



# Seeing in the Dark:

How to Use Dark  
Social to Your  
Marketing Advantage

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**“Darkness must pass;  
a new day will come,  
and when the sun  
shines, it will shine out  
the clearer.”**

***J.R.R. Tolkien,  
The Fellowship of the Ring***

You might not be Frodo Baggins on the quest to destroy The Ring, but you too may also be on a journey. Certainly not in Middle Earth, but on your computer and inside your data analytics. That journey is often a clear one with some insights. But, there remains dark and unknown parts of your data exploration—barring you from finding answers, clarity, and ultimately—success.

But, like Tolkien said, darkness does pass. Whether it’s literal, figurative—or in your case, analytical—there are ways to detect, address, and mitigate the dark gaps in data.



# Searching for answers in the dark

If you ask the average consumer, they'd say someone is tracking their every move online. Over **60%** of Americans believe it's impossible to go through daily life without having their data collected. Given the depth and breadth of analytics that brands have access to—and how reliant they are on those metrics—it's hard to argue with them.

But that is quickly changing.

As social media continues to establish its presence, there is a growing gap in analytics pipelines. As users send links and content to their friends through messaging apps, email, or text messages, they contribute to an increasingly important traffic segment known as dark social.

Lurking beyond the reach of traditional analytics tools, it's a painful but critical blind spot in brands' understanding of their customer journeys. In fact, industry research found that approximately **77.5%** of online shares happen through dark social channels—a number that simply cannot be ignored.

Should your brand be worried about dark social? Read on to learn what it is, why it's a challenge, and how to leverage it to elevate your business goals.

# What is dark social?

On the surface, the term “dark social” might sound ominous. Between trolls, propaganda factories, illicit drugs, and worse, the internet has no shortage of dark nooks and crannies better left undisturbed.

Fortunately, dark social is nothing of the sort. Originally coined by Alexis Madrigal in [The Atlantic](#), dark social encompasses all the “between the lines” social media activity that traditional analytics can’t track. As the online world has grown, so too have the various channels included in dark social:

- **Email and private messaging apps:** Direct communication is one of the original sources of dark social. Platforms like Facebook Messenger, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become ingrained in many people’s communication habits, while email and text messaging are as popular as ever. Users will regularly share links and content, but thanks to the private nature of the channels, analytics tools completely lose coverage.
- **Online groups:** Closed communities have always been a part of online life, but the rise of Discord, Slack, and Microsoft Teams has accelerated the sector’s growth. These platforms are especially vital in B2B and SaaS sectors, where monitoring user actions is a critical part of the customer journey.
- **Social networks:** Whether it’s Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, LinkedIn, Twitter, or another network, **82%** of Americans use some form of social media. While content is usually public, users often accidentally obscure analytics efforts by removing tracking tags from URLs, mentioning brands without tagging them, and sharing content without attribution or a link back to the source. This also includes private messaging on these platforms as well.
- **Audio and video content platforms:** Analyzing referrals and mentions in text is clear enough, but audio and video formats present unique challenges. When podcasters or video-bloggers mention your brand verbally or tell their audience about a specific URL on your site, there’s no direct way to track the source.

Taken as a whole, dark social comprises a big portion of interactions with your brand that you can’t directly track. And without actionable metrics, managing your marketing and CX improvement efforts becomes a guessing game.





Let's dig into why dark social is a problem for analytics and teams who rely on those insights.

## Tracking dark social is a challenge

Traditional analytics platforms present a wealth of statistics and information about how users engage your website or app. One of the most important aspects of analytics is the customer journey—where users start and the path they take while engaging with a brand.

In many cases, analytics tools will use the referring URL to track where the user came from.

Therein lies the problem of dark social—when a user clicks a link from a messaging app, it won't pass along a referring URL. Analytics tools think the user went directly to that page on your site, either by typing in the URL or clicking a bookmark in their browser.

Obviously, a huge chunk of that traffic isn't coming from direct hits to your site. But lacking evidence to the contrary, you can't segment it as anything else.

