Clickbait titles: Risky formula for attracting readers and advertisers

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Abstract

The use of clickbait titles in the domain of online journalism has the tendency for expansion. These titles are written with a very clear objective which is to increase the number of clicks on the specific news, and therefore the number of visitors to the particular website. However, in past few years, the use of clickbait titles became increasingly criticized. It is spotted that information which stands behind these headlines is incomplete and very often, titles are not aligned with the content. Concerning the readers, due to their unfulfilled expectations, clickbait titles create a sense of betrayal and deception.

Here we present the results of a quantitative research conducted on a sample of 406 participants, who have confirmed a negative attitude towards clickbait titles. This is directly linked to the frequency of reading news on the internet, as well as the time spent acquiring information this way.

A quality analysis was conducted as well, investigating the presence of clickbait titles on a corpus of 1.619 news articles from Serbia's most read daily newspapers. The results of this research have shown that clickbait titles are present in 33.11% within the news published in the most visited portals of daily newspaper, such as Blic, Novosti and Kurir. Although, there is a dominant presence of traditional titles (37.49%), the presence of clickbait titles is approximately equal to the presence of tabloid titles (29.4%). Clickbait titles are more frequent in entertainment (49.77%) and lifestyle (45.97%) sections, while they are less frequent in sections of politics – only 0.97%. These findings confirm the assumption that portals which share news accompanied by sensational headlines also have the highest number of clickbait titles (Kurir – 50.56%).

Key words: *online journalism, clickbait titles, web portals of daily newspaper, Serbia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Online journalism, as a modern form of presentation of media announcements, introduces numerous specificities into the style of media expression, adapting them to the technological and expressive means of the fourth medium – the Internet. In the wide communications and media environment allowed by the Internet, almost all print media can now be followed in a digitized edition. Thanks to its open multimedia structure, citizens are granted free access to its channels, with networked personal computers providing an increasing number of communicators. In a market competition both for the widest possible range of readers and advertisers, the press constantly finds new ways to deliver their online presentation. The latest way of online press presentation is the use of clickbait titles, as the "first line of news" that the reading audience meets.

The Internet questions the social importance of the traditional electronic media (Safranj, 2011). The Internet is beginning to take on the role of means of mass communication and thanks to its open structure as multimedia, citizens are granted free access to its channels, democratization and increase of communicators through networked personal computers (Radojković, Stojković, 2009).

2. CLICKBAIT TITLES IN THE FUNCTION ONLINE JOURNALISM

The use of clickbait titles in online journalism is experiencing an expansion despite their exclusivist and

often non-ethical nature. "Clickbait" is an expression that describes a provocative and promising news headline that will lure readers to specific contents and optimize relevance (Dor, 2003) of their, most often irrelevant stories. The purpose of the clickbait titles is to attract as many people as possible, enabling the particular portal to have as many unique visitors as possible.

Clickbait titles, the so-called "baits" are written in order to increase the number of clicks on a particular news item, which contributes to the increase in the number of visitors to the media portal. Frampton (2015) states that clickbait titles have been used in the pejorative sense and that these are actually sensationalistic titles. In this regard, sensationalism can be regarded as a style, that is, a combination of category and form, which tends to cause emotions in the reader (Vethenn et al. 2008), and delivers the subject in a tabloid manner. However, such titles are intriguing and draw the attention of readers and represent a good formula for earnings.

It is known that titles can have a great power of meaning and evoke specific associations in the audience. Explaining how the clickbait works, Andan et al. (2017) suggest that they are actually exploiting the contents that will activate insatiability and curiosity in readers. Based on Loewenstein's theory of the lack of curiosity, these authors explain that people feel a gap between what they know and what they want to know. If the title is viewed as a "specific type of text that cannot exist autonomously, but in correlation with the other text" (Iarovici, Amel, 1989: 441), then there is a clear existence of "emptiness" occurring as a result of the half-information delivered by the title and need to read the rest of the text. Thus, the reader's desire to fill the "emptiness" will prompt him to open the page that contains the desired text with a new click in the hope that he will receive the information announced in the clickbait title. Clickbait titles are really just tools for attracting attention, and not tools that provide information. (Ifantidou, 2009).

