Article

Clickbait Contagion in International Quality Media: Tabloidisation and Information Gap to Attract Audiences

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Abstract: The competition to attract audiences has led to an increase in sensational or misleading headlines and content, with the aim of garnering user clicks in the news media. This dynamic alters the journalistic manner in which news is presented, and it does so by reducing informative quality and eroding the trust of the audience. This study examines the proliferation of clickbait strategies on the front pages of reputable international 'serious' press and how it manifests in readers' consumption and sharing habits. We carried out a comparative content analysis of digital news articles from four international media sources (N = 1680): *The Guardian* (UK), *The New York Times* (USA), *El País* (Spain) and *Público* (Portugal). Our results confirm the existence of clickbait (N = 516) on the front pages, the most read content and the articles most shared on social media. Most clickbait titles resort to headline strategies of containing incomplete information that affect both hard and soft news topics. This particular finding highlights the inclusion of clickbait in the agenda of 'serious' journalism, despite the negative implications on information quality and trust. Associated with irrelevant content, this 'hook' captures the attention of the online audience more than the social media audience.

1. Introduction

Digital media are undergoing a comprehensive, communicative and technological transformation, forcing them to reconsider their business models, narratives, criteria for newsworthiness and the relationship they have with their audiences. The influence of the internet and social media as self-communication structures (Castells 2009), and the interactive audience's position as a producer, curator and gatewatcher of information (Dafonte-Gómez et al. 2022) have altered the traditional role of the news media as information intermediaries.

In light of the decline in their ability to control the agenda, associated with a crisis in media consumption and permanent information saturation (Nordenson 2009), the media are now operating in a highly competitive environment with new external actors, such as social media and user-generated content, to attract audiences (Fisher et al. 2019; Salaverría 2015). Specifically, their main focus is on increasing web traffic to maintain economic survival (Jodłowiec 2022; Bazaco et al. 2019), which depends on click-based monetisation (Wanda et al. 2021) due to an insufficient number of subscriptions (Newman et al. 2022) and the use of search engines for content consumption, that makes it essential for the media to achieve a good position for the audience to reach their news (Swart 2021).

In the context of multifactorial transformation, the media employ different strategies to maintain their informative mediation and 'reconnect' their informative agenda with users through strategies that include "easy consumption journalism" (Rosique-Cedillo and Barranquero-Carretero 2015, p. 452), cognitive shortcuts—visual narratives, using more images, prioritising headlines over detailed content—(Sarasqueta 2021) and tactics that 'sell'

or present information as content that is attractive, urgent or unusual to engage the public (Molek-Kozakowska 2013). Various techniques have emerged that undermine traditional journalistic standards of relevance and impact, based on factors such as proximity, relevance and consequence (De la Torre and Téramo 2015): instead, these methods prioritise marketing-oriented models that cater to the preferences of the audience (Groot and Costera 2018; Perreault and Ferrucci 2020; Panda et al. 2024).

One notable strategy worth mentioning is the well-established growth of clickbait or 'headline hook' (Palau-Sampio 2016), which pursues a digital positioning of content based on tabloidisation that often leads to disinformation and polarisation (Sánchez-Sobradillo and Diez-Gracia 2023). Clickbait is a type of headline "that does not meet the standards of traditional journalism and is designed to keep the reader on the page for as long as possible, rather than provide information" (García-Orosa et al. 2017, p. 1265). The deliberate writing of these headlines is influenced by two variables, as outlined by the Bazaco et al. (2019) model: their delivery through deceptive, misleading, incomplete, sensational or attention-grabbing information; and their content, which includes sensationalism, soft news and tabloid topics (Chen et al. 2015; Munger et al. 2018).

Academic research investigating clickbait has increased over the past decade with a focus on three primary strategies explored in reception studies pertaining to information quality and the emergence of a new media landscape referred to as 'pseudomedia'.

In the first approach, research associated with audience reception has focused on analysing how the hook technique is used, such as through incomplete headlines and the omission of relevant data. This technique aims to enhance attention and curiosity during reception by exploiting the psychological process of 'sensemaking': the instinctive tendency of individuals to fill in information gaps and satisfy their curiosity (Chen et al. 2015; Chakraborty et al. 2016; Bazaco et al. 2019; Scott 2023). It is a way to get engagement and boost metrics—even if it is only in the form of clicks and views—in a digital and multi-platform context that rewards popularity through algorithmic curation and SEO where it is critical for media to be seen and found to gain profit (Lischka and Garz 2021).

