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**FROM CREDIBILITY TO CLICKBAIT: AUDIENCE TRUST AND THE  
EVOLUTION OF JOURNALISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

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**Abstract**

*The digital transformation of news has shifted journalism from a profession anchored in verification and public service to one increasingly governed by metrics, platforms, and click-driven economics. While online distribution has expanded access and participation, it has also incentivized sensationalism, “clickbait” headlines, and algorithmic curation that can undermine trust. Drawing on scholarship on news credibility, audience analytics, and algorithmic gatekeeping, this conceptual paper examines how audience trust is being reshaped as journalism moves from credibility-centred norms to attention-centred logics. We synthesize literature on clickbait, metrics, and news trust to propose an integrative framework linking three layers: (1) newsroom practices driven by audience analytics and platform incentives, (2) platform architectures and algorithmic filtering, and (3) audience heuristics for evaluating credibility. We formulate research questions and propositions for future empirical work, with particular attention to the Global South where platform dependency and economic precarity intensify pressures toward clickbait and partisan content. The paper argues that trust in news is not simply eroding but being reallocated across legacy brands, digital-born outlets, influencers, and platforms. It concludes with normative and practical implications for rebuilding trust through transparency, slower news formats, audience engagement, and public-interest metrics that realign journalism with its core democratic functions.*

**Keywords:** journalism, clickbait, credibility, trust, audience analytics, algorithms, digital news, Global South

**1. Introduction**

For much of the twentieth century, journalism derived its legitimacy from professional norms emphasizing truth-telling, verification, and independence from power. Kovach and Rosenstiel famously described journalism’s “first obligation” as being to the truth and its “first loyalty” to citizens, grounded in a discipline of verification and proportionality (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). In today’s digital environment, however, the economic and technological infrastructure of news has changed radically. Advertising revenue has migrated to platforms, audiences increasingly access news via social media and mobile devices, and attention has become a core currency of survival for news organizations.

This shift has helped fuel the rise of “clickbait” headlines, engagement-optimized story selection, and algorithmic curation. Clickbait is commonly described as a set of linguistic or visual strategies designed to maximize curiosity and entice users to click, often by



overpromising or withholding key information in the headline (Kuiken et al., 2017; Jung et al., 2022). While such strategies can be effective in capturing short-term attention, they risk undermining perceptions of credibility and contributing to long-term distrust.

At the same time, trust in news has become more fragile and unevenly distributed. Cross-national survey data from the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report show declining public trust in many markets, with notable growth in news avoidance and scepticism about political coverage (Newman et al., 2023). Yet trust is not simply collapsing; it is being reconfigured, with some audiences gravitating toward alternative and partisan outlets, while others increasingly rely on social media feeds, influencers, and peers as news filters (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019).

This paper explores how audience trust is renegotiated as journalism evolves from a credibility-centred model to an attention- and click-based model in the digital age. We ask: How do metrics, platforms, and clickbait practices interact to reshape audience evaluations of news? Under what conditions do audiences interpret clickbait and platformized news as acceptable, and when do these practices erode trust? How might these dynamics differ across contexts, particularly in the Global South where media systems often combine weak regulation, intense competition, and high platform dependency?

Rather than presenting new empirical data, this is a conceptual and synthetic paper. We integrate scholarship on (1) news credibility and online information evaluation, (2) clickbait and metrics-driven journalism, and (3) algorithms and filter bubbles. Building on this synthesis, we propose an analytic framework and a set of research questions and propositions to guide future empirical studies. We also highlight normative implications for journalists, platforms, and policymakers seeking to sustain trustworthy journalism in an attention economy.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The digital transformation of journalism**

Digitization has fragmented audiences, diversified formats, and eroded traditional gatekeeping. The transition from print and broadcast to networked digital media has reconfigured how news is produced, distributed, and consumed. Legacy news organizations now compete with digital-born outlets, platforms, and influencers for attention, while audience participation via commenting, sharing, and remixing has become a central feature of the news environment (Newman, 2015; Newman et al., 2023).

Algorithmic curation by search engines, social networks, and news aggregators has created what some scholars call a "platformed" news ecosystem, in which platforms mediate access to audiences and shape which stories become visible (Thurman, 2019). As news use shifts toward these intermediaries, journalists' traditional gatekeeping power weakens while platform logics gain prominence.

