







### How to cite this article in bibliographies / References

A Bazaco, M Redondo, P Sánchez-García (2019): “Clickbait as a strategy of viral journalism: conceptualisation and methods”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, pp. 94 to 115.  
<http://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1323/06en.html>  
DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2019-1323en](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2019-1323en)

# Clickbait as a strategy of viral journalism: conceptualisation and methods

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** This article addresses clickbait as a strategy of viral journalism that seeks to lure users into clicking on a link to a page through tactics such as sensationalist stories and eye-catching headlines that work as bait. This research aims to provide a more complete definition of this phenomenon, as well as a characterisation of the variables associated with it. **Methods.** In its empirical phase, the study resorts to content analysis to check for the presence of clickbait strategies in 2,266 news stories posted on Facebook and Twitter by *El País* and *El Mundo*. **Results.** The research detected a high presence of clickbait content in both newspapers (41.6% on average), as well as the prevalence of techniques such as: incomplete information, pre-eminence of soft news, repetition and serialisation, and use of hyperboles. **Discussion.** The scarcity of research on clickbait requires the intensification of the analysis of its evolution and the monitoring of its consequences on the quality of the news circulating on social networks.

## Keywords

Clickbait; viral journalism; social networks; digital journalism; infotainment; sensationalism.

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## 1. Introduction

The current media environment is experiencing a severe drop in the circulation of print newspapers and a decline in the number of the subscriptions needed to sustain the newsrooms, which makes the press to depend more and more on online advertising, which is the only advertising sector that has grown in recent years. The InfoAdex report on advertising investment in Spain (2017) confirms that, although there has been an increase in investment since 2014, even higher than the growth in GDP, spending has progressively fallen on newspapers and magazines but has increased in the Internet, which has become the second most attractive medium just after television [1].

The sources of funding for digital media are, fundamentally, the visits they receive in their websites, which determine the volume and cost of buying and selling advertising. Given this circumstance, attracting readers to increase traffic to their websites is transcendental for the survival of all media companies.

In this economic context, the forms to distribute information online are also changing: the number of readers who visits news media websites through search engines is decreasing while there is an increase in the number of uses who reach news through social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, mainly through news media's pages, but also through recommendations made by content aggregators and friends, who have a dominant prescriptive character. The Spanish Association for Media Research (AIMC, 2017) reported that, in 2016, 56.5% of Spanish Internet users used social networks to inform themselves, 10.7% more than in 2013.

In this way, the isolated news story splits from the media context that represented its location on the page, the hierarchy applied by the medium, the relationship with other news within a section, even the identification with the newspaper that often goes unnoticed in the news spread through the networks. The medium as textual unit -a "paratext", following Genette's theory (2001)-, vanishes and each news story competes individually against the rest of the news and also against an amalgam of content that is not always adjusted to traditional journalistic criteria. The traditional gatekeeping role of the press appears weakened, while citizens acquire prominence in the dissemination of information, by determining what they want to share and promote, thus giving rise to a "mixed gatekeeping" (Luzón, 2000).

Along with this, new analytical software tools that allow news outlets to monitor the preferences of their audience end up influencing the agenda. The reception of information is measured instantaneously to identify "what photos, headlines, authors, themes and frames are the most attractive" (Rodríguez, 2013: 169). Aware of these preferences, digital media "cannot ignore the interests of citizens and, in good logic, what users prefer in these virtual social environments ends up becoming news" (Túñez, Sixto-García and Guevara, 2011: 63). Page views is what improves the position of news as they are more shared by users (Borrego, 2016).

This process has generated in the media a search for alternative content, even outside the traditional journalistic criteria. This strategy becomes more evident in the case of the news stories spread on social networks, which work as a "catapult" of web traffic for digital media (Chen, Rubin and Conroy, 2015).

Salaverría (2015) uses the term "viral journalism" to refer to this new information paradigm that affects news selection and production processes, and associates it with an intensive use of social networks for

journalistic purposes, but also with certain methods that seek to increase the success of news in an extremely competitive environment: “the media have refined their techniques to use networks: they use tricky headlines that seek to ‘force’ the user into clicking, they spread news on Twitter at strategic moments to multiply their impact, include videos that are specifically edited for dissemination on Facebook... The goal, in short, is to make a type of journalism that spreads with the ease of a virus” (Salaverría, 2015: 19).

