

Hits or the Long Tail?

How Concentrated Is the Facebook Engagement of European Parties and Leaders, 2010 to 2020

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Abstract

Online attention is often described as a world of hits, in which a few items take most of the attention. Is the engagement that political parties receive on Facebook driven by a few viral posts, or spread across the many posts they make? I use 846,289 posts from 185 party and leader pages in 20 European countries between 2010 and 2020, collected through CrowdTangle, and measure how each page's engagement in each year was distributed across its posts. Engagement was concentrated, but not extremely: in the median page-year the top 1% of posts drew 8% of the interactions, the top 10% drew 36%, and the bottom half 18%, and the single most engaging post drew 2.8% in the median page-year and more than 10% in only 5% of page-years. The degree of concentration was similar for parties and leaders, populist and other parties, and parties in and out of government, and somewhat lower for pages with more engagement per post. Within pages, the share of the top tenth of posts rose by about 0.7 points a year to 2018, then fell. The evidence on whether good years were driven by hits is mixed: depending on how extreme year-to-year swings are handled, the top tenth accounted for between 39% and 50% of the variance in changes, against a 38% share. The most engaging posts were more often videos and photos, less often links, and more likely to fall in the 30 days before a national election. The engagement parties receive on Facebook is better described as a broad base with a moderate head than as a market of hits.

Keywords: virality; concentration; long tail; Facebook; social media engagement; political parties; party leaders; Europe; CrowdTangle

1 Introduction

Attention online is famously unequal. A small share of websites, articles and posts draw a large share of the audience ([Hindman 2009](#)), and much of what spreads widely does so through rare, large cascades ([Goel et al. 2016](#)). At the same time, digital platforms were once expected to support a long tail, in which many small items together add up to more than the hits ([Anderson 2006](#)). For political parties on social media, the question has practical and analytical weight. If a party's engagement depends on a few viral posts, its success is lumpy and hard to plan, and averages of engagement per post can mislead. If engagement is spread across many posts, it reflects the steady support of an audience.

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This paper measures how concentrated the engagement of European parties and leaders on Facebook was, using 846,289 posts from 185 pages in 20 countries between 2010 and 2020. It asks three questions. **RQ1.** How much of a page’s engagement comes from its most engaging posts? **RQ2.** Does concentration differ between kinds of page, and did it change over the decade? **RQ3.** Are a page’s good years driven by its hits?

2 Data and measures

The posts come from CrowdTangle lists of official party and party leader pages that I built for my doctoral research and exported in October 2020 (CrowdTangle Team 2020; Hotham 2021). For each page and calendar year with at least 100 posts, I rank the page’s posts by their interactions (likes, comments, shares and emoji reactions) and compute the share of the year’s interactions drawn by the top 1% and top 10% of posts and by the bottom half, the Gini coefficient across posts, and the share drawn by the single most engaging post. This gives 1,462 page-years from 185 pages: 111 party pages and 74 leader pages, covering 846,289 posts. The 2020 data run from January to September only. The top 1% is the round($0.01n$) most engaging posts, at least one, so it covers between 0.8% and 1.15% of posts in 90% of page-years.

I compare page-years with fixed effects for country by year, holding the log number of posts constant. I examine change over time within pages with page and year fixed effects. To ask whether good years are driven by hits, I divide the change in a page’s total interactions from one year to the next into the part due to its top 10% of posts and the part due to the rest, and compare each part’s contribution to the variance of the change with its share of engagement. I use only pairs of consecutive years. Because a few pages had very large swings from one year to the next, I also report the decomposition with the most extreme 1% of changes at each end trimmed, and with changes measured in logs. Standard errors are clustered by page. Clustering by country instead gave similar results: for example, the standard error of the 2010 to 2018 slope below rose from 0.15 to 0.20.

Concentration measures depend on the number of posts. With few posts, top shares are biased downwards: if engagement were lognormal with the spread implied by the median Gini, the top 1% would draw 7.1% of engagement at 100 posts and 8.0% at 1,500. In the data, page-years with more posts were somewhat more concentrated (about 0.9 points more for the top 10% per log unit of posts, SE 0.5). I therefore check the main results on a fixed number of posts: 100 posts drawn at random from each page-year, repeated 20 times with a fixed seed.

3 Results

3.1 A broad base with a moderate head

Figure 1, left, shows how engagement was spread across posts. In the median page-year, the top 1% of posts drew 8% of the interactions, the top 10% drew 36%, the top fifth 53% and the top half 82%, leaving 18% for the bottom half. The Gini coefficient across posts had a median of 0.49, and the single most engaging post of the year drew a median of 2.8% of the page’s interactions. This is the kind of spread expected if the log of engagement varied across a page’s posts with a standard deviation of a little under one: unequal, but a long way from a world in which a few hits take almost everything. The single best post drew more than 10% of a page’s interactions in only 5% of page-years. With 100 posts drawn

from each page-year, the medians were 7.5% for the top 1% (here a single post), 35.6% for the top 10% and 0.48 for the Gini coefficient.

