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Use of clickbait in the online news media of the 28 EU member countries

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Abstract
Introduction. This article offers an analysis of "clickbait", one of the latest strategies employed by online news media to lure users into clicking a hyperlink through the use of non-journalistic values. **Methods.** The study is based on the analysis of the news headlines found on the front and inner pages of general-information newspapers of the 28 EU member countries. **Results.** The main consequence of the use of clickbait is that the news headline has gone from being just a key element to provide information to also crucial element to persuade the reader to stay on the page for as long as possible. **Discussion.** The results confirm the presence of clickbait in most of the newspapers analysed, to the detriment of traditional journalistic values in the writing and editing of headlines. **Conclusions.** The study concludes that general-information newspapers in the 28 EU member countries generate clicks not through quality content but rather, in nearly half the cases, through catchy, provocative and sensationalist front-page headlines that aim to exploit the curiosity in users.

Keywords: Journalism; audiences; cyber media; digital communication; Internet; ICT.

Contents: 1. Introduction. 2. Methods. 2.1. Objective, population and sample. 2.2. Analysis. 2.3. Data collection instruments. 3. Results. 4. Discussion and Conclusions. 5. Limitations and future research. 6. Acknowledgments. 7. References.

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1. Introduction

In the liquid media ecosystem (Bauman, 2007) that has been configured in the network society (Castells, 1996), information circulates at a great speed, virtually in real-time (Guallar, 2011), and the news production of cyber media, as part of the process of adaptation to the new scenario, follows the dominant constant-news-updating logic that has set in motion an uninterrupted cycle (Rodríguez-Martínez, Codina & Pedraza-Jiménez, 2010; Casero-Ripollés, 2012), in which the efforts of news producers focus on persuading users to click on hyperlink headlines. News media organisations have had to face a process of mediamorphosis (Fidler, 1997) or remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) to adapt themselves to the functioning of a communicative environment in which they must be present because it is there where users seek information (Jarvis, 2009). Changes in the news production process in the network society (Harcup, 2013) interweave old and new media (Jenkins, 2006) and derive in a hybrid system of media organisations and news production practices (Chadwick, 2013; Hamilton, 2016).

The new news-making model combines immediacy and depth (Bradshaw, 2007) to ensure users will remain for the longest time possible on the medium's website, which translates into economic benefits. The profound change that is taking place in news and entertainment media offers a prime example of how mass collaboration is revolutionising the economy of the media (Flores, 2009) and is changing the production model, not only its routines, but also the journalists and citizens who have an impact on the final product. Gatekeepers and Gatewatchers (Canavilhas, 2010) are now involved in the production of news.

In this process, journalism, in the various forms that have emerged since the advent of the World Wide Web (publicly introduced in 1993) until today, is experiencing profound changes (López & Campos, 2015; Hermida 2013), while both traditional and born-digital media become consolidated as a regular feature of daily life in the society of information and knowledge (Deuze, 2012). The production and distribution of news is experiencing a permanent transformation in online media, which gives journalists constant and renewed challenges that require not only competencies and digital skills but also creativity, continuous innovation (De Lara et al., 2015) and challenges in an emerging ethics (Ward, 2016). Digitisation offers journalism new options and technical characteristics (Casero, 2012), but also threats to its quality, which is known by journalists (Mompart et al., 2015). While the number of physical devices connected to the network continues to grow exponentially (Newman, 2016), some comparative studies in European media companies also highlight the decline of the quality of online information (Ramírez et al., 2015) and, since the 1990s, warn about the growing business or tabloid logic of news media (Harbers, 2016).

