



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

QUESTION-BASED HEADLINES LEAD TO NEGATIVE ATTITUDES ABOUT THE HEADLINE, ASSOCIATED NEWS STORY

A new report from the Engaging News Project on the influence of “clickbait” headlines finds that question-based headlines lead to more negative attitudes about the headline and more negative expectations for the associated news story compared to traditional headlines.

The goal of this study was to test whether headlines written using varying levels of uncertainty prompt different reactions to political news. To test the headlines, researchers conducted an experiment with 2,057 U.S. adults where they varied the type of headline participants saw (traditional, forward-reference or question-based), the brand of a news source (USA Today, BuzzFeed or Fox News/MSNBC) and the policy issue (the economy, immigration and U.S. Congress).

Researchers found that while people reacted more negatively to question-based headlines compared to traditional headlines, they didn’t have any change in opinion between forward-reference and traditional headlines. Also, while a traditional headline about Congress produced a positive reaction toward the headline, a question-based headline about Congress caused a negative reaction.

“With most consumers getting their news digitally, news outlets are turning to these ‘clickbait’ headlines to catch the audience’s attention,” said Dr. Joshua Scacco, faculty research associate for the Engaging News Project. “Our research shows that sometimes using clickbait headlines may not be the best choice, as they can actually turn readers off from news articles.”

Other findings include:

- News source brand matters for headline and story perceptions
- Forward-reference headlines did not lead to different reactions, expectations or anticipated engagement compared to traditional headlines
- Types of headlines and policy issues should be paired carefully – question-based headlines about Congress yielded the most negative responses

“Our results show that even small influences, like the type of headline used, can change audience responses, both commercially within a news organization as well as democratically,” said Dr. Ashley Muddiman, faculty research associate for the Engaging News Project. “It’s important for news organizations to consider these small influences and the effects they can have on the audience.”

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

