


Social media is bringing issues to Americans' attention that they may not have noticed otherwise:

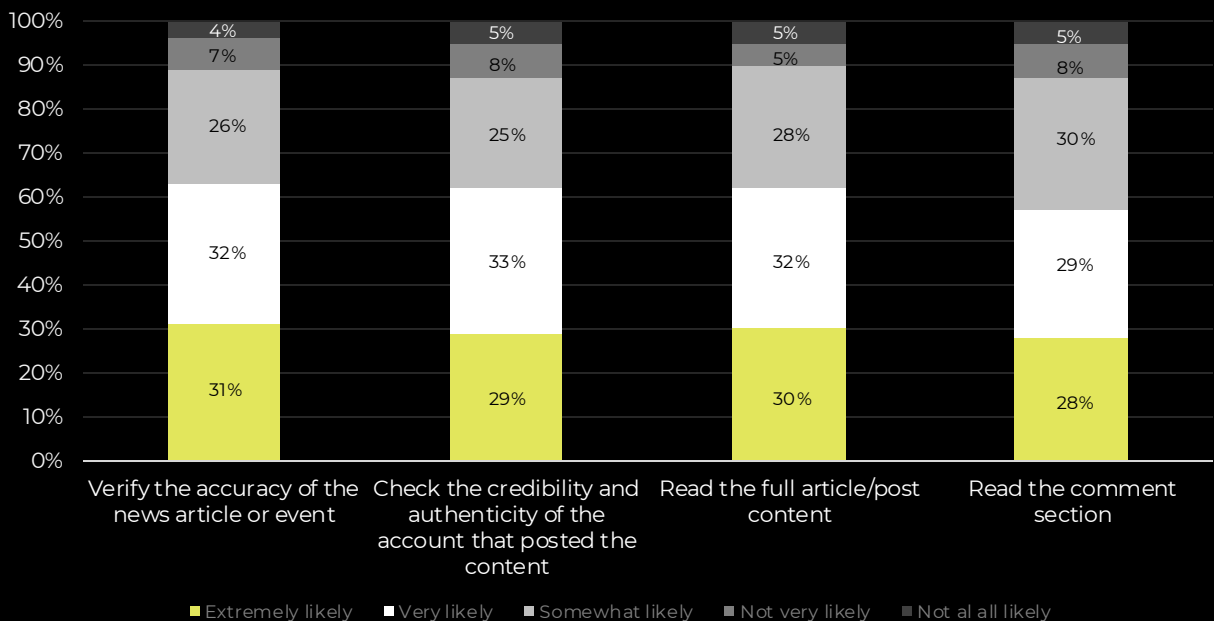


How frequently do you think social media brings important issues to your attention that you might not have noticed otherwise?

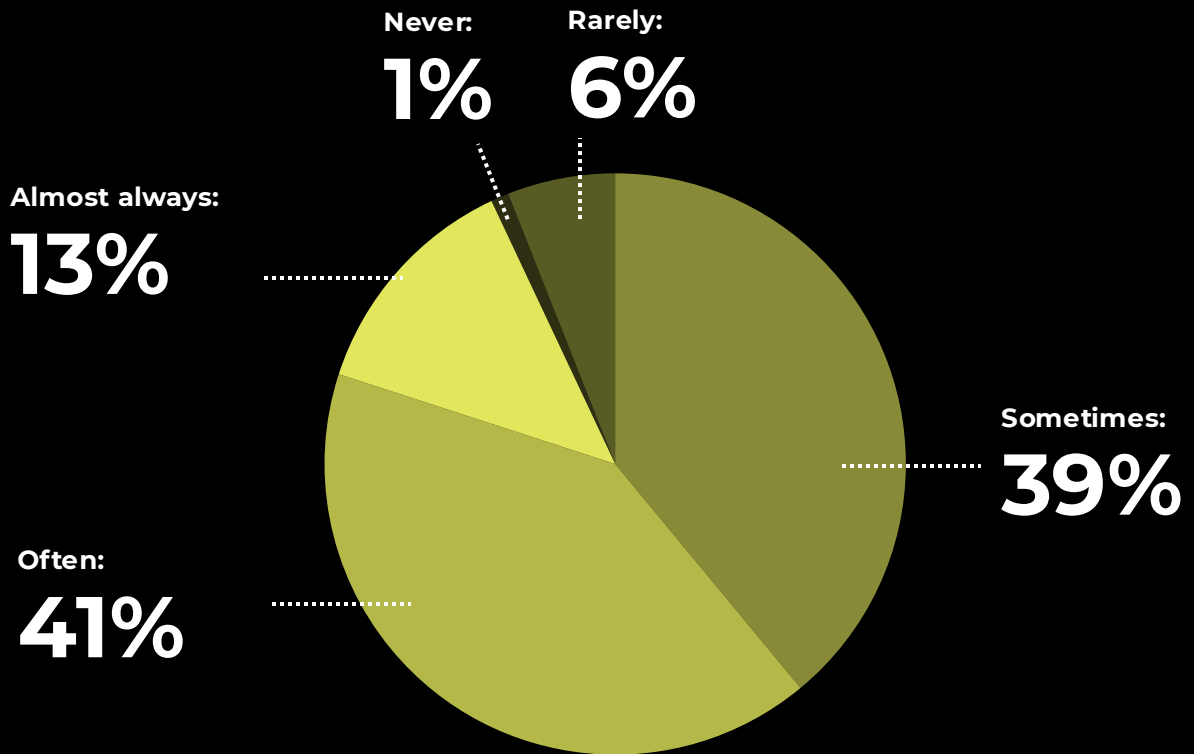
Americans are just as likely to trust people they know on social media as they are news sources:



Less than a third (29%) of Americans say they are extremely likely to check the credibility and authenticity of an account posting content, and nearly the same amount (31%) say the same for verifying the accuracy of a news article or event



More than half (54%) of Americans say they are frequently (almost always/often) encountering false or misleading information online



How often do you think you encounter information that is false or misleading when you're online?



INTRODUCING ALLISON AIM



Misinformation, disinformation and toxic conversations are certainly not going away – and in many cases, they will continue to grow. And certainly, society’s reliance on social media is unwavering. So, it is time brands have the tools to better understand conversations as they unfold and before they become damaging.

What if we can dispel and make sense of misinformation and help brands become braver in the face of criticism?

To accomplish this, we’ll use our proprietary AI-powered social listening offering, Allison Advanced Issues Monitor, to share how deeper insight into online conversations, their origins, primary players and projected growth can better arm brands to navigate these waters and feel confident with the path forward.

Next up, we’ll highlight two distinct case studies to bring to life how greater understanding can lead to better brand action.

What is Allison Advanced Issues Monitor?

Precise and informed decision-making is essential for business leaders. As social media platforms contribute to a fast and vast spread of information influencing media and general populations, corporate leaders must understand real-time impacts on their business.

The Allison Advanced Issues Monitor (AIM) is Allison's cutting-edge issues-monitoring offering designed to help leaders monitor, analyze and respond to conversation material for their business. Our advanced AI scans and interprets real-time social media conversations, sentiment trends and emerging topics to deliver actionable insights tailored to your industry. By harnessing the power of deep learning and natural language processing, our team identifies potential opportunities and threats and provides strategic recommendations to enhance your brand's performance.

Combined with the expertise of Allison's Purpose Center of Excellence, Corporate Affairs and Performance+Intelligence teams, AIM is a powerful new resource that empowers companies to identify, evaluate and address potential threats before they ignite by reaching mainstream communities, influencers and professional media—giving them the control and capability to effectively manage social media controversies.



CASE STUDY #1:

The Scholastic 'Book Bans' - A Brand-Centric Analysis

The Situation

In October 2023, amidst a highly divisive and polarized climate regarding accessibility of books and content related to LGBTQIA+, race, and gender and sexuality in public schools, Scholastic announced a change in policy related to its book fairs. The company would place books related to race, gender and sexuality in their own collection, while giving schools the option to "opt out" of the content altogether.

Scholastic said the change was aimed at helping schools navigate the charged environment regarding book bans and changing laws regarding content accessibility, which it referred to as "an almost impossible dilemma: back away from these titles or risk making teachers, librarians, and volunteers vulnerable to being fired, sued, or prosecuted."

Scholastic's decision was overwhelmingly criticized by those opposing censorship, and within several weeks the company reversed the decision. The reversal further enflamed the heated and divisive narrative attacking the company for its actions on the issue, this time led by those favoring censorship or limiting access to the content.