The strength of this new technique to produce and disseminate journalistic content is reflected in the new online style book of the *New York Times*, which urges its journalists to write keeping in mind what is shared and viral, the connection with users’ emotions and the need to share what has an impact on them, so that viral content becomes a new way of narrating the world (in Borrego, 2016: 1,181). One of the successful examples of this model is *Buzzfeed*, a news outlet specialised in the generation and monitoring of news and viral content. Its editorial scheme “fits social networks like a glove: providing soft news, entertainment content and videos, aiming to provoke in people an unstoppable desire to click” (Salaverría, 2015: 20). Another example of the expansion of this strategy is the initiative of traditional media to incorporate highly viral sections, as Palau-Sampio (2016) has shown in her analysis of four new sections of *El País* newspaper (*SModa*, *Icon*, *BuenaVida* and *Verne*), whose aim is “to attract a complementary readership, through light, if not banal, and viral content, with headline and writing strategies that are closer to the tabloid” (2016: 64). These examples show how many media companies are trapped in the impossible balance between following Internet trends and getting the attention of the public that allows profitability (and in the most dramatic cases their mere survival) and preserving the prestige that identifies them as credible news media sources (Silverman, 2015).

In fact, Rodríguez (2013) speaks of an “informational Darwinism” in which only contagious pieces survive. He establishes four stages in that process:

1. Viral success is the result of chance and is associated with the quality and opportunity of the disseminated content.
2. Real-time audience measurement begins to favour the “best adapted”, most successful and best disseminated contents.
3. The media focus on detecting the stories that have more success on social networks, aggregators and blogs. Then, they incorporate these stories into their agenda, converting them into news content and putting them back on social networks to continue with their viralisation.
4. The media deliberately “fabricate” content that is designed solely to go viral, to be contagious.

The author proposes a fifth stage that is proposed more as a wish than as a real possibility: “Apply everything learned so far about the meme to produce good journalism that catches the attention of the audience once again” (2013: 180).

In this context, this research aims to analyse the phenomenon known as clickbait, understood as the designing of contents that seek to attract the attention of readers and lure them into clicking on a link to a website through tactics such as sensationalist stories, eye-catching headlines and images that work as bait (Chen, Conroy and Rubin, 2015, Blom and Hansen, 2015).

The clickbait phenomenon is embedded in the so-called “attention economy” (Kaplan in Roca, 2008: 136), which refers to the competition established between content generators to obtain public interest

and monetise it in the context of a saturated information market. As described by Molek-Kozakowska, “information is not a passive resource waiting to be searched for and accessed. It is always in competition for people’s attention with other information. (...) That is why news outlets try to make their information appear relevant, urgent or unusual” (2013: 173 and 174).

## 2. Towards a conceptualisation of clickbait

The use of the term clickbait is widespread among producers of digital content and, especially, among news media. In fact, this term has recently become popular in such a way that citizen seems to have an intuitive knowledge to recognise its strategies (Chen and Rubin, 2017). However, the academic research that contributes to its definition and theorisation is still limited, both in Spain (Palau-Sampio, 2015, García-Orosa, Gallur and López-García, 2017) and internationally (Blom and Hansen, 2015, Chen, Rubin and Conroy, 2015, Potthast, Köpsel, Stein and Hagen, 2016, Chen and Rubin, 2017, Wiegmann, Völske, Stein, Hagen and Potthast, 2018). In addition, there is a dispersion of objectives and perspectives of study, given that the phenomenon has been addressed from different disciplines: computer science, linguistics (pragmatics) and communication, with different purposes [2].

The review of the literature on the subject allows us to point out two main notions or definitions. A restrictive one that reduces clickbait to the strategies used in the formulation of news headlines and a more general and inclusive one that encompasses different formulas to attract readers’ attention and increase traffic to a webpage.

The studies that identify the phenomenon with the formulation of bait headlines, analyse it as a link and explain its meaning as a strategy to catch readers through “a headline that does not respond to traditional journalistic criteria and whose ultimate goal is to keep the reader in the webpage for as long as possible, not to inform (...) They are, therefore, headlines that appeal to the curiosity of users, even though the information behind them has nothing to do with the headline and does not meet the expectations generated as the reminder news is too short” (García Orosa, Gallur and López García, 2017: 1,265). According to this perspective, headlines appear defined as “stylistic and narrative instruments that function as decoys to induce anticipation and curiosity in the reader so that they click on the headline and continue reading” (Blom and Hansen, 2015: 87).

Palau-Sampio also associates clickbait with a headline type that “unlike the informative headline, appeals to curiosity with humour, emotion or classic baits like sex” (2016: 68), but puts this phenomenon in relation to infotainment and content trivialisation, and associates it with the “viral strategies, developed in the field of marketing (...) an important resource when feeding digital traffic, and the ability of new media to capture advertising” (2016: 67).

