

The Emotional Appeal of Clickbait Headlines – between Entertainment and Deception

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Abstract

The present research attempts to shed light on a specific media genre, namely clickbait-headlined articles. While they are generally considered a classic example of unethical journalism, in that they tend to lure readers via sensationalized titles followed by articles whose content underdelivers on the initial promise, they are not always deceptive. They aim to entertain and overtly seek an emotional response from the audience; moreover, even when they do not lie and do not resort to illegal techniques, there still exists an unethical side to them, in that the readers almost always end up disappointed and feeling that the content of the article has not offered what the title entitled them to expect. To prove our hypothesis, we have selected three clickbait-headlined articles: one targeting the readers' pursuit of their economic wellbeing, one involving human tragedy, and one that can be described as "lifestyle advice", highlighting the similarities between them and how, although they appear to be different on the surface, they all leave their audiences disillusioned and sensing they have been misled.

Keywords: clickbait headlines; unethical journalism; sensationalism; suspense; deception

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1. A few general remarks on clickbait headlines

The present research looks into a specific type of media genre, namely internet articles that lure potential readers by resorting to what has been labelled as "clickbait headlines". While it is generally known that these headlines serve to introduce tabloid news and information, that

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they tend to overpromise, underdeliver (<https://jonahberger.com/why-clickbait-fails/>) and inherently rely on a certain degree of dishonest enticement, in our analysis, we will attempt to shed light on the different categories of clickbait headlines that exist and on the nuances that make some clickbait-headlined articles qualify as disappointing, but not downright deceptive. In the entertainment industry, being deceptive would mean blatantly breaking the rules of ethical journalism; by contrast, overpromising without technically deceiving a reader would qualify as bending the rules, which can still be classified as unethical journalism.

A clickbait headline has broadly been defined as "a sensationalized headline that encourages you to click a link to an article, image, or video" (<https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/thenow/what-is-clickbait/1/>). Clickbait has become widespread in recent years and it "refers to content that uses linguistic techniques to attract attention and encourage internet users to click on a particular link or web page where they will usually see some ads." (Jones, Jaworska and Aslan, 2021: 113). The common purpose of clickbait is to make recipients click on them and, to that end, they resort to some predictable lexical and grammatical features aiming to create suspense and generate mystery or ambiguity. Thus, the most common lexical characteristics include resorting to emotionally charged words such as "epic", "amazing", "incredible", "unbelievable", "shocking" etc. (Jones, Jaworska and Aslan, 2021: 113), while some frequent grammatical features include the use of the personal pronoun you / your, with the aim of giving the reader the illusion of a direct interaction and of making them feel the content targets them directly (as in, for instance, "This is the best diet *you* will ever find"⁴), or the "forward-reference", which can be described as "a form of discourse deixis which points to forthcoming discourse" (Blom, Hansen, 2015: 88), in an attempt to keep the reader hooked (as in, for instance, "*These are* the 10 main ways to look younger"⁵). All these lexical and grammatical particularities of clickbait headlines pursue an immediate emotional response from the audience, since an important number of views directly translates into increased revenues for the media producer.

Clickbait headlines are almost always an indicator of tabloid journalism and soft news, in that they emphasize sensationalism and the pursuit of an immediate feeling-based reaction rather than an objective,

⁴ The headline is hypothetical.

⁵ The headline is hypothetical.

rational rendering of facts. "Soft news, also known as the human interest story, is the kind of tales news workers feel may not have the critical importance of hard news but nevertheless would appeal to a substantial number of people in the audience" (Turow, 2020: 76). By contrast, hard news generally concerns subjects considered serious, such as those pertaining to science, politics, economics, social issues and the like. Thus, while one of the most frequent accusations against clickbait headlines has to do precisely with their tabloid dimension, on the other hand, in the "attention economy" (Jones, Jaworska and Aslan, 2021: 41), which is the constant need of media producers to grab the attention of large audiences so as to stay in business, we can also come across situations where facts that are true and even serious or relevant are wrapped into a sensational aura to increase the number of readers. Thus, even hard news has come to present a streak of sensationalism in the way it is presented to the public, a characteristic generally known to lead to "hybrid genres" (Turow, 2020: 71).