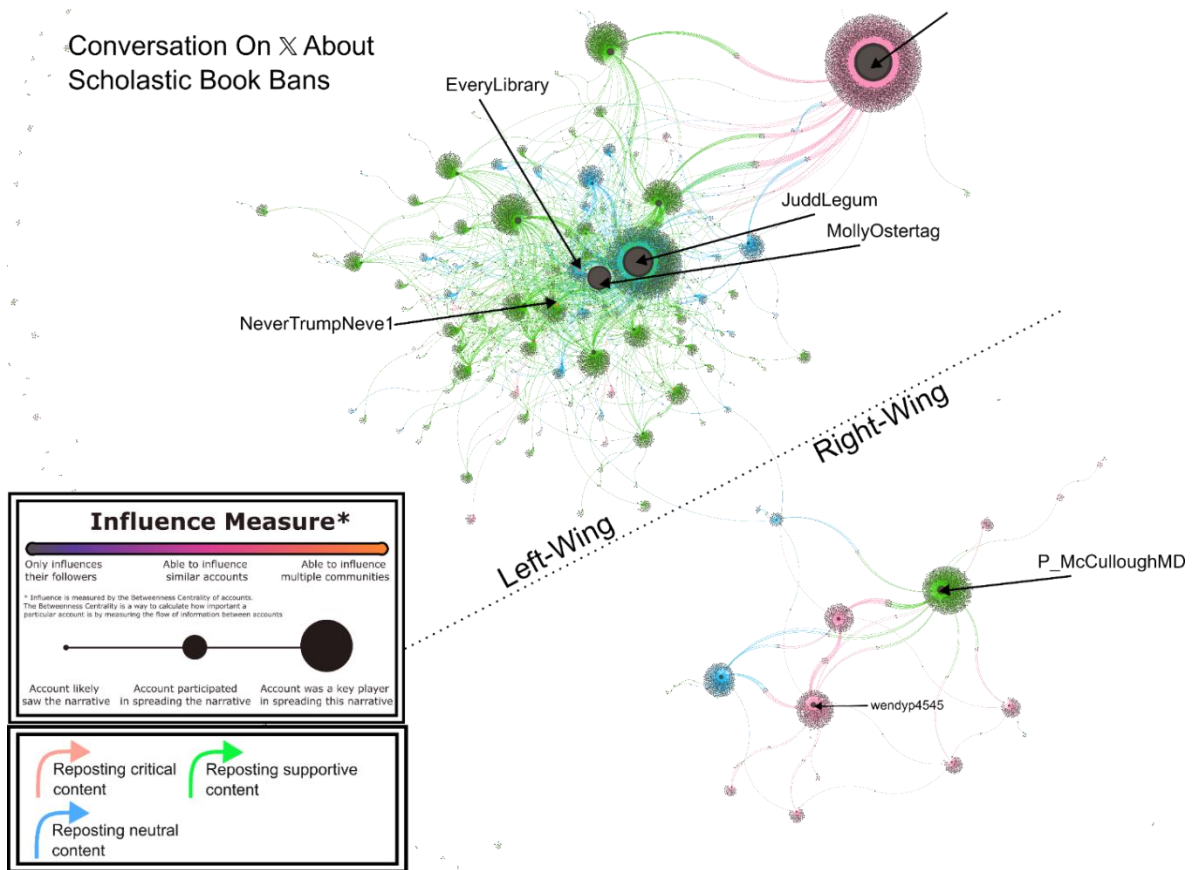
Advanced Issues Monitoring Analysis

We performed a deep analysis of thousands of posts, examinations of user behavior and engagement across various mainstream platforms, such as X, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, as well as fringe platforms like Truth Social and Gab, between October and December 2023.

The results reveal the existence of a highly polarized, bot-driven environment leading up to Scholastic's ill-fated actions. Within this environment, Scholastic's action and its reversal only served to draw intense opposition from both sides of the debate. Key findings include:

- **Over the 3 months, total exposure exceeded 27 million, with only 5% of views supporting the brand's actions.**
- **Sixty-percent of the accounts** sharing relevant content on X exhibit bot-like behavior indicating a high manipulated narrative and battleground being pushed by disruptive entities.
- The conversation surrounding Scholastic and book banning on X specifically was divided into two main, isolated communities: **progressive** and **conservative**. This isolation limited the spread of ideas between the groups, reinforcing the polarization of opinions. This created significant echo chambers where like-minded individuals engaged with one another while ignoring opposing viewpoints.

