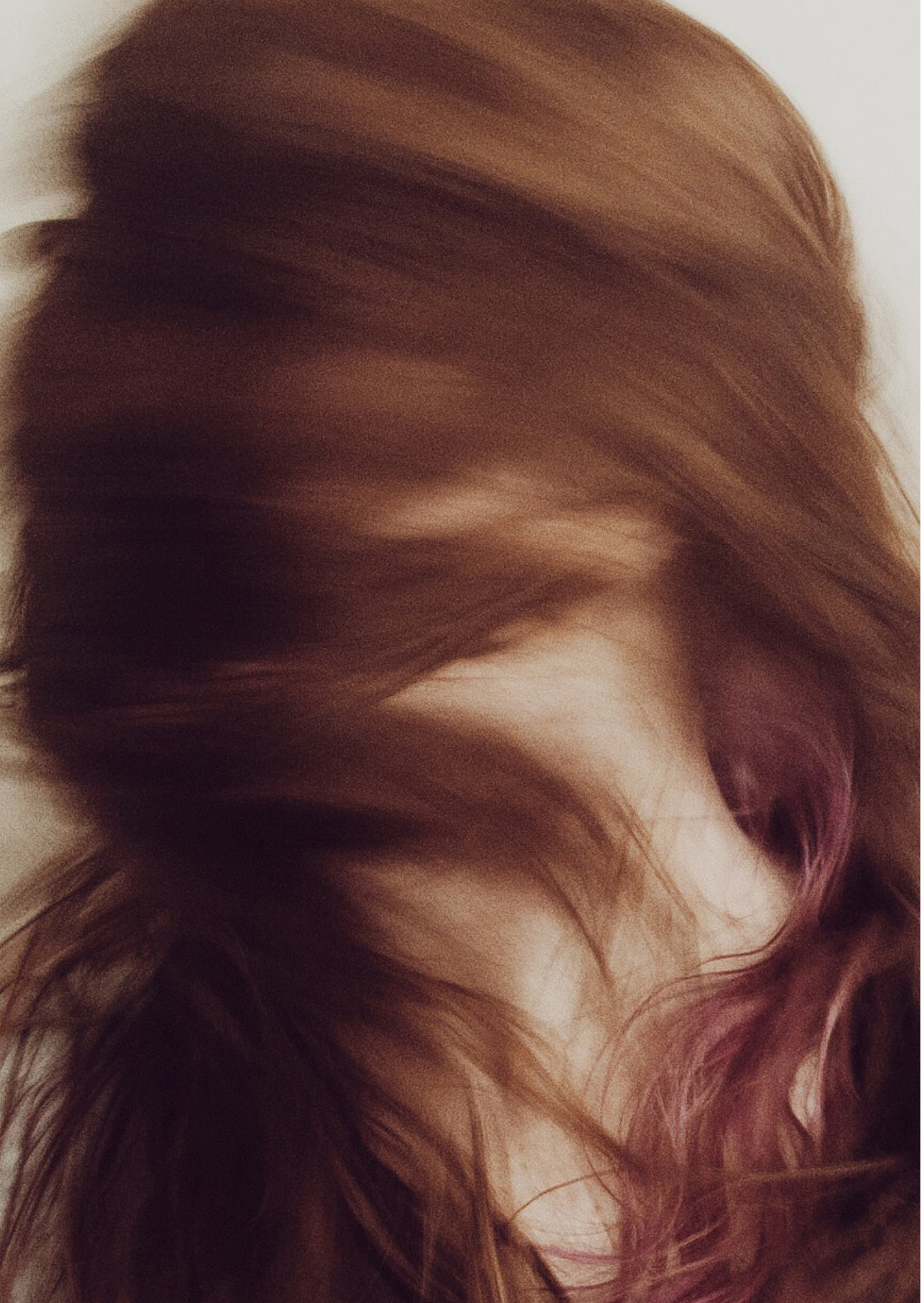
PULSAR

Case Study

Foco

Talking the same language:

how Foco and Pulsar used social data to uncover the energy within a network based on the strength of the conversations



Introduction

Social data is currently a largely untapped method of finding out how people are feeling. It allows us to examine large groups, and communities without recruiting them for a potentially self-selecting survey or focus group. We can understand how entire networks discuss and evolve topics.