Faced with this definition that is limited to news headlines, other authors identify the phenomenon with a wider spectrum of techniques used to attract attention on social networks, which would fit the meaning offered by the digital edition of the Oxford dictionary: “content whose main purpose is to draw attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page”. [3]

Chen, Conroy and Rubin (2015) prefer this inclusive definition that is directly related to news sensationalism and popular journalism. In fact, they describe clickbait as a new form of “tabloidisation” of media content and identify the phenomenon with any content that seeks to increase traffic to a page, including odd and emotional images.

In line with this interpretation, Potthast, Köpsel, Stein and Hagen (2016) define clickbait as “a certain way of promoting web content that is designed to attract readers to click on an accompanying link and is mainly disseminated on social networks in the form of short messages that serve as a bait” (2016: 810).

Based on the previous studies, the object of study of clickbait can be delimited through a definition that unifies its characteristics. In this sense, it is understood as a dynamic communicative phenomenon that resorts to pseudo-journalistic contents produced with attention economy strategies that are close to sensationalism and infotainment. Its messages are designed as a bait and their purpose is more similar to that of marketing, through resources such as eye-catching headlines, direct appeal to the reader and superficial and exaggerated content.

From the elements that characterise the phenomenon, the headline stands out as the main bait, given that it is a determining criterion for news selection, even more so in the digital context where readers are flooded “with an amount of new information which they have neither the time nor the energy to process. Newspaper headlines help them get the maximum out of this informational flood—for the minimal cognitive investment” (Dor, 2003: 172). This way, they become a tactical element that is used not only to summarise and frame the news as they traditionally did (Bell, 1991), but also to generate the news selection that readers will make.

### 3. The defining variables of clickbait

Different bait strategies have been described as elements that identify clickbait. These techniques are described below based on the literature review and observation; and are presented as study variables applied to the subsequent empirical analysis. It was decided to include them in this theoretical framework because we consider they contribute to the conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

**Table 1. Analytical model for the defining variables of clickbait**

A. PRESENTATION VARIABLES	1. Incomplete information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absence of the most relevant data</li> <li>• Unanswered questions</li> <li>• Use of enumeration and lists</li> <li>• Deliberate ambiguity</li> </ul>
	2. Appeals expressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocative</li> <li>• Imperative</li> <li>• Singularisation of reader</li> </ul>
	3. Repetition and serialisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thematic reiteration</li> <li>• Reiteration of frames</li> <li>• Dosage of data in successive deliveries</li> </ul>
	4. Exaggeration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyperboles</li> <li>• Comparisons of superiority and superlatives</li> <li>• Neologism formed with prefix “super”</li> <li>• Intensifying adjectivisation</li> </ul>
B. CONTENT VARIABLES	5. Soft news	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soft or sensational content</li> <li>• Personal, emotional, episodic or anecdotal representation frames</li> </ul>

	6. Striking audiovisual elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shocking and/or odd photos and videos</li><li>• Use of funny memes</li><li>• Image manipulation</li></ul>
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Source: Authors' own creation

We have identified six variables and have divided them into two main categories (Table 1): content variables (A), which includes the formulas that are related to the clickbait resources used in thematic selection and, therefore, refer to the reality depicted in the message; and presentation variables (B), which refer to the expressive resources and narrative order used in the news stories. These proposal of content and presentation variables are interrelated without being exclusive, as explained below through a detailed conceptualisation of the six variables that help us to delimit the characteristics of clickbait.

### A. Presentation variables

**A1. Incomplete information** that prompts users to click on the link to know and/or understand it. The psychological foundation of this technique was addressed by Loewenstein (1994) in his analysis of the psychological mechanisms that trigger curiosity. According to his theory, curiosity is “a form of cognitively induced deprivation that arises from the perception of a gap in knowledge or understanding” (1994: 75). He called this vacuum an “information gap”. When attention is focused on an information gap, the recipient experiences a sense of deprivation that generates restlessness and discomfort, and that is only alleviated by obtaining the necessary data to fill the gap. Menon and Soman (2012) demonstrated the effectiveness of the use of this resource in the design of advertisements.

This strategy is specified in several formulas usually applied in news headlines on social networks.