In addition to providing a description, studies into the phenomenon are critical of this practice, perceived to be a manipulation by the media that "prioritises attracting attention over reporting the facts" (Mont'Alverne et al. 2022, p. 7)—for example, preferring to add keywords or eye-catching facts that help web searches rather than valuable information (Swart 2021). This leads media editors to negotiate between newsworthiness, engagement, interaction and promotion through curation algorithms (Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos 2020) and search engines. The competition for the interest of the audience is driven by content created by prosumers on social media (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017), as well as by soft news content and tabloids.

The second research approach examines the correlation between the clickbait technique and the quality of information. It analyses the notion that clickbait is not a harmless strategy to attract audience interest, but that it disrupts the traditional hierarchical standards of journalism (Scacco and Muddiman 2020), contributing to disinformation and tabloidisation (Peña Salas 2020; Chakraborty et al. 2016). Previous research supports the notion that including extraordinary or sensational topics to attract users' attention (Chen et al. 2015) deviates from traditional news standards and values of mainstream media, resulting in a triviality more commonly associated with tabloids (Flores-Vivar and Zaharía 2022; Palau-Sampio 2016). However, the use of these techniques undermines the trust audiences have towards the media (Munger et al. 2018; Chen et al. 2015) and diminishes the importance of journalistic standards such as pertinence, impact or relevance (De la Torre and Téramo 2015), resulting in audience detachment. "Particularly, legacy news outlets find themselves in a dilemma of jeopardizing their reputation and user trust when providing too much clickbait" (Lischka and Garz 2021, n.p.). This manipulation of headlines and news structures is considered a type of disinformation (Gutiérrez Martín and González 2018; Bravo Araujo et al. 2021), as it is done to deceive users, who do not know what to expect (Peña Salas 2020;

Chakraborty et al. 2016), or who do not even find the data that they have been indicated will be in the content (Bazaco et al. 2019).

A third line of research on the clickbait phenomenon focuses on the existence of pseudomedia: websites that imitate the forms and styles of traditional media, while disregarding journalistic conventions to promote ideological agendas (Palau-Sampio 2022). These pseudomedia platforms employ a deliberate strategy of using clickbait to promote polarisation and populism, which creates a sense of belonging through word games understood by the 'group', while simultaneously fostering a strong aversion towards political opponents. Clickbait employs rhetorical questions and a conversational tone to ridicule fundamental social rights with absurd speculations or as a hook at the beginning of the headlines, also using provocative exclamations, offensive language and attention-grabbing tactics to introduce politically biased messages and polarising ideas. Deictic formulas in headlines that arouse curiosity are another strategy used by pseudomedia in addition to accumulations, lists or word games intended to evoke humour and provoke either acceptance or rejection (Palau-Sampio 2022).

Expansion and Consequences of Clickbait: Erosion of Trust and Degradation of Information Quality

Prior research into clickbait has shed light on the direct consequences of this phenomenon in all types of information content and how it alters the media agenda by promoting soft content in the mainstream media. The use of hook titration techniques has been identified in the hard news (Majstorovic 2021; Robles-Ávila 2019), referred to as 'Public' (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013). They focus on topics of informational relevance, such as politics, the economy or international affairs. In this context, the predominate approach is characterised by 'infotainment', employing colloquial, straightforward and impactful language, that incorporates codes from popular culture (Echeverría 2017) and dramatic or personal interests that "focus more on sensationalism rather than accuracy and factual information" (Valhondo Crego and Gonzalo 2020, p. 852).

Furthermore, it expands the scope of the overall media landscape that focuses on soft information, characterised as non-public, where personal perspectives and emotional or entertainment narratives predominate (García-Beaudoux and Slimovich 2019), contributing to "news genres and increasingly fusing and hybridising styles" (Widholm and Appelgren 2020, n.p.). Different studies have confirmed the increase in popularity of softer news topics and a decrease in 'harder' ones (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013; Diez-Gracia and Sánchez-García 2022). Within such a context, the media's deliberate use of banal headers and content, known as soft news, is becoming increasingly apparent as a technique to attract and engage people (Shiang and Wilson 2024).

Contrary to the belief that clickbait is a 'harmless' dynamic marketing strategy, researchers caution that it leads to a decline in the quality of journalism, as well as the distortion and depreciation of 'serious' media (García Serrano et al. 2019), affecting its reputation, the perception of its rigour and its credibility among the public. The trust of readers is eroded (Munger et al. 2018; Chen et al. 2015) to such an extent that it leads to the rejection of information and a connection with false or misleading information (Newman et al. 2018, 2022).

Building upon the existing theoretical framework that has already established the existence of clickbait, the present research study's objective is to identify, measure and compare the extent to which clickbait is present in the international generalist serious press (O1). Its second objective is to differentiate preferred consumption and sharing patterns of clickbait among its multi-platform audience on the web and social media (O2). To explore these areas, the analysis will focus on three informative spaces or spheres within each media: the front-page news, which reflects journalists' selection of newsworthiness and relevance; the news most read by the audience on the website; and the news articles most widely shared by users on the media's networks: particularly, X (formerly known as Twitter).

