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CLICKBAIT AND ITS IMPACT ON MEDIA TRUST: ANALYTICAL REVIEW

Research purpose – to analyze the essence of the concept of «clickbait» in the modern media space; to determine its impact on the level of audience trust in mass media, the consequences of its use for media and society; to investigate the causes of emergence and spread of this phenomenon.

Research methodology. To achieve the goal, a complex of methods was used, such as: method of system analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, structural-semiotic analysis, generalization, theoretical modeling, and expert evaluation method.

Research results. The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the concept of «clickbait» in the modern media space and its impact on the level of audience trust in media. Economic, technological, social, and psychological factors contributing to the spread of clickbait headlines in online media were studied. The manipulative mechanisms of clickbait's influence on consumers perception of information in professional and ethical aspects of this phenomenon in the media space were analyzed. The need to increase media literacy of the target audience to counter the negative aspects of clickbait was substantiated.

Novelty. Currently, the concept of «clickbait» affects not only professional and ethical problems in journalism but also forms a questionable media phenomenon at the intersection of economic and psychological factors, which primarily affects the state of information security during wartime.

Practical significance. Formation of recommendations for reducing the negative impact of clickbait on the media environment. Substantiation of the importance of an ethical and professional relationship between clickbait and information security using the example of the russian-Ukrainian war, which allows considering the counteraction to clickbait as an important component of national information resilience of Ukrainian society.

Key words: clickbait, information wars, ethics, trust, media, psychological techniques, headline, journalism, media literacy.

I. Introduction

In today's conditions of rapid development of society's information awareness and mass media digitalization, mass media have faced new challenges regarding maintaining financial stability and the interest of their audience. To improve competitiveness in the market, the phenomenon of «clickbait» has become localized in Internet media.

Clickbait is a term that represents intriguing headlines and/or preview materials that subconsciously evoke the reader's desire to familiarize themselves with the presented information on a conditional page in more detail. This psychological technique is adapted to modern standards, however, its first uses without a specific name were recorded in journalism since the emergence of mass press in the 19th century [2]. The official appearance of the term «clickbait» as a new addition to the Oxford English Dictionary occurred in autumn 2016, authored by J. Geiger [11].

The Internet technique «clickbait» primarily acts as a media phenomenon that is far from ethical-professional values. It is assumed that the potential reader follows their own natural curiosity at a sub-conscious level, engaging only superficial attention and ultimately experiencing only discomfort from informational gaps in Internet content.

This is how this mechanism works according to the concept of «curiosity gap» by American researchers B. Vojdyski and N. Chelkens. The scientists analyzed in their work J. Loewenstein's theory of information gaps (awareness of a gap in one's knowledge creates a feeling of psychological tension) and supplemented it with justifications regarding the impact of the «gap» on the Internet reader's subconscious desire to click and learn empty, incomplete information [18].

There is also a problem with the use of clickbait in media, which leads to a negative global trend of declining trust in media. According to the international Reuters Institute Digital News Report in 2023, the level of trust in news in most countries of the world is consistently low, and in some countries it continues to decline [15].

In a world where armed conflicts become a daily reality for millions of people, the information space transforms into a separate battlefield. Modern media, in order to get more views, use various techniques to go beyond «information oversaturation» and often resort to clickbait when covering military events. For example: «Russians in panic: Armed Forces of Ukraine tear apart the occupier» [9] or «Ukrainians lose, European Union wins» [4] – such headlines can cause human anxiety and fear, while simultaneously distorting the perception of reality. On a constant basis, such practice generates deep distrust not only in media but also in official sources of information, which in war conditions can have catastrophic consequences.

In Ukraine, with the beginning of the full-scale war (February 24, 2022), the issue of public trust in media became key and brought with it a number of problems not only in the quality of journalism but also in the quality of national security of the country. In her interview, Ukrainian journalist and editor-in-chief of «Babel» K. Kobernik analyzed the impact of war on journalism and emphasized the careful attitude towards the «clickbait» technique in modern journalism and its harm in the context of official messages [8].