Without a doubt, dealing with the concept of quality in journalism is a complex challenge based on the values of truthfulness, accuracy and impartiality (Schudson, 2003), which Kümpel and Springer (2015) have summarised in five large dimensions: relevance, completeness, diversity, impartiality and accuracy. Several authors have reported the decreasing quality of journalistic information due to economic and political pressures (Picard, 2004; Casero-Ripollés, 2014) and the audience perceives it so (Newman et al., 2015). However, quality is not only affected by these pressures but also by "technological "inevitability", based on which supposedly innovative decisions (Masip, 2016) constitute renewed threats to journalistic quality. The strategies that are designed to trap users and get them to click hyperlinks and neglect the values of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001) are a good example of this trend. These tactics involve sensationalist drifts (Redondo, 2011) and, on many

occasions, dissolve the classical boundaries between journalism and advertising. In newsrooms that are undergoing a process of convergence (Deuze, 2009) there are versatile journalists, with renewed yet hardly specialised profiles (Scolari et al., 2008), who find it difficult to create the added value required by the public (Picard, 2012) from the first word of the headline. Global news flows (McNair, 2006) impose renewed logics that target younger users, the ones with more access to online media through social networks, and privilege customisation (Thurman, 2011) in its different dimensions and forms. The bet for brief and concise language in the current environment of social networks (Huang, 2009), insofar as it orients news consumption in the digital age among young people (Casero, 2012), affects the orientation of news headline-making.

In the newsrooms that have changed to the rhythm of the transformations of online media (Boczkowski, 2004; Brannon, 2008; Domingo, 2008; Küng, 2008; Krumsvik, 2009; Steensen, 2009), which are increasingly circular and concentrated in few sections and with work schemes that will change more with the evolution of news media production, organisation and management (García-Santamaría et al., 2013), news headline-making currently appears to be guided by information criteria, with a concentration in a small number of people who supervise them and edit news stories -in many cyber media this process does not exist and the author writes the titles of his/her own stories without subsequent supervision-, but it is also guided by the techniques that are most successful among the users who consume more information.

Given that many web search results derive from the words contained in the headline, which is the anchor text of origin of hyperlinks (Salaverría & Cores, 2005), online media try to write catchy headlines, which in some cases may be exaggerated and deserve to be called “clickbait headlines”, i.e. headlines that lure users to click on them.

In online media, the headline, which has always been a key part of journalistic pieces, has become a nuclear element because its traditional functions have been expanded by the hypertext (Salaverría, 2005). The distance that exists between the journalistic stories that are better ranked by journalists and the preferences of users (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013), which are measured based on the number of views by online media, has made journalists to make greater efforts in the writing of headlines to find formulas to persuade users into consuming the pieces they consider to be more relevant. This is not new because the headline, which performs several functions in the journalistic text, has always facilitated or hindered the attraction of readers (Sánchez, 1999; Pou-Amérigo, 2004) through different techniques (Blom; Hasen, 2015). What is more innovative is the techniques applied in online news media in this phase of maturation (Salaverría, 2015).

Since almost two decades ago, the people responsible for headline-making in major newspapers highlighted the rules imposed by technology (Zorrilla, 1996: 377). In recent years the objective of attracting the reader not only as a subject that interprets the news but, above all, as a consumer through the traffic generated on the webpage (Salaverría, 2005: 151), has strongly modified the wording of headlines (Palau, 2013, 2016).

Recent research on European online news media (García & López, 2015) highlight the significant growth of headlines as transmitters of front-page news, which are hypertextual indicators of the different reading proposals developed in the inner pages, and above all as elements to improve search engine optimisation and positioning. In the digital media, the diversification of the traditional roles in charge of summarising and attracting the reader into the story is achieved through an adaptation to the characteristics of the web that cause modifications in the different elements of the headline and

in journalists' titling strategies. Technology is seductive when its offer manages to connect with human vulnerabilities (Tukle, 2012), i.e., the new technological dimensions open up new avenues for headline-making to accommodate the expectations and the intervention of the receiver in titling itself, but classic journalistic values must coexist with the compulsive search strategies to determine the time spent by users on the website, for which the headline is a very valuable tool. These recent techniques include "click-baiting" or headlines whose main objective is to lure the user and whose presence was warned by the recent issue of *Journalism* (2016) in the article titled "The Future of Journalism: Risks, threats and opportunities". In this sense, some studies already constitute a kind of anti- clickbait movement, which proposes detection and blocking systems for clickbait headlines (Chen, Conroy & Rubin, 2015; Chakraborty, Paranjape & Kakarla, 2015; Anand, Chakraborty & Park, 2016; Potthast, Köpsel, Stein & Hagen, 2016).