Conversation On X About Scholastic Book Bans



- While there was a cohesive, consistent conservative community pushing toxic narratives with a primarily pro-censorship theme leading up to Scholastic’s decision, the progressive community significantly dominated the conversation in the aftermath, both in terms of volume and engagement. The group was largely united in opposing book bans, with a strong emphasis on defending free speech and criticizing those who advocate for censorship.
- The initial wave of anti-censorship discourse on social media opposed to Scholastic and its initial decision was significantly larger than subsequent sub-narratives that were largely driven by influential conservative voices.

Key Takeaways

With its initial decision and later retraction, Scholastic placed itself in the very center of a highly politicized and divisive environment, effectively alienating both sides of the censorship debate while inflicting significant reputational damage.

Key takeaways from the Advanced Social Intelligence Analysis include:

- Understanding where the conversation came from and why could have helped Scholastic decipher an appropriate response, particularly given 60% of the conversation on a platform like X exhibited bot-like behavior.
- Greater visibility of the social landscape relative to progressive vs. conservative voices and the volumes associated with each could have allowed Scholastic to better anticipate the overwhelmingly negative and loud response from progressives to its initial decision to segregate content and provide schools with an opt-out option.
- Deeper social monitoring in the weeks following the initial decision and retraction revealed the emergence of several sub-narratives, including a woman who claimed a Scholastic book spurned a porn addiction, the state of Texas banning Scholastic book fairs and Kirk Cameron launching an alternative book fair to counter Scholastic. Each of these were driven by a narrow number of prominent conservatives, although overall views and engagements were significantly lower than the initial wave. Deeper visibility on these subsequent waves, their source and their volume could have helped Scholastic shape its longer-term external communications strategy, including whether to be proactive or reactive in its response.



CASE STUDY #2:

Gender & Sports – Tracking a Developing Issue



The Situation

Through the first half of 2024, issues related to gender identity in sports took their place at the forefront of media and social media conversation, particularly focused on the question of whether transgender women should be allowed to participate in women's sports.

The Biden-Harris administration's rewrite of Title IX, including gender identity as a protected class, and the

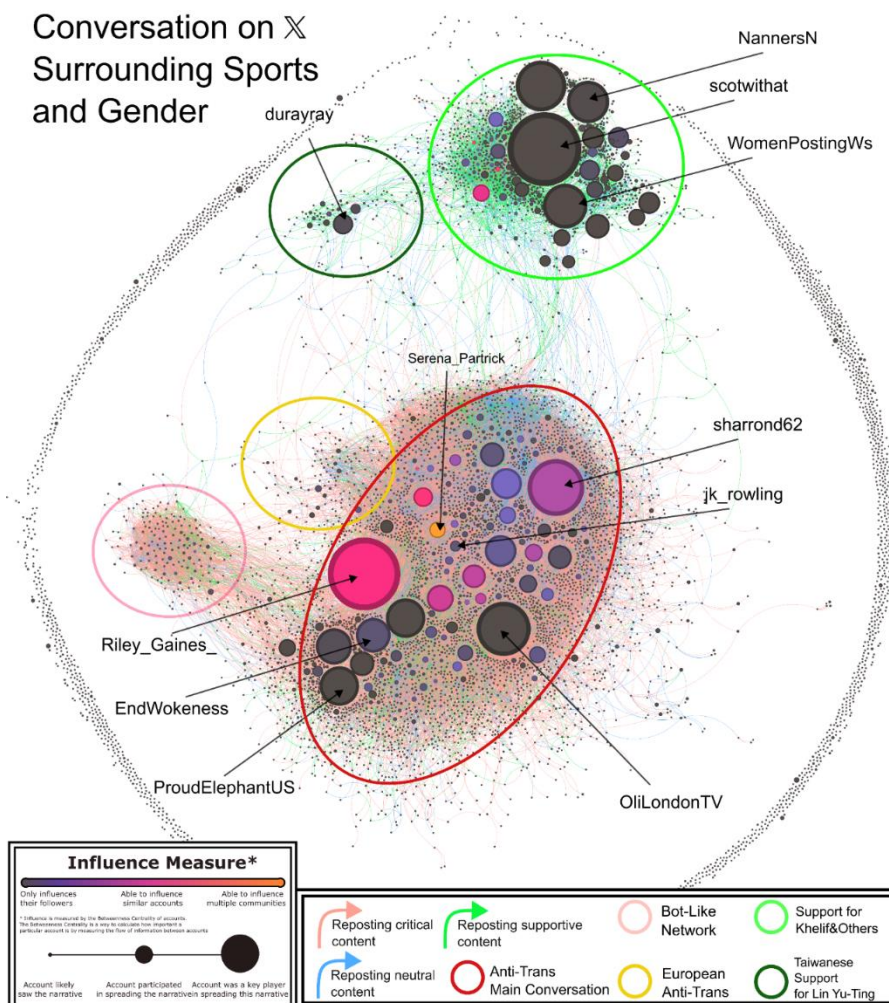
resulting legal challenges, court rulings and public statements from elected officials, athletes and others served to coalesce opinions on both sides of the debate, as did the NCAA's decision to allow transgender women to compete. These actions helped create an environment in which the positions and actions of brands, amateur and professional sports organizations, and athletes themselves are increasingly scrutinized.

