

CLICKBAIT STRATEGIES IN DIGITAL PRESS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EDITORIAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

The use of clickbait in online journalism is determined, exclusively, by the economic pressures that, in recent years, have disrupted the traditional model of how the press operates. As online publications increasingly depend on revenues generated through traffic-based advertising, user attention has become a valuable and limited, economically quantifiable resource. This "monetized attention" leads some media organizations to compete aggressively for visibility, and, as a consequence, the clickbait model is increasingly used. Titles meant to stimulate emotion, fear, curiosity are used widely and with exaggeration. The present research investigates the presence and frequency of clickbait titles in the Romanian online press, focusing on two popular media sources: *EVZ.ro* and *Viva.ro*. The aim of the study is to highlight, on the one hand, the editorial strategies used to attract the public's attention through headlines, and on the other hand, to compare the editorial behaviour between a general news site and one based on entertainment. The methodology applied was mixed: an automatic analysis, carried out through a Python script that uses rules based on keywords and linguistic formulas typical of clickbait; and a manual analysis, in which the headlines were qualitatively evaluated according to criteria such as emotional language, unrealistic promises, rhetorical questions or vague expressions. The results indicate a higher prevalence of clickbait headlines in the content of a tabloid site, but also the tendency of generalist publications to use this method to capture the user's attention. The study contributes to understanding how the digital environment influences journalistic style, in the context of the attention economy.

Keywords: *clickbait, online, press, website, disinformation, fake-news.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation and the attention economy

If thirty years ago television meant programs, viewers, antennas and televisions, now we have content, users, screens, streams and platforms. We access information when we want, where we want and on whatever device we want. News

journals and newspapers no longer mean an exact time or a specific day, but a permanent flow of information that flows unbridled on various platforms. An abundant flow that brings with it, in addition to news, waves of disinformation and unverified, manipulated, exaggerated theories. In 1964, Marshall McLuhan shows that new media are offered to the public before they are understood (McLuhan, 1964). Henry Jenkins argued, in 2006, that new environments are created, dispersed, adopted, adapted and absorbed in dramatic rhythms, creating a real revolution in communication (Jenkins, 2006). Now, in 2025, New Media is deeply integrated into our lives, and the interplay between technology, personalization, and adaptability is becoming increasingly complex. Algorithms are starting to know us in depth, even anticipating our desires and artificial intelligence offers us personalized experiences, and virtual reality helps us interact with content. Streaming platforms dominate the consumption of information knowing how to capture and maintain users' attention. The digital revolution that we experience every day and whose boundaries we do not yet know, is profoundly reshaping the way the public consumes information. New Media is fundamentally transforming the journalism industry. If in the not-too-distant past news came from newspapers, radio and television, today we have unlimited access to an instant and diverse source of information. The press has become ubiquitous, information abounds and is everywhere, it jumps in front of us, sometimes annoyingly, from a multitude of digital sources, in real time. Change comes with advantages but also challenges. On

the one hand, New Media facilitates quick, diversified and, in most cases, free access to whatever we want to know, on the other hand, incomplete, biased or even false information can serve us, depending on algorithms. On the other side of the barricade, for journalists, the online environment has changed the constants of the job. The need for traffic, audience and revenue, the huge competition for attention, editorial pressure and the expectations of the public, change the rules of the game. But the first question that journalists have in mind is the following: What will determine the reader or the viewer to access the news we have produced? If a reader does not click on the title of the article, he does not read the news, and this translates into less activity on the broadcaster's page and, implicitly, less advertising revenue, believes Jonas Nygaard Bloom (Bloom & Hansen, 2015). It shows that journalists use a number of editorial strategies to capture the public's attention. Some through stylistic procedures or through the use of certain keywords, others, through a subterfuge called *clickbait*, more precisely, titles characterized by emotional language, vague or exaggerated promises and a structure meant to arouse curiosity.

Although clickbait has always been associated with the tabloid or entertainment press, in recent years its proliferation trend has also been observed in mainstream news publications. In investigating the characteristics and frequency of this phenomenon, we started the present research from the following questions:

- How common is the use of clickbait headlines on news sites of different categories in our country?
- What stylistic differences can be identified between clickbait headlines published by mainstream news platforms and entertainment platforms?
- Does an automated method of identifying clickbait titles produce results similar to a qualitative manual analysis?