This article is part of these studies on headlines (Blom; Hasen, 2015; MolekKozakowska, 2014, among the most recent) and analyses the use of click-baiting in newspapers of the 28 countries that make up the European Union.

2. Methods

Content analysis was used to collect data from the headlines placed on the main and inner pages of general-information newspapers from the 28 EU member countries.

2.1. Objective, population and sample

The main objective of this research is the study of the use the clickbait headline as a strategy to lure users to click on hyperlinks.

The sample used for this study is composed of the leading general information newspapers in each of the 28 EU member countries, which has been validated in previous studies (Peña-Fernández et al., 2016). The sample of news media has been selected based on the circulation data audited by agencies belonging to the IFABC (International Federation of Audit Bureaux of Circulations) and the European Journalism Centre and Eurotopics. The final list of the news media included in the sample, is ordered from more to less circulation, is as follows: «Bild» (Germany), «The Sun» (United Kingdom), «Kronen Zeitung» (Austria), «Ouest-France» (France), «De Telegraaf» (Netherlands), «Corriere della Sera» (Italy), «Fakt Gazeta Codzienna» (Poland), «Helsingin Sanomat» (Finland), «El País» (Spain), «Afton bladet» (Sweden), «Blesk» (Czech Republic), «Slovens ke Novice» (Eslovenia), «Het Laatste Nieuws» (Belgium), «Blikk» (Hungary), «Click» (Romania), «Correio da Manhã» (Portugal), «Irish Independent» (Ireland), «24 Sata», (Croatia), «Nový Cas» (Slovakia), «Politiken» (Denmark), «Luxemburger Wort» (Luxemburg), «Trud» (Bulgaria), «Postimees» (Estonia), «Latvijas Avize» (Latvia), «Lietuvos Rytas» (Lithuania), «Ta Nea» (Greece), «Times of Malta» (Malta) and «Philelefteros» (Cyprus).

The sample of news article whose headlines would be analysed, was selected with the composite week method, which has been used in recent studies (Camacho et al., 2014) and has been audited by Riffe, Aust and Lacy (1993). The selection started on February 26 and ended on 24 March, comprising a total of 140 editions of European newspapers and a total of 840 texts.

2.2. Analysis

Click-baiting has been identified in media such as *Upworthy*, *Upsocl* and *BuzzFeed*, among others (Dans, 2015) but there is no academic consensus on the term yet. Recent research identifies it as "content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page" (Chen, Conroy &, 2015).

For this study, "clickbait", also known as "linkbait" or "listicles", is understood as a news headline that does not respond to traditional journalistic criteria and whose ultimate goal is to keep the receiver in the webpage for as long as possible, not to inform. In particular, a clickbait headline would have as its main objective the marketing and dissemination of news, while the journalistic headline would maintain the role of informing users. Thus, bait would respond to the production criteria of an advertising slogan but not to the basic guidelines of news production. The following examples will contribute to the differentiation between the two types of headlines:

-Informative headline: "First ceasefire agreement in five years of war has come into effect in Syria" (*El País*, Spain).

-Clickbait headline: Да мълчиш, или си мъртъв, крещял бияч от Околовръстното personalen (<Trud>, Bulgaria)

Therefore, clickbait headlines 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 as the remainder news is too short.