As we have said at the beginning, clickbait headlines are generally considered an unethical way of obtaining clicks and therefore revenue, as they misleadingly lure the reader into accessing an article that does not meet their initial expectations. Ideally, everyone involved in the media communication process has "an obligation to participate responsibly" (Baran, 2011: 14) – "for people working in the media industries, this means professionally and ethically transmitting content. For audience members, it means behaving as critical and thoughtful consumers of that content" (Baran, 2011: 14). Thus, tricking a reader into accessing content they might not have been interested in in the first place had they been given an honest title, clearly reflecting what follows, is widely considered dishonest and unethical journalism. In their turn, having received very little or nothing at all compared to what they were hoping for, the readers almost invariably feel deceived or at least disappointed after having gone through the entire clickbait-headlined article.

Therefore, it is safe to say that clickbait-headlined articles infringe the standards of ethical journalism, as they do not respect their duty to the audience. Media practitioners have the duty to make sure that what they do takes into consideration the nature and the expectations of their audience (Turow, 2020: 157). Moreover, in the grand scheme of things, they have a responsibility not only to their audience, but to society at large. What you write should ideally have a positive impact; when that is not possible, it should at least not have a negative impact. There are values, ideals and principles underlying the exertion of any profession, and

journalism is no exception – therefore, enticing readers via a sensationalized headline followed by an article that underdelivers on the initial promise represents a practice that falls short of the ethical requirements of the respective profession.

There are several reasons that explain the success of clickbait headlines, but we can safely state that the main one revolves around money. Thus, while in the age of the printed press, the goal of the producers was to sell as many newspapers as possible, and for that, enticing front-page headlines were a must, in the digital era, the goal of news producers has shifted to obtaining as many clicks as possible. Based on the number of clicks come advertising opportunities, therefore profit. Hence, the pursuit of financial gains "shifts the balance of power" and "tends to make audiences products rather than consumers" (Baran, 2011: 17). In the broader picture, news readers who are targeted as consumers tend to respond emotionally rather than rationally, a fact they may not even be aware of. Few people have what has been called "media literacy skills", namely "the ability to distinguish emotional from reasoned reactions when responding to content and to act accordingly" (Baran, 2011: 24). If they possessed them, they would also have the ability to recognize clickbait and not waste their time going through articles that contain nothing useful, insightful or helpful in any way. However, there is also the possibility that people access these links out of boredom, during downtime, or even during breaks from work. From the news producers' perspective, "thinking about the audience (...) means learning to think of people primarily as consumers of media materials and other products" (Turow, 2021: 63).

It is also important to draw attention to the fact that the rise in the number of clickbait headlines is neither accidental nor random. The production and consumption of media products function according to the laws of supply and demand; had there not been a demand for this kind of journalism, we would not have seen a supply thereof. More specifically, these articles appear in response to the demands of popular culture, since large numbers of people look for them, consume them, and enjoy them (Curran and Hesmondhalgh, 2019: 23) without a second thought of the ethics behind them. Since popular culture is "a vibrant and authentic expression of the people" (Curran and Hesmondhalgh, 2019: 25), we can assume that the growing impact of clickbait headlines and the tabloidization of news in general respond to broader societal trends that are impossible to oppose.

2. Types of clickbait headlines

All clickbait-headlined articles favour the sensational and target an emotional response, while the media shape emotions and reactions and gauge the impact of their product based on the number of readers. Research has showed that any information or story that is emotionally arousing has a better chance of being retained (Curran and Hesmondhalgh, 2019: 325). Society itself is understood in terms of experience and emotions. Therefore, through mass communication, emotions can reach large audiences and generate an unprecedented impact. "Traditionally, mass communication has allowed only limited opportunities for feedback because the channels of communication are largely one-way, but with the rise of interactive communication networks, the opportunities for feedback are growing rapidly" (Hanson, 2021: 5).

