**This is why you should attend this talk: Clickbait and the Reception of News Stories**

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Experimental narratology panel

Abstract:

Narrative techniques have always been a central part of journalism. The genre lives off serialization and suspension strategies, such as cliffhangers, to retain the interest of the reader (e.g. the widespread use of wordings like ‘Fortsetzung folgt’ in the 19th century, cf. Kaminski et. al. 2014).

Today still, we encounter a prominent exponent of such suspension strategies in the form of ‘clickbait’. ‘Clickbait’ refers to headlines that create information gaps which the reader can only fill when reading, and thus by clicking an article. As such, the phenomenon has often been criticized on account of its sensationalist effect on news stories. Existing research predominantly focuses on the (complex) rhetorical elements (Blom/Hansen 2014, Palau-Sampio 2016) or on software recognition parameters (Chakraborty et. al. 2016, Potthast et. al. 2016).

This paper outlines research we are doing in the Experimental Humanities Lab of Indiana University. Building on earlier work about reader expectations (Zwaan 1994), we examine how clickbait influences the reading act and modifies the way readers receive a (news) story. ‘Clickbait’, we intend to show, demonstrates that narrative structure is no fixed entity: in guiding the reader to specific salient features of a story, it fundamentally affects the reading act.

Works cited

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**Introduction**

In the last two editions, I had the opportunity to present aspects of my dissertation research focusing on the music criticism of the German composers Robert Schumann and Richard Wagner. Specifically, I delved into the narrative aspects of press discourse during the 19th century. As part of my investigation into the pragmatics of critical discourse, I emphasized the narrative role of paratextuality in periodical literature.

For those acquainted with 18th and 19th century periodical literature, the prevalence of narrative devices, such as serialization, becomes evident. An example of this is the use of cliffhanger-like formulas like 'Fortsetzung folgt' (to be continued) at the end of articles. While serving the practical purpose of marking the conclusion of an article, these cliffhangers were also designed to evoke curiosity and suspense, encouraging readers to eagerly await and continue reading in the subsequent issue.

**Concept**

Around a year ago, I successfully completed my PhD and subsequently relocated to Indiana University, where I became an integral part of the Experimental Humanities Lab. During one of our brainstorming sessions, my attention was drawn to contemporary expressions and arrangements resembling the serializing 'cliffhangers' I had encountered in my research, namely clickbait.

But what exactly is 'clickbait'? Clickbait is often used pejoratively to describe enticing headlines featuring a conspicuous unknown element (Leerstelle) designed to pique curiosity and encourage readers to click on the headline. Typically driven by revenue, clickbait is commonly associated with social media and tabloid news.

However, a crucial distinction exists between clickbait and serializing paratextual elements like cliffhangers. In clickbait, the suspense element is positioned at the beginning of the article, generating curiosity before readers delve into the content. Consequently, the headline imposes a narrative or storyline on readers, signaling a specific interpretation of the narrative. We aim to investigate how this might potentially influence the act of reading.

Importance:

- The reliance of clickbait on suggestiveness can have significant consequences, underscoring the need for a detailed understanding of the interaction between readers and clickbait.

- While primarily a web-based phenomenon, we observe that the key discursive elements of clickbait are permeating print-based media, ranging from newspapers to billboard advertising.

If this trend persists, it suggests a more proactive, teleological-processual approach to conveying news and information. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how such a narrativization of knowledge communication impacts the reading experience and the way we process information.

Clickbait has been a subject of limited studies, with most of them focusing on specific areas of inquiry:

* Linguistic and rhetorical properties
* Recognition software
* Curiosity

Narratologists, however, have not extensively explored clickbait. Nevertheless, we can draw inspiration from:

* General perspectives on the narrativity of journalism
* Relevant insights from Zwaan
* Narratological work on curiosity and suspense, as explored by Sternberg
* Digital storytelling

These existing bodies of work provide valuable cues for a more comprehensive understanding of clickbait from various perspectives.

**Pilot Study**

The objective of this project is to investigate if and to what extent clickbait influences the act of reading, i.e. the reception of articles. Does the Leerstelle clickbait headlines typically rely on, steer the way readers read the news story? And what does that mean for their reception of a text?

As you can well imagine, there were some practical and less practical concerns and difficulties from the beginning, among many others:

\* First of all, how do we measure the ‘influence’ of clickbait?

\* Secondly, what kind of clickbait do we use? Only the exaggerated, “You’ll never know what happened”-type or also less obtrusive kinds? Do we use real headlines from websites, or are we more interested in ideal, perfected forms to study the maximal effect clickbait can have?

\* How do we keep the balance between clickbait and the reader? In other words: do readers mainly click on headlines out of personal interest or out of curiosity, which is the ‘core business’ for clickbait?

In order to assess some of these difficulties and reflect on the best way to start our project, we launched a pilot study:

1) We selected headlines from websites (as diverse as Buzzfeed, HuffPost or The Guardian) and made different kinds of clickbait out of them according to 3 rhetorical types we discerned:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Deixis  words and phrases, such as “me” or “here”, that cannot be fully understood without additional [contextual information](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Context_%28language_use%29) | Open (rhetorical) question | (Numerical) List |

2) We drafted an experiment that covers as many aspects of the project as possible:

* + Let readers read headline of an article and probe how much and what they remember from the article
  + We had two variants of this headline: a forced headline and the choice between clickbait and non-clickbait

**Conclusion and outlook**

The results of the pilot experiment suggest that:

* + Readers are more prone to select clickbait headlines: 58% mor so
  + Readers read articles more attentively when exposed to a clickbait headline
  + Headlines influence retellings: the element of ’95 pennies’ appeared more in retellings that were expose with a clickbait headline mentioning ’95 pennies’.

Further steps:

* + More extensive analysis of salient features in retellings needed
  + Less emphasis on experiment as reading comprehension
  + Personal interest vs. clickbait effect

About the Experimental Humanities Lab at Indiana University

The lab was founded by Fritz Breithaupt as a way of bringing researchers and students together to reflect on the role narratives play in our daily lives. People in our group come from different backgrounds and want to study different ideas: interactions between medical doctors and patients, legal affairs, empathy etc.

Our goals are to better understand the way we use narratives and to utilize narratives to improve learning and human interactions. We try do to that by including a prominent empirical element in our studies: we conduct experiments with real-life subjects in order to examine how we create stories, narrativize our thinking and transfer stories onto each other.