The unit of analysis in the study was the main headline on the frontpage of each of the journals and the inner headline corresponding to the same news story. The analysis sheet was especially designed for this research and therefore understands the headline as the gate of access to information and as a journalistic element that should provide the most important information for the receiver from the point of view of newsworthiness, and its main theme should coincide with the theme of the news. While front-pages are no longer the only sources of access to digital media (Desideri, 2016), they continue to be important not only due to the traffic they generate but also due to the revenues they generate by luring and maintaining users on the website. Multi-titling is practiced in digital media so that each journalist writes for each piece of news, at least, two headlines. This research examines the two main headlines: the cover headline and the inner-page headline.

2.3. Data collection instruments

The tool designed for the collection of data was identical in both cases and had the following categories of content analysis based on the features that journalism precepts **[2]** assume as characteristic of informative headlines in cyber media:

a) There is identification between the content of the headline and the body of the news story. The headline, being the gateway to the information, the announcement of the news, should coincide with the topic and perspective offered in the body of the news to avoid deception.
b) There is correspondence between the headline and the six basic questions in the news. The information headline offers the most relevant data of the news as an advance to content.

c) The headline reports on an event. It is an informative text, so a fundamental requirement is that it must report on a real event, which is what differentiates it from other texts such as literary texts.
d) The headline responds to the criteria of newsworthiness. It is the first journalistic text witch which the receiver has contact and the most important text so it must respond to news values, as selection elements in journalistic information.
e) The headline makes sense by itself. The main objective of journalism is to report not the creation of suspense, so that it must provide the reader with complete and understandable information.
f) The headline tells the main idea of the story. The headline traditionally coincides with the lead of the news because, somehow, it advances the main information, in particular in the case of online media in which the receiver must click to get to the body of the news.
g) The headline privileges information against creation and emotions. The fundamental purpose of journalism is to inform, not to stimulate sensations.
h) The headline favours information over simple curiosity. Thus, the headline's level of information or intentional lack thereof is measured.

Thus, a journalistic headline would be one that informs about the main event of the news, that contains news values, responds to one or more of the W's, and makes reference to the main idea of the story. On the other hand, a clickbait headline would be one that favours the creation of emotions, curiosity over information.

The following analysis sheet (where 1 refers to presence and 0 to absence) was created for the analysis of headlines:

Item	Response
1. The headline content coincides with the remainder of the news story	Yes/No
2. The headline responds to the W´s	Yes/No
3. The headline reports on an event	Yes/No
4. The headline responds to the criteria of newsworthiness	Yes/No
5. The headline makes sense by itself	Yes/No
6. The headline refers to the main idea of the story.	Yes/No
7. The headline privileges information over creation of emotions	Yes/No
8. The headline favours information over simple curiosity	Yes/No
Observations of the encoder	

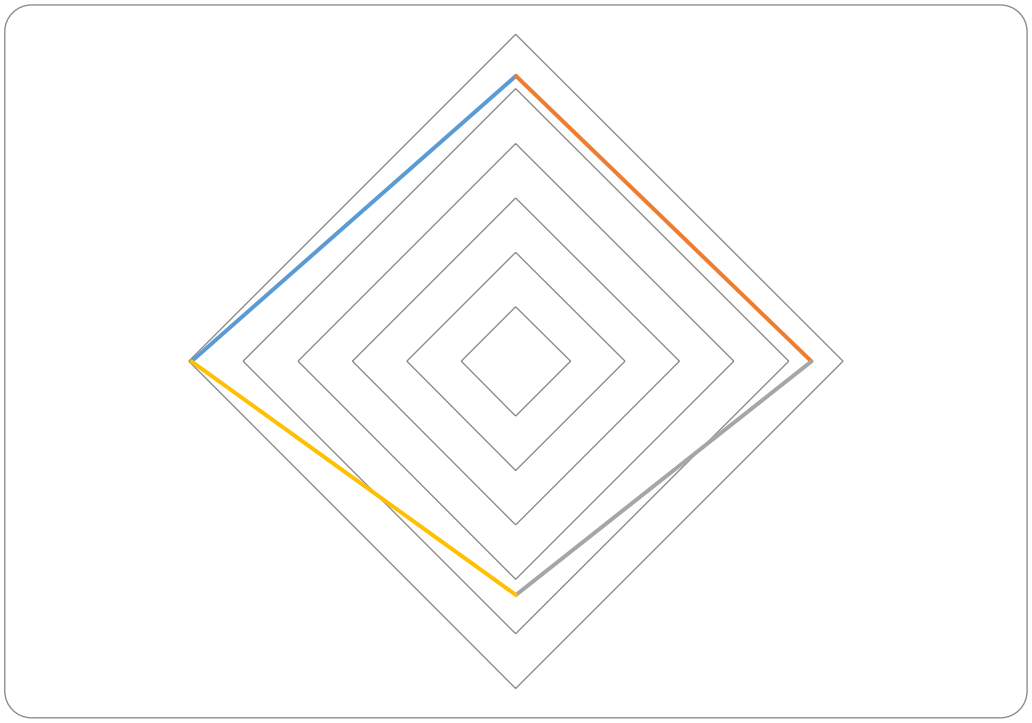
All data were extracted independently by two researchers and later discussed to achieve the highest possible level of reliability.

