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Q&A#131 Clickbait?

May 11, 2019



Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "In today's world, where there seems to be an overflow of information, is clickbaiting justified?"

Within this episode, I recommend the work of The Bible is Art YouTube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9sPRleqnVlasw8wnUGBVyA>

I also mention feedly as an RSS feed aggregator: <https://feedly.com>

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>. You can see transcripts of my videos here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/list-of-videos-and-podcasts/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:
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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, in today's world, where there seems to be an overflow of information, is clickbaiting justified? It's a fun question. I think we need to begin by defining what clickbaiting means for the purpose of the conversation.

When we think about clickbait, some people might be thinking about anything that attracts attention to an article, video, or some other piece of online content. So any title

that's eye-catching or image, whatever it is. But yet bait has a negative sense.

When we think about bait, it's a lure or it's a decoy, or it's something that gets an animal or a human being to go to something and to get their attention, but actually there's a false pretense there. And there is an over-promising and under-delivering. So we can think about bait in terms of bait on a hook or decoy of an animal.

These things are designed to attract the attention of animals. And then when they get them, they realize they've been sorely misled. In the same way, when you're going online, people are hunting for your attention and you'll have these clickbait articles and other things like that, that present something that seems to be of interest.

And then you click through and no, it's not at all. The other thing to bear in mind here is when we think about those areas in which clickbait tries to get people's attention, they're generally vices. So it tends to be gossip and our involvement in other people's affairs and interest in the things that are going on with them, envy, these sorts of things, lust and pride, anger, all these sorts of things are caught up in clickbait.

So there's something that's going to outrage you, or there's something that's going to titillate you, or there's something that's going to give you some juicy piece of gossip, whatever it is, clickbait is usually not appealing to the best parts of ourselves. Very, very rarely is it doing that. Even the upbeat stuff is often just about feeding our sense of distractedness.

And so we're distracted and we're just going around on the internet and we've not really got any single place that we're trying to go. We're feeling quite aimless. And there's something that, oh, here's an upbeat article that will distract me for a short period of time.

And you'll forget it within five minutes. But the important thing is you've got your attention for a few moments, you've clicked through. And so much of this is about a dysfunctional funding model.

The idea of depending upon advertising. And the more that you depend upon advertising in that sort of way, the more that you're actually going to try and attract people's attention on false pretenses, you're going to constantly divert people's attention. So there are some websites when you're reading people's articles and nonstop, there are these ads breaking up the text.

I think I come here to read your material and yet you're constantly distracting me from that material. Do you expect me to click through and go to this site when I'm actually trying to read the complete article? It's not actually serving the process of my reading. Now, it's difficult for writers to fund their work.

I know this firsthand, it is really difficult. It's one of the reasons why I don't blog so much

nowadays. I don't have the time and it's just, I don't have, I can't afford to do it.

When you think about the cost of the time and all the other funding things, funding a website, you need to find a funding model that works if you're going to do it and you're going to have to depend upon it for some degree of income. So it's a problem and many people have had to rely upon an ad-based model and that ad-based model does come with a series of downsides. It attracts a certain sort of, it develops a certain sort of attitude where you're trying to attract as much traffic as possible.

But yet, that traffic is not necessarily going to stay around, nor is it going to be the sort of traffic that is going to be engaged. Often what you attract with clickbait is distracted people, people who aren't really going to pay attention to what you're writing. And so it's not really serving your work and often what you'll have is the more that you're designed to attract attention in that way, you will write articles and you'll produce videos that are themselves clickbait.

So it's not just the title, it's everything about what you're producing is just designed to produce clicks. So you may even deliver on what you promise in the title, but that delivering is not really something that's of any edifying purpose. And you're not doing it because you think this is worthwhile or good or that people really deserve this material, you're doing it because you want to get clicks and you need the money.

And the whole funding model encourages that sort of thing. And that I think counts as clickbait too, even if there isn't a false pretense. If the article is purely designed to attract clicks and there is a lot of material online, so much of the hot takes, and you see this increasingly in even some formerly respectable newspapers and magazines, a lot of their output now is merely designed to attract clicks.

And there's very little content, there's very little solid journalism. And the result of it is whipping up some of our basest emotions. So people get angry about political issues, people get worked up and they get titillated by gossip or some rumors that are spreading around around some celebrity figures, or their lust is attracted to a particular set of images, whatever it is, it's usually not doing us any good whatsoever.

So I think that whole clickbait economy is a mess and it's bound up with a funding system that's based upon advertising. It's very, very hard to extricate yourself from that. And I've seen on my own blog that there are things that will attract people's attention and get huge amount of attention for a short period of time.

And it tends to be things that are associated with outrage, some current dispute or argument, whatever it is, something that whips up people's attention, it whips up people's emotions and then that gets their attention. But usually that material is not the most worthwhile. There are times when I've produced things that have been really substantial articles that have received a lot of attention.