Interpreted results of the analysis show a clear difference in the use and construction of clickbait titles between the two publications subjected to the research. Moreover, the qualitative method used highlighted stylistic differences between

the two publications. While the tabloid site predominantly uses emotional language and the stimulation of curiosity, the generalist publication preferred alarmist headlines, related to political, economic or crisis topics. The high degree of consistency between the two methods (automatic and manual) supports the validity of the detection algorithm and confirms the observed editorial trends (Baran, 2010; Enache et al., 2022).

2. THEORETICAL LANDMARKS REGARDING THE CLICKBAIT PHENOMENON

In a scalable digital media system, where performance is measured in clicks, and the public's attention is monetized, clickbait has become an adaptive editorial strategy, at the limit of journalistic ethics. In a simple but concise definition, catchy headlines that make users click and open a hyperlink with a specific news item are called clickbait (Chrakaborty et al., 2016). The word *clickbait* was first used in 2006 by an American blogger by combining the words *click* (pressing the mouse to initiate an action on the computer) and *bait* (from eng. bait). Since 2015, the word clickbait has also been in the American Merriam-Webster dictionary, explained as follows: "something (such as a title) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink, especially when the links lead to content of questionable value or interest." Another definition is given by Jones, Jaworska and Aslan, who show that the clickbait phenomenon has spread in recent years and "refers to content that uses linguistic techniques in order to attract attention and encourage internet users to access a specific link or web page where they will usually see advertisements." (Jones et al., 2016). But such practices are not new in the press, they only now have a dedicated term. In the 1800s, the term "yellow journalism" was used to refer to sensational and exaggerated articles disguised as news (Thiel, 2018). The phrase describes the rivalry between the media moguls of the time, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. To increase the market share of the newspapers they owned, the two began to sensationalize the news and put exaggerated and catchy headlines

on the front page (Pengue, 2021). Researchers then began referring to this type of journalism as “yellow” in order to distinguish it from serious, fact-based journalism. This dichotomy is preserved in the media to this day.

Therefore, the starting point of the *clickbait phenomenon* is the title of an article. Dor (2003) explains: a title is “a communicative device whose function is to produce the optimal level of affinity between the content of the story and the reader’s context of interpretation, in order to render the story optimally and relevant to the reader.” But when the title is put with the intention of capturing attention at all costs and without a clear connection to the subject, it is a *clickbait* headline. However, why did this rush for clicks come about? Angèle Christin (2018) argues that “news that was previously incomparable in terms of quality can now be measured by the same standard – that of the number of clicks. This has changed the way publishers choose stories and headlines, as these clicks represent an important factor for online advertising revenue and thus for the profitability of the publication.” The phenomenon, with important sociological implications, has begun to be carefully studied in recent years, or since digital media has been an inextricably part of our lives. And that’s because clickbait exploits emotions, curiosity, indignation, spreads misinformation and erodes trust in the media. It is Loewenstein (1994) who laid the theoretical foundations of the phenomenon by introducing the concept of the “curiosity gap” – the difference between what a person knows and what he wants to know, the central mechanism exploited by clickbait headlines. These introductions, which contain one or more keywords, without providing enough information, lead the reader to believe that the interior of the article has valuable or shocking content. When attention is focused on an informational gap, the recipient experiences a feeling of deprivation that generates anxiety and discomfort and that is alleviated only by obtaining the necessary data to fill the gap (Bazaco et al., 2019).