The larger and more diverse the audiences, the wider the range of topics that can be covered by clickbait. There are many clues pointing to the fact that we are dealing with clickbait; yet, some of the most commonly known articles belonging to this genre include stories (they focus on the narrative, on something that happened, thus appealing to our curiosity and aiming to entertain – if they include names of celebrities or striking deviations from the norm, so much the better), and articles giving advice on healthy living, weight loss, improving your looks, sleeping better, etc. (in this case, too, if the expert advice is backed by a famous name, it bestows increased credibility upon the article). In other words, the two largest, best-known categories of clickbait target either the readers' curiosity or their pursuit of their own personal well-being.

In this subsection of our research, we shall analyse three very different types of clickbait headlines: one focused on people's economic wellbeing (giving advice on how to save money), one involving human tragedy, and one "lifestyle" headline, which allegedly involves advice on how to lose weight. The second and the third one include the names of celebrities, and a fact worth mentioning would be that all of these articles can be accessed from our yahoo accounts – we feel this is important to specify because it shows that they do not target people specifically searching the internet for tabloid news; rather, they target people who innocently want to access their emails and then somehow find themselves lured into clicking on a headline that might randomly relate to one of their interests.

2.1 Clickbait headlines focused on people's economic wellbeing

In this subsection, we will look into a type of article with a clickbait headline that focuses on the reader's prosperity— more precisely, it aims to teach audiences how to save electricity money by raising awareness of a device with a high electricity consumption. Generally speaking, these clickbait headlines play upon a combination of scientific information and emotional appeals, as the former bestows legitimacy upon the content and makes it sound reliable, while the latter ensure that the reader will go through the entire article and possibly access more clickbait headlines available at the end. In this case, the title says "[The home appliance that consumes a huge amount of electricity. In one minute, it consumes as much as a LED bulb does in eight hours]"⁶.

The headline above invokes our financial wellbeing or, more precisely, people's desire to save money and decrease the cost of living, especially in times when everyone is speaking about an imminent energy crisis and the increase of household bills. What we may find surprising about a headline like this one is that it taps into the resources of "mediatization", namely the way in which media and everyday life are increasingly entangled (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2016: 333), so much so that even the most mundane facts or activities can become news. In this respect, mediatization constitutes the very opposite of "newsworthiness", which describes "whether or not a particular story is worth publishing, broadcasting or posting to begin with" (Jones, Jaworska and Aslan, 2021: 31). Newsworthiness implies novelty and deviation from the norm, and neither of these aspects appears to prevail in the headline above.

However, despite its inherent lack of glamour, the title aims for our curiosity in several ways: firstly, the device in question is not mentioned in the title, nor is it at least hinted at, a mandatory strategy if one is to make sure people will actually click on this particular title. Secondly, the appeal to the emotionally charged adjective ("huge"), followed by very specific data (which grant a scientific aura to the entire extract) aims to combine the recipient's emotional response and their trust in science in order to make sure they keep reading.

⁶ Original title in Romanian: "Aparatul din casă care consumă o energie electrică uriașă. Într-un minut consumă cât un bec cu led în 8 ore" (<https://ro.yahoo.com/?p=us> , accessed on October 18, 2021). The title was translated into English by the authors.

If we click on the headline, we get redirected to a different site where we can find the entire article (Playtech, 2021a). Here, we are given the information gradually, so as to boost suspense and make the reader increasingly impatient. Thus, we first learn yet again that the culprit consumes a huge amount of energy; then, that it is used primarily by women and that it is a beauty product, a small electrical appliance. Hence, suspense is built gradually, alongside the reader's stronger urge to stay on this page and find out what this is all about.

The following paragraph informs us that, aside from large electrical appliances, there also exist small devices that consume much energy, such as the hair straightener – we are therefore led to infer that this is the culprit mentioned in the title. Immediately afterwards, the article brings up LED light bulbs which, according to the writer, are more durable, albeit more expensive than regular bulbs.

At this point, the first pang of disappointment is bound to emerge. We have embarked upon reading this article in the hope of discovering a big surprise, something that will upend our experience of the world as we know it and will hopefully help us save an important amount of money through our awareness of this "merciless" equipment. By contrast, we come across reference to a device as mundane as the hair straightener, and to LED bulbs, which are generally known to be more expensive to purchase and more economical than regular ones. However, there is nothing "earthshattering" or even significantly informative up until this point.