The working hypothesis posits that the phenomenon of clickbait is prevalent in the 'serious' international news media under analysis (H1). Although it may not predominate on the Front Page (h1), it has significant visibility on the Most Read articles within the media websites and also on the Most Viral selection on social media (h2), through incomplete headlines and a tendency towards the tabloidisation of the content (h3).

2. Materials and Methods

To identify, measure and compare the prevalence of clickbait in the media and its impact on audiences, we used a content analysis approach to the study. This method, known for its standardised, systematic and replicable approach, facilitates comparison and inference of the characteristics of a communicative product (Stemler 2001; Wimmer and Dominick 2013), through technical validation procedures (Bardin 1986), the quantification of units and grouping categories (Piñuel 2002).

This study uses this technique to analyse clickbait content published in four general digital and international media of reference among digital audiences in their countries: *The New York Times* (NYT), in the United States (Newman et al. 2021); *The Guardian*, in the UK (Gayle 2021); *El País*, in Spain (AIMC 2022); and *Público*, in Portugal (Newman et al. 2021). This selection was made on the basis of two criteria: the first one was to include languages that could be understood by the coders of the study, trying to achieve the widest possible language range (English, Spanish and Portuguese). The second criterion, taking the opportunity of the first, was to geographically limit the sample by country to the two relevant English-speaking countries (USA and UK) and, in the case of Spanish and Portuguese, to the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal).

The sample comprises content collected from three specific sections of each media: the front page, the listing of the most read articles on the website, and the most shared articles on X by the media analysed in 2022. To obtain a representative sample of this period, we selected units analysis from four random weeks (Riffe et al. 1993). From the initial round, we acquired an initial sample of 1,680 items, which are analysed in a second phase to identify those that used clickbait or tabloidisation strategies. Following this, we obtained a final sample (N = 516) from across the four media, which was analysed by two coders (Table 1), who finally obtained an intercoder reliability data of ≥0.75 according to Krippendorf's alpha. A coding sheet (Table 2) was applied to categorise this sample into three distinct categories.

Table 1. Sample distribution in the analysis of clickbait in the global mainstream media (2022).

Scheme 420.	NYT	The Guardian	El País	Público
Initial sample	420	420	420	420
Useful sample (with clickbait)	174	90	133	119
Total useful sample	N = 516			

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

- C1. Identification of the unit of analysis. Media and information section to which it belongs (Front Page, Most Read, Most Viral).
- C2. Type of clickbait. Conduct a breakdown analysis of clickbait strategies based on the taxonomic proposal by Bazaco et al. (2019) and Diez-Gracia and Sánchez-García (2022), who identified two types of techniques from the preceding literature: those that manipulate the headline by omitting relevant data or creating an information gap, emphasise the importance of the protagonist, exaggerate claims or are attention-grabbing, etc.; and those that use tabloidisation techniques, soft strategies or striking multimedia resources.
- C3. Topic and journalistic genre. This category encodes which topic(s) on the journalistic agenda the identified clickbait content corresponds to, and which journalistic genre it falls into (informative, interpretive, opinion, etc.)

Table 2. Sample distribution in the analysis of clickbait in the global mainstream media (2022).

| Category	Variables
C1. Identification	-Media (*NYT, The Guardian, El País, Público*) -Information section (Front Page, Most Read, Most Viral)
C2. Clickbait type	-**Information gap**. Intentional omission of the expected data, unanswered questions, use of numbers and lists, etc. -**Exaggeration**. Use of hyperbole or language to attract attention -**Attention-grabbing language**. Use of vocatives, calls for the reader's attention -**Importance of the protagonist**. Use of a public personality or figure -**Demand for urgency**. Last-minute deadlines, updates or exclusive offers -**Sensationalist delivery on social media**. When clickbait or tabloidisation is found in the paratext of a tweet or post -**Repetition and serialisation**. Segmentation or reiteration of information -**Soft news**. Tabloidisation and sensationalism -**Striking audiovisual elements**. Demand or inclusion of videos, images or other resources that have an impact
C3. Topic and journalistic genre	-**Themes are categorised into general blocks following a cumulative coding system**: politics, economy, events, wars, shootings, environment, health, curiosities, celebrities, sports, science and technology -**Genre**: informative, interpretive, opinion, interview, hybrid, multimedia

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Bazaco et al. (2019) and Diez-Gracia and Sánchez-García (2022).

