

Research paper RWS 411

Clickbait: history, typology, psychology, and profit

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Introduction

Clickbait is “something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest” (Merriam-Webster, 2019, p.1). Clickbait has been around since the mid 1800s and has manifested itself through newspapers and now through mediums of technological outlooks such as tablets, computers, and smartphones. In the 21st century, it is normal for anyone on these devices so come across a familiar advertisement such as “Congratulations! You won \$1,000,000 click here to claim!” This strategy has been seen and used since the 1800’s to generate not only a profit, but a reputation that fishes for clicks resulting in revenue. In my research paper, I will be exploring the history and psychology of clickbait, clickbait typology, and how people profit and benefit from clickbait.

History of clickbait

Modern Clickbait has several ancestors primarily consisting of Yellow journalism. It is a common myth as many individuals believe clickbait started when the internet started. The clickbait strategy was used during the newspaper era in the mid to late 1800s. During this time, it was called Yellow Journalism. According to google dictionary (2019), yellow journalism is “journalism that is based upon sensationalism and crude exaggeration”(p.1). This aligns closely with the definition of clickbait. Yellow Journalism started between two competing journalists in New York City, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. At first, they were conflicting over illustrations for their newspaper over a drawing of a yellow kid- which formed the term Yellow Journalism. This term became like clickbait to these two competing journalists, they both

started forming a career off of yellow journalism as they extended and exaggerated certain events (n.a., 2019, p.1) Yellow Journalism played a vital role in the Spanish-American war due to its exaggerated content and headlines.

In February of 1898, a U.S. naval vessel was headed to the Havana Harbor in conjunction with a planned ship from a Spanish ship to New York to defuse tensions. The U.S. ship named “Maine” had exploded and sunk. The colonial government of Cuba concluded that everything happened onboard, but Hearst and Putlizer created a different and untrue conclusion to this within their newspapers. Hearst and Putlizer had been creating anti-spanish content in their newspapers to give a “clickbait” feel to the audience who were embedded with this Spanish-American tension. They claimed that the explosion had come from a mine in the Harbor which launched an investigation and called for war, by early May the Spanish-american war had begun.

Yellow Journalism has been responsible for international relations, and it can be argued that modern clickbait plays a vital role in politics. The term which transformed into clickbait, has been used and around since the beginning of the internet.

Clickbait Typology

Clickbait manifests itself in a variety of ways that is subject to each and every “clicker.” Different forms of clickbait attract to one’s insecurity, curiosity, or urgency that results in that click. The content (bait) reeled in the clicker by posing an illusion of ways that appeals to one’s needs or wants. According to Ashuta Bhattarai’s article (2017), “You won’t believe how these 9 shocking clickbaits work! (number 8 is a killer!)” she poses clickbait typology that explains the responsibilities nine types holds with various appeals.

The first type is called “shocking/amazing/unbelievable results” which consists of

Man Tries to Hug a Wild Lion, You Won't Believe What Happens Next!

EARTH PORN — 1620 COMMENTS



headlines that imply curiosity within the reader. The Naytev team argues that even though clickbait is not unethical, it sparks an interest overall, creating a delusion to the reader (n.d., p.1). To provide further insight, terms like “You won’t believe” triggers reverse psychology due to humans desiring to limit the

unknown. Humans need to know things, this is how we’re built. This trait desires the human mind to click on this type of clickbait to fulfill the capacity of things we won’t believe, but will now know.

The second type is called “Celebrity gossip” clickbait. As simple and lighthearted as this may appear, this can be shown through forms of online tabloids through sensationalism, “the use of exciting or shocking stories or language at the expense of accuracy, in order to provoke public interest or excitement” (2019, p. 1). Celebrity lifestyles and fame are constantly caught up in the minds of individuals and is in constant conversation. Celebrity clickbait that “exposes” or



43 STARS WHO'VE GROWN INTO BEING HORRIBLE LOOKING CREATURES

“undermines” a celebrity's reputation are the most common form of this type. This is because most “normal” individuals don’t experience the lifestyle of being famous. Seeing shocking headlines about celebrities prompts us to click and see where fame has taken these celebrities for the better, or for the worse

The third type is called “Mysterious stories.” This is especially attractive to mystery/thriller seekers (such as myself) to find out puzzling and strange concepts. This type



presents something that seems so simple, yet has a compelling story that reels in the reader. This type of clickbait makes the audience feel like investigators to solve the unknown. In a convincing manner, the reader is intrigued by the mystery in other’s lives (such as picture to

the left) and determining the process of a certain result.