- Absence of the most relevant information in the headline caused by the use of unresolved pronouns (Chen, Conroy, and Rubin, 2015) or deictic words that refer to people, events, places whose identification is postponed to the body of the news (Palau-Sampio, 2016). This strategy involves the use of deixis with the adverb “like this” (Palau-Sampio, 2016) as an introductory element of the description of an event. This type of headlines “do not advance any information but invite readers to discover the result of the subject for which they bait readers, with the adverb” (Palau-Sampio, 2016: 72). This formula disregards the traditional inverted pyramid structure that orders data according to their importance, offering the most important facts at the beginning of the narration, thus giving the reader sufficient clues to value the news and make a decision about the convenience of its reading.
- Use of unanswered questions whose answer is the key to the news. This type of headline generates “the impression that a mystery is about to be solved and the truth revealed” (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013: 188). This strategy aims to attract the reader’s attention by offering information that was not available before.
- Use of enumeration and lists. The news headline contains cardinal numbers or is written as an inventory so that readers have to click on the link to see the complete list. They are the so-called listicles (articles in the form of a list) addressed by Vijgen (2014). For example, “Four most

hated politicians”, “Five things you do wrong when driving”. Sometimes, there is no numbering, but the list format is implicit, as in the example: “Best techniques to make your bed”. For Vijgen, the success of this formula is related to people’s progressive loss of ability to concentrate: “the time a person can remain concentrated has decreased rapidly in the last ten years: falling from 12 to 5 minutes. This type of articles satisfies the needs of the average reader because it is simple and straight to the point” (2014: 105).

- Deliberate ambiguity: lack of clarity or precision in the writing of the headline intended to sow doubts in the reader. Occasionally, a misleading wordplay is used, a lexicon denoting intrigue and suspense or a confusingly structured phrase with striking elements. The following example taken from the subsequent empirical analysis exemplifies this confusing construction: “110,000 Euros from Donald Trump to ‘promote reading’ go to Catalonia”. The body of the news contradicts the headline as it explains a controversial advertising campaign to promote reading in Barcelona that aimed to send books to the White House to raise the cultural level of the US president. Silverman (2015) associates this technique with fake news and the publication of rumours or unproven facts, which are often mere unverified speculations.

**A2. Appealing expressions** that directly address the reader and demand a reaction. Vocatives and imperative phrases are used as a form of instruction. These types of messages seek interaction with the reader by asking them to perform an action, which is usually reading or viewing the subsequent information.

**A3. Repetition and serialisation:** reiteration of a publication to generate more interaction. Refers to the selection of news that generated many comments and reactions the first time they were disseminated or that are likely to be of interest to an important number of people and are used as a decoy. Serialisation also allows for the offering of fragmented information, the dosing of data or the offering novelties, even if they are small, knowing that the subject “sells”. By repeating the publication for several days, the news loses its status of “new”, but can continue to be profitable since it guarantees traffic to the web. In this way, the “presumption of commerciality”, in the words of Sánchez Noriega (1997: 68), is placed above traditional news values.

**A4. Exaggeration:** intensification or emphasis of a trait or action to encourage readers to pay it more attention than it deserves. It is a marketing technique that is used to increase the news worthiness of an event, by turning it into something exceptional by means of hyperboles or the use of superlatives and comparisons of superiority (Ekstrom, 2002, Molek-Kozakowska, 2012). In this sense, Palau-Sampio detected the abundance of neologisms introduced with the prefix “super”, the use of the adverb “more” and “intensifying adjectivisation (strange case, epic accidents)” as features of clickbait (2016: 74). Sometimes capital letters and exclamation or admiration signs are used to reinforce the emphatic meaning of words and simulate the expressiveness of oral language.

## **B. Content variables**

**B5 Use of soft news and sensationalist content.** The agenda of clickbait content abounds in the so-called soft news, applying the norm that Ramonet already detected in the case of television: “Insensibly, the laws of spectacle rule over information demands and rigour. Soft news (crime, sports,

happy-ended stories, anecdotes...) are often more important than hard news (political, economic or social issues of real importance)” (1999: 90). Subsequent research has distinguished between hard and soft news not only based on thematic areas but also taking into account their writing style and frames which, in the case of soft news, would be personal, emotional and episodic or anecdotal (Reinemann et al., 2013). These news stories do not have a legitimate public interest but encourage interaction by awakening the curiosity of the reader.

**B6 Striking audiovisual elements:** profuse use of the different image formats that social networks allow: photography, gallery of images, videos and even memes and gifs with spectacular, strange or impressive content, or that are advertised as such.

#### 4. Methods

Having delimited the phenomenon of clickbait from a theoretical point of view, with a proposed definition and conceptual characteristics, we present an experimental empirical study that allows to test, and in this case validate, the analytical model applied to clickbait contents. To this end, quantitative content analysis is performed on the news stories published on the social networks Twitter and Facebook by the two main digital newspapers in Spain: *elmundo.es* and *elpais.com* (according to comScore, 2017). These social networks were chosen because they are used by news media companies as platforms to develop innovative strategies (Noguera, 2010) and to attract readers to their websites.