3. Results

The following sections outline our findings on the presence and type of clickbait detected in the international digital press, organised according to the categories outlined in the methodology.

3.1. Clickbait in the Media: Prevalence in Front Pages and Reach to Multi-Platform Audiences

Of the total information collected during 2022 from the four international media publications, 30.71% (N = 516) contain clickbait or tabloidisation. The comparative analysis of these results highlights two specific nuances (Figure 1): the differences between media and the discrepancy between the Front Page, the Most Read and the Most Viral in each of them.
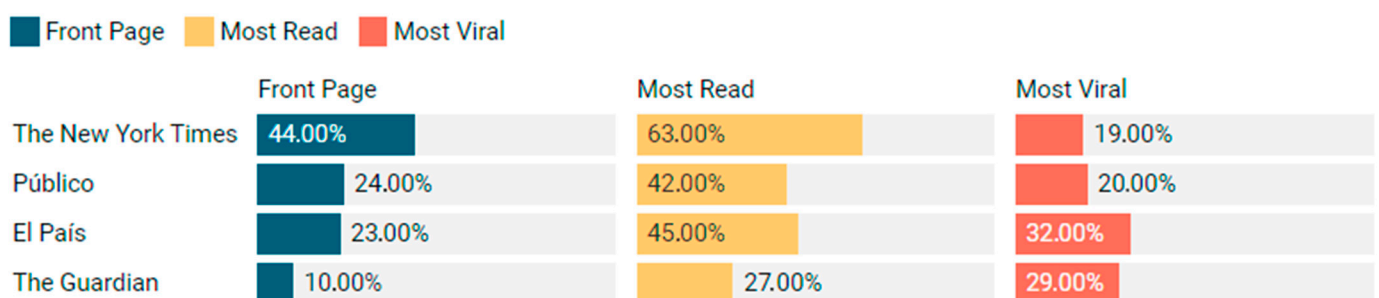
Figure 1. Presence of clickbait compared between media and their multi-platform audiences.

In the first case, *TNYT* has the highest prevalence of clickbait out of the content analysed (33.72% of the total), followed by *El País* (25.77%) and *Público* (23.06%) and, to a lesser extent, *The Guardian* (17.44%). Its use on Front Pages is very low (ranging from 10% in *The Guardian* to approximately 25% in *El País* and *Público*), with the exception of *NYT*, where it is 44%.

This uneven distribution is also evident in another context, when comparing its presence on Front Pages, in regard to multi-platform audience preferences. In the four media publications studied, we identified an increase in the presence of 'hooks' in the Most Read compared to the Front Pages, with data that more than double, in *El País* (45%),

Público (42%) and *The Guardian* (27%). In *NYT*, the increase is greater, but with a narrower margin compared to the Front Page (63%).

The selection of X users also shows its own dynamic, with an intermediate finding between Front Pages and Most Read in the case of *El País* (32%), similar to *The Guardian* (29%) and less in Público (20%) and *NYT* (19%).

These results provide insights into three noteworthy aspects: the Front Page does not have much clickbait (with the exception of *The New York Times*) but does have an audience that finds it and clicks on it, but does not share it on social media.
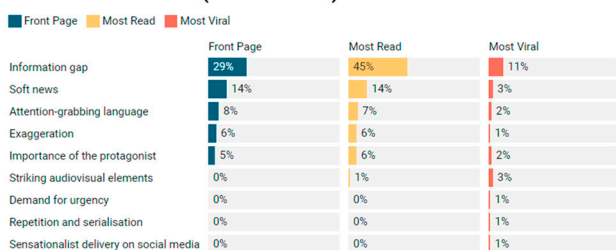
3.2. Type of Clickbait in General Digital Media and Audiences

The broken-down coding of the types of clickbait and soft news techniques used reveals different trends that vary according to the media and audiences observed. Overall, across all the categories examined, it is notable that there is a significant prevalence of headlining resources aimed at omitting part of the information, either due to the absence of specific information, the use of numbers, questions or ambiguity.
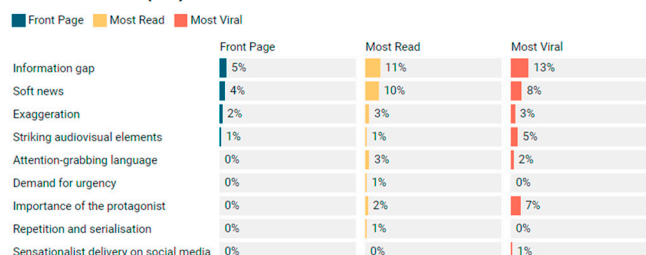
Soft news techniques and other resources, such as subject relevance, exaggeration or using attention-grabbing language, come second. Similarly, techniques such as the use of serialised and repeated information, sensationalist delivery on social media or a demand for urgency, through last-minute or exclusive promotions, only have a minimal presence in the total sample analysed.