However, one challenge presented by studying social data is that the volumes can be so large that it is hard to extract meaning, as well as an indication of how people are truly feeling. Is it possible to uncover the energy within a network?

A recent collaboration between audience intelligence platform Pulsar and John Shewell at Foco for a study for the RSA raised some interesting questions about how we study these energies within various networks, based on the strength of conversations and connections.

The report examined conversations around mental health in the Manchester area, and found that mental health discussion is growing, particularly amongst younger groups aged 14-24, yet local authorities were not speaking the same conversation.

This paper will examine the methodology behind this study, the importance of the insights uncovered, and the way the methodology can be applied to similar studies.

Chapter 1: What we did

→ **The challenge:** Data collection and analysis at scale, to understand the both the topic at hand, but also how to use social media research to analyse difficult topics, and how to identify the energy within a network. Limitations of budget and time were a problem.

→ **The solution:** Using Pulsar TRAC, we set the search parameters and filters to gather the most relevant and useful conversations to ensure that we were honing in on the most meaningful data specific to the project - which in this case was about identifying all the conversations and connections relating to mental health among young people across the Greater Manchester area. The hypothesis was around whether social media network analysis can identify the energy within a network based on the strength of the conversations and connections relating to mental health issues. Setting up a study using historical data, this data was analysed by John Shewell at Foco to uncover the insights to write the RSA report.

→ **The results:** Key findings, all valuable to the client in developing policy but also helpful to Foco and John Shewell in developing new methodology around this sort of study using social data.

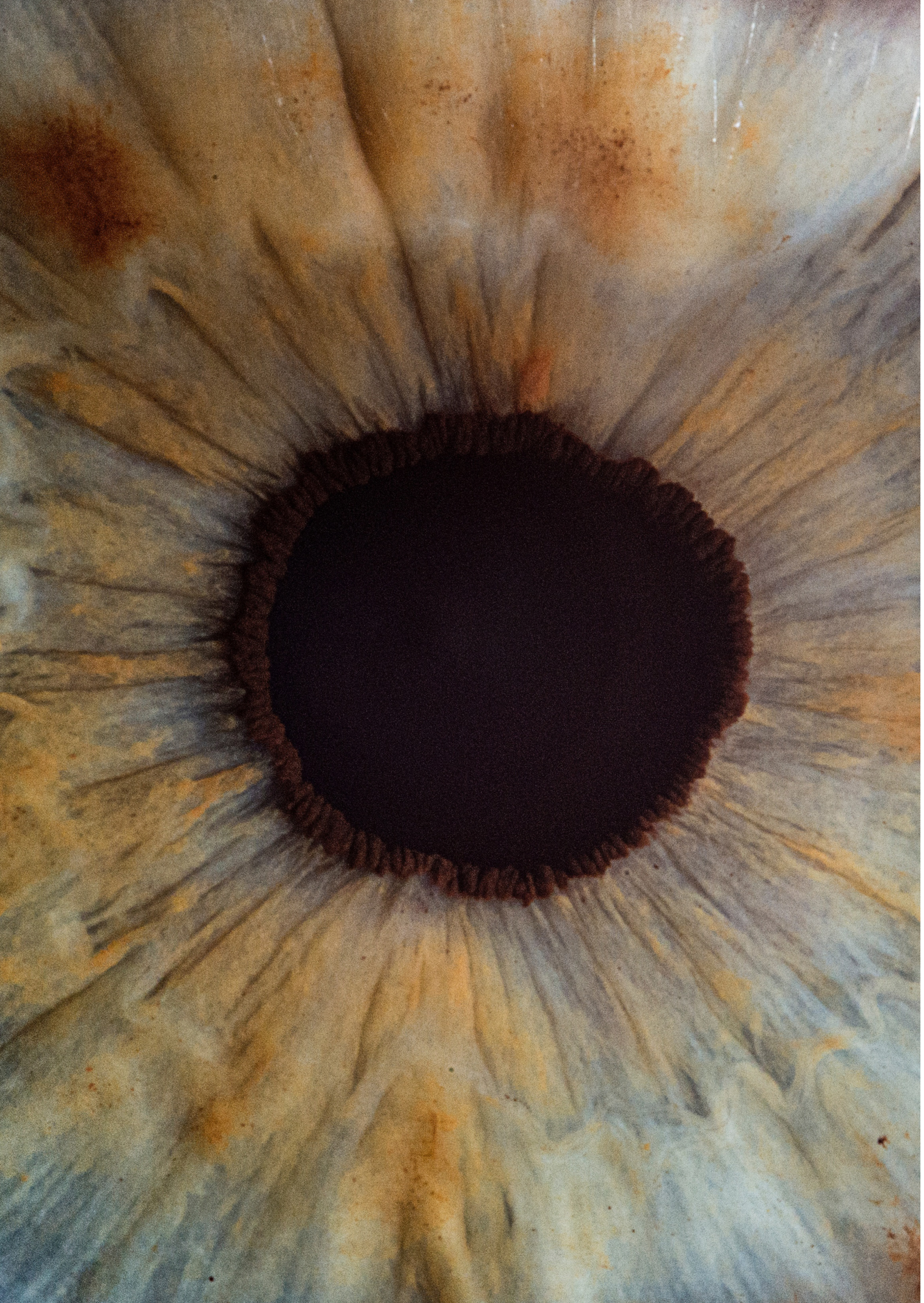
The key findings were:

·Mental health is growing as a topic in UK, mainly among people aged 14-24.

·The main mental health topics in Manchester were: depression, sleep/tired, suicide, anxiety.

·Women are talking more about this in general, but men between 14-24 have a larger share of voice when discussing suicide.

·Online conversation discusses sharing resources amongst peers, but local service providers don't engage.



Chapter 2: What we found

The open-ended hypothesis helped to shape a new style of methodology for this report for Foco. John Shewell used this as an opportunity to address challenges in researching areas such as mental health, and develop a new methodological framework to deliver actionable insights to organisations like the RSA. Being able to use large datasets from social media meant being able to have access to much more information, as well as 'from the horse's mouth' opinions, and the team were able to tap into the energy of the conversation.

2.1 Challenges in exploring 'difficult' topics

A topic such as mental health is difficult to scratch the surface of. Finding what people are sharing on social media is only the tip of the iceberg, and it's vital to uncover patterns in language and attitudes to understand the energy of a group discussing a topic like this. While it is is far more cost-effective to research using social media, the methodologies must be sound in order to get any realistic data back.

John Shewell explains: "Previously to this project, I worked on a project to identify conversations and connections relating to self-harm among young people.

The methodology we used was social listening 1.0 because we were doing it manually. We would search and scrape conversations on the social web by tracking as many conversations as possible, put the data into a spreadsheet, and repeat this process. It was long and arduous.

We didn't use any software because (a) we weren't convinced that there any tools that could identify these specific issues, the various sub-cultures, and successfully surface the conversations about this topic; and (b) the companies that claimed they could do all this for us often charged a fortune.

While that project uncovered fascinating insights about conversations and connections relating to self-harm among young people, it reinforced my view that we had to find a better solution for collecting data, so that we could focus on what we do best, which is conducting the analysis and identifying the actionable insights."

2.2 Refining research methodologies

The RSA study brief encouraged Foco to explore a new direction. Using Pulsar, it was possible to break down the topic in a more granular way, both by having more data available, but also by being able to present, analyse and filter it in several different ways, using Pulsar's proprietary algorithms.

John Shewell explains, "when we were presented with the brief from the RSA, we wanted to examine this topic in as much detail as possible. Social media research addresses four critical issues that traditional research methods often struggle with: volume, velocity, variety and veracity.