The article goes on to praise the benefits of LED bulbs by providing specific facts and figures – always a good idea when aiming to build credibility as a source of information – and to recommend warm or neutral light rather than the cold one. The following paragraph points to the electric stove, the water heating mug and the bread toaster as major electricity consumers, while also referring once again to the hair straightener, hair dryer and hair curler as significant ones.

The key information, the one we have been waiting for, comes with the following paragraph, where we are told that a hair straightener will consume as much as 15 regular light bulbs, or as much as 300 LED light bulbs, while one minute of using the hair straightener will amount to the same energy consumption as eight hours of using a LED bulb. We can therefore assume that this is the key information put forward in the title and the hair straightener can be identified as *the* significant danger to our budgets.

The final section of the article revolves around other major household electricity consumers: air conditioners, refrigerators and washing machines – again, there is no surprise here, as the fact that these large appliances raise our electricity bills is well known. The penultimate paragraph (in italics), which describes fancy, state-of-the-art washing machines designed to reduce electricity consumption, is redundant from many readers' point of view, since the explanations cover a very small range of products, which few people can afford. Finally, the article ends on a legal note, referring to EU regulations on reducing electricity consumption and pollution – this ending serves a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it attempts to take the tabloid streak away from the story and make the article come across as a serious one; on the other hand, it is in line with recent public discussions taking place worldwide about saving the planet and preparing future generations for a greener, healthier environment. Therefore, the final part of the article attempts to widen the scope of the ideas conveyed and morph its purpose from providing entertainment to providing information.

To conclude, we can say that this article's headline has made us click on it due to the combination between its curiosity building strategies, the science-like approach, and the appeal to our desire to cut the cost of living. In reality, it contains nothing ground-breaking; still, we cannot say we have been deceived. There are no lies, no misleading information, no swindling, no famous name used in a fraudulent way; however, the profound mundanity of the whole story makes us feel that we have wasted time we could have put to better use.

2.2 The clickbait headline involving human tragedy

The second article with a clickbait headline we shall look at can also be found as we get redirected from Yahoo news to an article about Petrică Mîțu Stoian's death on Viva.ro (www.viva.ro, 2021a). From this article, entitled "[What Andreea Gușman, the agent's daughter, found in Petrică Mîțu Stoian's phone: «A conversation where he said that...»"⁷, an article which is also clickbait-headlined, after reading up to the end, we get redirected to a number of other tabloid articles about the artist's death, out

⁷ Original title in Romanian: "Ce a găsit Andreea Gușman, fiica impresarului, în telefonul lui Petrică Mîțu Stoian: «O conversație în care a spus că...»". The title was translated into English by the authors.

of which we have chosen one titled "[Horrendous! The last messages Petrică Mîțu Stoian sent after his oxygen therapy have become public. How long he really stayed in the hyperbaric chamber] ⁸".

From the very beginning, the article aims for an emotional response. Petrică Mîțu Stoian's death is not only a very topical subject, since it is about a folk music singer who was hugely popular and much too young to die; it also activates all the emotional potential brought about by the death of a person who has received at least a full Covid-19 vaccination treatment – although some claim he had received the booster as well, shortly before his death. Therefore, all the rising conflict that has taken over public life in recent months, that between supporters and opponents of the Covid-19 vaccine, finds an outlet in this article. Stoian's death has challenged both myths that have been circulating ever since the coronavirus pandemic broke out: the myth of the "frontline heroes", since it has been widely speculated that the artist's death was brought about by a wrongful and excessive intake of oxygen (www.antena3.ro, 2021 – this is only one example of such speculation), which could only have been the consequence of medical error, and the myth of the redeeming vaccine as the only solution to the pandemic, since it is undisputable that he had received at least two doses, and yet he died in the aftermath of his alleged recovery. Whatever the ultimate cause of the artist's demise, one or the other of these myths is bound to wane and lose credibility. Therefore, for all these reasons, it is clear that the article aims for a powerful emotional response from the very beginning, tapping into all the societal undercurrents that are underlying the collective unconscious at the moment⁹.

⁸ Original title in Romanian: "Înfiorător! Au apărut ultimele mesaje pe care Petrică Mîțu le-a trimis după terapia cu oxigen. Cât a stat, de fapt, în camera hiperbară". The title was translated into English by the authors.