In the case of the Spanish media publication *El País* (Figure 2), it is worth noting that it has an almost unique presence in information gap on its Front Pages (15%), compared to a greater diversity in the Most Read (21% information gap, combining with soft news (15%), importance of the protagonist (9%) and attention-grabbing language (7%)). A similar fragmentation is found in the Most Viral, where information gap (12%), soft news (9%) and percentages of approximately 3% and 6% of a demand for urgency, use of striking audiovisual elements and importance of the protagonist, among others, coexist.
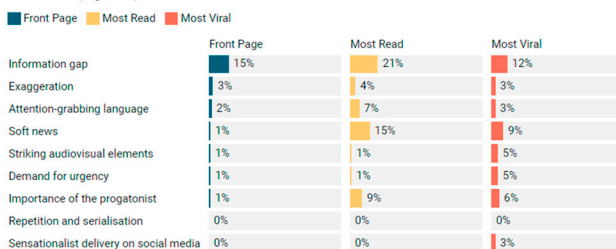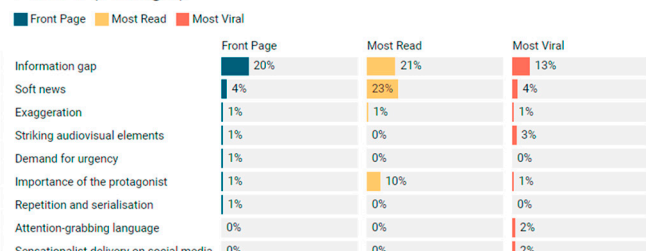
The New York Times (United States)

■ Front Page ■ Most Read ■ Most Viral

	Front Page	Most Read	Most Viral
Information gap	29%	45%	11%
Soft news	14%	14%	3%
Attention-grabbing language	8%	7%	2%
Exaggeration	6%	6%	1%
Importance of the protagonist	5%	6%	2%
Striking audiovisual elements	0%	1%	3%
Demand for urgency	0%	0%	1%
Repetition and serialisation	0%	0%	1%
Sensationalist delivery on social media	0%	0%	1%

The Guardian (UK)

■ Front Page ■ Most Read ■ Most Viral

	Front Page	Most Read	Most Viral
Information gap	5%	11%	13%
Soft news	4%	10%	8%
Exaggeration	2%	3%	3%
Striking audiovisual elements	1%	1%	5%
Attention-grabbing language	0%	3%	2%
Demand for urgency	0%	1%	0%
Importance of the protagonist	0%	2%	7%
Repetition and serialisation	0%	1%	0%
Sensationalist delivery on social media	0%	0%	1%

El País (Spain)

■ Front Page ■ Most Read ■ Most Viral

	Front Page	Most Read	Most Viral
Information gap	15%	21%	12%
Exaggeration	3%	4%	3%
Attention-grabbing language	2%	7%	3%
Soft news	1%	15%	9%
Striking audiovisual elements	1%	1%	5%
Demand for urgency	1%	1%	5%
Importance of the progatonist	1%	9%	6%
Repetition and serialisation	0%	0%	0%
Sensationalist delivery on social media	0%	0%	3%

Público (Portugal)

■ Front Page ■ Most Read ■ Most Viral

	Front Page	Most Read	Most Viral
Information gap	20%	21%	13%
Soft news	4%	23%	4%
Exaggeration	1%	1%	1%
Striking audiovisual elements	1%	0%	3%
Demand for urgency	1%	0%	0%
Importance of the protagonist	1%	10%	1%
Repetition and serialisation	1%	0%	0%
Attention-grabbing language	0%	0%	2%
Sensationalist delivery on social media	0%	0%	2%

Figure 2. Distribution and type of clickbait in the international general press: comparison between *NYT*, *The Guardian*, *El País* and *Público*.

The results of the international comparison reflect that *El País* differs from *The Guardian*, *Público* and *The New York Times*, in terms of audience fragmentation across platforms. The British media studied exhibit the lowest clickbait data across all areas, with barely a 5% information gap on their Front Pages, 4% in soft news and 2% for exaggeration. Most Read slightly increases in percentage, with 11% incomplete information and 10% soft news.

Only the Most Viral is fragmented in a similar way to *El País*, combining information gap (13%), soft news (8%), importance of the protagonist (7%) and, secondarily, use of striking audiovisual elements (5%) or exaggeration (3%).