II. Problem statement and research methods

Current problems in the use of the «clickbait» technique, such as: declining audience trust in mass media and Internet media sources, potential and existing consequences for Ukraine in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and possible ways to overcome these issues have frequently become the object of analysis by Ukrainian and foreign media experts, scholars, and practitioners, such as: K. Vemuri, V. Ivanov, M. Karalis, V. Kaushal, M. Luca, T. Maksymyak, K. Munger, A. Mishchenko, J. Nagler, S. Pengnate, J. Tucker, V. Teremko, A. Hansen, J. Chen, O. Churanova, A. Young and others.

To achieve the goal, methods of system analysis, content analysis, discourse analysis, structural-semiotic analysis, generalization, theoretical modeling, and expert evaluation were applied. These methods allow for a clearer analysis of the Internet phenomenon «clickbait»; its impact on the ethical-professional component, information security in the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the state of public trust in media sources in the modern world; they provide potential ways to improve society's media literacy to eliminate threats of manipulative disinformation attacks directed at the Internet audience.

Since the Russian invasion, Ukrainian media have found themselves at the epicenter of an information war, where clickbait has become one of many manipulative techniques for effectively influencing society. Statistics show that the level of Ukrainians' trust in domestic media and the state is critically decreasing: the difference between the pre-war period (December 2021 – January 2022) and the first months of the war (September-October 2022) in trust is approximately a 15–20% (decrease) [7]. This negative trend has created an information field where Russian propaganda can easily influence the Ukrainian population and generate distrust through disinformation and manipulative content.

The Center for Countering Disinformation at the National Security and Defense Council and other state institutions emphasize the need to form a culture of responsible media consumers and restore trust in domestic media, which is an important component of the national information resilience of Ukrainian society.

III. Results

In the modern information space, there are many obstacles to quality communication, especially important during martial law. Therefore, it is very important to control the appropriateness and ethics of such a technique as clickbait and try to improve its «pros» and maximize the neutralization of its «cons» in order to maintain public trust in the media. To restore and preserve public trust, clear journalistic standards need to be implemented that would encourage accuracy and responsibility in the presentation of information.

Media literacy is a key tool in restoring public trust in the media, especially in the context of wartime information challenges. Through educational programs, training, and public campaigns, it is possible not only to protect society from fakes and confusion but also to stimulate media to raise their own quality standards. Such a two-way process will strengthen trust between the media and the audience, which is a serious step toward creating closer communication between the state and citizens in critical moments.

According to Ukrainian researcher L. Naydonova, it is media literacy that can form the immunity of Ukrainian society to information manipulations and allow for the recognition and critical evaluation of potentially manipulative content [5].

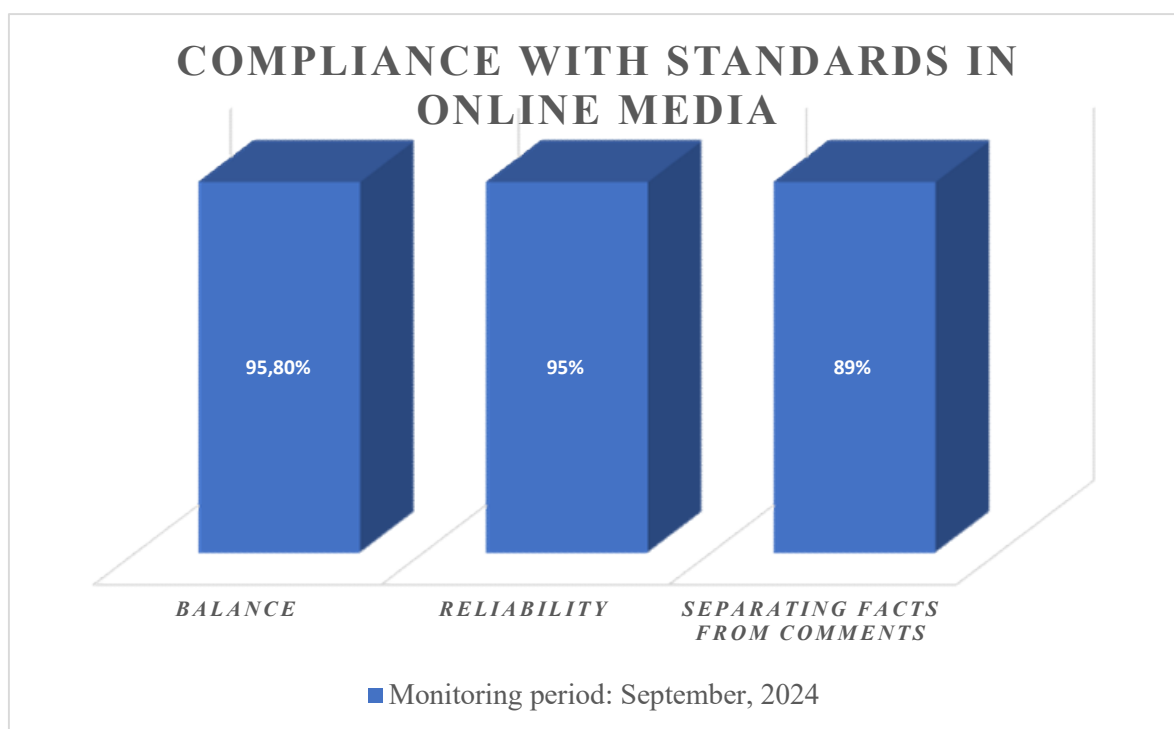
Also, even from the global experience of systematic implementation of media education, significant results can be observed. For example, in Finland, which is a leader in world media literacy rankings, everything is built on the principles of critical analysis of media texts, integrated into school programs from primary grades, which contributes to the formation of a critically thinking audience from childhood [13].