Behind the clickbait title is a special style of news writing, which, at first glance, seems like a delayed news message (a so-called reverse pyramid). This keeps the reader on the visited page and prompts him to read the whole news – down to the last line, but with the delay of satisfaction to finally reach the whole of the information. The looks of the news itself is also attractive because it contains adequate photos or videos, in addition to the sensational title.

However, no matter how attractive, the news that starts clickbait titles increasingly becomes the subject of expert criticism, as well as the disapproval of the readers themselves. Namely, these headlines usually do not hide actual information, because the title and content are not in agreement. This creates a sense of confusion and deception among readers, and even an increasingly widespread negative attitude towards online media whose credibility they are questioning with a good reason. The orientation of media towards attracting readers with "empty" texts adversely affects the quality of the media itself, the norms and standards of public information, as well as the economic results (Borger et al., 2012).

Below are presented the quantitative and qualitative results of the research, conducted with the aim of determining the presence of clickbait titles on the most visited media portals in Serbia, while in the survey part of the research investigates the attitude of research participants, students of the University of Novi Sad, towards this type of newspaper texts, i.e. clickbait titles and their accompanying contents, such as photos and videos.

3. RESEARCH

3.1 The subject, aim and sample of research

The subject of the research was the views of participants on the online news information that contain clickbait titles, which were published on the most visited internet portals. In this regard, among other things, the following was examined: do the research participants recognize the reasons for using clickbait titles as an accompanying content of news published on internet portals; to what extent such title can affect the choice of news which will be clicked and read; and what is the frequency of reading news that contains clickbait titles?

The aim of the research was to determine the attitude of research participants towards clickbait titles, as well as the reason for their interest in reading the news containing such titles that would justify the high presence of this style of media writing.

The research involved 406 respondents, students from various faculties of the University of Novi Sad, and was dominated by female respondents (57.9%). The largest number of respondents was between 23 and 26 years of age (53.9%), with a slightly smaller number of them aged 19 to 22 (35%). 7.6% of respondents were somewhat older than 26.

Almost all of the research participants attended undergraduate (67.5%) or master (29.1%) studies, with only 3.2% of respondents attending higher levels of education (doctoral studies - 2%, specialist studies - 1.2%). The largest number of students involved in the research was on budget financing (68.2%).

3.2 Research method and instrument

The survey method was used as the basic research method for data collection, and a semi-structured questionnaire containing sixteen questions grouped in three parts was used as the research instrument. The first set of questions was formulated with the aim to identify the socio-demographic characteristics of participants, while the others were related to the methods of informing, that is, reading news via the Internet. This included the frequency and average reading time, the device and the way of accessing news, favorite news portals and columns, attitude towards the news content and headline, as well as the factors that influence the choice of news to read. The third set was related to clickbait titles, where the

following was examined: knowledge of the meaning of this term, attitudes towards the use of sensationalist terms contained in such titles, attitudes towards accompanying photos and videos contained in texts, and the confidence in the news containing such titles.

The SPSS program was used to analyze the results of the research. The descriptive and frequency method, the t test for independent samples, the Man Whitney test and the main component analysis were applied.

The research was conducted over the period from May 10 to May 17, 2017, and the average time of filling in the questionnaire was 5 minutes.

3.3 **Results of the research**

3.3.1 *Different aspects of informing and reading news via the Internet*

News on the Internet were read by 94.8% of respondents, with the majority of them doing it once a day (35.2%). Once in two days or at least once a week online news coverage was followed by 17.2% of respondents. The habit of reading news information every two to three hours was reported by 16.5% of respondents, with 11.8% of them reading online news several times in one hour. Male respondents follow information by reading online newspaper editions considerably more than female respondent, ($Z = -3.18$, $p < .01$).

The largest share of respondents (59.4%) reported that they spend less than 30 minutes a day or between 30 and 60 minutes (25.4%) reading the news via the Internet. Men are reading news much longer than women ($Z = -2.37$, $p < .05$).

That most frequently used devices for reading online news are smart phones (58.6%) and laptops (24.7%). The use of PC (9.3%) and tablets (7.3%) is somewhat lower.