The period of analysis includes a randomly chosen calendar week, from Monday to Sunday, between 15 and 21 May 2017. In total, 2,266 news items have been analysed in both social networks, with the following distribution: 726 items on Facebook (460 from @elpais and 266 from @elmundo) and 1,540 on Twitter (1,056 from @el\_pais and 484 from @elmundo). Although the one-week period is very limited, it was considered to be sufficient given the exploratory nature of the research and the high number of units analysed.

With regards to the comparison of results, a content analysis table was developed for each social network to collect the following information: identification data of the unit (URL, date and time of publication, and section where the message is located), the text of the publication, and social networks' own information: number of retweets, likes, replies on Twitter, and in the case of Facebook, number of reactions to the publication, comments and shares; and as a fundamental element for the research, the presence or absence of the variables that characterise clickbait as defined in detail in the theoretical framework of this study. Each message can contain more than one variable. In fact, this occurs in a high percentage of cases. Therefore, the total computation of the variables that characterise clickbait exceeds the number of messages that comprise the selected sample.

#### 5. Comparative analysis of the presence of clickbait in the social networks of *elpais.com* and *elmundo.es*

The Twitter account of *elmundo.es* newspaper has over 3 million followers (3,079,391, as of 24 January 2018). During the analysed period, it published 484 tweets, of which 185 contained clickbait resources, representing 38.2% of the total. The Facebook account of the same newspaper has one million less followers (2,008,769 as of 24 January 2018). During the week analysed, the newspaper published 266 times, of which 72 contained clickbait resources (27% of the total). Therefore, on



average, clickbait is present in 32.6% of the content published in the main social networks used by elmundo.es.

The figures of *El País* newspaper are significantly higher in terms of volume of followers, publication of messages and frequency of use of clickbait resources. With 6 and a half million followers (6,535,983 as of 24 January 2018), the Twitter account of the newspaper published 1,056 tweets during the week analysed, of which 605 contained these resources (53%), 14.8 points above its rival newspaper. Its Facebook account registers 3,863,971 followers (24 January 2018). In the analysed week, it published 460 times, of which 223 contained clickbait resources, representing 48.4% of the total, 21.4 more than elmundo.es. The general figures indicate, therefore, a significantly more intensive use of clickbait resources in the case of *El País*, so that more than half of its posts on social networks (50.7% on average) introduce characteristic variables of this type of content.

The differentiated distribution of the presence of clickbait resources according to day of the week does not allow us to draw significant conclusions. The research established as one of the initial hypotheses that a greater presence of clickbait resources would be published over the weekend due to the drop in institutional activity and the need to incorporate softer contents that compensate for the lack of hard news. However, this hypothesis cannot be verified given that the results are very heterogeneous and there is no more intensive use of these techniques during Saturday and Sunday.

**Table 2. Days with the highest frequency of use of clickbait resources**

elmundo.es	Facebook	Friday
	Twitter	Saturday
elpais.com	Facebook	Friday
	Twitter	Saturday

Source: Authors' own creation

At this point it is necessary to acknowledge a limitation of the research given that the sample period, one week, is not enough to identify reliable parameters that can detect trends according to the day in question. In addition, there is an informative fact that undoubtedly caused a distortion in the results: on Sunday, 21 May 2017, primary elections were held to elect the general secretary of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) in a context of great rivalry among candidates, which provoked a greater presence of political news content during that weekend. In fact, the Twitter and Facebook accounts of elpais.com registered on that Sunday the lowest proportion of clickbait resources for the entire week analysed. Despite these limitations, it is considered that the study maintains its validity in order to test the proposed analytical model, accompanied by examples that reinforce the definition of the study categories.

The results are presented below in two sections: the thematic sections and the detected clickbait strategies, according to the proposed analytical model.

### 5.1. Analysis by sections

Regarding the distribution of clickbait by sections, there is a huge diversity in the accounts of both newspapers. In the case of elmundo.es, the section with the highest percentage of clickbait on Twitter is "Spain" (26 tweets), followed by "Society" (25), "International" (19) and "Economy" (18).

