Business Implications of Clickbait and The Information Gap Theory

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Business Implications of Clickbait and The Information Gap Theory

Introduction

There are few things that qualify as universally human experiences. Hunger, pain, and love all making for prime examples. Another is that you will be marketed to. Especially but not exclusively in first-world countries, you cannot turn a corner without seeing an advertisement of some sort. Marketing is both an art and a science in that to successfully sway a potential customer, you must get their attention and keep it long enough to deliver a message. On top of that, a good businessman/businesswoman would know how to leave lasting impressions on a consumer in creative and effective ways that do not break the bank. For example, one of the best ways for companies to advertise their brand is short songs called 'Jingles'. We have all had at one point or another gotten an earworm from a radio or T.V. commercial. Most people can immediately recognize the accompanying tune to these phrases and there therefor the company and product:

- "I'm Lovin' It"
- "The snack that smiles back."
- "They're g-r-r-r-eat!"
- "Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there."

Slogans and catchy jingles are just one of many tactics that marketers use to influence you and your purchasing behaviors, whether you know it or not. Right now, there is a similar tactic that is being used by individuals and by companies and it is raising questions about the laws and ethics surrounding marketing.

Clickbait, What Is It?

Clickbait, as defined in the *Merriam Webster* dictionary, is "something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest." (Merriam Webster, 2019) For the purposes of this report, we can think of clickbait as something that entices someone to engage with some material, whether it be online or in the physical world. On the surface, clickbait seems like just another marketing scheme. However,

because of its incredible effectiveness and potential for misuse, some people argue that it is both unethical and ruining real journalism.

The Evolution of Clickbait

As far back as journalism goes, there was also the quandary of how to get people to read your piece of writing. Of course, one method is to create good work, thus establishing a reputation with your clients and inclining them to return. A far easier tactic is to fashion a bolded, catchy headline with captivating images. In the 1890's, the term 'Yellow Journalism' was coined to describe these tactics rooted in sensationalization.



After all, what matters is that the customer purchases the product. This is clickbait. Both methods are likely to get you more engagement, the pros and cons of which will be discussed.

Modern Clickbait

Much has changed over the years in regard to how we sell things. Nowadays, clickbait is a standard in the world of marketing, and especially online journalism and social media. In an environment where every article appears to contain life-changing information, it can be difficult to garner the attention of your audience without resorting to such tactics. But what is the problem? Why would you not want to use clickbait? For every person that navigates to a clickbait article, there is also someone that recognizes this technique and clicks elsewhere. It is common for many to consider clickbait shady and dishonest. This is because people do not like to think they are being manipulated. For example, there is an article by *BuzzFeed* titled, "25 Things Starbucks Employees Will Never Tell You" with a subtitle reading "A better life is just a click away." (Stopera, 2019)



25 Things Starbucks Employees Will Never Tell You

A better life is just a click away.



While some people might feel inclined to click on this link, a lot of people would see this and know that it is ridiculous. It is very apparent that this article will not make anyone's life that much better, so it must

be exaggerating. In the same way people riot because their Subway '\$5 Footlong' is 11 inches, people hate clickbait tactics because they feel they are being exploited.

Common Practices

Those who publish clickbait articles which accumulate millions of views have established precedents and made full use of the human psyche when developing their 'bait'. Below is a list of methods that are used in the creation of titles/thumbnails that would be considered clickbait.

- Eye-Catching Imagery
- Buzz-Words
- Capitalization
- Arrows / Outlines



(Fuller, 2018)

Alongside these devices are a set of common practices used by individuals and companies that are known to produce clickbait content. These change with time, but currently, here are some that circulate the internet frequently:

- Ordered Lists
- Quizzes
- Challenges
- The use of the term *Not Clickbait*
- Reverse Psychology



(Marquez, 2019)

Information Gap Theory

These practices may seem totally unrelated, however there are attributes that they all share. What do the titles, "10 Creatures You Will Not Believe Actually Exist" and "This week's "Game Of

