

PULSAR*



Some scoops travel further than others

How audiences & media platforms
amplify investigative journalism

Some scoops spread further than others

Investigative journalism is a cornerstone of news media, playing an important civic role in holding organizations to account. However, the impact of a simple piece of journalism can be highly dependent on the nature of the audience that engages with it.

To better understand this dynamic, we used audience intelligence platform Pulsar to map three high-profile case studies —from the AP’s U.S. prison labor reporting and Reuters’ investigation into LVMH’s supply chain practices to the BBC’s documentary into the K-Pop Burning Sun scandal. While distinct in focus, each story provides insight into the mechanics of how investigative journalism can resonate and endure.

In this study, we'll be covering:

- ◆ How news-driven stories evolve across different platforms
- ◆ How the top influencers shape a story’s spread
- ◆ What impact these stories have on brands and institutions
- ◆ Why some stories retain visibility longer than others

Approach

Data Collection Period:

AP’s US Prison labor exposé: Jan 28th – Feb 7th, 2024
Reuters’ LVMH reporting: June 10th – Aug 16th, 2024
BBC’s Burning Sun doc.: May 18th – Jul 29th, 2024

Channels:

 X  Reddit  Facebook  TikTok
 YouTube  Blogs  Forums  News
 TV  Radio  Podcasts

Markets/Languages:

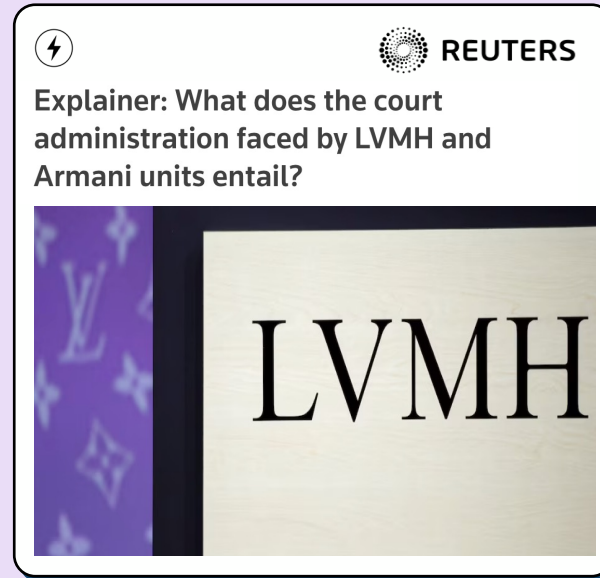
Global data collection.
Analysis collects all mentions in English language

Three scoops, three audiences, three distinct dynamics



AP's two year investigation into food brands' use of U.S. prison labor

Story duration:
Jan 29 – Feb 7, 2024 (11 days)



Reuters reveal Italian prosecutor's probe into worker exploitation at LVMH and Armani

Story duration:
June 11 – Aug 16, 2024 (57 days)



BBC's Burning Sun documentary investigates a South Korean K-Pop sex scandal

Story duration:
May 19 – Sept 7, 2024 (112 days)



Some stories don't travel far beyond specific communities

AP's investigation into U.S. prison labor exploitation

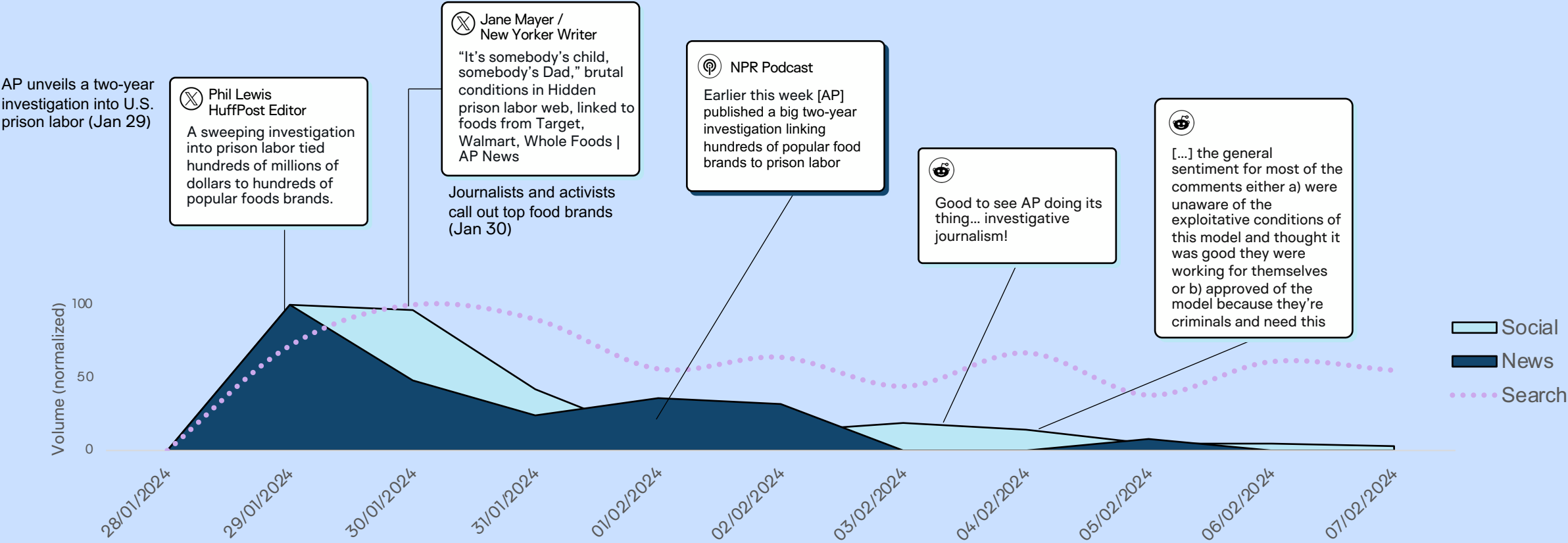


AP investigation initially amplified by journalist peers

When AP published its two-year investigation into U.S. prison labor, and how it benefits food brands on January 29, 2024, social media buzz peaked immediately, fueled by peer journalists on X sharing the story and a limited number

of small-scale activist accounts spotlighting the food brands involved. The story's momentum quickly waned when it reached broader audiences, especially Reddit, where a number of users were quick to label it as unsurprising.

This pre-existing assumption of bad-faith on the part of corporations and organizations, together with the identity of the group impacted – prisoners – was itself identified by users as one reason for the story failing to gain significant traction.