The fourth type of clickbait is titled “Instances of people’s stupidity.” This clickbait makes the audience feel superior and intelligent, knowing there are people out there that lack common sense. Usually this type of clickbait leads you to what you want to see with the exception of an ad or making an account to see what you clicked for.

15 hilarious tweets of stupid people that makes you think 'Do these people even exist?'



Man its so crazy that the earth is soon gonna be 2017 years old

RETWEETS
2

LIKES
10



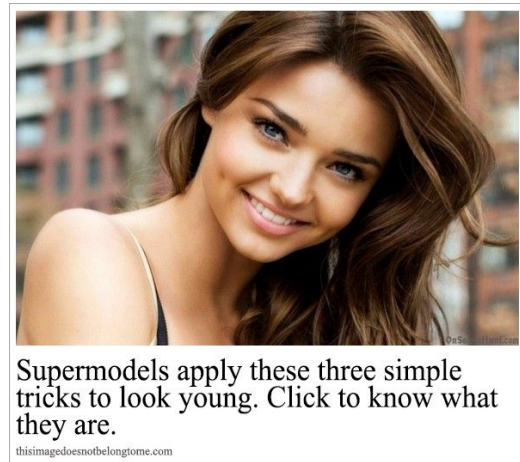
9:21 PM - 26 Dec 2016 from Borås, Sverige

The fifth type of clickbait is “A Challenge to your IQ.” This one challenges the audience in a way that poses an insecurity to one’s intellect. A common headline would be “I bet you can’t solve this, 99% of people have failed.” This triggers the reader to click the headline to potentially fulfill a satisfaction if they are that 1% that completes a challenge to the IQ. This along with “Instances of people’s stupidity” are rather innocent as they are not headlines that are



exaggerated and may spread. To provide further insight, Tomar's "11 reasons we're too dumb to resist clickbait" examines that "clickbait doesn't always have to break its promise. Nor does that promise always have to be kept poorly. Sometimes, the promise itself can be inherently hyperbolic, and therefore impossible to satisfy" (2018, p. 2). This is heavily involved with this type because when clicked, it will let you go through the process of multiple choice answers and will hold back to let you know if you got it wrong or not. It will have you create an account to "unlock the answer" or take a questionnaire or survey with the company presenting this clickbait.

The sixth type is called "simple tricks," which also triggers insecurity within the reader usually about physical traits. It will convey the reader simple tactics in ways to improve your physical appearance. Once clicked, they're usually "common sense" tricks that the reader already knew that was bait to get views. In this particular clickbait (image to the right) the three simple tricks are: get at least 8 hours of sleep, exercise regularly, and maintain a positive attitude.



The seventh type of clickbait is called "simple tricks," "the fear inducing stuff." This one is manipulative and uses a "fear tactic" which calls out to the reader's insecurity. Common



headlines include: "how to log into your boyfriend's phone," "are you being watched? Click here now.", and "If you're single here is what you're doing wrong." If you're going through a bad day, an insecure time, or

rough paranoia/ anxiety might gear the audience to click on “the fear inducing stuff” clickbait. As it seems this hyperlink might offer a real explanation you were not expecting, the five things listed were: he does not have time for you, he gets irritated on simple things, he avoids your calls, he goes to “business trips” more often, and he changes his phone number too many times. These answers are posted on different pages that the reader has to click through to finally reach, just to be disappointed with the realization that this is in fact, clickbait. This realization might result in an embarrassing manner within the clicker as they may come to a realization that they were baited into clickbait due to insecurity.