3. Results

The data reflect clearly identifiable trends towards the use of clickbait in the sample of European news media.

The highest percentages are recorded in the sections "3. The headline reports on an event" (54.2%) and "6. The headline refers to the main idea of the story" (with 59.52%) as shown in Figure 1. There sections are followed by the categories "1. The headline content coincides with the remainder of the news story" (58.33%) and "2. The headline responds to the W's" (52.37%). A little below are the categories "4. The headline responds to the criteria of newsworthiness" and "5. The headline makes sense by itself" (both with 42.85%), as well as "7. The headline privileges information over creation of emotions". The section with the lowest values was "8. The headline favours information over simple curiosity" (27.37%), as shown in Figure 2.

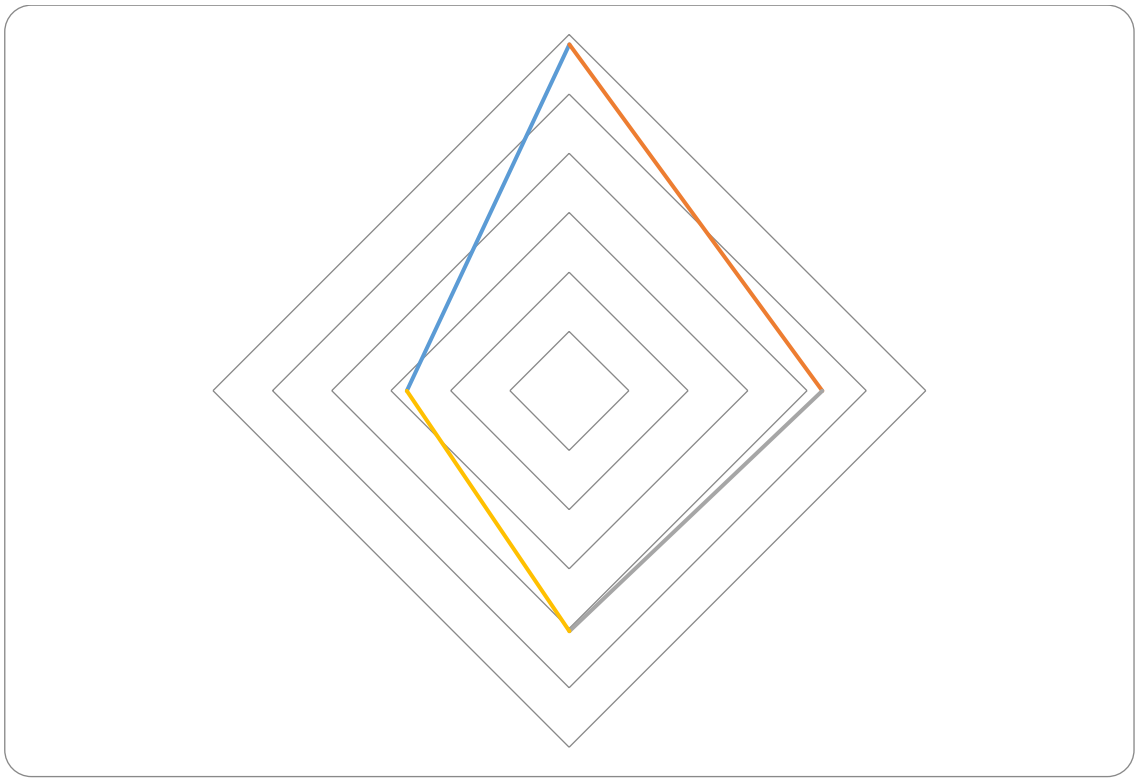
Figure 1. Traditional elements of the journalistic headline