Story fails to achieve traction beyond journalist circles

Journalists themselves remain a powerful channel for the spread of information on social platforms – particularly X. However, stories such as this illustrate what can

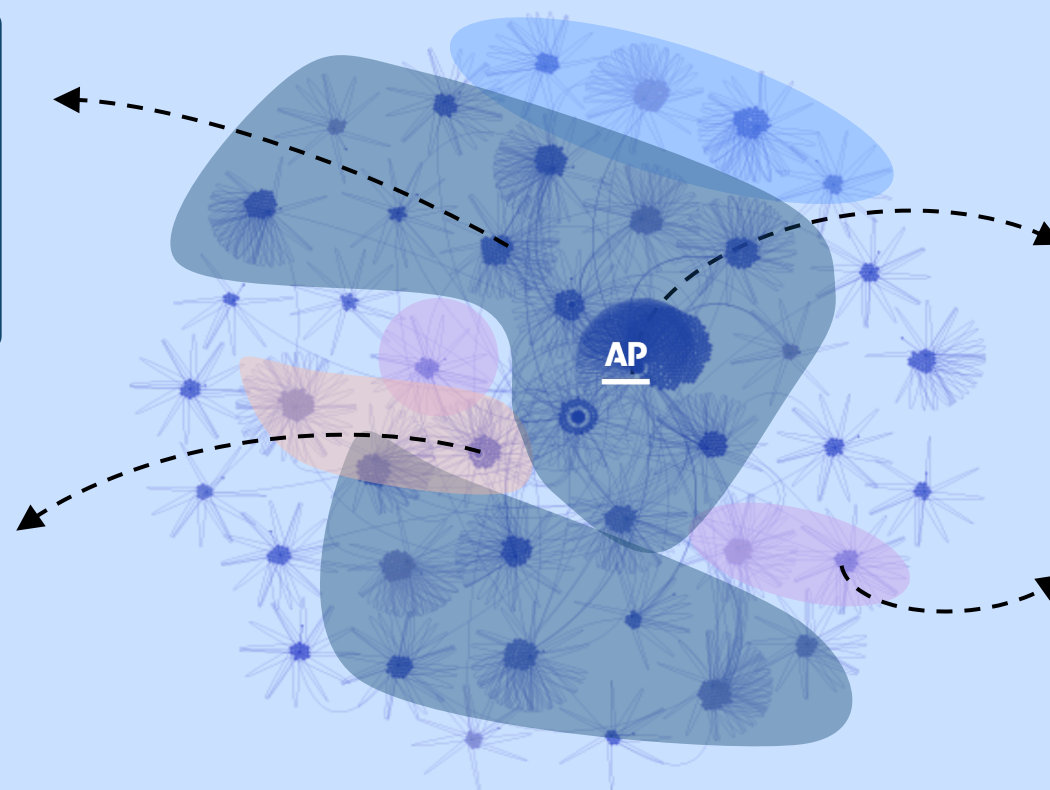
happen when a narrative isn't taken up by users and other type of influencer. The sizeable audience of many such journalists and media platforms will have ensured a

readership, but the absence of any significant community or subculture engaging with the narrative capped both the peak and length of the story's visibility.

- Journalists
- Activists
- Authors
- News followers

ⓧ
@AP traced trucks carrying prison-raised cattle from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola some 650 miles to a Texas slaughterhouse that feeds into the supply chains of giants like McDonald's, Walmart and Cargill.

ⓧ
Slavery by another name: Prison: Forced labor, paid pennies & often still unable to get a job after prison. Investigative journalism from @AP shines a very big light on a very dark part of our economy.



ⓧ The Associated Press
The anatomy of a McDonald's meal: A sweeping two-year AP investigation finds that the supply chains of companies that provide chicken nuggets, burgers and fish fillets are linked to U.S. prison labor.

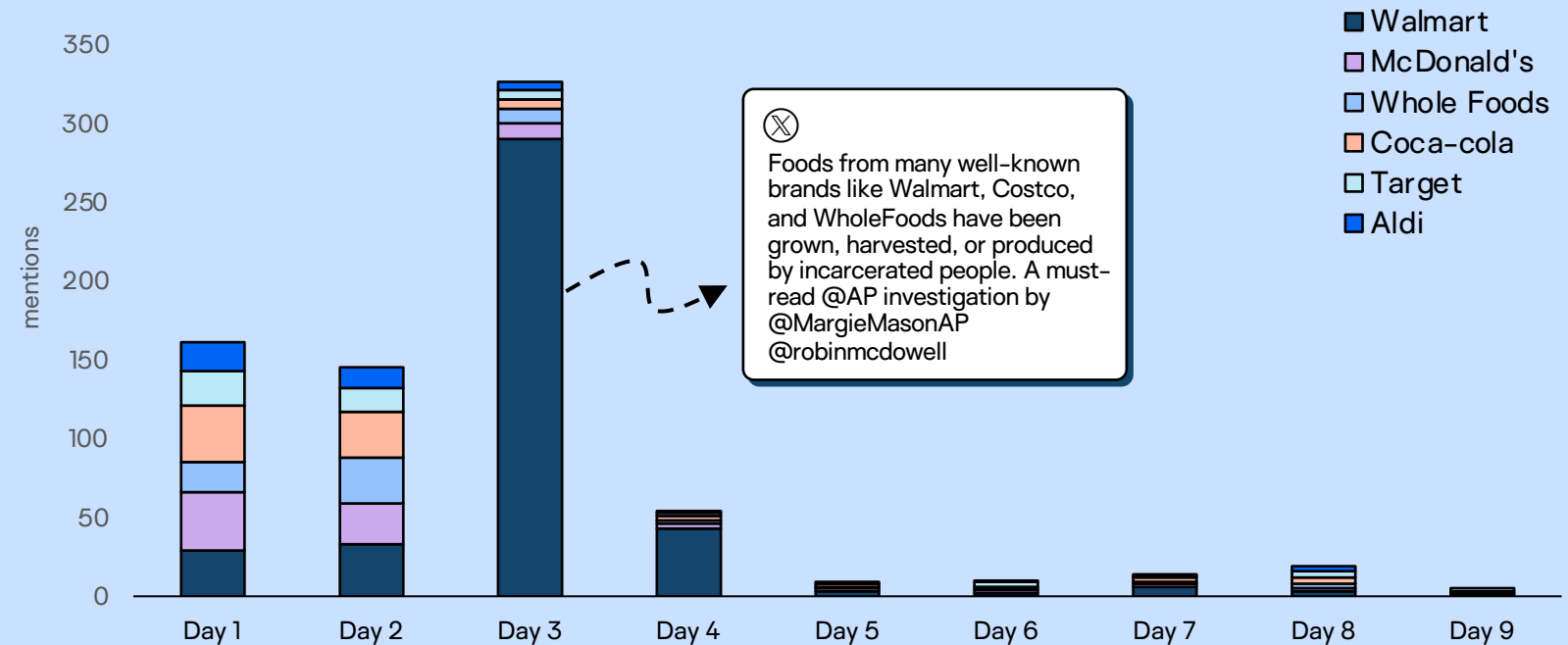
ⓧ
Corporations from Walmart to Wholefoods use prison labor, with some incarcerated people forced to work in chain gangs in prisons built on plantations where enslaved people did the same 150 years ago. A searing piece by @robinmcdowell and @MargieMasonAP

Which brands are impacted by the story?