In the audience selection, the Portuguese *Público* reflected an increase in the presence of clickbait, although the types decrease. The Front Pages predominantly use the information gap technique (20%), with only a 4% presence of soft news. Although the web audience chooses both resources to a greater extent (21% and 23%, respectively), they only click on 10% of content that uses importance of the protagonist techniques and 1% exaggeration techniques. The clickbait found among the selection of social media users decreases the information dissemination of these strategies by a figure even lower than that of the Front Page: 13% information gap and only 2–4% soft news, audiovisual elements, attention-grabbing or sensational delivery on social media.

In *The New York Times,* the highest percentage of information gap is found on the Front Page (29%), which is combined with the highest percentage of soft news techniques (14%), attention-grabbing language (8%), exaggeration (6%) and importance of the protagonist (5%). Among the web audience, the preference for content that omits key information in the headline almost doubles (45%), while there is a similar presence of the other resources mentioned. As in the previous case of the Portuguese *Público*, the Most Viral section of *NYT* shows fewer clickbait strategies than those found on the Front Page, with only 11% of information gap and 3% or fewer of soft news, striking audiovisual elements and importance of the protagonist.

3.3. The Spread of Clickbait into Hard News and Information Treatment

The last category of analysis outlines which topics and journalistic genres are present in the clickbait content found on the Front Page, the Most Read and the Most Viral. The results allow us to identify two specific trends: one, the inclusion of soft news or trivial topics in the journalistic agenda; and two, the presence of hooks and soft news in 'hard' and informative articles.

The results of the thematic agenda associated with the use of clickbait in the international digital newspapers (Table 3) reflect a Front Page that uses hook techniques to report about current affairs. This occurs in *El País*, where the five topics containing the highest proportion of clickbait are national politics (31.25%), international politics (25%), sports (12.5%), the war in Ukraine (9.38%) and the environment (9.38%). This trend is also detected in *Público*, which uses clickbait in its economic coverage, the war in Ukraine, the environment and national and international politics, with percentages between 9% and 15%.

The Guardian has a 40% presence of clickbait on its Front Page covering the war, representing the highest figure of the four media analysed, but this includes other soft news topics such as curiosities (13.33%) and current affairs (13.33%). The combination of hard and soft news is also reflected on the front page of *The New York Times*, with more clickbait in current affairs (24.59%), shootings as a current affair in the country (21.31%), celebrities (14.75%), curiosities (9.84%) and the economy (8.2%).

The content with hooks that readers click on and spread varies in theme for each media publication. The topics containing the most clickbait clicked on by readers of *El País* are soft news, with celebrities (23.81%) and sports (20.63%), and those including matters of science, current affairs and crimes approximately 10%. These topics are also found in those spread through social media, with a higher percentage, and also inequality and social movements (16.67%).

In the cases of *Público*, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, the presence of clickbait is visible in a thematic agenda that combines soft and hard news. Despite some variations in data and specific characteristics, the Portuguese and British cases align in terms of their audience's preference for hooks and tabloidisation in the coverage of celebrities and sports (between 8% and 22%), but also in the war in Ukraine (27.03%, in the case of *The Guardian*) and national and international politics. Irrelevant topics are also present in all three, such
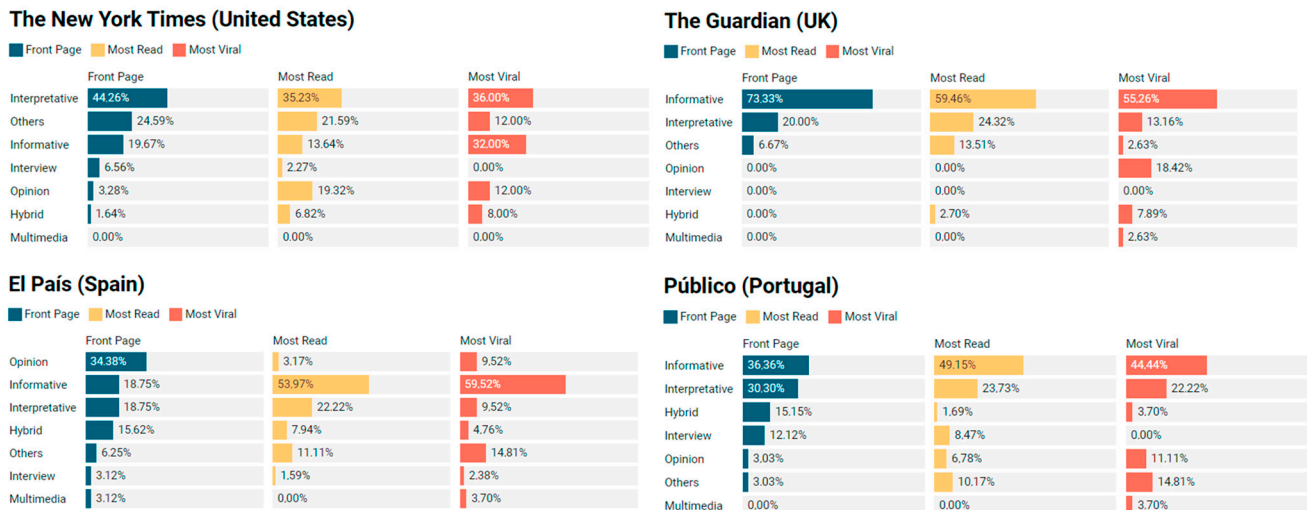
as curiosities (the highest being *NYT*, 9.09%). A similar trend can be seen among content shared on social media, with a marked presence of clickbait in the case of international politics in *Público* (18.52%), and in *NYT*, current affairs (44%) and shootings (40%), a topic that reflects the current situation in the United States.