Source: Authors' own creation

Based on the previous findings, it is necessary to emphasise a series of ideas that stand out from the analysis. While only about a quarter of the news headlines of the 28 European media favours information against curiosity, and 60% of the news headlines privileges sensations and emotions over information (40.47% does privilege information over the creation of emotions), less than half of them have correspondence with the basic W's in journalism. At the same time, despite that about less than two-thirds of headlines report on a fact, tell the main idea of the news and are identified by the text of the news, about two-thirds of the headlines make no sense by themselves (42.84% does make sense by themselves, while 57.16% does not) nor responds to the criteria of newsworthiness (42.84% does respond to the criteria of newsworthiness, while 57.16% does not respond to these criteria).

Figure 2. Elements that privilege click-baiting

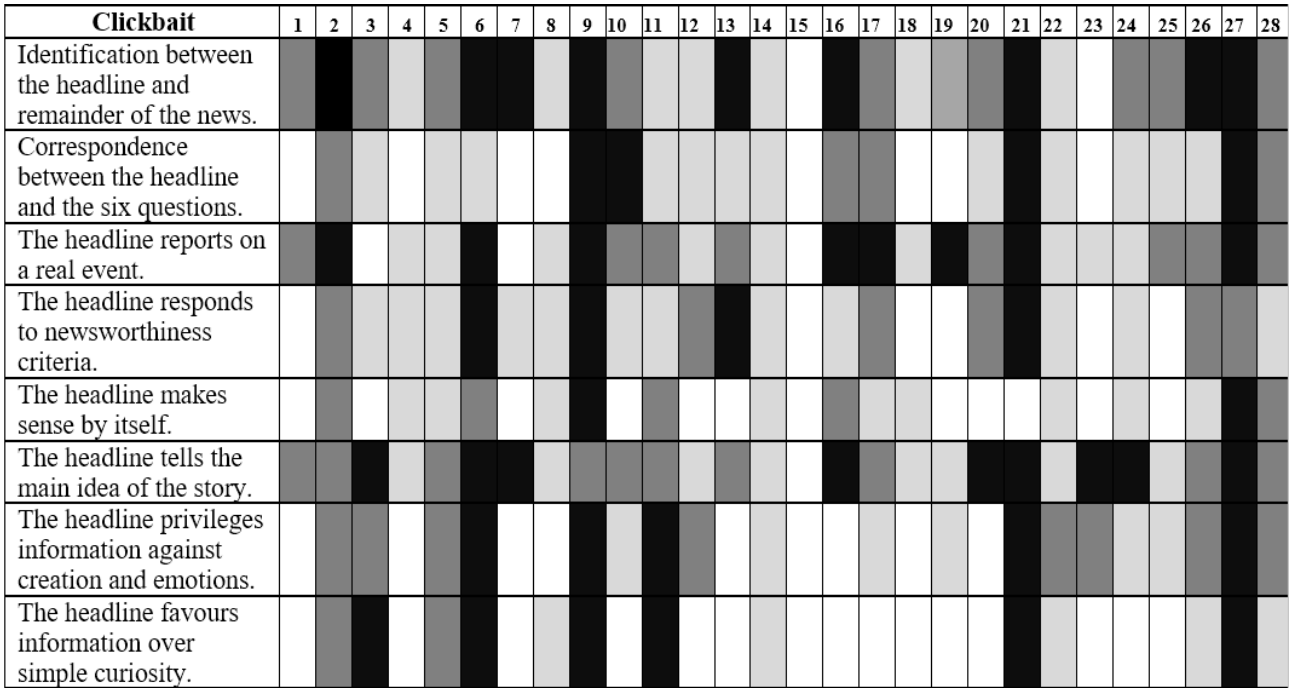


Source: Authors' own creation

The largest part of sample of headlines of the 28 news media under analysis does not respond to the basic journalistic questions nor to the criteria of newsworthiness, nor make sense by themselves, nor tell the main story of the news, nor privilege information over feelings and opinions, nor favour information over curiosity. Therefore, we can say that the studied headlines do report on actual news that are present in the reminder of the news, but from a "tabloid" point of view since they privilege emotions, feelings and curiosity, without taking into account the basic journalistic questions when choosing the theme, nor the criteria of newsworthiness, making the reader to reach a news piece whose headline story does not match the story present in the remainder of the piece

Binary contingency table with data obtained from the analysis of clickbait in European news media