Of course, even a limited spread can still impact the brands embroiled in story. This visualization, mapping how often different brands were mentioned in the story, also illustrates the contingencies that can impact how a narrative travels.

For instance, Walmart far outpaced all the other brands mentioned due to a tweet from a high-profile user placing all other brands after a 'read more' cutoff.

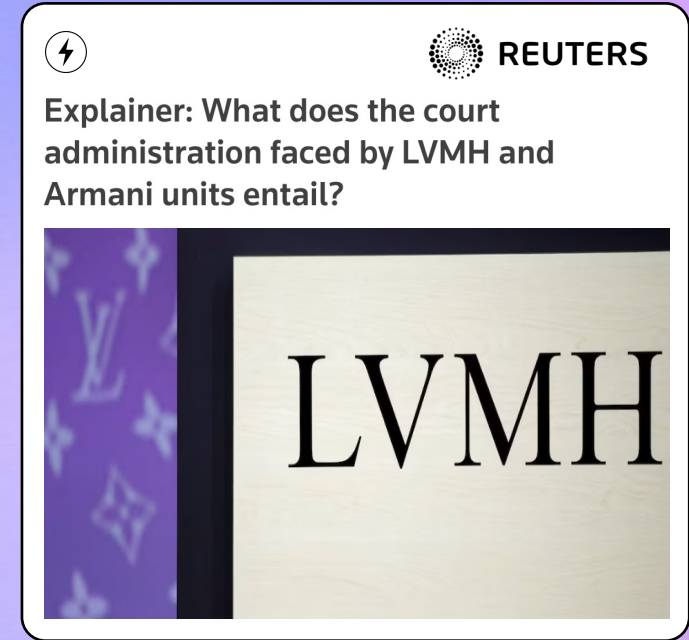
It's also illustrative to map which brands' mentions are driven by audience mentions (Coca Cola, for instance), versus those which driven by the media, and fail to gain public traction (Aldi).





Some stories are amplified by interest groups

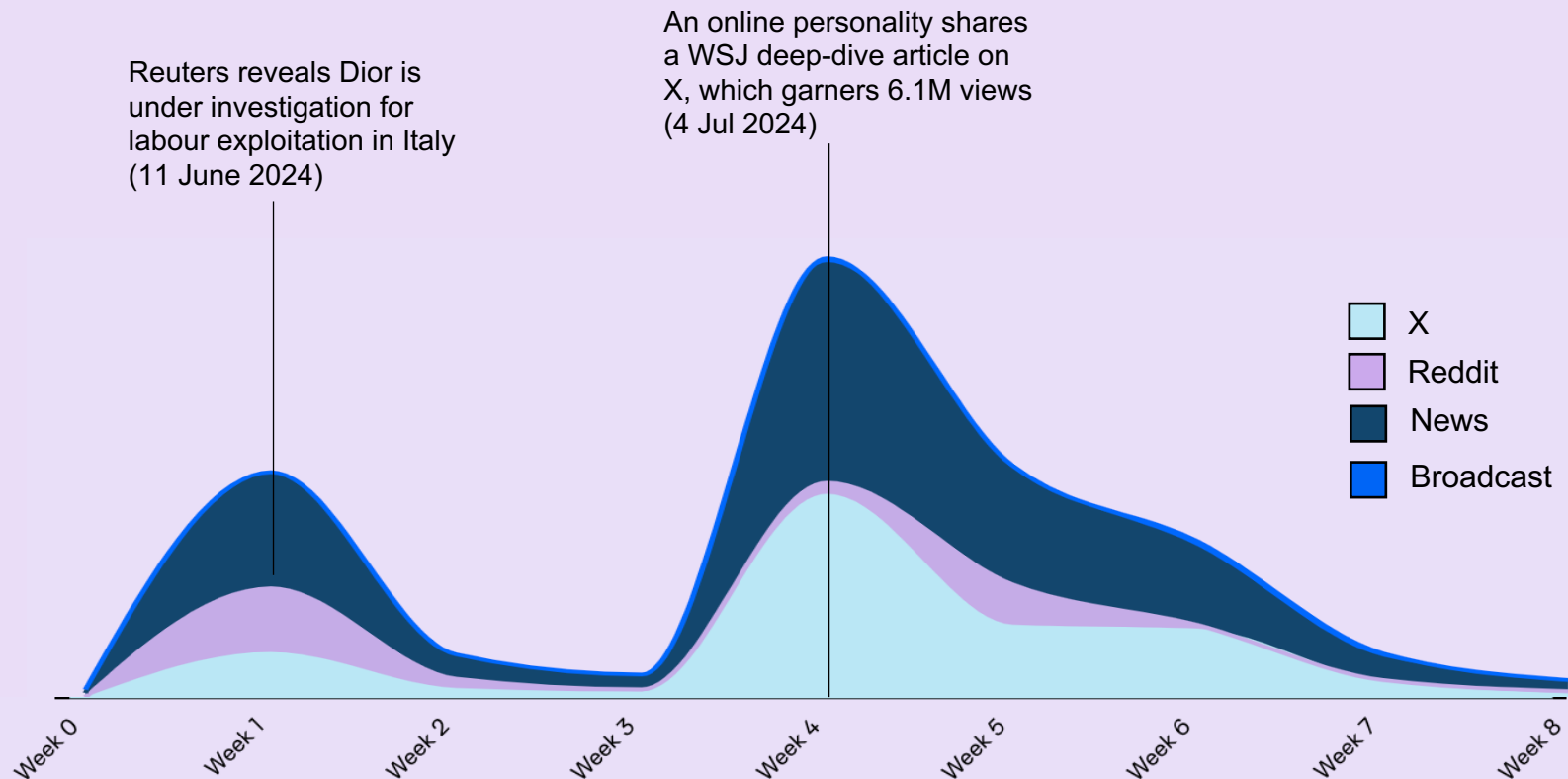
Reuters report Italian prosecutor's probe into worker exploitation at LVMH and Armani



Reuters' initial scoop amplified across the world by social sharing

On 11 June 2024, Reuters reported that luxury goods company LVMH – owner of Dior, Armani, and Givenchy, as well as Tiffany, Moët, Sephora and Fenty – was facing court administration due to accusations of exploitative labour practices. The report was shared widely, along with related articles from WSJ and Fortune.