The eighth type is called “the list with a jewel.” This is exemplified by the title of this article: “You won’t believe how these 9 shocking clickbaits work! (number 8 is a killer!).” “number 8 is a killer” is the specific strategy to lure in the reader, which aligns with the first type

“shocking/amazing/unbelievable results. The creator tries to find the most interesting type of information just to get more views keeping in mind the reader is

scrolling just for that “jewel.” Common tactics is making sure it’s on different pages, with ads in between clicks, and having the jewel be either common knowledge or a waste of a click.

The last a final type is called sports gossip, which can be combined into “celebrity



9 things noone knew about Princess Leia. Number 7 will blow your minds!

thisimagedoesnotbelongtome.com



La Liga superstar is set to join the Premier League giants. Fans are getting upset!

thisimagedoesnotbelongtome.com

gossip.” Bhattarai made this in a separate category rather than combine it because of the distinction and audience between

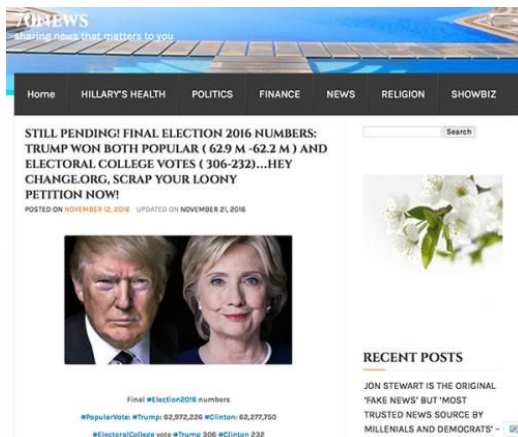
celebrities and sports gossip. These contain controversial topics with simple content.

Each of these nine serve a different purpose and strategy for luring in their clickers. It can be argued that there are more than nine, consisting of politics, agenda shifting/setting, and “fake news.” According to Yimin Chan in “Perceptions of Clickbait: A Q-Methodology Approach,” clickbait is extremely hard to identify (2017, p.2). If you’re not up to date with what is going on around you, then anything can appear as clickbait to the reader. Just because a headline is compelling, it doesn’t mean it’s necessarily clickbait. Chan differentiates this by labeling headlines as: definitely not clickbait, possibly clickbait, and definitely clickbait. With the exception of a headline being obnoxious, the reader doesn’t entirely know if a hyperlink is clickbait unless clicked, skimmed, and determined.

Due to this, I will introduce and add political-fake news as a type of clickbait (#10). It can be argued that it is the other way around- clickbait is a type of fake news. But I am arguing that political-fake news is a type of clickbait due to the desired click that needs to happen to generate money. Ever since the 2016 election, politics have been a hot topic for the past four years. There has been an enormous amount of political fake-news processed from both sides of the political candidates. As passionate as people are about Donald Trump or Hilary Clinton, polarized individuals can’t help but click exaggerated and fake partisan headlines that bash the side that they hate. “Fake news, or hoax news, refers to false information or propaganda published under the guise of being authentic news” (Stroud, 2019, p.1). Using Soll (2016) as a backdrop, I will present political-fake news as *a medium of presenting false information implicitly or explicitly in favor or hatred of a political group, candidate, or events to shift [society] and formulate opinions against, or for a position on a falsified and insubstantial*

grounds. Much of the political-fake news headlines are biased and consists of: “Trump having affair with daughter and she will be running against him in 2020!”, “Hilary Clinton is spying on and reading your emails!”, etc.

Political-fake news is used in motive to provide a confirmation bias or present a shock



factor. The psychology and responsibility is geared towards those who are for example, far to the left or too far to the right on the political spectrum. Clickbait creators, most who are doing it for profit, know these types of content that will trigger their audience to click their headlines and articles: Donald Trump, Guns, the environment, immigration, abortion,

LGBTQ+, etc. I will present a syllogism in perspective of these creators:

If Donald Trump is a popular topic [in favor or against], then I will create and present clickbait on this topic. If Donald Trump is not a popular topic [in favor or against], then I will not create or present clickbait on this topic.

There is an emphasis on the word “popular.” Throughout the hundreds of political topics, if it is not popular then clickbait creators won’t create this content to fulfill political-fake news. For example, poverty in third world countries is an issue that many candidates have spoken about yet have not committed to. If this is a priority in a candidate's campaign that causes controversy, then political-fake news creators will create, present, and post insubstantial news articles to the public about this either for or against.