Studies have identified common types of phrases used in clickbait headlines. Recurring expressions such as:

- “You won’t believe what happened...”
- “Shock! Last minute decision...”
- “Everything you need to know about...”
- “Here’s what happened when...”
- “Find out why...”
- “What followed is simply incredible!”
- “This simple trick will change your life”
- “Here’s what the authorities DON’T tell you about...”
- “5 Things You Didn’t Know About...”
- “What followed is unimaginable...”

or the words: “incredible,” “shocking,” “amazing,” “unbelievable,” “unexpected,” “sensational,” “hallucinating,” “shaking,” “explosive,” “warning,” “danger,” “alert,” “now,” “urgent,” “serious,” “critical,” “immediate,” “catastrophe,” “trick,” “solution,” “advice,” “remedy,” “guaranteed,” “works,” “transformation,” “change,” “result”;

have been identified by several authors, including Chakraborty et al. (2016) or Blom and Hansen (2015), as the most common ways to conceive of a clickbait title.

Other authors (Bazaco et. al, 2019, Molek-Kozakowska, 2013) have identified clickbait formulas in certain queries or questions addressed directly to the reader, whose answers or mysteries are unravelled within the articles. Formulations such as: “Did you know that you make this mistake every day?” or “Do you think you know the answer?” induce the reader to the idea that, in the full text, it is a great enigma revealed for the benefit of the user.

Another clickbait technique is the article in the form of an enumeration or list. Vijgen (2014) explains this subterfuge by stimulating the reader to discover the entire inventory: “10 tricks for rapid weight loss”; “6 reasons why you suffer from insomnia”; “5 mistakes you make daily”; “10 signs that your relationship with your partner is creaking.”

Exaggeration, identified by Ekstrom (2002), represents another clickbait way of turning common things into sensational facts. Thus, the reader pays undeserved attention to some sensationalist platitudes: “This is the most shocking thing you have heard...”; “How she lost 10 kilos in a week...”; “Incredible! Romania is in a state of shock...”; “What he did is hallucinating! Everyone talks about it...”.

Bazaco (2019) proposes an analytical model, which uses six variables in detecting clickbait titles. These are: 1) incomplete information, 2) imperatives, 3) repetitions (enumerations, listings), 4) exaggerations, 5) soft news that provokes emotion and 6) shocking audiovisual elements, while Potthast (2016) comes up with an automatic method of recognizing exaggerated or misleading information, using an algorithm for processing and identifying specific expressions.

With this theoretical framework once achieved, we can move on to the actual research that involves a mixed, quantitative and qualitative methodology. (Bădău, 2017)

3. OPERATIONALIZING THE CONCEPT OF CLICKBAIT IN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The Methodological framework

After delimiting the clickbait phenomenon from a theoretical point of view and building a conceptual framework, we applied in this study an experimental research method, which combines artificial intelligence with manual data collection. We chose two online news sites for this research. On the one hand, *evz.ro*, a mainstream, generalist publication, with an increased influence and credibility among the public and on the other hand, *viva.ro*, a tabloid site, which offers updated content about celebrities, social events, politics, lifestyle, fashion, recipes and horoscope. *Viva.ro* is at the top of the online audience and registers more than 4 million unique users. In the first stage, between May 1-7, 2025, we collected, daily, randomly, 10 titles of articles published on the two sites. Subsequently, we analysed the titles by two complementary methods:

1. an automatic analysis, using artificial intelligence, carried out with the help of a Python script that detects elements typical of clickbait (keywords, rhetorical formulas, vague or hyperbolic structures);
2. a manual analysis, in which the titles were evaluated based on several qualitative variables such as: emotion, exaggeration,

ambiguity, sensationalization and use of questions. The criteria were then binary coded with 0 and 1.

The specific objectives of the research were the following:

1. Determine the proportion of clickbait titles in the analysed samples.
2. Identify the main linguistic and stylistic formulas associated with clickbait in each publication category.
3. Assess the level of consistency between the automatic analysis (based on language rules) and the manual evaluation of titles.

We start our research from the following hypotheses:

- H1: Tabloid sites use significantly more clickbait headlines than generalist ones.
 H2: The linguistic patterns in clickbait titles vary depending on the editorial profile.
 H3: Automatic detection will be more than 80% consistent with human evaluation.

The results obtained by the two methods were compared in order to assess the level of agreement and to identify possible stylistic and editorial nuances between the two categories of publications. The research was designed to identify not only the prevalence but also the stylistic variations of the titles from the two media sources.