Conversation would spike again three weeks later, when an WSJ article was shared on X by a venture capital influencer focusing specifically on labour practices for luxury handbags. While the engagements generated by this article lasted only a day, The New York Post would later up this thread, driving the conversation further.



Volumes of the Reuters' LVMH conversation by platform across X, Reddit, blogs, forums, online news, TV, radio, and podcasts between June 11 – August 16, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC.

Fashion communities propel story further into mainstream

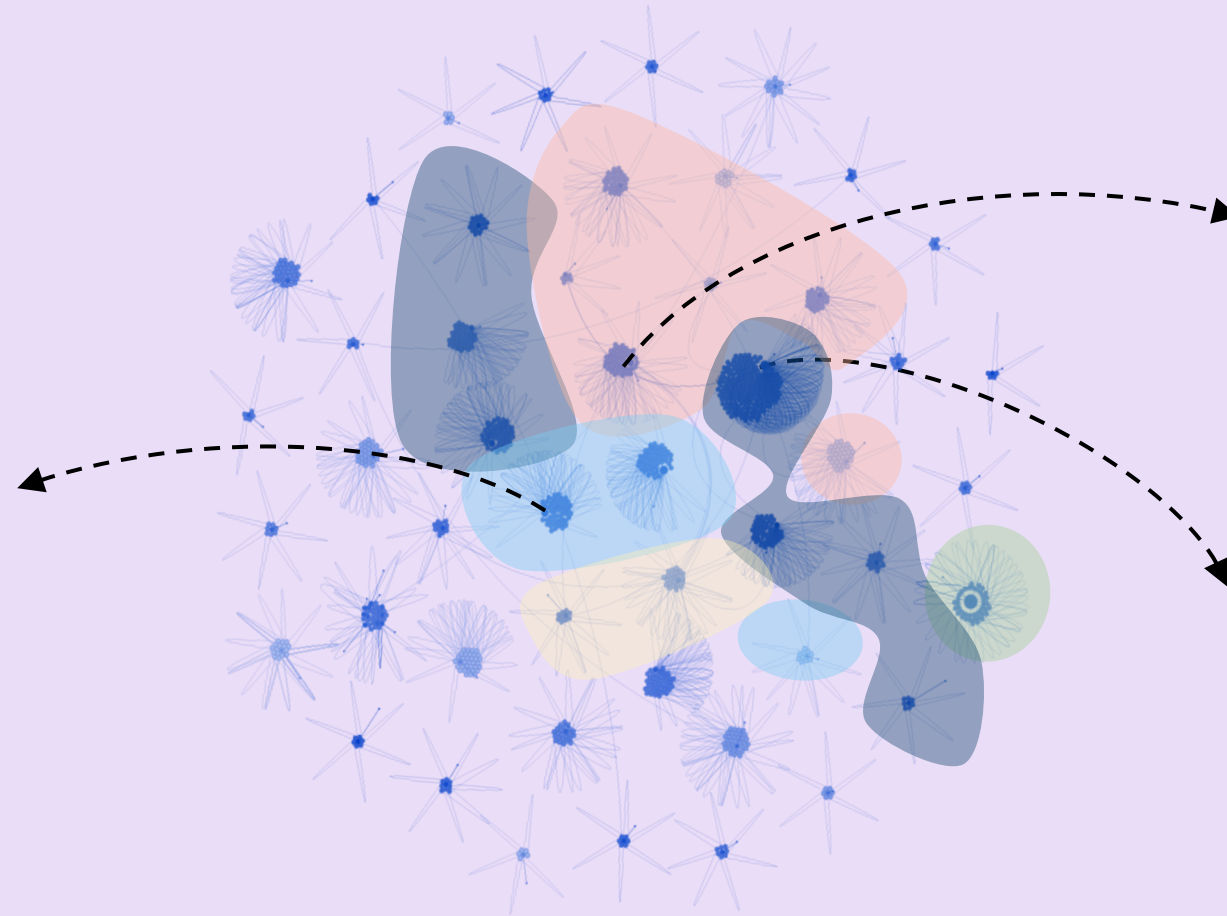
The LVMH story became a flashpoint for various interest groups, quickly moving on from mainland European news followers to global fashion fans. Influencers within this space spread the story to those outside the audience of the initial news channels.

As political influencers joined the conversation, the debate grew polarized, further escalating the story's reach. MAGA factions reinterpreted the narrative, casting it as evidence of media bias and tying labor issues to capitalism.

In contrast, activists underscored anti-exploitation messages, connecting the brand's actions to broader movements for social justice. Yet, the story's fragmented spread across disconnected networks ultimately prevented it from achieving sustained impact.

- News Followers
- Fashion Enthusiasts
- MAGA
- Activists
- Fashion Redditors

ⓧ
DEMS ETHICS-->Do As I Say
Not As I Do
"Italian prosecutors uncovered
Dior pays only \$57 to produce
bags retailing for \$2,780!"
"investigation extended to
include Giorgio Armani"
"exploited workers round-the-
clock production" Let them
eat cake!



I think we should be more
focused on the fact that
[BLACKPINK Lisa's] alleged
boyfriend is the heir of LVMH
which heavily invests in Israel
and funds the genocide in
Palestine as well as
exploiting countries in Africa
for precious stones/gems
and labour.



DWNews

€3,000 for a €60 bag? Police
raids in Italy on workshops
manufacturing luxury
handbags revealed how little
it's costing Dior to make its
products — largely due to
exploitation of workers.

Which brands are associated with the LVMH scandal?