In Ukraine, there is also a positive dynamic – since 2016, the course «Media Literacy» has been included in the programs of many schools, and since 2021, elements of media education have been integrated into the curricula of most subjects within the framework of the New Ukrainian School concept [14].

Effective regulation of clickbait in the press should be based primarily on ethical standards and professional responsibility of journalists and editors in any field. That is why the construction of informational headlines should be based not only on the desire to reach a larger audience but also on the principles of professional clarity, conciseness, transparency, and accuracy of the information presented. The media community can adhere to the ethical codes established by the country, which clearly specify standards for headlines and leads that will serve as an effective tool for countering manipulative practices. This approach will especially contribute to enhancing the reputation of the media and restoring public trust, which is critically important for the functioning of a democratic society in wartime conditions. It is also important that such regulatory measures do not limit press freedom but rather stimulate its responsibility to its audience.

For example, the British Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) in 2020 added a separate clause to its Code concerning the use of headlines in online media [17].

In Ukraine, there is the Commission on Journalistic Ethics in collaboration with the Institute of Mass Information, which in 2023 developed recommendations for preventing the use of clickbait, including them in the «Handbook on Journalistic Standards». According to Article 19, paragraph 8 of the «Code of Ethics of Ukrainian Journalists», editorial processing of materials (including the headline) should not falsify the content [3]. Also, according to the results of the monitoring of professional standards by the Institute of Mass Information (September 2024), the share of adherence to journalistic standards in Ukraine increased by 2,5% compared to June 2024. According to the IMI, this is related to the publication of commissioned and sponsored content, where the use of manipulative techniques with headlines and other elements is inappropriate. Media also improved the marking of information sources by 2,4%, which indicates an increased attention of editorial offices to transparency and quality work with facts; the indicator of separating facts and comments also increased by 3,6%, which indicates the efforts of editorial offices aimed at reducing subjectivity in news materials (Scheme 1). The lowest percentage of adherence to standards was recorded on the Ukrainian media sites TSN and «Telegraph» (50%) [6].



Scheme 1. Compliance with standards in online media for September 2024 [6]

Another active environment for the existence of clickbait in media is social networks, which are not very famous for their objectivity and at the same time contain a large amount of easily accessible information and, most importantly, have a direct impact on public opinion through two-way communication. In the digital era, the algorithms of social platforms contribute to the formation of information bubbles, where users constantly receive content that confirms and «feeds» their own beliefs, using disinformation as well. This trend creates a favorable environment for spreading distrust in the media, when sensational headlines and emotional messages receive more attention than balanced official information.

A study conducted by a Yale University team in 2021 showed that announcement headlines and posts that evoke strong emotions (especially indignation) are 20% more likely to receive widespread distribution on social networks [10].