Period analysed: Data were collected between 1-7 May 2025, in order to cover an editorially representative week. The period is a deeply charged one, with exceptional political events (presidential elections, MET Gala) that had the role of further intensifying the fight for views.

Data selection: Ten titles published on the main pages of the sites were randomly extracted from each media source each day, resulting in a sample of 70 titles per publication (N total = 140). If the digital analysis did this automatically by generating the results with the help of a Python script, which chose and went through each title, for the manual analysis the titles were copied in full in the published form and then saved in a text file for further processing.

Stages of the method:

1. Automated analysis: Artificial intelligence was asked every day from May 1-7 to randomly choose ten titles from the two sites. Then, a

Python 3.11 lexical analysis script went through each title to identify clickbait-specific formulations, phrases, and words, based on a predefined list identified by the literature. Each title has been binary coded:

- 1 = clickbait title (if it has at least one identifiable characteristic)

- 0 = non-clickbait title
2. Manual analysis (qualitative validation): Separately, the same list of titles was analysed by an independent evaluator, based on a coding grid.

Table 1. Title Analysis Grid – Manual Evaluation (Codable Version)

No.	Title	Emotion	Ambiguity	Exaggeration	shock/ sensational	Clickbait formulas (list, question, "see")	Final Encoding (0/1)
1	See what happened to...	0	1	1	0	1	1
2	The minister announced a clear measure	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	You won't believe it...	1	1	1	1	1	1

Legend of the criteria:

1 = Feature Present

0 = absent feature

♦ **Description of the criteria:**

1. **Excessive emotionality:** the title appeals to strong emotions (e.g. surprise, fear, revolt, exaggerated enthusiasm).
2. **Intentional ambiguity:** The title is vague or intentionally leaves essential details unsaid in order to determine the click.
3. **Exaggeration:** The title uses hyperbolic or distorted phrases to cause the hyperlink to be clicked.
4. **Shock/sensational appeal:** Includes terms like "shocking," "hallucinating," "you won't believe it," "incredible."
5. **Clickbait formulas:** the title contains typical clickbait formulas (list: "10 reasons...", the question: "Do you know what he does...?", promises: "See how..." etc.) (Table 1)

4. RESULTS

After separate analyses, the results were summarized for each of the two sites, as following: the number of clickbait titles, their proportion, the rhetorical typology and the degree of concordance between the two methodologies.

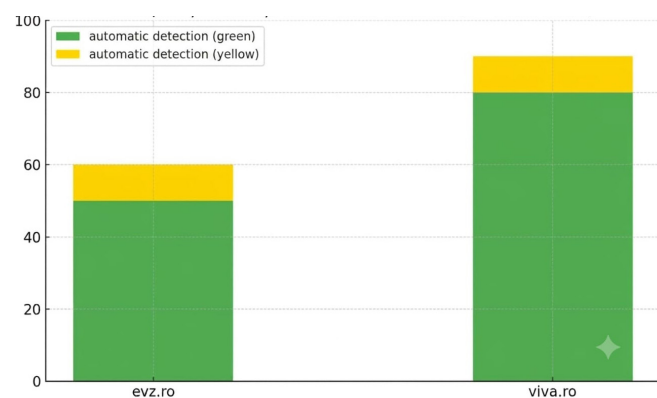


Fig. 1. Clickbait Headlines Analysis Summary (May 1-7, 2025)

Table 1. Clickbait Headlines Analysis Summary (May 1-7, 2025)

Website	Total number of titles analysed	No. of clickbait titles	Clickbait Rate	Prevailing rhetorical typology	Degree of agreement between methods
evz.ro	10 per day × 7 days = 70	35 – 42	50% – 60%	Intriguing titles, appeal to curiosity and emotions (fear, shock)	Moderate (automatic vs. manual difference detection)
viva.ro	10 per day × 7 days = 70	56 – 63	80% – 90%	Exaggerations, sensational titles, appeal to emotions and exclusives	High (almost identical automatic and manual detection)

The analysis carried out on clickbait titles on the **evz.ro** and **viva.ro** websites, for the period May 1-7, 2025, highlighted several important aspects regarding the use of reader attraction techniques. After comparing the automated and manual methods of identifying clickbait headlines, some key conclusions emerged:

- 1. Predominance of clickbait titles:** On both **evz.ro** and **viva.ro**, a significant proportion of the titles in the analysed period were identified as clickbait. However, the prevalence of misleading headlines is higher in entertainment media (80-90 percent), compared to generalist publications, where clickbait headlines are at a moderate level of 50-60 percent. In both online publications, various click manipulation techniques were used, among which the most common were stimulating curiosity and appealing to emotion. Words and phrases such as “Shocking,” “See what happened,” “Incredible,” “You won’t believe it,” and the characteristic of titles that seek to attract attention quickly, are used abundantly, tiringly, with a particular prevalence on **viva.ro**.
- 2. Analysis methods:** Both analyses conducted for this research had similar results in identifying clickbait titles on **viva.ro**. However, the manual analysis had the advantage of understanding the subtleties that escaped an automated algorithm, especially in the editorial style practiced by **evz.ro**. Manual analysis had the ability to grasp details and provide a better understanding of editorial intentions. On the other hand, however, automated analysis is more efficient when it comes to time and speed, having the advantage of being applicable to a larger volume of data. These aspects suggest the need to use a mixture between automatic and manual qualitative analysis, in order to finally obtain a complete picture of the phenomenon.
- 3. The typology of clickbait titles:** “Shock,” “Incredible,” and “Exclusive,” were the most used words that announce a clickbait title. Headlines have been formulated in such a way as to give the reader the impression that he will discover a secret, or will understand an unknown aspect. In reality, however, the articles did not deliver the promised information, but only sensationally packaged common things. There are also some differences between the two publications. The abundance of clickbait is lower in **evz.ro**, where headlines are more moderate in expression. The editorial technique of **evz.ro** is based on headlines with more symbolism, double meaning, irony or ambiguous constructions. However, there is an increasingly frequent trend of using shocking wording on the general site as well. On the other hand, **viva.ro** has as a clear editorial technique when it comes to the use of clickbait and almost every title contains specific elements. Exaggeration, appeal to emotions and sensationalist promises along with formulations based on enumerations, lists or omissions, are among the most used.
- 4. The impact of clickbait on the audience:** In the short term, an uninitiated audience can be a

valuable product in the rush for clicks. The reader responds to manipulations, is curious, surprised, annoyed. In the long run, however, he becomes disappointed, annoyed and tired of the constant non-fulfilment of expectations. The user becomes aware that he is being manipulated and the tendency is to avoid these media sources. Consistently misleading or exaggerated headlines lead to a decrease in public trust, in the source of information and ultimately to unsubscribe.

5. Recommendations for editorial practices:

The sensational has become tiring and avoided by most readers. The repeated disappointment of the public, bored and annoyed by the same pompous and exaggerated formulations, translates into avoiding and unsubscribing from certain publications in which false headlines and sometimes even fake-news journalism abound. While clickbait can generate rapid traffic and grow your audience, the long-term risks include loss of trust and respect from readers. We recommend a more balanced approach, where the headlines are attractive but genuinely reflect the content of the article.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Maximizing online traffic for the purpose of monetization and manipulating public perception represent the two deliberate strategies of clickbait. In the fight for revenue and attention, the rush for clicks is a common practice in the Romanian media landscape. This analysis shows not only the magnitude of the phenomenon but also the rhetorical and editorial subtleties of today's digital media. The use of clickbait is no longer an exception or a feature attributed to the tabloid press, but a widely used discursive reality. This trend raises more and more questions about ethics in online media and the need for digital education of the public constantly exposed to such deceptive techniques. Platforms have profoundly changed the way information is produced, delivered and received, and clickbait is one of the indicators of this transformation.

The present research shows with figures and concrete examples the use of this technique.

However, it comes with its own limitations. It was made over a short period of time and examines only two media sources. Future studies could explore the topic over a longer period of time, but also by expanding the number of sites or their orientation. Expanding the sample, integrating engagement metrics into research or a comparative approach with the international press could allow more accurate outlines of the phenomenon. The article, however, can pave the way for broader research on the relationship between content and effect in contemporary digital media.

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