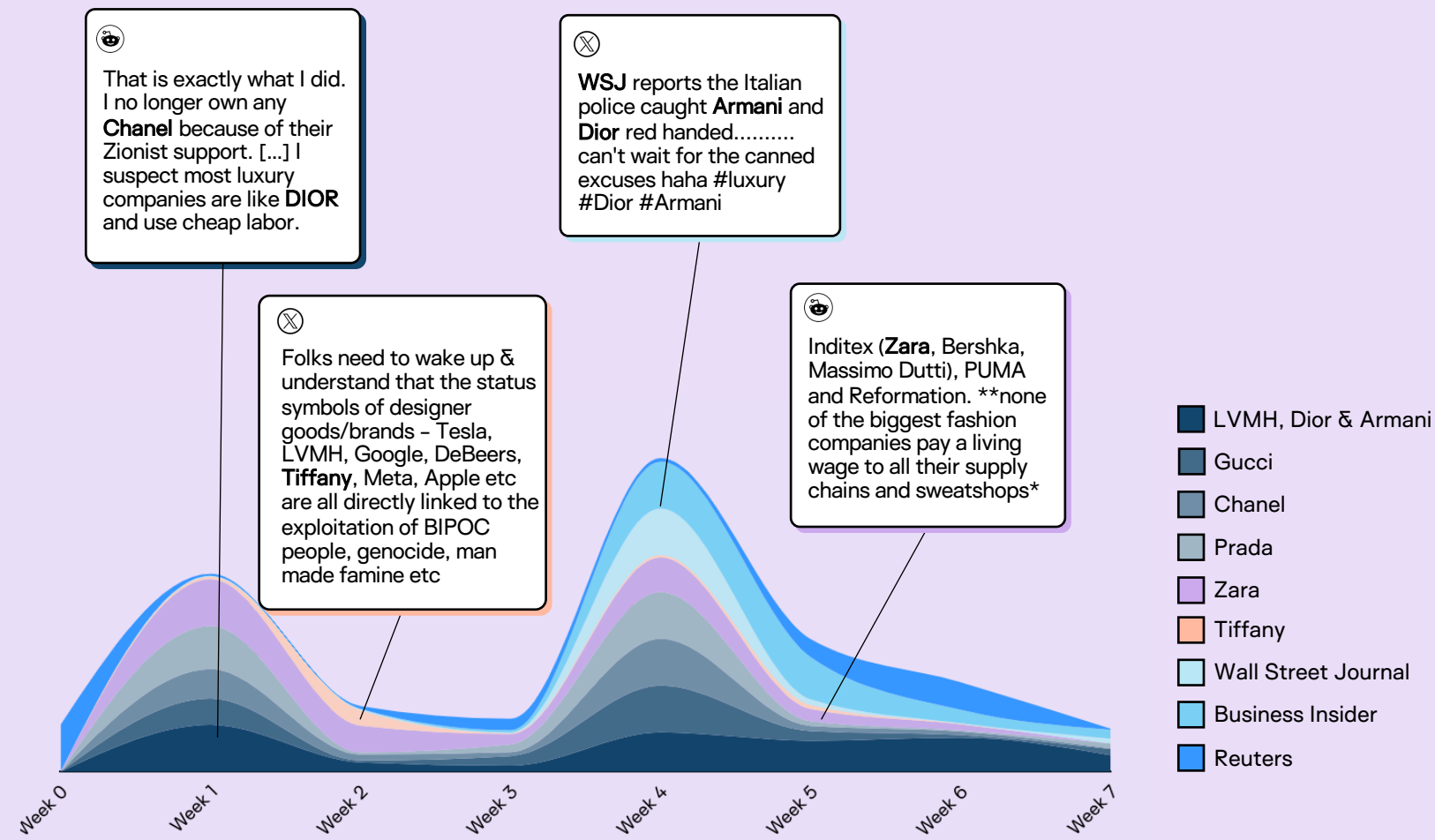
Media

Having originally been broken on Reuters, the story continued to build momentum on X and Reddit, amid speculation of what effect this would have inside the high-end goods sector.

By week 4, however, the story started to reach a wider audience with coverage by The WSJ and Business Insider, both of which cited the original Reuters report. This new wave of coverage expanded audiences, but also saw The WSJ become more popularly associated with the story for several weeks at the expense of Reuters.

Fashion

Elsewhere, it became clear that a story of this nature could have a corrosive impact on the brand identity of brands outside LVMH, including rivals and high-street alternatives, as users looked to situate the abuses within the context of broader fashion industry trends.





Some stories are catapulted into the mainstream by coherent communities

BBC's Burning Sun documentary looks into the South Korean K-Pop sex scandal



B B C

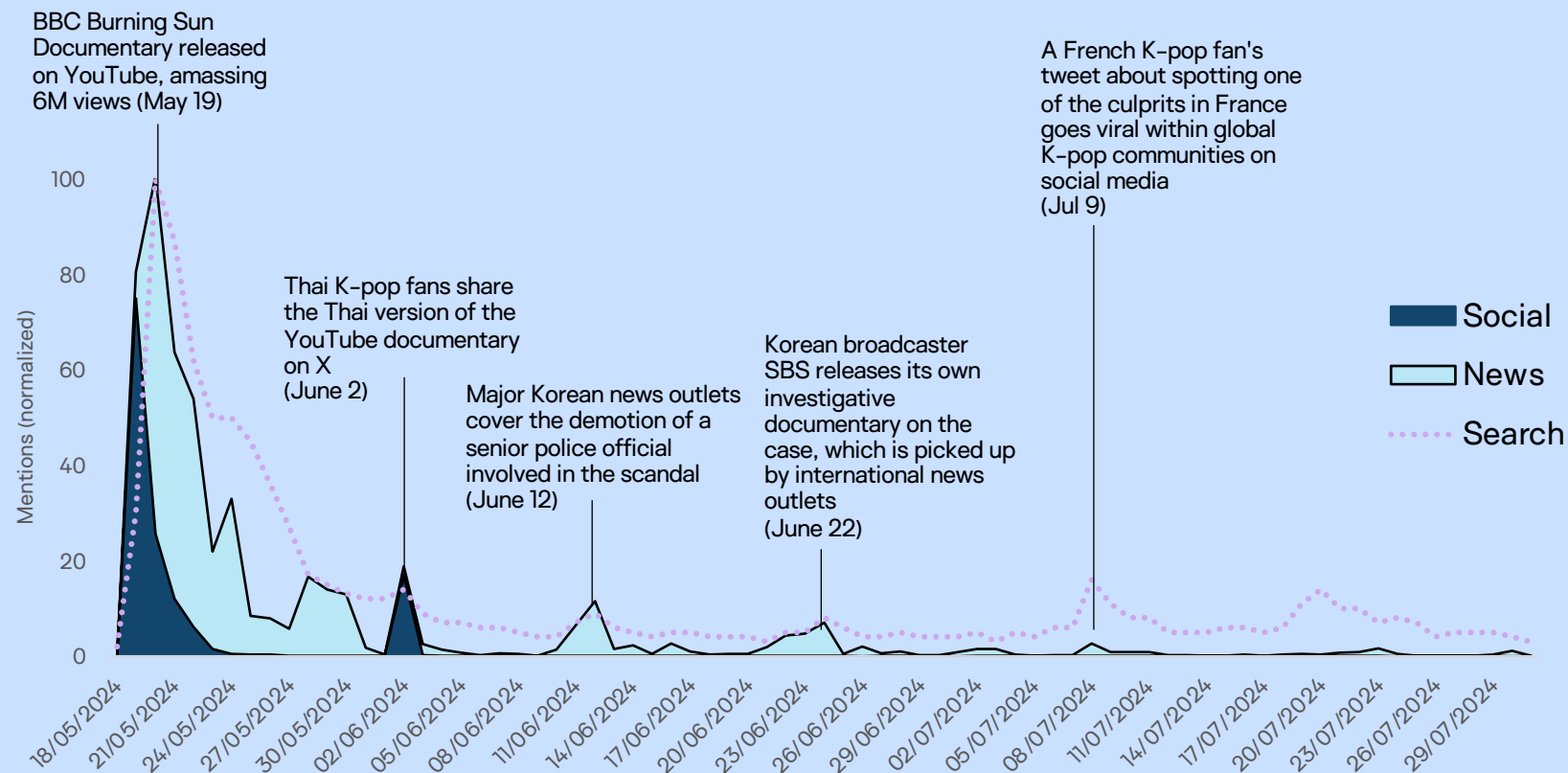
Burning Sun: the BBC Eye documentary about the women who exposed the secret K-pop chat groups



