Search Referral Traffic Down 60% For Small Publishers, Data Shows via @sejournal, @MattGSouthern

Search referral traffic to small publishers dropped **60%** over two years, according to Chartbeat data reported exclusively by Axios.

That’s nearly three times the decline at large publishers. The analytics firm, which tracks traffic across thousands of client websites globally, segmented its network by size. Mid-sized publishers (10,000 to 100,000 daily page views) lost **47%**, and large publishers (over 100,000 daily page views) lost **22%**.

What’s New

Aggregate search traffic data from Chartbeat isn’t new. Our January Reuters Institute coverage cited Chartbeat data showing a **33%** global decline in Google Search referrals. What’s new is the size breakdown. Previous Chartbeat figures cited in earlier coverage were aggregate numbers, and this data shows the losses are concentrated at the bottom.

Page views from Google Search fell **34%** between December 2024 and December 2025, per the Chartbeat data. Google Discover, the other top referral source, fell **15%** over the same period.

ChatGPT referrals grew more than **200%** during that window, but chatbots still account for less than **1%** of all publisher page view referrals. Growth in chatbot traffic hasn’t come close to

replacing what search lost.

How Larger Publishers Are Compensating

Larger publishers appear to be finding alternative traffic sources to partially offset search losses. News and media sites in particular are seeing growth in direct and internal traffic as a share of referrals.

Email and app referrals are also growing among news publishers, per the Axios report. Our Reuters Institute coverage in January found the same pattern, with publishers saying they planned to invest more in owned channels.

Overall weekly page views across all publishers in Chartbeat's network dropped **6%** between 2024 and 2025. The firm attributed that to factors outside search, including a quieter election cycle, though that's their interpretation, not a measured cause.

AI Referral Engagement Varies By Site Type

One finding that stands out for content strategy is that news and media sites get the highest total page views from AI chatbot referrals, but the lowest engagement per article.

Axios reports that this pattern suggests readers use news citations in chatbots for quick fact-checks or context, not deeper reading.

The other category in the data is "utilitarian sites," meaning publishers offering health advice or gardening tips. Those publishers see fewer total referrals from AI platforms but more page views per article.

Methodology Notes

Chartbeat sells analytics tools to publishers and has tracked traffic across its client network for close to two decades. Its data covers thousands of websites globally but skews toward news and media publishers.

Small publishers in this data average 1,000 to 10,000 daily page views, medium is 10,000 to 100,000, and large is over 100,000.

Axios received the data exclusively, and Chartbeat hasn’t published it independently.

Why This Matters

Search referral traffic loss is hitting sites with the fewest resources to build alternative traffic.

Most reporting on search traffic declines has treated publishers as a single group. This Chartbeat data breaks down the data by size. For anyone working with smaller publishers, these numbers should change the conversation.

AI chatbot users click to news sites for quick checks but spend more time on how-to content. That means the value of an AI referral depends on what you publish.

Looking Ahead

We’ll be watching for Chartbeat to publish the full data set. How chatbot referral engagement differs by site type is still early data worth tracking.

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https://www.searchenginejournal.com/search-referral-traffic-do

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