Advanced Issues Monitoring Analysis

Our AIM analysis focused on the period between March to mid-August 2024, reviewing hundreds of thousands of posts, examinations of user behavior and engagement across various mainstream platforms, including X, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram and fringe platforms like Truth Social and Gab.

Key findings from the analysis include:

- During the period analyzed, data revealed a broad range of distinct communities pushing a variety of toxic narratives and with primarily anti-trans themes.
- These narratives were driven by a variety of influential “gatekeepers” — accounts that acted as critical connectors within a network of conversations, beyond simply having the most visible activity. A prominent example is Riley Gaines, an Olympic influencer known for her outspoken views on transgender participation. These accounts controlled the flow of information between separate communities, acting as bridges, allowing for exchange of ideas and fostering communication between otherwise disconnected communities, feeding the pace and virality of the narratives.



Key findings from the analysis include:

- Analysis also revealed the role alt-right, bot-like accounts played in amplifying anti-trans sentiment. These accounts contribute to the anti-trans discourse likely either to push a specific agenda or perhaps to increase their following by engaging with a trending topic. Despite being an offshoot, this bot-like network remains relatively connected to the main conversation, with frequent reposts between the two groups. This suggests the bot-like accounts are successfully influencing and amplifying the broader anti-trans conversation while growing their own influence as well.
- Initially, key trending narratives included the call for boycotts of entities and brands, supporting transgender athletes, general opposition to the Title IX rewrite, and attacks against the NCAA for allowing transgender women to compete.
- These narratives and the establishment of the gatekeepers and networks that gave rise to them laid the foundation so that when the issue of Imane Khelif's participation in the Olympics hit center stage in Paris, the sports and gender controversy catapulted to a global scale, significantly surpassing views and engagement on any issue.

Key Takeaways

The gender and sports issue is an example of a topic that—while at the surface is about the participation of transgender women in sports—is comprised of several narratives on a range of related topics, driven by an even further diverse number of communities, gatekeepers and influencers.

All of these have the potential to coalesce together to magnify the volume and impact of a related event. Other key takeaways include:

- The importance of identifying early the gatekeepers for an issue and the value of monitoring their activity as an early indicator for the amplification potential of a related event, such as Imane Khefif's participation at the Olympics.
- Understanding the source of information, or misinformation, can be critical in determining the appropriate response. In the instance of sports and gender, it's important to note the influence of bot-like behavior in driving views and engagement.





OUR FINAL TAKE

Mis- and disinformation are not going away. And certainly, it is not a brand's role to take on a bot community head-on.

Yet, with greater insight into the players, the goals and pervasive narratives, companies can make engagement and brand reputation decisions with eyes wide open. This type of information can empower companies to identify, evaluate and address potential threats before they ignite by crossing over to mainstream communities, influencers and professional media. It gives companies a strong sense of control and the ability to effectively manage social media controversies and encourages brands to take charge of their online reputations. At the end of the day, armed with the right data and information,

ARE YOU
READY TO BE
BRAND
BRAVE?