BBC Documentary leads to massive, instant engagement

Relative to the other stories analyzed here, BBC's Burning Sun documentary (which exposed sexual abuses within the K-Pop industry) remained in the public eye for longer – over ten times as long as AP's prisons story, for instance.

However, many of the dynamics that helped contribute to this staying power were at play over the initial two-day period, which which we'll be exploring in greater detail.



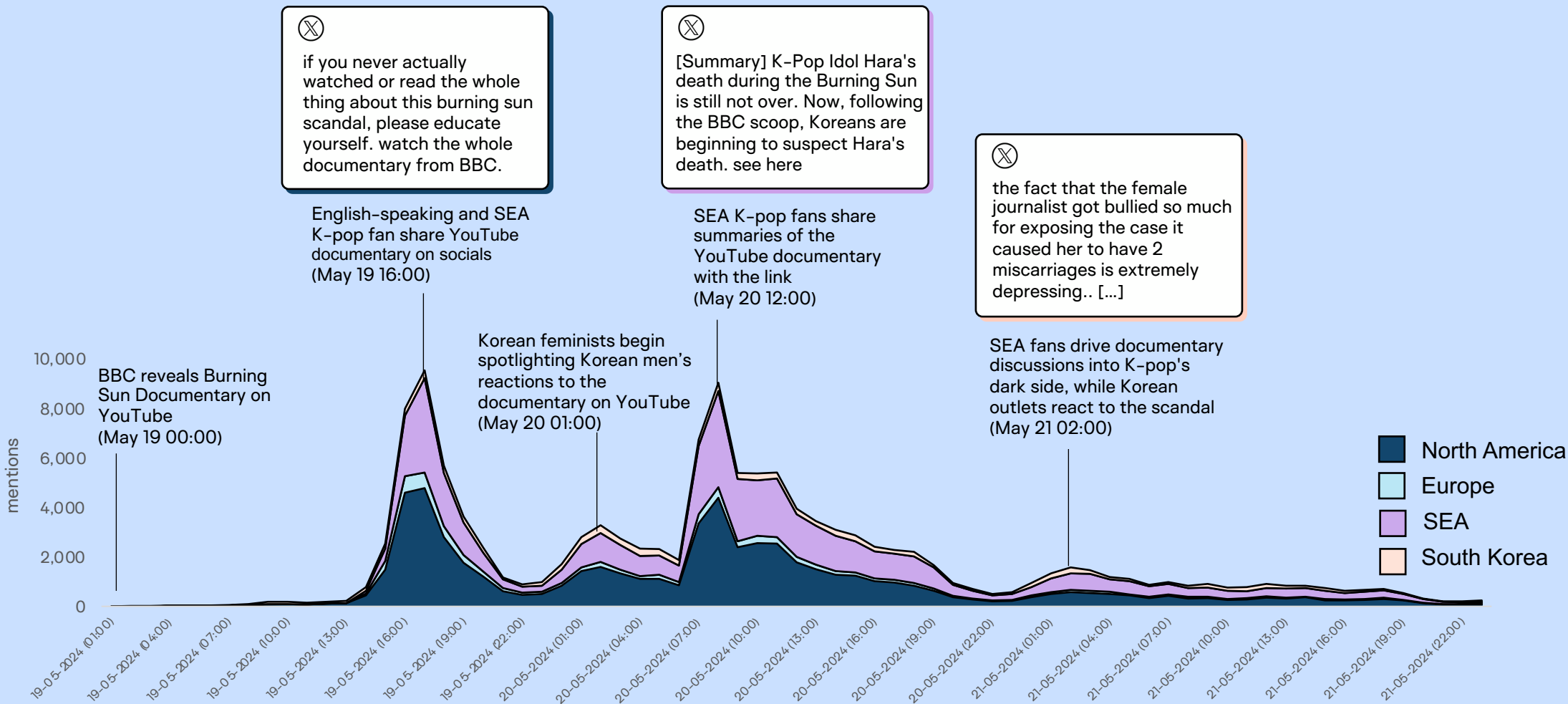
Mentions of the BBC Burning Sun Scandal across X, YouTube, Reddit, Blogs, Forums, Online News, TV, Radio, Podcasts and Google Search between May 19 – Jul 29, 2024.
Source: Pulsar TRAC.

Global fandoms maintain interest levels in evolving story

Burning Sun, a BBC World Service documentary racked up 700M impressions in 24 hours globally. This was driven in large part by the rapid sharing over this documentary among fandoms.

Breaking down the locations this conversation played out, however, reveals the impact played by both the North American and South East Asian wings of the global fandom.

This conversation also circled back to Korean communities, a small but highly engaged group who saw local discourse around gender and the role of journalism suddenly thrust under a global microscope.



