

## Why BuzzFeed Doesn't Do Clickbait

You won't believe this one weird trick.

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Jenny Chang / BuzzFeed

Jon Stewart was asked about BuzzFeed and *Vice* the other day, and had this to [say](#):

"I scroll around, but when I look at the internet, I feel the same as when I'm walking through Coney Island," Stewart told *New York* magazine. "It's like carnival barkers, and they all sit out there and go, 'Come on in here and see a three-legged man!' So you walk in and it's a guy with a crutch."

That may be the best definition I've ever heard of what's referred to as "clickbait." But it suggests that Stewart, like many people in the media industry, confuses what we do with true clickbait. We have admittedly (and at times deliberately) not done a great job of explaining why we have always avoided clickbait at BuzzFeed.

In fact — and here is a trade secret I'd decided a few years ago we'd be better off not revealing — clickbait stopped working around 2009.

I avoided talking about it because, well, a lot of our rivals hadn't yet figured it out and were becoming addicted to and deeply reliant on misleading headlines; since we weren't, there seemed to be no harm (to us) in letting others focus on the short-term. But last winter saw a particularly virulent strain of hyper-optimized clickbait take root: the tempting, vacuous "curiosity gap" headline. Meanwhile, the many publisher Twitter accounts that auto-tweeted dozens of misleading, over-torqued headlines became Twitter's favorite joke — and spawned a set of fairly useful "spoiler" accounts.

Now it's no longer much of a secret that clickbait doesn't work. BuzzFeed News' Charlie Warzel wrote a [nuanced history](#) of the topic not long ago. *The Verge's* Nilay Patel probably described our position better than we ever have in [an interview with Poynter](#):

"Most clickbait is disappointing because it's a promise of value that isn't met — the payoff isn't nearly as good as what the reader imagines," Patel said. "BuzzFeed headlines pay off particularly well because they actually make fairly small promises and then overdeliver."

[In a blog post](#) in August, Facebook engineer Khalid El-Arini made clear what we all know: that readers don't want to be tricked by headlines; instead, they want to be informed by them.

### **The origins of clickbait**

Clickbait actually has its origins in old media, not the web, and specifically in the don't-touch-that-dial antics of television and radio. Because you won't believe what happens next...after the break. It's a pretty rough consumer experience to demand your audience sit through an ad, online or off. The banner ad, whose decline Farhad Manjoo recently [celebrated](#), was also born during this era and created a business model in which clicks are tied directly to dollars — something many people assume is still how all online publishers make their money. But BuzzFeed has never sold a banner, and I couldn't even tell you how many monthly page views we get. And so our business model at least moderates that incentive to drag every last click out of our audience.

The worst form of this online is on a pennies-per-click business model in the transactional netherworld of outsourced sponsored content sitting at the bottom of articles around the web. All that matters in that space is the snappy headline. Grab the reader's attention, get the click — even if this isn't the craziest thing Ted Cruz has said yet; even if "Paris Hilton — topless" is in fact demurely dressed and riding in a convertible; if this one easy trick won't actually lose you weight; and if you actually *can* believe what happens next.

### **You can trick someone to click, but you can't trick someone to share**

If your goal — as is ours at BuzzFeed — is to deliver the reader something so new, funny, revelatory, or delightful that they feel compelled to share it, you have to do work that delivers on the headline's promise, and more. This is a very high bar. It's one thing to enjoy reading something, and quite another to make the active choice to share it with your friends. This is a core fact of sharing and the social web of Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and other platforms.

The best way to ensure your readers *won't* choose to share a story or a post is to trick them. Anyone who has spent the last 20 years online knows the specific disgust that comes with a headline that doesn't deliver on its promise. It's the kind of taste you get in your mouth from a glistening but spoiled peach. The publisher got the



