



ENGAGING NEWS PROJECT

Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin
2504 A Whitis Avenue (R2000), Austin, TX 78712-1538
engagingnewsproject.org · @engagingnews

Contact: Katie Steiner, Communication Associate
(512) 475-7074, katie.steiner@austin.utexas.edu

SOLUTIONS HEADLINES CAN INCREASE CLICKS, BUT RESULTS VARY DEPENDING ON OTHER HEADLINE ATTRIBUTES

A new report from the Engaging News Project finds that solutions headlines yield a modest increase in clicks over non-solutions headlines, but other factors also affect clicks.

Solutions journalism emphasizes responses to entrenched social problems. It focuses not just on what may be working, but how and why it appears to be working or, alternatively, why it may be stumbling. The goal of this research, funded jointly by the Solutions Journalism Network and the Engaging News Project, was to better understand how audiences engage with solutions-oriented headlines.

To study the effect of solutions headlines, we partnered with The Huffington Post to test 50 pairs of headlines. For each test, The Huffington Post randomized whether visitors to their homepage saw a non-solutions-focused headline or a solutions-focused headline. Both headlines linked to the same article that included information about a problem and a possible solution.

Although solutions headlines did not outperform non-solutions headlines in every test, the solutions headlines did yield a small, but detectable, increase in the number of clicks when looking across all 50 tests.

As anticipated, many other factors also affected the number of clicks received by each headline. To analyze several of these factors, we conducted a survey-based experiment with 1,034 U.S. adults. In this study, participants were shown a list of headlines and asked to pick which story they would most like to read. Each headline list contained a solution headline, manipulated to contain different attributes, and three unrelated headlines. This study allowed us to analyze what attributes of solutions headlines heighten or diminish user interest.

The results showed that:

- Including a “mysterious” unnamed location or group in a headline can increase the click-through rate (e.g. *“This City Has a Solution to Poverty”*).
- Adding the word “simple” can affect headline clicks, but does not do so consistently (e.g. *“A Simple Way to Address Climate Change”*).
- Taking solutions-oriented information or an action item onto a headline does not significantly affect the click-through rate (e.g. *“This is a Problem. Here’s How to Help”*).
- Adding the word “you” does not have a significant influence on the click-through rate (e.g. *“Here’s How You Can Help Save the Rainforests”*).

“Taken together, our experiments show that newsrooms may want to consider using solutions-based headlines,” said Alex Curry, research associate for the Engaging News Project. “Our findings also provide a good starting point for doing more research on which headlines yield greater audience engagement through clicks.”

The Engaging News Project provides research-based techniques for engaging online audiences in commercially viable and democratically beneficial ways. Learn more at engagingnewsproject.org