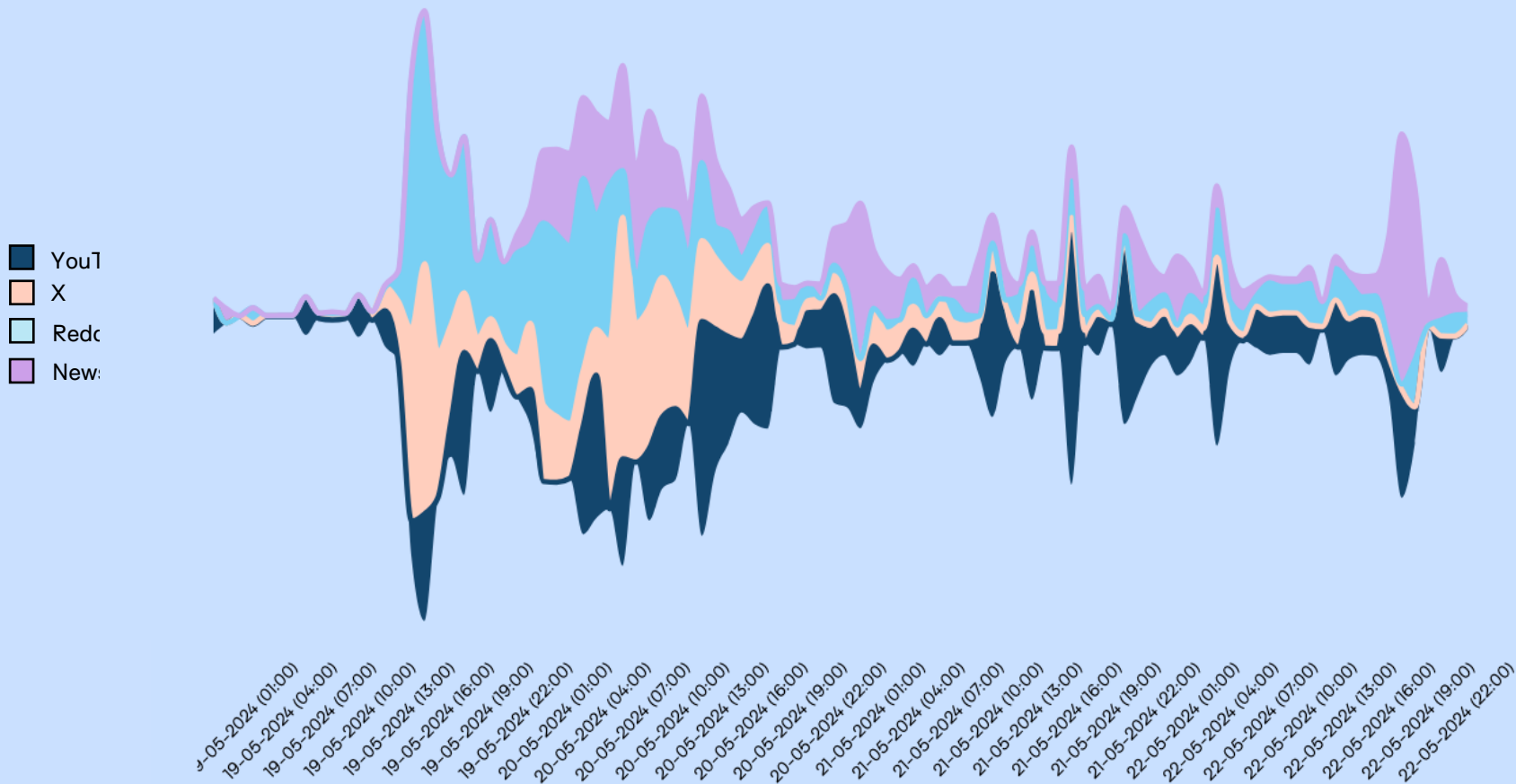
Mentions of the BBC Burning Sun Scandal by region across X, YouTube, Reddit, Blogs, Forums, Online News, TV, Radio and Podcasts between May 19 – Jul 29, 2024. Source: Pulsar TRAC.

YouTube-native story travels differently

The BBC Burning Sun documentary's use of YouTube as a channel represents an increasingly prevalent dynamic in today's fast-paced news landscape. Not only does YouTube enable a greater

degree of accessibility to global audiences, its also subject to a greater degree to audience interaction, from summaries and analysis and to reaction videos and the clipping and resharing of

specific moments – all of which help ensure a greater degree of interaction, virality and spread. This is epitomised by the traffic we observe on both X and Reddit in the hours following the documentaries release.