However, for the social network Facebook, the distribution by sections is as follows: “Spain” (102), “International” (78), “Society” (55) and “Technology” (31). In *El País*, however, the section that generates the most content of this type on Twitter is “International” (100), followed by “People” (86), “Culture” (60) and “Verne” (53). Similar results are presented in Facebook, with the following distribution: “People” (29), “Verne” (20), “Culture” (19) and “International” (17). Therefore, in this aspect we did not find a fixed pattern, although it is noteworthy to highlight, in the case of *elpaís.com*, two sections that are among the four with the highest presence of clickbait contents: “People”, which focuses on “actors and actresses, models, singers, politicians, royalty, athletes”, and “Verne”, which focuses on discovering news on the Internet “always with wonder as a prism to frame reality”, according to the description of the website. This fact confirms the research results carried out by Palau-Sampio on clickbait and tabloid journalism strategies in *El País*. The researcher highlights the “Verne” section as a model of success in attracting readers: “seven months after its launch, it represented 12% of access to the digital edition, with 75% of its original traffic coming from social networks, mainly mobile phones” (2016: 67).

In both newspapers the presence of the International section is among the four with the highest use of clickbait in both social networks. A more detailed analysis shows that, to a large extent, these news area about banal issues, crime and anecdotes, typical of the so-called soft news (B5), which demonstrates the value of curiosities over other criteria of newsworthiness more typical of hard news such as topicality, proximity, notoriety of protagonists, conflict, number of people affected and transcendence (Wolf, 1987).

An example, Figure 1 shows a news event in the United States where a police officer, after undergoing a DNA test, discovered his Sub-Saharan origin and began to suffer discrimination.

**Figure 1. Screenshot of @el\_pais (16/05/2017)**



Source: @el\_pais

## 5.2. Main clickbait strategies in elpais.com and elmundo.es

The resource used the most by both newspapers to favour clickbait on social networks is to present incomplete information (A1): the headline omits the fundamental fact, or the most relevant data reported by the news, generating an “information gap” (Lowenstein, 1994) that triggers the curiosity of readers and makes them click to end their uncertainty. 46.25% of clickbait news has this feature.

Sometimes, abundant data or clues are offered about the protagonist of the information, but this is insufficient to deduce their identity, which is relegated to the body of the news. The Facebook post shown in Figure 2 offers information about an expanding fashion company that competes with the two main Spanish brands but avoids giving its name. This confirms the strategy of the medium to omit the data so that readers have to visit the website if they want to find it out. In addition, the news appeals to the reader directly with the tagline: “Yes, it is in your city for sure”, which brings the news closer to the reader and makes him feel addressed (A2).

**Figure 2. Screenshot of *El País* Facebook page (20/05/2017)**



Source: [www.facebook.com/elpais](http://www.facebook.com/elpais)

Within this variable, we identify other strategies that pursue the same objective, like the use of suspense language, a well-known resource in literature and film, where the order and rhythm of the narrated story is altered to generate greater expectation in the reader. Figure 3 shows an example in which suspense is generated by the interruption of the sentence, graphically indicated by the ellipsis.

**Figure 3. Screenshot of @elmundoes (15/05/2017)**



Source: @elmundoes

Another technique used extensively to hide relevant information from the reader and arouse curiosity is the formulation of a headline in the form of a question, so that readers have to clicking on the link to find the answer to the question, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Screenshot of @elmundoes (17/05/2017)



Source: @elmundoes

This post also resorts to repetition or serialisation (A3) since it was published twice on the same social network. The interest of an important part of the audience to know the formula that will be followed in school examinations, which affects a good number of schoolchildren, makes this news to persist as the medium knows that it will continue generating traffic to its website.

The second technique in terms of frequency of appearance is the use of trivial content typical of sensationalist journalism (B5). This resource is present in 41.05% of the analysed messages, although with a clear disproportion across media: elpaís.com uses it in 64.8% of the messages identified as clickbait, while elmundo.com only uses it in 17.2%. Therefore, there is a difference of 47.6 points between both media.

Within soft news, there is an abundant presence of information about celebrities, famous people who thanks to their media visibility capture the attention of the public towards aspects of their professional and personal life. This is the case of the news story shown the image 5, which offers information and a picture of the wedding of a well-known actor participating in a successful American series.

