2017

Perceptions of Clickbait: A Q-Methodology Approach

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Keywords

Clickbait, reader behavior, Q methodology, news, digital literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Clickbait is "content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page" ("clickbait," n.d.). The term is also generally used to refer specifically to the attention-grabbing headlines. Critics of clickbait argue that clickbait is shallow, misleading, and ubiquitous – "a new word that has become synonymous with online journalism" (Frampton, 2015). It is the subject of a small, but growing number of studies in disciplines ranging from linguistics, communications, and information sciences. Palau-Sampio (2016) analyzed linguistic strategies associated with tabloid journalism in the Spanish digital newspaper *Elpais.com*, concluding that there is a trend towards lower quality news reporting. In their research on Danish news sites, Blom & Hansen (2015) identified forward-referencing, specifically the use of empty pronouns to create an information gap, as a feature of clickbait headlines. Chen, Conroy & Rubin (2015) proposed that automatic identification of clickbait could draw upon three types of features: a) lexico-semantic and pragmatic linguistic patterns (e.g. unresolved pronouns, affective and suspenseful language, action words, overuse of numerals, and reverse narratives), b) incongruent image placement with a possible emotional load, and c) user reading and commenting behavior. An effort in automated identification of clickbait by Potthast, *et al.* (2016) achieved 79% accuracy on Twitter tweets. But debate still rages over what the word actually means (Gardiner, 2015).

RESEARCH QUESTION

While people seem to have an intuitive understanding of what clickbait is, a formal description of the concept is still lacking. Examples of what are definitely or definitely not clickbait are generally unambiguous, but uncertainty and disagreement tend to muddle the middle (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Spectrum of "Clickbait-ness" in News Headlines. (Source: Buzzfeed.com, 2016)

This study is guided by three inter-related research questions:

1) What types of news headlines do readers rate as most and least clickbaiting?

2) What common features exist among headlines that are rated most clickbaiting?

3) In what ways does a reader's understanding and perception of clickbait affect their interpretation of news headlines?

In recent times, clickbait has been implicated as a tool to facilitate the spread of fake news and as a contributing factor in creating a "post-truth" environment (Gross, 2016). This research is motivated by the need to understand and address these concerns in the interest of information literacy and civil engagement.

METHODOLOGY
The study employs Q-methodology, which was developed expressly as a way to study human subjectivity (Brown, 2008) and later adapted for use in information sciences (e.g., Burkell & Fortier, 2014). Thirty study participants (thus far) were presented with 70 clickbait headlines collected from Buzzfeed in 2016 (see examples in Fig. 2). The participants were asked to first separate printed cards with these headlines into three piles: 1) definitely clickbait, 2) definitely not clickbait, and 3) uncertain and then to rank them from "least like my idea of clickbait" to "most like my idea of clickbait" according to the distribution shown in Figure 3. Participants were encouraged to comment on their decisions during the Q-sort activity and in a semi-structured interview afterwards. The completed data for 50 participants will be subjected to correlation and factor analysis to identify similar sorting patterns among participants, indicating commonalities in perception and indicating subjective perspectives (Watts & Stenner, 2012).
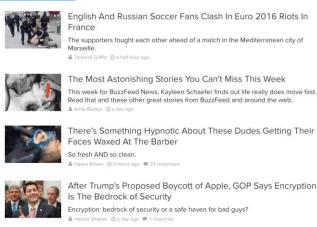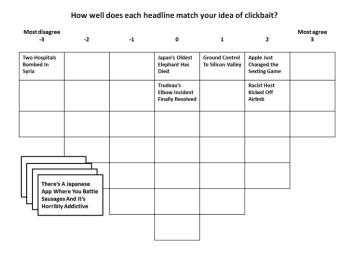

Figure 2. Buzzfeed News Headlines. (Summer 2016)

Figure 3. Sample Q-sort in Progress with Buzzfeed News Headline Cards.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS
Participants tended to base their clickbait judgements on at least two main factors: form and content (Fig. 4). In terms of form, participants identified features such as profanity, forward-referencing, and colloquial phrasing as indicators of clickbait. In terms of content, participants were more likely to rate "soft" news headlines like entertainment/sports news and "offbeat" stories to be clickbait.

A)
Newsworthy Form / Clickbait Content

Prince's Paisley Park Home To Open For Paid Public Tours

Zimbabwe's Biggest City Shut Down To Protest Everything Going Wrong In Zimbabwe

B)
Clickbait Form / Newsworthy Content

Figure 4. Headlines Showing:
A) Newsworthy Form and Clickbait Content; B) Clickbait Form and Newsworthy Content.

The pragmatic significance of this ongoing study is in identifying reliable textual indicators for clickbait that may be used to design more accurate automatic detection systems to flag and filter low-quality journalism. Conceptually, the study will produce a multi-perspective categorization of the convoluted phenomenon of clickbait, based on news readers' mental models about the notion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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