Table 3. Topics containing clickbait in the international newspapers.

	NYT	**The Guardian**	**El País**	**Público**
Front Page	**Current affairs (24.59%)**	**Ukrainian war (40%)**	**National politics (31.25%)**	Economy (15.15%)
	Shootings (21.31%)	Curiosities (13.33%)	**International politics (25%)**	Ukrainian war (15.15%)
	Celebrities (14.75%)	Current affairs (13.33%)	Sports (12.5%)	The environment (15.15%)
	Curiosities (9.84%)	Science and technology (6.67%)	Ukrainian war (9.38%)	International politics (12.12%)
	Economy (8.20%)	International (6.67%)	The environment (9.38%)	National politics, Health, Current affairs (9.09%)
Most Read	**National politics (31.82%)**	Ukrainian war (27.03%)	**Celebrities (23.81%)**	**Celebrities (22.03%)**
	Current affairs (12.5%)	**International (18.92%)**	**Sports (20.63%)**	Sports (16.95%)
	Shootings (12.5%)	**Current affairs (18.92%)**	Science and technology (11.11%)	Curiosities (8.47%)
	Curiosities (9.09%)	Curiosities (13.51%)	Current affairs (9.52%)	Economy (8.47%)
	Celebrities (9.09%)	Celebrities (8.11%)	Crimes (7.94%)	Ukrainian war (8.47%)
Most Viral	**Current affairs (44%)**	**Celebrities (26.32%)**	**Sports (33.33%)**	**International politics (18.52%)**
	Shootings (40%)	**Sports (18.42%)**	**Celebrities (28.57%)**	Culture (14.81%)
	Science and technology (12%)	National politics (15.79%)	Science and technology (16.67%)	Crimes (11.11%)
	Celebrities (12%)	Curiosities (13.16%)	Inequality and social movements (16.67%)	Sports (7.41%)
	National politics, international politics (12%)	International politics (13.16%)	Current affairs (16.67%)	Celebrities (7.41%)

Finally, the analysis of the journalistic genres assigned to clickbait content (Figure 3) reveals a consistent pattern among the four international media outlets analysed, when it comes to finding these types of resources in the informative genre. In *El País*, it is mainly found among the selection of the web audience (53.97%) and the selection of users on social media (53.52%), and to a lesser extent on the front page (18.75%), while at the same time it combines also with other genres such as opinion or interpretation. The percentages increase in *Público* (36.36% on the front page, 49.15% in Most Read and 44.44% in Most Viral) and especially in *The Guardian* (73.33% on the Front Page, 59.46% in Most Read and 55.26% in Most Viral). It only decreases in the case of *The New York Times*, where this resource is found to a greater extent in the interpretive content, with 44.26% on the Front Page, 35.23% in Most Read and 36% in Most Viral, while the informative content has 32% in social media audience and less than 20% on the website.

The New York Times (United States)

Front Page   Most Read   Most Viral

	Front Page	Most Read	Most Viral
Interpretative	44.26%	35.23%	36.00%
Others	24.59%	21.59%	12.00%
Informative	19.67%	13.64%	32.00%
Interview	6.56%	2.27%	0.00%
Opinion	3.28%	19.32%	12.00%
Hybrid	1.64%	6.82%	8.00%
Multimedia	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

The Guardian (UK)

Front Page   Most Read   Most Viral

	Front Page	Most Read	Most Viral
Informative	73.33%	59.46%	55.26%
Interpretative	20.00%	24.32%	13.16%
Others	6.67%	13.51%	2.63%
Opinion	0.00%	0.00%	18.42%
Interview	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Hybrid	0.00%	2.70%	7.89%
Multimedia	0.00%	0.00%	2.63%

El País (Spain)