The first (volume) is simple economies of scale. By this, I mean we can gather and analyse thousands, hundreds of thousands and even millions of conversations at a fraction of the cost of traditional research methods. Therefore, there is value in the cost of data acquisition. The second issue is tracking trends temporally by both looking back in time and observing in real-time, which provides us with a trend of the topic. This rear-view mirror gazing enables us to cast our eyes towards the future.

The third is the variety of conversations about the topic and the connections, which can identify specific insights about a particular issue that may not have been part of the original brief, but is nonetheless important to the overall subject under investigation; such as why are conversations about suicide higher among young men when talking about mental health.

Finally, we can use social media research to assess the strength of an issue to identify its relative importance among target audiences, but more importantly we can test an hypothesis. In the case of this project, we wanted to determine whether it's possible to identify the energy within a network relative to a specific issue, which could help inform public policy and improve levels of engagement, and participation.

We can conduct deep social intelligence into heavy subjects at a fraction of the time, and apply expertise in the area that clients are paying for, which is the analysis and insights. The simplicity of the product is its most powerful feature, Pulsar enables us to reduce time and therefore cost."

2.3 Diving deep

The research indicated that mental health is a significant topic among young people both in the UK and in the Greater Manchester area, and they are talking openly about the issues. A parting question for the report was: are providers of mental health services actively listening?

Understanding this conversation on social media was just not just a case of getting volumes of mentions of various keywords, this required a deep dive and human analysis by researchers once the individual posts had been uncovered, something that cannot be surfaced by a machine alone.

One hypothesis for the study was to understand whether social media research can uncover the energy within a network. An example from the report was the way that 'depression' seemed to be used as shorthand for a range of mental health issues. This was possible to uncover by searching the posts, but required expert researcher analysis to pull out the meaning of this. Uncovering an energy is not possible by using a tool alone, but using Pulsar's platform to filter the data, researchers are able to uncover a sense of energy via analysis. Using social listening and audience intelligence tools and research expertise in conjunction is a new style of research, developing as the social web itself develops, and methodologies for these sorts of studies are still emerging.

Chapter 3:
What we want to do next

Our social intelligence methodology can be applied to almost any research context whether its formulating public policy or corporate strategy. The problem that this methodology solves is identifying the probability of an event recurring, so that our clients can proactively plan ahead at a fraction of the cost of normal research, analysis and modelling techniques.

This means clients can proactively manage their finite resources by observing the likely outcomes based on real-time data.

The methodology is called the 'Six-T Revolution'

The 'Six-T Revolution':

The added value of our methodology is that we're also able to develop rich customer and potential customer personas using real-time data and identify their likely patterns of behaviour, which is rich insight for organisations. For public sector organisations this means they'll be able to formulate more effective public policies based on our real-time data insights.

1. Topic

What is it specifically we want to study. In this stage we are formulating the hypothesis we want to test?

2. Time

Over what time period do we want to conduct the research and analysis to ensure that we are thoroughly testing the hypothesis?

3. Trend

Is there a trend specific to the topic and, more importantly, are there other trends that relate to the topic - i.e. sub-topics - that we need to explore?

4. Trigger

What was the trigger that created the trend? This is really important because we want to identify whether this is a one-off trigger or whether this has happened in a similar situation because we want to explore whether this relates to the hypothesis and whether we can model future trends based on these triggers.

5. Transmission

how strong is the topic within the network in terms of resonance, so we're looking for two things: speed of transmission within the network and the scale of spread. In short: how far did the subject matter spread and how long did it take to spread?