Pictured to the left is an example of political-fake news. Following this syllogism, since the 2016 is a popular topic. It's emphasis on fake facts and exaggerations might shift opinions and beliefs if one is not careful with fact checking. It's true that Donald Trump won the electoral college, but did not win the popular vote.

Psychology of clickbait

To most tech users, they are immune to clickbait as it does not pose a threat. It's the "new normal" when logging into a smartphone device. It's still around and listed everywhere on a website because it works. So what is the psychology behind clickbait?

Clickbait creators understand the human's need for knowledge to fill the void of curiosity. Using Celeste Kidd's (2015) "The Psychology and Neuroscience of Curiosity", "Curiosity is a basic element of our cognition, but its biological function, mechanisms, and neural underpinning remain poorly understood" (p.1). It is rooted in our DNA to fill the information gap, which results in us spending hours and hours seeking and consuming information; reading magazines/books, the internet, conforming to the latest trend, and watching the latest movie. As humans, we don't want to feel left out. Curiosity is a huge motivator for learning and discovery. Therefore, these clickbait creators cling to the human's need for curiosity and emotions that will result in that desired click.

"Harry Harlow—the psychologist best known for demonstrating that infant rhesus monkeys prefer the company of a soft, surrogate mother over a bare wire mother. Harlow referred to curiosity as a basic drive in and of itself—a "manipulatory motive"—that drives organisms to engage in puzzle-solving behavior that involved no tangible reward" (p.2). With this being said, clickbait is a medium to be the end result of "basic drive" triggering a

“manipulatory motive” for its reward. Natural curiosity and a desire for resolution are key components that are embedded within clickbait.

Clickbait exploits human’s tendencies to close an information gap with the desired result of the clicker of “aha! I knew it.” The information gap theory states “humans have a constant, unsatisfied need to accumulate knowledge, whether it’s useful or not” (O’Flaherty, n.d., p.3). “Whether it’s useful or not” is huge in favor to clickbait. Whether we want to know “what happened next” or “three and simple tricks to look young,” we need to fulfill that satisfaction in order to neutralize a degree of curiosity-associated-sanity- this is the psychology behind clickbait.

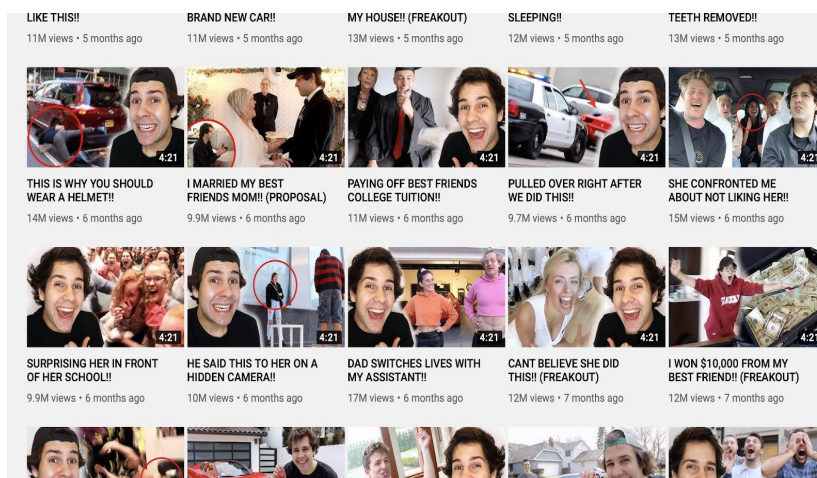
Clickbait: profit and earnings

There are several ways to earn a profit and benefit from clickbait from the creator’s side, either through partnership or marketing. Zarrin breaks down for us how clickbait works for the creator’s side. Content (clickbait) creators can be compensated and paid by how many views or clicks their partner’s get on a site (2017, p.2). “Slant article writers receive \$5 for every 500 clicks they receive, and in writing three pieces a week, the amount of clicks can really add up... you can apply this to any social media site or medium, whether it be SoundCloud, Twitter, Instagram, or anything else” (Zarrin, 2017, p.2). With that being said, creators can do this as a side job or career. This creates a shift from a traditional marketing standpoint to digital marketing. Though clickbait has gotten backlash for faulty news spreading, it is a smart digital marketing strategy to use if one is smart with their headlines and the sites they put it on. Paris Wade and Ben Goldman, the two men behind the fake news site LibertyWriters.com, made up to \$40,000 per month in the runup to the 2016 presidential election (McCoy, 2016, p.3).