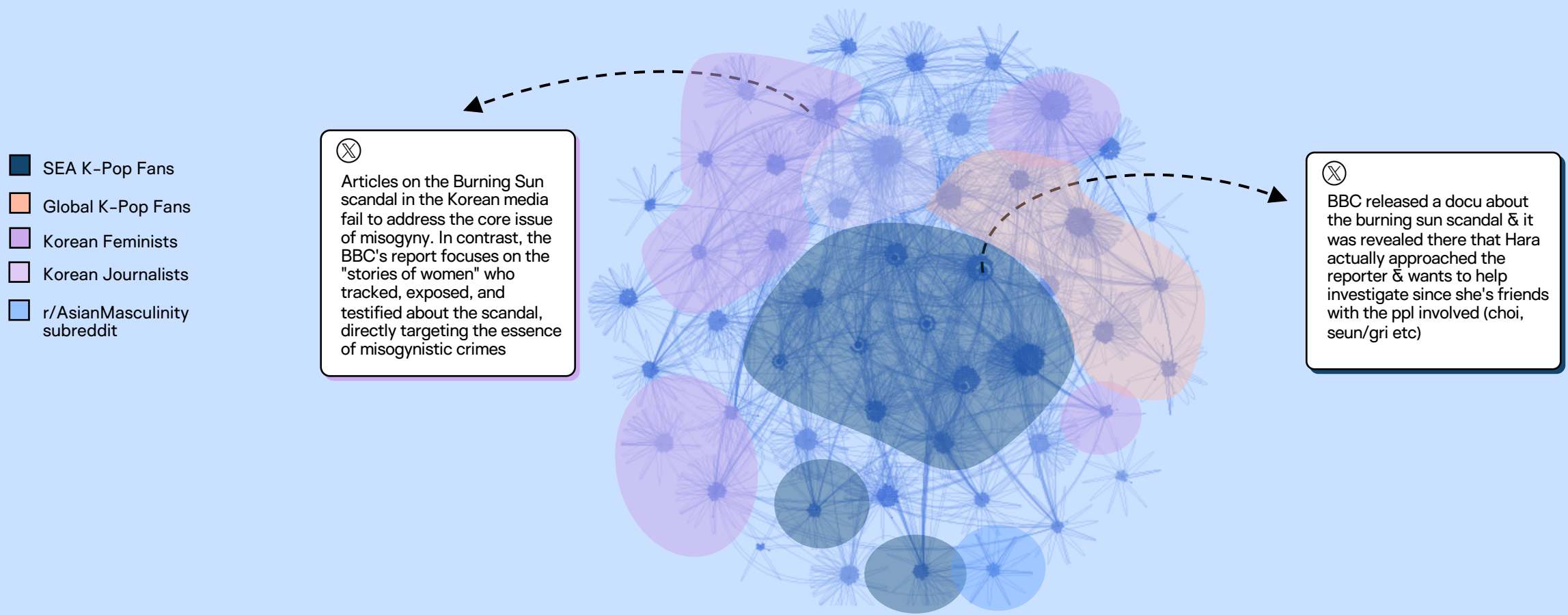


Fandoms keep the story relevant and spreading

Contrary to traditional media, fandoms are agile, reviving the scoop through constant real-time engagement. The network map below illustrates how K-pop fandoms, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand, played an important role in

amplifying the BBC documentary through constant interaction and engagement. We also saw the conversation fork into different communities and platforms – one instance of which was Korean feminists

citing the documentary on platforms like r/AsianMasculinity. This global, cross-platform engagement emphasises how fandoms do not just spread news but also shape its resonance.





Why some stories hold visibility
longer than others

What can our virality model tell us about these stories?

Each of these stories takes place on radically different levels, which is unsurprising given how the addition of a few outsized influencers or communities can result in exponential conversation growth.

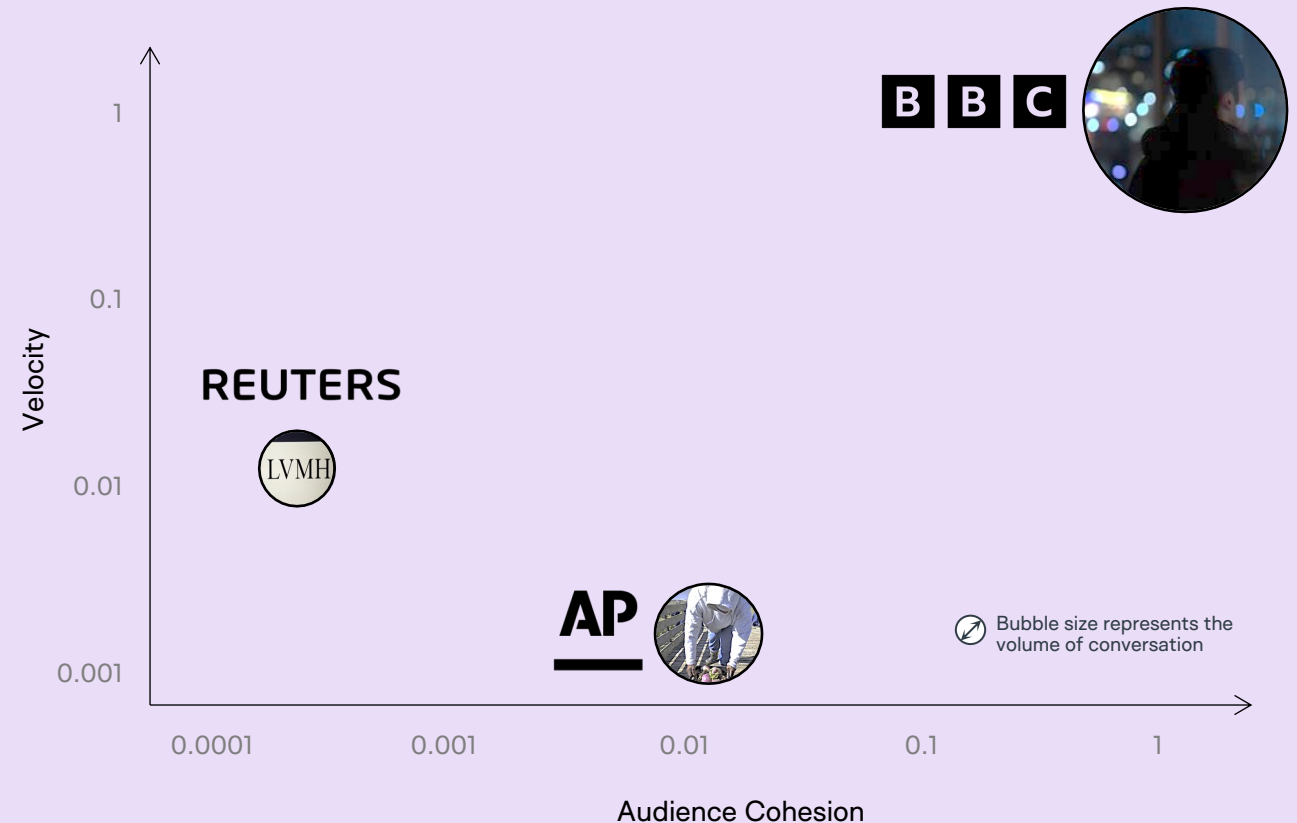
Organizing these dynamics on a logarithmic map allows us to visualize some of these dynamics in an easily comparable way.

Reuters' story is aided by how fragmented its audience is, as influential figures within media, fashion, right-wing and left-wing politics each share the story amongst distinct communities for different reasons.

The AP audience, on the other hand, is far more cohesive, which helped it build a degree of momentum. It also, however, speaks to its failure to escape the sphere of a subset of media publications.

Burning Sun, meanwhile, is a 'black swan' type event, which rode on the back of one of the world's most coherent fandoms. In that sense, its dynamics are more relevant to similar cases surrounding celebrity, sports, religion or politics than they are most investigations or brand stories.

Yet a part of its rapid spread is also attributable to its origins on YouTube and the layers of interaction and personalisation this enabled. This is not limited to YouTube or even video but it underlines the potential of socially native content when the right platform, audience and story intersect.



Comparing peak conversation times for three scoops from AP, Reuters, and BBC across X, Reddit, blogs, forums, news, TV, radio, and podcasts. Source: Pulsar TRAC

PULSAR*

About Pulsar

Pulsar is the world's leading audience intelligence platform—harnessing rich data sets, AI and human minds – so our clients can access nuanced and actionable insights that get straight to what matters most to their customers, their businesses and to society.

Learn more

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