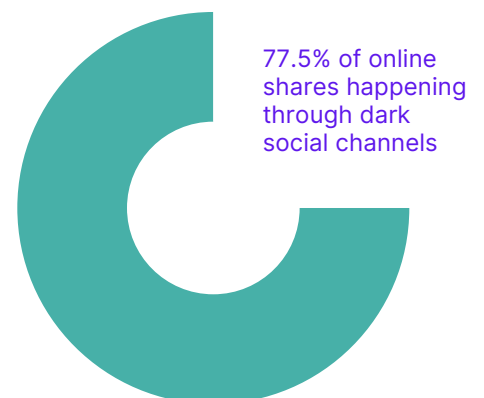
Improperly categorized traffic from dark social causes a few key problems:

- **False attribution:** If you know you have traffic coming from social media but can't categorize it as such, you have a clear misattribution problem. But without a way to catch and quantify all social shares, you can only estimate where users are coming from and hope you're close.
- **Skewed and reduced ROI:** Brands can only justify running campaigns that have a positive performance. If you can't accurately understand how users reach your site, you can't match the costs from a given marketing campaign to customer revenue. Spending decisions based on flawed data will cost you money, customers, and management's faith in your marketing plan.
- **Flawed statistics:** The digital world moves at lightspeed and requires split-second optimization. If you're working from incomplete or inaccurate data, you're likely making flawed decisions—and will get flawed results.
- **Customer journey gaps:** When there are blind spots in the customer journey, you're forced to guess how they discovered your brand or how they went from point A to point D. Thus, you lose chances to optimize some of the most important touchpoints in a customer relationship.

## Why you must embrace the dark (social) side

Getting a handle on dark social isn't easy, but it is essential. With **77.5%** of online shares happening through dark social channels, there is a massive amount of user activity brands are missing. Your users are spreading your content, evangelizing your brand, and providing free advertising—but if you don't know how, that may be a problem.

The last thing you want to do is misclassify such a critical portion of your visitors as direct traffic. Or worse, ignore it entirely without trying to manage and leverage it.





Dark social isn't as easily quantified as traditional analytics. Nor can you harness, direct, and optimize it in the same ways. Regardless, dark social can help elevate your brand:

- **See how users engage your content:** Traditional analytics can tell you when a user looked at a piece of content and for how long. But once they take the link and send it to someone, you lose visibility. A person's desire to share your content is such a critical indicator of the value they place on it. And measuring that outcome goes a long way toward understanding your content's lifespan and long-term value.
- **Foster community-led growth:** Social media isn't just for cat videos and vacation pics. **68%** of consumers use it at key points in the buyer journey, often through direct interaction with friends or family. Help your customers grow your brand organically by developing content that's easily shared and digested in dark social channels. And indirectly track the outcomes to refine how you're empowering your customers to act as brand ambassadors.
- **Build your brand:** One aspect of brand building you don't control is how others talk about your brand. Discovering how your customers convey their thoughts and experiences to ultimately get others on board is invaluable feedback. Not only does it help you improve CX and marketing, but it also helps you refine active brand building to ensure your customers' views align with your intentions.



# Three industries missing key analytics from dark social

Illuminating dark social is a challenge for every brand, but essential to understanding your users. And the dark spots make that more difficult. Due to their heavy reliance on customer insights, these three industries feel the pain more than others.

## 1. Telecom

The telecom industry is notoriously competitive. Services and prices are similar across the board, customers are frequently unsatisfied, and you must deliver a phenomenal CX to stand out.

However, dark social presents three critical problems for telecom brands monitoring CX:

- **NPS challenges:** Telecom companies have enough trouble improving NPS, and dark social doesn't help. Customers share their opinions and experiences via private channels more than ever. Considering **88%** of consumers trust recommendations from friends more than any other source, being able to see these interactions is vital to telecom companies' success.
- **Complaints and resolution:** Efficient customer service is critical when users need help with devices, billing, service, or other questions. When customers have an experience that tries their patience, they often turn to private conversations to vent. Your brand doesn't get the feedback it needs to improve, the customer doesn't get a resolution, and the cycle continues.
- **Customer retention:** Churn is an ongoing problem for telecom brands, with over **20%** of customers looking to change providers. If they're expressing their dissatisfaction on dark social channels, you won't know until it's too late, and you'll wonder why you lost another customer. Imagine if you had insight to the moment a customer complained on social, even if they don't tag your brand—you'd be able to directly contact them, provide resolution, and hopefully retain them as your customer.



## 2. SaaS

Real-time user data drives everything in SaaS from marketing campaigns to product development decisions, and even C-suite strategizing. But tracking user behavior is becoming a challenge as platforms like Slack and Microsoft Teams take over companies' internal workflows—which fall under the dark social umbrella.

This complicates monitoring two key metrics for SaaS brands:

- **Product adoption:** Turning customers into daily users is one of SaaS' most important KPIs. Unfortunately, dark social obscures the way customers integrate your tool into their workflow. Say a user creates a project on your platform and sends it to the marketing team via Teams, to analysts via Slack, and to their supervisor via email. Every time the link passes through private chat, your view of the customer journey has a glaring blind spot. How can you really know how your tool is being used, or could be improved without these key touchpoints?
- **Ongoing product performance:** One of the most effective strategies for discovering problems is within the context of the customer journey—where are people falling out and what caused it? But when you lose visibility into surrounding events, you can only guess at what happened. Users could be encountering glitches and bugs that they're discussing internally on Slack, leaving you completely blind to their experience.