5. Traction

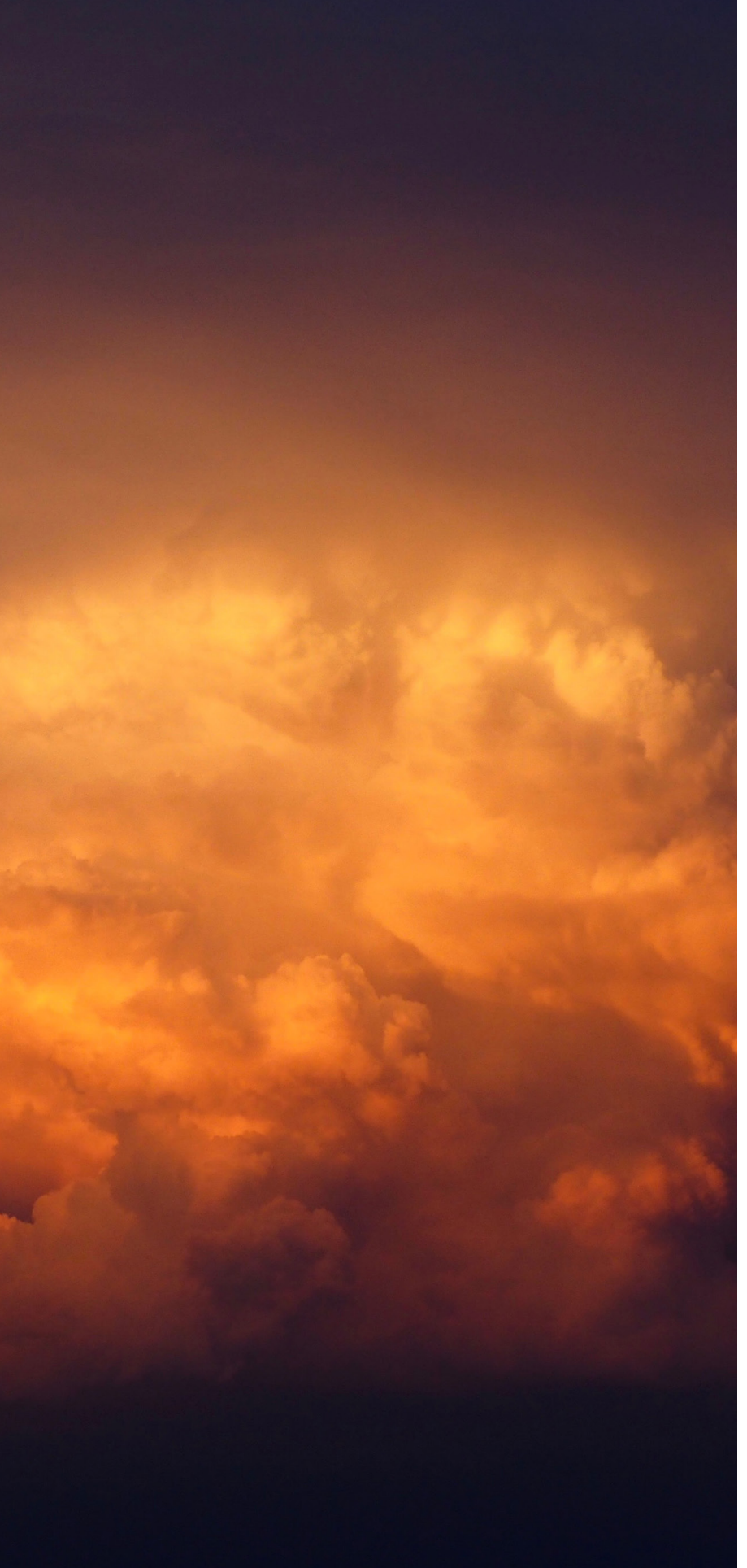
What is the level of traction within the specific target network? We're looking for the likelihood of the topic being repeated based on 4 and 5. which gives us a measure of confidence to confirm or challenge the hypothesis; but more importantly, it enables us to model future outcomes.

Conclusion

Foco and Pulsar's collaboration demonstrates how social media analysis can be used at its full power - to identify where the energy is within a network of posts, by understanding where certain trends, moments and behaviours are coming from within the posters, and then developing models to estimate where these can lead.

Within the RSA report, it was possible to develop a clear answer to the hypothesis questions and advise on policy around this, as well as understand the limitations of the budgets and resources available, plus be able to estimate ways the project could be expanded and continued through a replicable methodology.

This methodology would help organisations from across the public and private sector to target the right resources and communications at the right people in the right way at the right time through the right channels. The ability to harness social network analysis in this way can deliver spectacular results, but it demands a new set of skills in terms of data gathering and analysis.



Contact Pulsar to see what the platform can do for you...

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