In the Ukrainian context, this problem becomes particularly acute, as according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, about 67% of Ukrainians receive news through social networks [1]. This creates a powerful incentive for media to use clickbait headlines to increase their visibility in users' feeds.

Some social networks and search engines are already implementing algorithms that reduce the visibility of content with signs of clickbait. For example, Facebook has been regularly updating its algorithms since 2016 to detect and downgrade posts with clickbait headlines [12]. Google is also adapting its ranking algorithms to lower the positions of sites that systematically use manipulative headlines [16].

That is, social networks, despite their usefulness, are tools with algorithms aimed at maintaining attention, not ensuring objectivity or public good, and this needs to be taken into account. Critical consumption of information and regular verification of sources become a primary personal protection against manipulations that systematically undermine trust in state institutions and media. Formed media literacy of citizens, combined with responsible state policy regarding the regulation of the information space, can create a balance where social networks serve for communication and unification of society, not as a tool for spreading obfuscation and disinformation.

Therefore, for better functioning in journalism with such a technique as «clickbait» in order to maintain audience trust, it is necessary to:

1. Increase transparency and objectivity of editorial processes, eliminate disinformation completely.
2. Not only implement but also regulate existing internal monitoring systems and assess the compliance of headlines with the journalistic standards of the information presented below.
3. Reduce or completely remove the use of the «clickbait» technique in official news media related to political activities.
4. Create platforms/trainings for exchange of experience between media experts regarding effective practices of engaging and retaining audiences without using clickbait.
5. Expand media literacy programs/trainings for society, including practical skills for recognizing clickbait and critical analysis of headlines.
6. Develop specialized educational programs for vulnerable population groups, especially those prone to the influence of manipulative headlines.
7. Conduct systematic research on the impact of clickbait on different audience groups and disseminate their results among the media community and the general public.

IV. Conclusions

Thus, having analyzed the phenomenon of «clickbait», it can be understood that it is a complex problem of the modern media industry and has a negative impact on the level of trust in the mass media and the state, which can lead to irreparable consequences. This phenomenon primarily harms ethical and professional guidelines and deforms the reality of actual information at a subconscious level, as the psychological mechanisms of clickbait influence are based on the exploitation of human cognitive biases and the provocation of strong emotional reactions, which reduces the criticality of information perception.

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Файвішенко Д. С., Шудрак І. О. Клікбейт і його вплив на довіру до медіа: аналітичний огляд

Мета дослідження – проаналізувати сутність поняття «клікбейт» у сучасному медіапросторі; визначити його вплив на рівень довіри аудиторії до медіа, наслідки його використання; дослідити причини виникнення та поширення цього явища.

Методологія дослідження. Для реалізації мети було використано комплекс методів, таких як: системного аналізу, контент-аналізу, дискурс-аналізу, структурно-семіотичного аналізу, узагальнення, теоретичного моделювання та метод експертних оцінок.

Результати. У статті здійснено аналітичний огляд поняття «клікбейт» у медіапросторі та його вплив на рівень довіри аудиторії до медіа. Досліджено економічні, технологічні, соціальні та психологічні чинники, що сприяють поширенню клікбейт-заголовків в онлайн-медіа. Проаналізовано маніпулятивні засоби впливу клікбейту на сприйняття інформації споживачами. Обґрунтовано потребу в підвищенні медіаграмотності цільової аудиторії для протидії негативним аспектам клікбейту.

Новизна. Наразі поняття «клікбейт» охоплює не лише професійні та етичні проблеми в журналістиці, а й формує сумнівне медіаявище на перетині економічних і психологічних факторів, яке впливає насамперед на становище інформаційної безпеки у воєнний час.

Практичне значення. Формування рекомендацій щодо зменшення негативного впливу клікбейту на медіасередовище й обґрунтування важливості етичного й професійного взаємозв'язку між клікбейтом та інформаційною безпекою надають змогу розглядати протидію клікбейту як важливий компонент національно-інформаційної стійкості українського суспільства.

Ключові слова: клікбейт, інформаційні війни, етика, довіра, медіа, психологічні прийоми, заголовки, журналістика, медіаграмотність.