And that is really what I'm looking for. But when I'm writing something that's just causing, getting people angry, not really interested in that spreading that widely. But yet when you're talking in that context of clickbait, when you're talking in a context where there isn't a set commitment to any outlets or anything like that, and your work is just spreading through social media, it feels like speaking into a microphone and described like this before, microphone where people are fiddling with the volume switch.

So as soon as you say something controversial or titillating or something that whips people up in some way, your volume switch will be turned right up. And so there's an incentive built into that. If you want to develop your audience, if you want to get in more income, then you just constantly engage in that sort of clickbait.

There are some people who have an established audience who constantly engaging in clickbait, but it's a sort of, it's not, everyone knows that it's clickbait. And that sort of thing can be a joke. It's not, the content itself may have worthy character, but it may just be presented in a way that's trying to attract people as they walk past, that's eye catching.

And there may be occasions when that's justified. But the whole model is not an ideal one. I think what we've lost particularly is commitment to specific sources over longer periods of time.

So if you're depending upon your news, for instance, from Facebook links, it's a very poor delivery system. Because what you will get, you will get those articles that attract people's outrage, that attract their sort of very upbeat, positive feelings. You'll get some things that people are titillated by or rumors and gossip and things like that.

But there will be a focus upon certain types of material and other stuff will be left out. So subscribe to a newspaper or magazine, use RSS feeds. This is really important.

If you want to have a healthy online system, then you need to commit yourself to particular sources and listen to a particular conversation and set of voices over time. Don't just focus upon drawing from your social network. Now that can be helpful, but if that's all that you're doing, you have a very poor delivery system and you'll end up focusing upon particular types of material and other things won't cross your path.

So what I found very helpful is people who follow me on a regular basis, who listen to the stuff of mine that's not really controversial, that's not really eye catching, but it's the stuff that I'm really invested in. I love doing biblical theological work, but I find that whenever I do that work, I can have fewer visitors and hits by an order of magnitude at least. And sometimes by two orders of magnitude.

There are some pieces that I've written that have received over a hundred thousand hits, but then there are other pieces I write, they barely even received a hundred. And the

difference is that the main, the pieces that receive a lot of attention are the things that whip up certain emotions that play to big debates, things like that. The material that I'm most invested in tends to be at the middle of the range.

It's not really something that's attracting a lot of attention. It attracts a core group. And really those are the people I produce material for.

I'm not really that invested in just getting random people's attention. Because when I get those random people's attention, I can't really do much with it in most situations. Most of them aren't going to be interested in some biblical theological stuff.

And I'd just be wasting their time. They can spend their time better elsewhere. And unless there's someone who has a background in this sort of material, much of it will go over their head perhaps.

So I'm not really interested in attracting a broad group of people's attention. What I want more than anything else is a small group of committed people who are engaged over a longer period of time. That is a really quality audience.

And it's hard to maintain that sort of audience or that sort of model when it just does not work with funding and other things like that. So the bigger newspapers and journals and websites will often tend to veer in the direction of a clickbait model. And they'll try and resist to some extent, but it does have that constant leaning in that direction unless you find a better funding model.

I find that for myself, I have to commit myself to making this possible for other people. So the material that I value, I invest in. So I spend probably about 200 pounds a year at least on subscribing to certain things online and making sure that I get good material.

Then I use an RSS feed aggregator. I use Feedly generally. And that way I'm listening to certain voices over a period of time consistently.

So I hear what someone's saying every week or so, every time they put out a post or an article, I'm reading what they're saying. So I have a sense of their more general output and not just of the things that will attract the most attention. So generally try and break out of that clickbait model.

So on the one hand, if you're a content producer, try and focus on developing a model that will enable you to speak consistently and with clarity to a small group of people who are really paying attention. Because otherwise you're just attracting people whose attention is of little value because they've not got much attention. They're in a state of distraction.

And that's when clickbait is most appealing to us. Whereas if you're looking for someone who really is going to engage with your material, find people who give their attention

and to invest in material. And I think all of us need to do this to make this work.

And this is how material will, a healthy internet will develop when we're actually invested in good material. And that involves also publicizing people's material by word of mouth. And that's not just the same thing as clicking on material, sharing material and links and things like that.

But recommend it in a very specific way to specific people. I've done that with a lot of different people's material and I've had a lot of people do this for me. And that's how I've come across the best resources that I'm using at the moment because there is some really good stuff out there but you generally have to dig a bit deeper because the best material does not tend to get produced in a clickbait model.

It tends to get produced in these smaller, more obscure corners of the web where people are committed to a different model. And if you want to make that work, you will generally have to depend more upon word of mouth than people who are using clickbait. And word of mouth is not just the same thing as viral and things moving virally through the internet.