Thrones" Ended In The Worst Way And People Are Mad" have in common? They pique your curiosity without revealing too much information. If you as a clickbait publisher, can get the attention of someone without revealing too much that they become uninterested, you have successfully exploited the information gap. It is this very gap that can send you spiraling into hours of online quizzes and articles that are so bizarre that you wonder how you got there in the first place. The study of such a gap has brought about something called the information gap theory. This theory covers why clickbait tactics work, but also goes beyond that. Say, for example, someone was searching online for video tutorials for math homework. On one hand, a video titled "What is a Triangle?" can be immediately deemed not useful. Meanwhile, a three-hour long recording of a university lecture also does not seem very captivating. The information gap theory suggests that these two videos are on opposite ends of this gap, while in the middle, would be a video of appropriate length, not to simplistic, and not too complicated.

A Clickbait Epidemic

With the science of why clickbait works covered, it should be apparent that such a powerful and easy-to-use tool can be used nefariously. If there is personal gain to gotten, someone will go for it. Clickbait is no exception. In fact, one of the reasons many people do not consider clickbait a legitimate means of marketing is because of its potential to mislead or even flat-out lie to consumers. In a world where technology and platforms are changing faster than laws and regulations can catch up, there is plenty of room for scam artists to thrive. Nonetheless, the public's distaste for clickbait has not gone unnoticed. In 2014, Facebook announced that they would be attempting to reduce the amount of clickbait found on the platform. (Visentin, 2014)

Clickbait vs Traditional Journalism

The reason why there seems to be more mistruth in clickbait rather than in its traditional counterpart is because of the difference in motivation, and the differences of the authors themselves. In one case, writers for a trusted news source like *The New York Times* must keep in mind the accuracy of the content they publish in order to keep both their jobs and their happy readers. On the other hand, a writer for a lesser known company might only be concerned with the short-term revenue they gain from a single article that may have been exaggerated, regardless of whether the readers leave unsatisfied. Likewise, a company like *The New York Times* is also more likely to hire journalists that are educated in

their fields and understand what makes for quality publishing. At the same time, a company known for clickbait 'listicles' (list-articles) like *BuzzFeed* more than likely focuses on pushing out a large quantity of content rather than a smaller amount of well-written stories. If this is the case, they would not be as inclined to hire highly qualified journalists whose own integrity is linked to what they post.

Conclusion

Does It Kill Real Journalism?

With every passing year, it seems our attention spans are decreasing which is even more reason to go for writing clickbait over traditional, time-consuming articles. Hence, we have seen quite the rise in clickbait as well as debate over its subsequent regulations in recent years. One debate in particular has been on the topic of whether or not clickbait tactics are killing 'real journalism'. Ironically enough, it would not be far-fetched to say that journalists claiming something like "Clickbait will be the death of real journalism", employ the same sensationalist practices that they claim are putting them out of work.

Is Clickbait Ethical?

Finally, is it ethical to present your work in a way that you know is more likely to attract attention? Absolutely. Is it ethical to hide your mediocre writing behind a title that is incredibly misleading? No, it is not. As with most of life's questions, the answer is not black and white. If your entire business model is to put effort into getting that initial click, then leave the reader hanging, then the answer should be obvious. This is not only manipulative, but also borderline lying and should be regulated. However, if you are a decent publisher that puts out good content but also uses some of the aforementioned clickbait tactics to help collect some well-earned revenue, you are in the clear. To put it more concise is Author Nitsuh Abebe on clickbait tactics used by online content publisher *Upworthy*:

"It turns out that if your noble goal is to 'draw massive amounts of attention to the topics that really matter,' then the success of that mission and the short-term success of your company are precisely identical. It's the ultimate in 'social entrepreneurship'—the good of the company and the good of mankind are, allegedly, the exact same thing." (Slate, 2014)

If you find yourself wondering whether a source of information is reputable and being morally responsible, make sure to consider the intentions of the publisher, the tactics they use, and whether they deliver the content they promise.

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