⁹ For objectivity's sake, it is important to mention that neither the exact reasons leading to the singer's death, nor the reasons why he decided to undergo hyperbaric oxygen therapy have been fully elucidated. While there has been media coverage as to his having suffered from Covid-19 in the past and to his having received at least two vaccine jabs, nothing can be said with absolute certainty about the specific facts leading to his death. We do believe, however, that the intense media coverage this case has received, alongside the speculations surrounding it, are of utmost importance in assessing the emotional impact of the story.

By reading the headline above, it is only natural that we, as readers, should expect some new, horrendous information about the folk music singer's death, and we would also expect to actually get a glimpse of his last messages and find some new and frightening revelation inside¹⁰. Let us now look at the article and see what we are offered instead.

The first paragraph tells us that Stoian's death remains a mystery; thus, suspense lingers on, although we are told that new information continues to surface (at this point, our expectations to find out something new and heart-wrenching are reinforced). We are also told that he spent more time in the hyperbaric chamber than the healthcare facility involved had declared, which implicitly challenges the myth of the frontline heroes, as they are covertly accused of malpractice and also of having provided inaccurate information to the media, therefore misleading the public about the details related to the singer's treatment.

Then there is the first subtitle, which focuses on what the artist told his friends after his first treatment session. We learn that he spent much more than 75 minutes in the hyperbaric chamber, more precisely, 2 hours and a half. Here, we also have a typo in Romanian which makes it difficult to state with certainty if the interval mentioned is one hour and a half or two hours and a half, but we can see that the difference between one hour and a half and 75 minutes is not that high. We are also told that the artist had seemed happy with the treatment he received.

Subsequently, we learn that his agent's daughter, who is a doctor – an essential detail that bestows credibility upon her testimony – makes an accusation, namely that the time spent by the artist in the hyperbaric chamber had been longer than the one admitted to by his doctors; she draws this conclusion by checking the artist's activity on the phone. However, while she is said to have mentioned a time span of one hour and 30 minutes, the actual time during which he showed no sign of activity on the phone is of only 51 minutes (between 4.30 PM and 5.21 PM). Therefore,

¹⁰ Again, for objectivity's sake, we must specify that the article is accompanied by a set of pictures featuring some Whatsapp messages allegedly exchanged between the artist and an unknown interlocutor on the phone; in those messages, Stoian says he is feeling well and he does state that one spends two hours and a half in the hyperbaric chamber, so we can infer this is the amount of time he spent there himself. However, these messages, the truthfulness whereof is impossible to verify, are contradicted by the very information in the article, since the time he actually spent away from the phone was only 51 minutes (see analysis below).

yet again, we are faced with conflicting bits of information and it becomes increasingly more difficult to identify either precise details, or the reliable source. Also, the artist's alleged statement, that "they have come to take me to the chamber", contains in itself nothing spectacular, unusual or terrifying.

The following section gives us a very succinct account of the clinic's perspective: that only small doses of oxygen had been administered to the singer, doses that could not have affected the IRN (international normalized ratio) – therefore, the blood clotting issues that led to the artist's death could not have been the result of the treatment received there. We then have an avalanche of medical jargon that few are likely to understand, the main idea thereof being that the clinic bears no responsibility for the singer's ensuing death. Moreover, by invoking their large number of patients, they attempt to gain legitimacy and prove once again that they cannot in any way be held accountable for the tragic outcome.

We can safely say that, at the end of this article, we as readers are left with an overwhelming feeling of having been deceived. There was nothing new or sensational to learn, the article underdelivered on what the title had promised (there was nothing horrendous to reveal and no relevant last messages to read), we are not one inch closer to discovering the cause of the artist's death, we become confused due to contradictory details and, to top it all, the end of the story bombards us with a flood of medical jargon we do not understand, jargon that no one could be bothered to translate into layman's terms. To put it in a nutshell, we feel we have been duped, as we have clicked on an enticing headline that led us nowhere.