Based on the data obtained, we cannot confirm clear differences by the geographic origin of the news medium, as shown in table 1, but two trends are noticeable. The first is towards the widespread use of click-baiting because, to a greater or lesser extent, it affects eight of every ten online media in the sample. And, secondly, the clear trend of some of the analysed media to use click-baiting as a common tool in their main news. Four news media stand out: «Click» (Romania), «Ouest-France» (France), «Helsingin Sanomat» (Finland) and «Blikk» (Hungary). In a second level, the media that stand out are «24 Sata», (Croatia), «Postimees» (Estonia) and «Trud» (Bulgaria).



100% (3/3)	66% (2/3)	66% (2/3)	100% (3/3)
No: white	No: light grey	Yes: Dark grey	Yes: Black

Source: Authors' own creation

On the opposite side are three newspapers, again, with no apparent geographic link, whose inclination towards click-baiting is virtually non-existent, since they meet almost 100% of the criteria marked as journalistic and, except on rare occasions, do not seek to generate curiosity in the reader through the concealment of information, suspense or emotion, but focus on the transmission of the main information in the news headlines: «Corriere della Sera» (Italy); «El País» (Spain), «Luxemburger Wort» (Luxembourg), «Times of Malta» (Malta).

4. Discussion and conclusions

In the early years of digital journalism, the main page was the natural route of access to the news media. However, the advances of the web have led users to enter through different places. In 2014 the leaking of "The New York Times Innovation Report" indicated that traffic from the home page of the *New York Times* between 2011 and 2013 fell to half (Benton, 2014). In March 2016, the same newspaper said that it was still looking for formulas for the promotion of the first page (Wang, 2016). In this common search in the digital news media of different countries, there has been, in recent months, an increasingly important use of appealing headlines, which are an important element in traditional journalism, in the digital news media as an element to attract readers. In this way, one of the dysfunctions of journalism is called "clickbait", understood as headlines that abandon the principles of quality journalism and only seek to keep the reader on the website to obtain more economic returns.