Informing through portals

Internet portals of the *Blic* daily newspaper (92.86%) and the *B92* television (71.69%) are portals through which the largest number of respondent informs. The portal of the local *Radio 021* (58.13%) is third in terms of being followed, with the *Kurir* daily newspapers (57.14%) taking the fourth position.

In order to determine the portals which participants read the most often, summarized scores were generated in the frequency of reading individual portals. The answers were valued as follows; "never" – 0, "sometimes" – 1, "regularly" – 2. Respondents were able to estimate the frequency of reading for a larger number of portals (Figure 1).
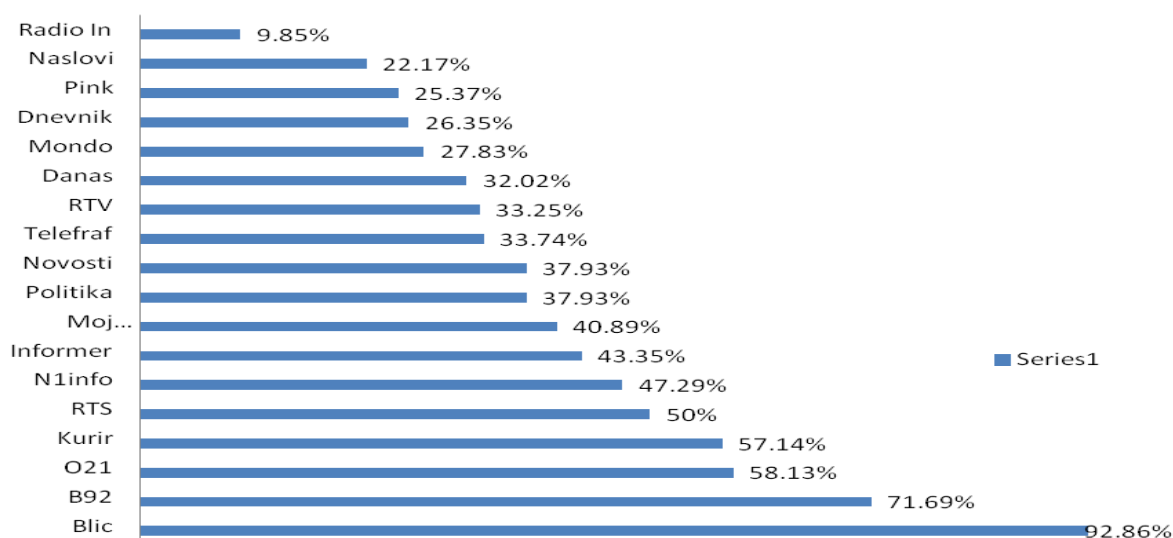

Figure 1. Levels of popularity of individual media portals

The most frequently read sections on internet portals were: sport (23.4%) and entertainment (21.4%), followed by political topics (15.4%), lifestyle (14.5%) and culture (12.5%). The most rarely read sections were local news (6.1%) and leisure time (6.5%).

Relation to the choice of news

According to the answers of the research participants, the following factors have highest influence on the choice of news to be read: personal interest in the topic ($AS = 4.59$), short and understandable text title ($AS = 3.82$), up-to-date topic ($AS = 3.71$), and available reading time ($AS = 3.78$). The lowest influence is that of headlines formulated in clickbait format (3.05), as well as the visual elements accompanying the news: video ($AS = 2.7$), photo ($AS = 2.65$) and GIF ($AS = 2.46$).

The largest share of research participants reported that they carefully read the whole news only if they are interested in it ($AS = 4.31$). News which continue on some other link is mostly not read entirely ($AS = 3.42$); the same is the case with news written and elaborated in several pages, i.e. in sequences ($AS = 3.34$).

3.3.2 *Attitude towards clickbait titles*

More than a third of the respondents (38.9%) were aware of the meaning of the word clickbait in the context of news writing. A slightly lower percentage of

participants (32.5%) was not aware at all of the meaning of this term, or heard about it, but was not sure what it meant (26.4%).

More than half of the participants (55.16%) confirmed that clickbait headlines are rarely justified and in relation to the content of the news article. 32.76% of them said the headline is not at all related to the content.

Adding videos and photos does not aid the news article in any way, and it is not more likely to be read. 53.45% of participants in our research choose to click on a news article only if the subject matter is of interest to them, regardless of the accompanying content available. The photo and video mattered only to 9.61% of participants who consider them to be crucial in choosing the news articles they read.