It's not just the general audience that you want. You want specific people. And when that works well, I think we get a far better internet as a result of it.

You're not wasting your time and you're not dealing with this overflow of information. You've got key resources and key people that you're listening to. So I find follow a number of key people on YouTube, follow a number of podcasts, subscribe to at least one newspaper and pay for it.

It's important that you make it possible for good journalism to be produced. Fund some people who are producing good material. It's important to make all of these things possible.

And I've had a lot of people make this possible for me and it's a struggle, but it really makes a difference. And so I think I want to make it possible for other people. Think about how you're using your time.

If you're spending your time in the context where click baiting is the way that things work, you're probably not getting the best content. You're probably wasting time with material that's just designed to get your click in order to increase advertising revenue. But if you really want the best quality material, you might need to dig a bit deeper, pay attention to people who have their ear to the ground, who are well-connected and who are listening out for the best material and get some tips from them.

If we want to make the internet a better place, we really need to find a model that works. And I don't think there's a more general model. I think more generally, we are stuck with the advertising model for now.

But this is one of the things that allows us to form smaller, more obscure communities where we won't necessarily have to suffer from the downsides of everything being spread everywhere. And I've enjoyed actually returning to a more obscure community on YouTube and elsewhere where my material is slightly less accessible. So I've not really got much click bait.

I've not really got things to attract people's attention. But people who know what I produce may be interested and they'll spend time with it. But other people, they're just going to ignore it.

And often you do not want their attention because it will just come with outrage and you'll end up spending your time putting out fires rather than actually dealing with concrete, solid information. So try and make that sort of situation possible. Give your time to things that really are of the best quality.

RSS feeds have been wonderful for me. An RSS feed aggregator is something like Feedly where you can subscribe to a particular blog and every single one of its posts you see. Now there's a difference between that and receiving material on Facebook or Twitter because when you have an RSS feed aggregator, you're reading it by yourself.

And so I'll go through my Feedly account on my mobile phone when I'm waiting in line in store or something like that. It is something that can help me to make the most of that time. And it also means that I really get to know certain thoughtful voices.

And I'm not just depending upon whatever distracts my attention for a short period of time. And the people that you'll find online sharing the most viral material, that material has generally little of value to it. And it whips up more material because someone gets outraged about something that someone said that's gone viral and then builds up this hot air around things that have very little substance.

So spend your time in things that really have substance. And that will also mean spending less time on the internet. There are great books out there and we need more people on the internet to actually direct our attention to those things outside of the internet.

Read some good old books, read some the new material that's being released on various subjects. But maybe you should be spending less of your time online in a context where you're just engaged with clickbait. Think about the amount of time you could spend, for instance, listening to the Bible as I discussed yesterday, or reading some book, use Audible, use something that enables you to make the most of those periods of time that might not be of use for other purposes.

Subscribe to Feedly. So you're spending more time reading in solitude and reading consistently. Subscribe to newspapers and read them consistently and get to know

particular authors and writers and their particular editorial vantage point, these sorts of things.

That's what I've found most helpful. But if we're going to make this possible, we have to invest in the sort of internet that we want to have for ourselves. And that I think, particularly within my context, involves invest in the best Christian material that's out there.

I think there are some really good people producing material. I think, for instance, of the Bible is Art, YouTube channel. That needs more attention.

And there's great material being produced there. Go over there, take a look, and consider supporting him on Patreon. It's something that is a fledgling work and could really become something valuable.

But we need to make this possible because those sorts of things will die unless we invest in them. So water those plants, make them possible to grow, and build the internet that we wish we could have that is not just an internet of clickbaiting. Now, there are times when you will need to attract people's attention and make things more attractive.

Certainly, I could do a lot more on that front. Occasionally, I'll give something, a title that attracts some people's attention. But what I'm wanting more than anything else is to attract the right sort of attention.

So for instance, a clickbaity title, not a clickbaity title, but a title designed to attract people's attention that I used a couple of weeks ago was something like Jonah's Ark. It's playing on the word Joan of Ark, but it's also trying to get people's attention by asking an interesting question. It's attracting people's curiosity, but it's not just a curiosity that I'm going to disappoint them on.

I want them to think about, how could we say that Jonah has an ark? And what might that ark be? And I answer that question. So I don't think that is clickbait in the negative sense, but it's the sort of thing that I could probably do a lot more of. And I could have more attractive images for my videos.

So you wouldn't just have to look at my face all the time. And I do change my shirt most days, but that's about it. It's not really a very interesting thing to look at.

If you want something to attract people's attention, that's not a bad thing. And so in that sense, clickbait is not unjustified. But if we want a better internet, we should probably engage less in clickbait and we should probably avoid the context where clickbait is the means by which things are spread.

Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing, you're having a good day. If you would like to ask me any question, please do so on my Curious Cat account.

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