This article performed an in-depth analysis of the use of clickbait in digital media in the European Union and discovered common patterns of behaviour among the analysed news media, which allowed us to detect the trends mentioned in the introduction towards the search of new strategies to catch the user through titling and, in recent months, particularly through the so-called «clickbait». The click is sought through a headline that makes no sense by itself, that does not complete the information or the referred event and, therefore, creates suspense and invites the reader to read the full news article not through the creation of interest in the news itself but through the dissatisfaction created by the lack of information about the story in the headline. In addition, the majority of the analysed headlines reinforce this suspense by privileging curiosity over information and, secondly, by privileging emotions over information. Finally, four of every 10 headlines are misleading because they make no reference to the real subject of the news although they do not always correspond to fake news.

Therefore, the analysed media seek the click but not through quality information but, in many cases, through the creation of suspense, curiosity, excitement or the sensationalist treatment of a subject. «Clickbait» is performed primarily in the headlines place in the main page based on two fundamental elements:

a) A sensationalist approach to a subject, for example terrorism.
b) Through the creation of curiosity in the viewer and therefore, through a headline that does not inform about the fundamental event of the news (sometimes it informs about a secondary event or no event at all) and it make no sense by itself. Its main function is to create curiosity and cause the reader to click on the link to make profit.

In this process, the traditional journalistic criteria for the creation of a headline are relegated to the background. The benefits of technological advances are used for the creation of hyper-textual headlines almost immediately after the news event takes place. However, in almost half of the cases, the primary function of reporting is abandoned, and the deadline focuses on catching and retaining the reader in the webpage for as long as possible. This role differs from the traditional attitude of journalism to attract the reader since this was used as a means to lead the recipient to information, while in the case of cyber media, the main objective is to turn the user into a commodity to sell to advertising companies, regardless of the transmitted knowledge or information.

The use of these techniques, which is still a minority but has a significant presence in the major European newspapers, moves journalism ways from its traditional functions and values as well as from its basic principles of truthfulness and accuracy (it does not respond to the content of the news and sometimes is not even a real event). Clickbait headlines neither describe a relevant event, not even the most important aspect of the news, but usually focus on a secondary aspect. Completeness, diversity, fairness and, above all, accuracy are absent since in some cases these headlines do not even make reference to information contained in the news piece.

The analysed technique also breaks with the traditional production routines since the need to capture the user leads to the use of titling strategies that focus on making the internet user to click on the hyper link to the detriment of traditional journalistic values and, even, the existence of a news event.

There is a tendency towards click-baiting in eight out of every ten of the European news media analysed, which could be accompanied with other extra-journalistic techniques that are relevant to analyse in future studies. It is, in short, a very valuable and powerful technique to achieve, at the

present time, web users, but it could also involve, in the mid and long term, an abandonment of the basic principles of journalism and, therefore, a loss of credibility.

5. Limitations and future research

The limitations of this research can be divided into two types: limitations related to the theoretical framework and methodological limitations. Both are interrelated since they derive from an element that is essential to the development of this research and, at the same time, conditions it greatly: the concept of clickbait is a really novel concept that has been scarcely examined from the academic point of view. While it is a well-defined concept, each of its features allows for very particular interpretations that end up generating research studies that are not necessarily coincident in their theoretical approaches. This happens when we participate in the debate on whether clickbait refers to fake news, "half-truths" or sensationalist news.

The questions related to the interpretation of this concept also affect the methodological approach since the simple choice between studying fake news or sensationalist news brings into play diametrically opposed methodological approaches. So, which news media do we choose? during what period? and how many news pieces do we analyse? are questions that need very different responses depending on the conceptual nuances that we give to the term clickbait. This is because initially we can dare to say that very few prestigious news media organisations that represent each European country will take the risk to publish "fake" news. However, the situation varies if we talk about sensationalist news. Therefore, since this is the first academic article on clickbait linked to sensationalist news, the methodological option for the selection of the universe of study and the sample is one within the infinite possibilities available to explore an uncharted territory. Without a doubt, future research studies in this regard will allow us to elucidate more correctly on the types of methods that are more suitable when studying a term linked to a fully digital media environment.

Moreover, this is the first study that covers the European Union so its results should be validated in other areas.

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-End of research: 15-06-2017.

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