The participants were almost polarized in assessing how they choose clickbait titled articles. The highest number of participants (43.35%) said that they sometimes choose to read these kinds of news,

depending mostly on their mood and free time. On the other hand, 40.89% of participants don't read these kinds of news articles, feeling turned off by their clickbait titles. Only 13.55% of participants read clickbait news willingly and gladly, because they consider them to be entertaining.

Headlines that contain the words 'Shocking', 'Amazing' etc. or common sentence constructions (You won't believe what happened! etc.) that are obviously linked to clickbait, always attract the attention of only 25.12% of participants, that is 22.17% respectfully.

The last six questions from the third part of the questionnaire dedicated to clickbait titles were analyzed conducting the main components analysis using the maximal likelihood estimator. The number of components was determined using the Guttman-Kaiser criterion. Since only one value of characteristic root exceeds the limit value of 1.00, the results suggest that 1-factor solution is optimal. Factor loads are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor loads

R.B.	Assessment	Opt
p12	What is your attitude towards titles that contain words like: SHOCKING, UNBELIEVABLE, FASCINATING, and the like?	.841
p11	How do you react when you see a title like "You will never believe what happened ..." when visiting a particular portal?	.833
p15	Are you happy to read news that contains clickbait titles?	-.746
p16	Do you have confidence in information posted through news whose titles are written as clickbait?	.653
p14	How often was the clickbait title justified and in line with the content of the news (was you honestly shocked, surprised, etc.)?	.494
p13	What do you do when you notice a title with the addition of PHOTO and VIDEO?	.487

Elevated scores across the first main component indicate a negative respondent attitude towards clickbait titles, as well as avoidance of or distrust in news that contain such titles. In accordance with the object of measurement, the component was called Negative attitude towards clickbait titles.

Reliability of the scale is very high despite the small number of items and is $\alpha = .82$. Representativeness of the scale expressed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin coefficient is high, KMO = .86.

Scores across the dimension Negative attitude towards clickbait titles are distributed normally (skewness = -0.03, kurtosis = 0.94).

Gender differences were tested using the t test for independent samples. The results suggest that there are significant gender differences ($t (346.24) = 4.18$, $p < .001$), with male respondents achieving higher scores (AS = 17.94, SD = 3.80) than female respondents (AS = 16.32, SD = 3.75).

The negative attitude towards clickbait titles is significantly related to the frequency of reading news online ($r = -0.18$, $p < .001$), as well as to the length of time spent reading news on the Internet ($r = -.21$, $p < .001$).

3.4 Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis was conducted with the aim of determining the relationship between the presence of traditional, tabloid and clickbait titles on the most visited daily newspaper portals, as well as to assess the consistence between the news headlines and news contents, as well as the title photo and the news content. The analysis was conducted in the period from 6 to 13 April 2017. The sample of the research consisted of news, and their elements: title, photo and content, published in sections of *politics*, *entertainment* and *lifestyle* on portals of *Večernje Novosti*, *Blic* and *Kurir* daily newspapers.[*]

3.4.1 *Presence by type of title*

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[*] The most visited daily newspaper portals in Serbia in March 2017, according to the official data of *GemiusOLA*.

In the observed period, 1.619 news articles were published, of which 692 were in *Kurir* (42.74%), 675 in *Blic* (41.69%) and 252 in *Večernje Novosti* (15.57%), which indicates that the latter has the lowest dynamics of publishing new information. Portals of *Blic* (42.96%) and *Kurir* (43.21%) are dominated by news from the field of entertainment, while political topics are the most present on the *Večernje Novosti* portal (47.22%). On average, 202.4 news articles are published in one day.

From the aspect of section where the news is published, entertainment contents are the most present - 39.72%, followed by political - 31.93% and lifestyle - 28.35% contents. The highest number of news in the field of politics, compared to news published on all three portals, was published on the *Blic* daily newspaper portal (47.39%), while entertainment (46.5%) and lifestyle news (52.29%) was the most present on the *Kurir* portal.