### 3. Media

Content is king in media and entertainment. Social media metrics like reach, user engagement, and shares are key statistics that help brands know if their content is resonating. But when people interact with your content in a private channel, you only see a slice of the picture.

Dark social affects media companies in a couple of ways:

- **Personalization:** According to McKinsey, **71%** of consumers expect personalization from the brands they choose. This is especially true for media apps that stream video and audio—like Instagram and TikTok—where users have a short attention span.

If you recommend content that doesn't resonate to users, they're going to bounce. Because of dark social, you have no idea what happens next—they could be sharing their frustration with friends through direct messages or text—or they could be going to a competing platform for content. Either way, you lack actionable insight to deliver a more relevant experience. In other words, you don't know what you don't know.

- **Content sharing:** Knowing how and where users share your content is critical to understanding brand performance. But given that over **three quarters** of shares occur on dark social, you're missing a massive share of attribution. Without that data, it's difficult to measure and optimize your content's reach.





# Six ways to illuminate and leverage dark social

In spite of its challenges, staying on top of dark social is essential. With the right tools, you can mitigate a majority of problems and restore end-to-end, 360° customer journey coverage.

**Here are six strategies to help light the way:**

## 1. Social sharing buttons

Social sharing tools allow users to send your links and content to friends but still provide tracking data. Entice your customers to use them as much as possible:

- Provide as many options as possible so users can share content via their preferred platform.
- Make social sharing buttons easy to find without cluttering your UI.
- Eliminate pain points that will deter usage, such as forced logins and annoying captchas.

## 2. Link shorteners

Link shorteners like Goo.gl and Bit.ly make links easier to copy and paste—and thus share. They also allow you to embed tracking variables, providing visibility into how and where people share your links. This might be tedious if you're tracking a lot of links, but could be the missing puzzle piece to finding out the journey of a link as users share and click on it.

## 3. UTM codes

Urchin Tracking Module (UTM) parameters should be in your regular toolset. They're especially helpful in adding granularity to your analytics when you suspect a link will end up on dark social. By adding a series of variables to the URL, you can later determine where the traffic actually came from. In tandem, link shorteners also come in handy when using UTM codes, as they save your users from having to copy unwieldy URLs.

## 4. Dark social segmentation in Google Analytics

Analytics can't directly track dark social traffic, but with some creativity and smart segmentation, you can still gain insight. Setting up a segment that ignores commonly bookmarked URLs and excludes returning users provides a reasonable estimate about which visitors are likely coming from dark social.

## 5. First-party data

Sometimes, being direct is the best approach. Asking users how they found your site with unobtrusive popups or feedback forms ensures you're getting accurate data. Not only do you eliminate a blind spot, but you also start building a customer profile with first-hand feedback.

## 6. Dark social tracking platforms

Social listening is a nascent industry dedicated to addressing the problem of dark social. No social listening platform can entirely solve the problem of dark social, but for brands that rely heavily on social media, they can be a valuable complement to traditional analytics tools.



# How Scuba helps you see in the dark

It's clear that these dark spots in the customer journey are an ongoing problem for brands. And there's no silver bullet to magically solve it. Instead, you need to employ diverse strategies to suss out clues about what's happening in the dark, stitch together a comprehensive picture, and perform nuanced analysis to produce actionable insights.

That's where Scuba comes in. Scuba's continuous intelligence platform isn't just an analytics tool. It's a comprehensive toolset that empowers team members across your organization to perform complex analyses and make rapid, informed decisions.

# Scuba helps your brand solve dark social with several key features:



Easily ingest disparate data sources and streams from across your company and combine them into a unified data warehouse.

Run complex queries and reports without any assistance from data scientists or IT personnel.



Perform robust customer journey analysis, seamlessly moving from a bird's-eye view to granular details.



Build highly configurable real-time analytics dashboards, letting you easily monitor your brand's KPIs all in one place.





Leverage artificial intelligence and machine learning to perform nuanced analysis of your customer data, yielding detailed and meaningful results.

Set up customizable alerts to monitor customer pain points so you can deal with small problems before they become bigger.



Keep your customers' data safe and secure with industry-leading security and regulatory certifications, including SOC2, GDPR, ISO27001, ISO27018, and PrivacyShield.

**With Scuba's continuous intelligence platform, your brand can tread forth into the dark, confident you have the ability to illuminate the path forward.**