Front Page   Most Read   Most Viral

	Front Page	Most Read	Most Viral
Opinion	34.38%	3.17%	9.52%
Informative	18.75%	53.97%	59.52%
Interpretative	18.75%	22.22%	9.52%
Hybrid	15.62%	7.94%	4.76%
Others	6.25%	11.11%	14.81%
Interview	3.12%	1.59%	2.38%
Multimedia	3.12%	0.00%	3.70%

Público (Portugal)

Front Page   Most Read   Most Viral

	Front Page	Most Read	Most Viral
Informative	36.36%	49.15%	44.44%
Interpretative	30.30%	23.73%	22.22%
Hybrid	15.15%	1.69%	3.70%
Interview	12.12%	8.47%	0.00%
Opinion	3.03%	6.78%	11.11%
Others	3.03%	10.17%	14.81%
Multimedia	0.00%	0.00%	3.70%

Figure 3. Journalistic genres containing clickbait in the international generalist press: *El País* (Spain), *Público* (Portugal), *The Guardian* (United Kingdom) and *The New York Times* (USA).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

An analysis of clickbait and tabloidisation in four digital media outlets in Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States has enabled the identification and quantification of the extent to which these strategies are employed in reference to the international press (O1)—an aspect that has been studied to a lesser extent–, as well as its influence on predominant consumption and spread by multi-platform audiences (O2). The identification of hook resources in all the media studied indicates the contagion of these strategies to the 'serious' press (Palau-Sampio 2016; Robles-Ávila 2019; Majstorovic 2021), as well as the substantial changes in how news is now read and received. On the one hand, there is the delivery of news with altered headlines requiring access to the full content to fill information gaps (Scott 2023); and on the other hand, there is an inclusion of soft news and irrelevant topics in the journalistic agenda: sometimes even on the front page, where one would expect traditional news standards based on relevance and significance to prevail (De la Torre and Téramo 2015; Flores-Vivar and Zaharía 2022).

These findings validate the main hypothesis by demonstrating the widespread prevalence of clickbait across all international media analysed (H1). Although clickbait does not dominate the Front Page (h1)—with the exception of *The New York Times* (44%)—it gains greater visibility in the Most Read website news and the most spread news on social media (h2). This study shows that the media use clickbait despite its implications for trust (Kaushal and Vemuri 2021) and its close relationship with deceptive information (Scott 2023). This is evident as those headlines compromise information delivery with incomplete content and an absence of data. To a lesser extent, clickbait lowers standards by using soft news techniques or the inclusion of irrelevant topics in journalistic agendas that are even noted on their front pages, confirming the third sub-hypothesis (h3).

The findings indicate a correlation between the news genre and the prevalence of clickbait, suggesting a deterioration of news quality (Shiang and Wilson 2024). It is evident that while audiences engage with clickbait and soft news by clicking on it (Most Read), they do not actively share those articles (Most Viral). This occurs either because the content is not what they expected—deceptive and misleading content (Jodłowiec 2022), nearing disinformation—or because, as Bright (2016) suggests, people spread content that is not what they read for convenience or social appearance. These results could be reflected in the difference found between the information read—with a focus on soft news such as celebrities, curiosities or current affairs—and that which is spread, which more widely tends to be about national and international politics, science or social affairs.

Undoubtedly, at the present juncture, the digital media such as those we have analysed in this study, seem willing to sacrifice their thematic agenda and professional rigour in order

to retain the audience by promoting clickbait. Nevertheless, this choice carries inherent hazards as audiences respond with distrust and a growing tendency to avoid consuming news (Newman et al. 2022). The presence of a 'crisis of relevance' is evident, along with a compelled effort to seek engagement (Castells-Fos et al. 2022). This can be described as an information gap (Diez-Gracia and Sánchez-García 2022) characterised by the difference between what the media believe is relevant according to their journalistic standards and what their audience prefers.

The main finding remains valid despite limitations such as sample size, its limited geographical representation or the number of general information media analysed: the 'serious' press (Robles-Ávila 2019) has a journalistic agenda that is obscured by the inclusion of 'hooks' in its informative content and hard news which prevents audiences from judging the suitability of a news story by its headline (Scacco and Muddiman 2020). This research can be expanded through a comparative analysis of different media and international contexts through time, as well as by increasing the perspective of audiences as recipients, selectors and curators of content (Dafonte-Gómez et al. 2022). Similarly, in order to comprehend the perspective of journalist and media editors, in-depth interviews could be of interest. Regarding distribution and spread of information, understanding the structure of the algorithmic and recommendation systems that mediate the circulation of information flows is crucial. Studying the potential implementation of detection tools that counter these systems is also important (Agrawal 2016; Potthast et al. 2016), thereby fostering an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the impact of this phenomenon on journalism.

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