Figure 5. Screenshot of *El País* Facebook page (15/05/2017)



Source: [www.facebook.com/elpais](http://www.facebook.com/elpais)

This resource is intensely used, especially in the Twitter account of [elpais.com](http://elpais.com), where we find abundant posts starring very diverse celebrities:

- “Sofia will be dressed in school uniform: grey skirt, white shirt with tie and blue blazer” (@el\_pais)
- “Celebrities are also fans, and these 22 photos show it” (@el\_pais)

Some news media take advantage of the vicarious fame of famous people’s partners to produce a story whose headline incorporates the name of popular characters:

- “By dint of roasts and mate, the partners of Messi and Suarez became friends. And opened a shoe store in Barcelona” (@el\_pais)

Police reports also include this thematic strategy. Already in 1982, De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach identified the functional value of police reports to attract large volumes of public, in agreement with Rodríguez Borges (2007): “Impelled by the objective of maximising audiences and benefits, the media discovered very soon that the stories about events, crimes, catastrophes and other misfortunes were especially effective in capturing and retaining the attention of the public”.

This is the case of news stories such as:

- “An octogenarian woman allegedly killed her husband, who suffered from cancer, by banging him 14 times with a crutch” (@el\_pais).

Curiosities and sensationalist events (B5) are trivial but also stand out in the agenda of clickbait. An example of this is the following story published in the Twitter account of *El País*:

- “Went to buy a watch and they treated her like a beggar. After learning who she was, Chanel apologises “(@el\_pais)
- “How the Portuguese Prime Minister came to babysit the four children of a journalist” (@el\_pais)

Repetition and serialisation (A3) are the third most used resource by both news media to achieve greater impact of their publications. Popular news stories are published again or are expanded with additional information to take advantage of the bait effect of an issue that is attractive to readers. 23.7% of the news posted on Facebook and Twitter had already been published earlier in the analysed week. The distribution by social networks and media outlets yields disparate results: the account that uses this resource the most is the Twitter account of El País with 46.2% of the repeated or serialised entries, followed by the Twitter account of *El Mundo* with 28.6%. The Facebook accounts of both newspapers are very far behind: *El Mundo* registered 13.8% of repetition and *El País* only 6.2%.

Typically, news serialisation occurs when the issues addressed are considered serious or important and must be extended and developed in successive instalments (Martini, 2000). In the cases that are presented here, they are minor news stories but their potential to attract public interest causes them to appear repeatedly.

The news story shown in Figure 6 appeared for the first time on Monday 15 May but it is repeated a total of three times throughout the week, appearing for the last time on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup>.

**Figure 6. Screenshot of @elmundoes (21/05/2017)**



Source: Source: @elmundoes

The cyberattack that affected 150 countries and that encrypted the information of computers had generated great expectation given the enormous number of potential victims. The news story, through a process of personalisation, identified the young man who would have contributed to neutralise the attack by presenting him as a hero. Given the interest aroused by the topic, it is noted that the repetition strategy aims to get more visits to the web page of the newspaper and generate more interaction.

Images 7 and 8 show a serialised news story (A3) with a great potential of interest. It is a news story about the job offer made a large supermarket that announced the hiring of 6,700 people. The story was posted on two successive days, thus taking advantage of the economic and employment situation -the unemployment rate in Spain at the time of publication reached 17.7%- to generate traffic to the website. In the repetition (Figure 8), the headline that accompanies the story reflects to a great extent the strategy of publishing incomplete information to encourage readers to read the news story on the website.

**Figure 7. Screenshot of @el\_pais (17/05/2017)**



Source: @el\_pais

**Figure 8. Screenshot of @el\_pais (18/05/2017)**



Source: @el\_pais



The use of eye-catching audiovisual elements (B6) is in fourth place as a strategic clickbait resource. It is present in 7.4% of the news stories, although with a marked difference between media. This strategy is more common in the social networks of *elmundo.es*, where it is present in 11.1% of the stories, than in those of *elpais.com*, where it is present in 3.8% of the entries.

One of the stories including eye-catching audiovisual elements is the one shown in Figure 9. This story uses a screenshot of the video that shows a child who commits suicide in the US lying on the ground after being harassed by his classmates. The publication of the video does not necessary contribute to the understanding of the news story but provokes curiosity and morbidity. In addition, it disregards the norms for the treatment of suicides that recommend avoiding the publication of images and details of the suicide. With this story *El Mundo* generated 1,569 reactions, 91 comments and 216 shares.

**Figure 9. Screenshot of the *El Mundo* Facebook page (16/05/2017).**



Source: [www.facebook.com/elmundo](http://www.facebook.com/elmundo)

6.65% of the news stories (8.6% in the case of *elmundo.es* and 4.7% in *elpaís.com*) use exaggeration (A4) with the intention of increasing the value, importance and significance of the narrated news event. Sometimes, the exaggerated attribution of qualities goes beyond the limits of reality and even of credibility (Figure 9).