2.3 The "lifestyle" clickbait headline

The same overwhelming feeling of deception is often felt by the consumer of tabloid news providing advice on lifestyle. Thus, in November 2021, from the Yahoo main page, if we click on the title mentioned below, we get redirected towards an article on viva.ro (www.viva.ro, 2021b): "[The diet which helped Lavinia Pîrva lose 30 kilos: I no longer eat...]"¹¹

¹¹ Original title in Romanian: "Dieta care a ajutat-o pe Lavinia Pîrva să slăbească 30 de kilograme: «Nu mai mănânc...»". The title was translated into English by the authors.

The title is classic clickbait, providing incomplete and enticing bits of information – the titillating reference to a diet taps into every woman’s wish to be skinnier, whereas the celebrity’s name itself is bound to attract clicks, as Lavinia Pîrva is the wife of Ștefan Bănică Jr, one of Romania’s most famous singers, who has had a life replete with love affairs and marriages to women famous in their turn. Also, the incomplete sentence “I no longer eat” followed by ellipsis clearly targets our curiosity, enhances suspense, and the immediate implication would be that there is a certain product or category of products that she stopped eating altogether – this would also reinforce the message of the word “diet”.

“Reader and viewer surveys indicate that most people identify more closely with an individual than with an abstract issue. Therefore, the news media tend to report stories that feature prominent, powerful or influential people.” (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2016: 480). Indeed, a significant number of clickbait headlines feature celebrities, either famous men or beautiful women – they are bound to attract attention and a large number of readers is guaranteed, even in those cases where deception can be spotted from the very beginning, such as when fraudsters use the image of celebrities to advertise for “miracle” weight-loss products – one of the classic examples of clickbait that is downright deceptive.

That is not the case here, we are not confronted with open fraud, the article contains some degree of truth and has a certain connection to its title. However, when we click on the content, we find a story slightly different from the one we were expecting. The beginning is neutral, in that we discover that the singer has gained weight while pregnant, and at this point we keep waiting for the recipe that has helped her lose 30 kilos and then remain at her desired weight. We also learn that she is incredibly fit, and the article is replete with pictures aiming to prove this point. The visual plays a powerful role in tabloid news, especially when beautiful women are involved.

In one of the following paragraphs, we finally come across the key information we have been expecting, the search whereof has made us click on the headline in the first place. We learn that the singer started working out and paying attention to the hours when she had her meals. Thus, when she would notice she had gained one or two kilos, she would stop eating after 5.00 PM, thus quickly returning to her desired weight. According to the interview that is cited, she also said that she generally avoids eating too much. The final section of the article speaks about her clothing business,

how she thought of it and how it started, information that is neither particularly appealing, nor does it have anything to do with what the headline had promised.

Why are we disappointed after reading this article? The same as with the other two recounted above, the title overpromises through an enticing line, while the article underdelivers. In this case, when we read the headline, we are led to believe that we are about to discover some new diet that helps people lose significant weight efficiently, and / or that there is a type or a category of food we must avoid – these aspects are usually omnipresent in articles recommending diets. To our surprise, we get no such information – no miracle diet to follow, no dangerous product(s) to avoid, just some plain, mundane information everyone knows, such as to eat less or to avoid meals in the evening. Therefore, it is safe to state that the title above is clickbait and the ensuing article falls short of most readers' expectations.

3. Conclusions

In our research, we have attempted to shed light on the emotional appeal of clickbait headlines, on the way in which they lure readers into clicking on them and reading the content to the very end, with the prospect of subsequently accessing similar titles, and on why this type of headlines can be classified as unethical journalism. Broadly speaking, clickbait headlines represent an immoral way of producing media content because, even when they are not downright deceitful, they are not completely honest, either. Titles are by definition sensational, they employ a wide range of techniques to increase suspense, generate mystery or ambiguity and promise information worth accessing. However, even in those situations where they neither lie nor engage in fraudulent activities, as is the case in the three examples we have analysed, it turns out that they underdeliver on their initial promise by putting forth facts that are either uninteresting and mundane, or bring nothing new and insightful to the media consumer – thus, clickbait-headlined articles almost always end by disappointing their readers. However, they remain popular for a number of reasons which include their powerful emotional appeal, the fact that they rank as "human interest" stories and the fact that they have become somehow iconic for the age of popular culture.

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