News headlines were divided in three categories: traditional, tabloid and clickbait. Despite the trends in news writing in line with the development of online journalism, traditional titles still represent the most prevailing form of expression – 37.49%. Figure 2. depicts their presence by the analyzed media.
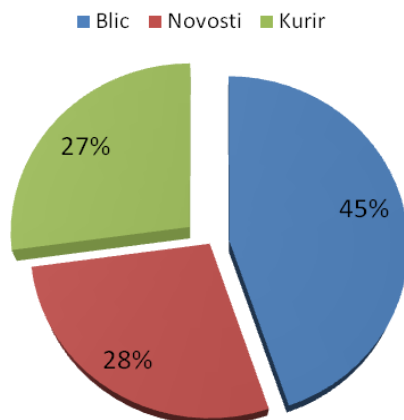

Figure 2. Headlines categories

On all three portals, the traditional styling of titles is the most present within the *politics* section.

News containing clickbait titles account for one-third of all posts (33.11%), while tabloid titles are present with 29.4%. Titles of both categories are dominating the entertainment (*Blic* and *Kurir*) and lifestyle (*Večernje Novosti*) sections. Most news articles that have clickbait titles are published in *Kurir* (50.56%) and *Blic* (45.52%), while the number is of titles is drastically lower for *Večernje Novosti* - 3.92%.

3.4.2 *Coordinating titles and content, photos and content*

Based on the assessment of matching between the news title and content, it was found that as much as 88.08% of titles correspond to the content of the text. By contrast, only 11.92% of titles are incompatible with the information that is communicated in the article body. In this way, the readers' attention is attracted to non-attractive content, which are often part of sponsorship packages and which must be published but lack the elements of attractiveness or actuality. They are the most common cause of dissatisfaction among readers and the sense of being deceived.

Of the total number of news published, in 74.12% of them the accompanying photo was in accordance with the title and content. Almost a quarter of texts (23.59%) contained a photo, but it was not matched with the title and content, i.e. it was attached randomly, without the goal of illustrating the content or attracting additional reader attention. A negligible number, only 2.29% of posts were not illustrated by a photo. The smallest number of news without an accompanying photo was published in the *lifestyle* section – 0.44%.

4. CONCLUSION

Modern online journalism and publishers of online content are using sensational and provocative clickbait titles more often in their articles nowadays in order to attract viewers to their web pages. Clickbait or 'click on bait' describes a type of a hyperlink on a web page that attracts by choosing appropriate terminology for its titles, or with photos and video clips.

The main results of the research point out the following tendencies. On the whole, a negative attitude towards clickbait titles has been expressed by the majority of participants, as well as a tendency to avoid reading these types of news articles. Clickbait is considered to be untrustworthy by most. This is confirmed by the finding that a clickbait title, attached photo or video clip are the least responsible when one is deciding on a news article to read. Choosing a subject matter and a sensible title are the first criteria people use when choosing to read a piece of news. A news article that has a clickbait headline attached to it is almost never read from beginning to end if the continuation is on another link or web page.

Clickbait and tabloid headlines make up two thirds of published news in the most visited sections on media portals. The headlines are followed by a photo, video clip of gif, with the goal of attracting more attention. Only 11.92 % of the published articles had a title that did not correlate to the content, and 24.59% did not have an adequate photo attached to it, which shows that, regardless of the predominant intentions, these articles are written so that the level of 'deception' is kept minimal.

On the other hand, results of the quantitative research show that part of the auditorium who reads these kinds of news believes there is a misrepresentation of the article in the title. Moreover, it is important to stress the thin line between assessing a clickbait or tabloid headline because there are elements that are quite similar, in regards to the approach taken when writing the news article. Almost all the participants said they read online news - 94.8% of them, mostly once a day 35.2% and most often no longer than 30 minutes cumulatively - 59.4%. The device most often used to

acces news is a phone - 58.6%. Men inform themselves using these means more often and longer than women.

The *Blic* online news portal is the main source of information for 92.86 % of the research participants, which is in line with official information of media portal visitation measurements, which hold this portal in first place with over 14 million visits a month.

The research concludes that the following sections of media portals are the most visited: *sport* (23.4%), *entertainment* (21.4%), *politics* (15.4%) and *lifestyle* (14.5%). Most clickbait headlines were found within the *entertainment* section (49.77%) and *lifestyle* section (45.97%).

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