Figure 10. Screenshot of @el\_pais (15/05/2017)



Source: @el\_pais

In some cases, the hyperbole may favour social alarm by turning an infrequent negative event into a generalised problem. This is the case of the news story shown in Figure 10, which is an effect enhanced by the fact that the same news appeared repeated (A3) on different days.

Figure 11. Screenshot @elmundoes (17/05/2017)



Source: @elmundoes

On many occasions, several of the analysed techniques appear simultaneously in the same story. An example is shown in Figure 11, which hyperbolically promotes the video of what it calls “the world’s best own goal”. The soft news content (B5) also includes exaggeration (A4) and an image (B6) that, as the entry says, “must be seen”. To see the video and satisfy the curiosity, the user has to click on the link to the complete news story, which only offers one photograph as bait.

Figure 12. Screenshot of @el\_pais (17/05/2017)



Source: @el\_pais

## 6. Conclusions

Clickbait, as a phenomenon arising from the adaptation of the media industry to the digital environment, is a strategy used by news media companies that affects the quality of news through the use of banal and exaggerated stories that integrate expressive resources that serve as bait on social networks. In its practice, not only popular media participate, but also news media traditionally considered as serious.

The analysis of the stories published on the social networks Facebook and Twitter by the two most important newspapers in Spain, *El País* and *El Mundo*, allows us to detect a significant presence of incomplete information, bait headlines, hyperboles, pre-eminence of soft news in the construction of the agenda, and reiteration of viral messages, as the main resources used to generate expectation in readers and stimulate their curiosity with the objective of increasing traffic to the news media's websites. In this way, clickbait is present in a high percentage of the messages and in a great diversity of sections, so it can be recognised as a phenomenon that is functionally used to gain visits.

The model proposed to analyse clickbait aims to generate a method to delve into its detection. However, the reach of this study has to be exploratory given the novel nature and mutability of the phenomenon. In this sense, we propose the following future lines of research:

- The diachronic study of this tendency to observe its evolution, understanding that the saturation of some news marketing formulas can lead people to avoid them, can cause their rejection by algorithms that filter news on social networks, and can provoke the modification of current tactics and the appearance of new ones.
- The examination of the relationship established between clickbait and the most viewed and shared news in the construction of mixed gatekeeping, valuing the capacity of these news stories to generate the public interaction that favours their viral dissemination. In the same sense, it is necessary to carry out a differentiated study of the effectiveness of the different clickbait strategies defined here when it comes to redirecting traffic from social networks to news websites.
- The vigilant analysis of the consequences of these resources in the way citizens inform themselves, news quality and the degree of knowledge of the reality that the media provide, since clickbait can be a valuable technique to attract users to the web “but could imply, in the mid and long terms, an abandonment of the basic principles of journalism and, therefore, a loss of credibility” (García Orosa et al., 2017: 1.271).

Given the incipient nature of clickbait research and the evolution of this communicative phenomenon, the variables proposed in this study should not be considered as a closed list but as a starting point that will undoubtedly require verification, correction and expansion in subsequent research. However, it has been considered necessary to define and delimit the concept and characteristics of clickbait to advance in such a novel object of study.

**\*Funded research:** This article is the product of the research project titled “Politainment in the post-truth environment: new narratives, clickbait and gamification” (reference CSO2017-84472-R), funded by the National Plan for Research, Development and Innovation of the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain, Call 2017.

## 7. Notes

[1] InfoAdex places the Internet in second place in investment volume, experiencing a growth of 12.6% in 2016, with an advertising investment of 1,407.8 million euros compared to 1,249.8 million euros in 2015. On the contrary, advertising investment in newspapers registered an investment of 617.4 million euros, which is 6.3% less than the previous year.

[2] In the case of computer science, research focuses primarily on designing automatic clickbait detection systems. Understanding that its success and its subsequent massive use on social networks can suppose a type of spam, a solution is sought to help users and social networks to filter messages (Potthast et al., 2016). In fact, Facebook has introduced several changes to the algorithm that ranks news stories with the aim of combating the pre-eminence of clickbait headlines. Those responsible for the modification point out that it filters out those news stories whose headline omits information that is needed to understand the context of the article and whose headline exaggerates the article to generate misleading expectations in the reader (In Sánchez, 2016).

[3] <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/clickbait>

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### How to cite this article in bibliographies / References

A Bazaco, M Redondo, P Sánchez-García (2019): “Clickbait as a strategy of viral journalism: conceptualisation and methodst”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, pp. 94 to 115.

<http://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1323/06en.html>

DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2018-1323en](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2018-1323en)

Article received on 25 October 2018. Accepted on 21 December.

Published on 3 January 2019.