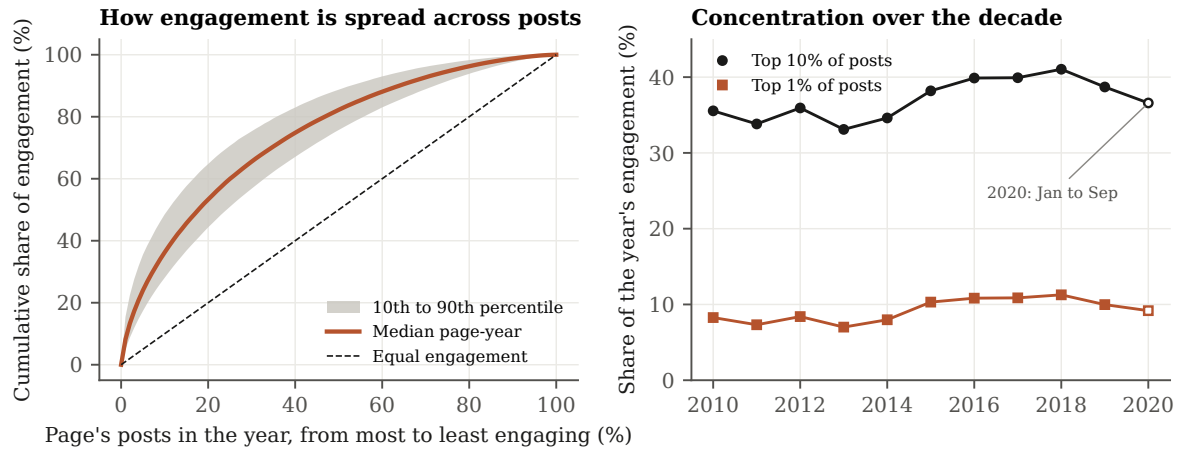


Figure 1. Left: cumulative share of a page’s interactions in a year by its posts ranked from most to least engaging, median and 10th to 90th percentiles across 1,462 page-years. Right: average share of a page’s yearly interactions drawn by its top 1% and top 10% of posts, by year. These are raw means over the pages active in each year, a set that grows from 61 page-years in 2010 to 177 in 2019; within-page estimates are in the text. The 2020 point (open marker) covers January to September only.

3.2 Similar across pages, rising then easing

Concentration differed little between kinds of page. Comparing page-years in the same country and year, and allowing for the number of posts, the top 1% of posts drew a similar share of engagement on leaders’ and parties’ pages (0.7 points less for leaders, SE 0.5), on populist and other parties’ pages (0.5 points more, SE 0.7), and for parties in and out of government (0.2 points less in government, SE 0.4). For the top 10%, the populist difference was 0.7 points (SE 1.1, 95% CI -1.5 to 2.8). Pages with more engagement per post were somewhat less concentrated: each log unit of total interactions, holding the number of posts constant, went with a share for the top 10% about one point lower (SE 0.3).

Over the decade, concentration rose and then eased (Figure 1, right). In the raw yearly means, the top tenth of posts drew about a third of engagement in 2010 to 2014 and about two fifths in 2016 to 2018, before falling back to 37% in January to September 2020. The same pattern holds within pages. With page and year fixed effects, the share drawn by the top 10% was 3.0 points lower in 2013 than in 2010 (SE 1.4) and 4.3 points higher in 2018 (SE 1.4). From 2010 to 2018 it rose by about 0.7 points a year (SE 0.15). It then fell: compared with 2018, it was 2.5 points lower in 2019 (SE 0.6) and 4.3 points lower in 2020 (SE 0.7). A single linear trend fits poorly; a quadratic term is negative and clearly different from zero (-0.10 , SE 0.03). With 100 posts drawn from each page-year, the rise and fall remain: the mean top 10% share was 32.6% in 2013 and 40.0% in 2018, and the within-page slope to 2018 was 0.8 points a year (SE 0.13).