If an election is extremely polarized, clickbait creators have creative liberty to create faulty headlines that lure in these clicks due to honing in of one's confirmation bias. They created dozens of clickbait articles on facebook that got thousands of views leading up to the election. Their trending article, "Right After LOSING The Election, Hillary Clinton Just Humiliated Herself In Worst Way Ever!!" got banned on facebook which resulted in them consulting a lawyer. They've committed to creating clickbait like, "Viagra alternatives; ways to remove lip lines, cracked feet, 'deep fat'; and 'the 13 sexiest and most naked celebrity selfies'" (McCoy, 2016, p.5). They've since moved to California and have made a career out of creating content of various degrees of polarizing.

Paris Wade and Ben Goldman and just two of the hundreds of creators that make a living and profit off of clickbait. An ethical dilemma arises as it's in question if clickbait is ethical or not? Many would argue that spreading faulty news headlines and clickbait with the intention of views and profit is unethical. This is due to the trust that citizens give within their news sources, headlines, and article they come across. However, Goldman (2016) believes that what he made in the last six months would have taken him 20 years waiting tables at his old job (McCoy, p.5). Creating clickbait has made a living for these creators that held creative value and liberty with them that is in fact, legal in the United States of America to do.

Another example of making a living off clickbait is explicitly stating that you're creating clickbait. David Dobrik is a famous youtuber that makes millions from exploiting clickbait and



catchy headlines for views that YouTube compensates him for. He currently holds 14.6 million

subscribers and six billion views. According to social blade, he averages \$12.8K - \$204.3K in gross earning from Youtube. Most of his clickbait is successful due to him explicitly stating he makes a living off of clickbait. You will hear him and his friends saying jokingly “gotta do what we gotta do to get views” and it would be obnoxious behavior that poses a good clickbait title. David Dobrik sells merch (sweaters, t-shirts, pants) that have the word clickbait or views on it (n.a, 2019, p.1). These retail anywhere from \$15-\$50 with a few items being sold out. Other YouTube clickbait creators consists of: Morgz, Leafyishere, RiceGum, PewDiePie, and Mysticgotjokes. Each of these Youtubers get millions of views and thousands of earnings off implicitly or explicitly using clickbait for content.

Conclusion

Clickbait has been a common occurrence possessed within any technological device. It's motives and intent has shaped historical events while pursuing a career for some. Clickbait has been illuminated through the mid 1800s by yellow journalism and sensational content. The typology has created a set of responsibilities targeting different audiences in efforts to obtain clicks and views: “shocking/amazing/unbelievable results”, “Celebrity gossip”, “Mysterious stories.” “Instances of people’s stupidity.” “A Challenge to your IQ.” “simple tricks,” “the list with a jewel.” These nine types have different duties to target one’s insecurity, anxiety, curiosity, and/ or confirmation bias. I have argued and added “political-fake news” to the typology of clickbait. This is due to it’s clickable nature that entail individuals to provide the action of clicking on it. This is because Clickbait creators know their audiences and hot topics in the news.

The psychology behind it consists of appealing to one's curiosity and emotions that will enable a click to a particular hyperlink. Using several psychologists and theories, humans are driven to fulfilling the information gap that lies between them and a prevailing headline that lies the unknown. This is the psychology that many clickbait creators use such as David Dobrik, Paris Wade, and Ben Goldman scorching hundreds of thousands of revenue off of this.

Overall, Clickbait serves as a money making and belief-shifting phenomenon that exploits the human's weakness of the need to fulfill curiosity. This strategy has been seen and used since the 1800's to generate not only a profit, but a reputation that fishes for clicks resulting in revenue.

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