3.3 Were good years hit-driven?

If a page’s best years were made by its hits, the change in its total engagement from one year to the next would come disproportionately from its top posts. The answer depends on how extreme swings are handled. Of 1,277 pairs of page-years from the same page, 36 spanned a gap of more than one year

and are dropped, leaving 1,240 consecutive pairs. In these, the top tenth of posts accounted for 50% of the variance in year-to-year changes in total engagement, above their 38% share of engagement. But the changes were highly skewed: the proportional change had a mean of 1.2, a standard deviation of 3.6 and a maximum of 73. When the most extreme 1% of changes at each end are trimmed, the top tenth accounted for 39% of the variance; with changes measured in logs, 39%. So in typical years the top tenth contributed roughly in proportion to its share, while in the few years of very large growth the hits mattered more. Within the same page and country-year, years in which engagement was more concentrated were years in which the median post drew less: each point of share for the top 10% went with a median post about 3% lower. This is partly mechanical, since for a given total a larger share for the top posts leaves less for the rest.

3.4 What the hits were

The posts that made a page's top 1% in a year differed from the rest (Figure 2). Videos made up 32% of these posts against 24% of all posts, and photos 35% against 27%, while links made up only 22% against 44%. The most engaging posts were also more likely to fall in the 30 days before a national election: 7.8% of top posts against 5.5% of all posts. Because elections fall only in some years, I repeat the comparison within country-years with a national election. There, 23.4% of top 1% posts fell in the campaign, against 16.6% of all posts.

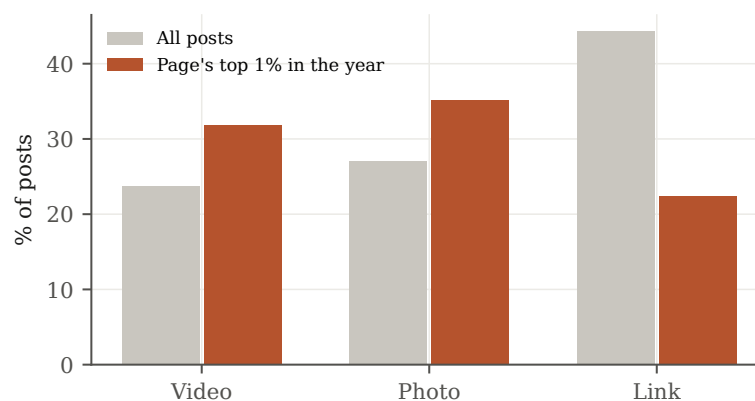


Figure 2. Share of video, photo and link posts among all posts and among each page's top 1% of posts in each year. Page-years with at least 100 posts.

4 Discussion

The engagement parties and leaders receive on Facebook is unequal across their posts, as attention online generally is (Hindman 2009), but it is not a market of hits. The bottom half of a page's posts still drew almost a fifth of its engagement, and the single best post drew 2.8% in the median page-year. Whether a page's good years were made by its hits is less clear. In most years the top tenth contributed roughly in proportion to its share, but in years of very large growth it mattered more. For analysts, this suggests that a page's total or median engagement is a reasonable summary of its standing.

Concentration was statistically indistinguishable across kinds of page. Populist parties, often described as masters of viral content, were not detectably more dependent on hits than others: the difference in the top 10% share was 0.7 points, with a 95% confidence interval from -1.5 to 2.8. Whatever explains

their higher engagement ([Hotham 2026](#)), these data give no sign that it was a heavier reliance on a few hits. The rise in concentration in the middle of the decade coincided with the spread of native video and with changes in Facebook’s ranking, and the hits were more often videos and photos, but the data cannot show which drove it.

The design has clear limits. CrowdTangle records engagement, not reach, so a post’s interactions are a partial measure of its spread. The pages are those on my CrowdTangle lists, and page-years with fewer than 100 posts are excluded. Concentration depends on the number of posts, which I hold constant in comparisons and fix at 100 in a robustness check, but which differs between pages. The set of pages changes over the decade, and 2020 covers only January to September.

5 Conclusion

Across 185 pages of European parties and leaders over a decade, the most engaging tenth of posts drew a little over a third of engagement (36% in the median page-year). Concentration rose to 2018 and then fell. Whether good years came from a few hits depends on how the largest swings are treated, but in typical years the top posts contributed roughly in proportion to their share. Facebook engagement with parties had a moderate head and a broad base.

Data and code

The posts were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020. CrowdTangle’s terms do not permit sharing the raw posts. The analysis code, the list of pages and page-year aggregate data are available from the author.

Provenance and AI use

The data were exported from CrowdTangle in October 2020 for my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis ([Hotham 2021](#)). The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

I designed the study and am responsible for the analysis and conclusions. I wrote the text, with drafting and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code. I reviewed and checked all text and results.

Ethics

Not applicable: the study involves no human participants. The data are public posts by the official Facebook pages of political parties and party leaders, analysed only as counts of interactions aggregated by page and year. No post content is quoted or reproduced, and no data on individual users are used.

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