Audience metrics and real-time analytics further transform newsroom routines. Tools such as Chartbeat or in-house dashboards track clicks, dwell time, and social shares, making audience behavior visible and actionable (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Fürst, 2020). Tandoc (2014) shows how web analytics can reshape gatekeeping, as journalists and editors adapt coverage to maximize measurable engagement. This can lead to a stronger focus on emotionally arousing, sensational, or personalized stories at the expense of public-interest reporting.

### **2.2 From credibility to clickbait: Metrics, headlines, and the attention economy**

Headlines have always played a crucial role in attracting readership, but in an online environment they function as "micro-cues" that determine whether a user clicks at all. Research on clickbait shows that such headlines often rely on curiosity gaps, emotional language, and ambiguity ("You won't believe what happened next") to increase click-through rates (Kuiken



et al., 2017; Molyneux, 2019; Jung et al., 2022). Jung et al. (2022) conceptualize clickbait as short teaser messages that exploit cognitive biases to increase the likelihood of clicking the associated content.

Lischka (2023) argues that clickbait is best understood as part of a broader “game” in which newsrooms respond strategically to platform algorithms that reward engagement. As platforms prioritize content that generates strong interaction, news organizations face structural incentives to adopt attention-optimizing strategies. While some studies suggest clickbait may increase immediate engagement, there is concern that it damages perceptions of quality and trust when headlines are perceived as misleading or disproportionate to the underlying story (Kuiken et al., 2017; Molyneux, 2019).

Audience metrics amplify these dynamics. Fürst (2020) reviews evidence that metrics influence not only story selection but also headline writing and resource allocation, potentially undermining traditional news quality criteria such as depth, diversity, and proportionality. As metrics become intertwined with commercial survival, newsroom decisions increasingly reflect attention-maximizing logics rather than strictly public-interest considerations.

### **2.3 Credibility and trust in online news**

Trust is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing beliefs about the accuracy, fairness, independence, and benevolence of news sources (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). In digital environments, audiences often rely on cognitive heuristics—such as source reputation, design quality, or social endorsements—to judge credibility quickly (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

Survey data show that trust in news has declined in many countries and is unevenly distributed across sources. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023 documents declining interest in news and growing news avoidance, with many respondents citing negativity, overload, and perceived bias as reasons for disengagement (Newman et al., 2023). Fletcher and Park (2017) find that individuals with low trust in mainstream media are more likely to turn to alternative news sources and to engage in selective sharing of partisan content.

Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) show that trust is correlated with patterns of news use: users who trust news are more likely to rely on institutional brands, whereas those with lower trust are more inclined to use social media, search, and alternative outlets as their primary gateways. This suggests that trust is being redistributed rather than uniformly eroding, with some audiences placing more faith in peers, platforms, or influencers than in professional news organizations.

### **2.4 Algorithms, personalization, and “filter bubbles”**

Algorithms shape not only which stories are visible but also how individuals experience the news (Ahmad et al., 2021; Aslam et al., 2020; Aslam & Ahmad, 2019; Hussain et al., 2021). Pariser’s notion of the “filter bubble” warned that algorithmic personalization could isolate users in ideologically homogeneous information environments, limiting exposure to diverse views (Pariser, 2011). Subsequent work has nuanced this claim, suggesting that filter bubbles may be less absolute than originally feared but nonetheless contribute to selective exposure and perceived polarization (Bruns, 2019).

Thurman (2019) and colleagues argue that algorithms and automation now perform many tasks once reserved for human editors, including story ranking, content recommendations, and even automated writing. While such automation can improve efficiency and personalization, it also raises concerns about opacity, bias, and the displacement of editorial judgement. From the audience’s perspective, the distinction between editorial choices and algorithmic decisions is



often unclear, complicating attribution of responsibility when misinformation or sensationalism spreads.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

To analyze the shift “from credibility to clickbait,” we integrate three theoretical strands: gatekeeping and metrics, filter bubbles and algorithmic curation, and credibility heuristics.

#### 3.1 Gatekeeping and metrics-driven journalism

Classic gatekeeping theory conceptualizes news selection as a multi-level process shaped by individual, organizational, and societal factors. In digital newsrooms, web analytics introduce a new, powerful input to gatekeeping: real-time feedback from audiences (Tandoc, 2014). Tandoc shows how journalists increasingly treat audience metrics as a form of capital, which can influence which stories are promoted, updated, or dropped.

Audience analytics thus reshape gatekeeping in at least two ways. First, they encourage what Fürst (2020) calls “metrics-driven news,” in which story prominence and resources follow indicators such as click-through rates and time-on-page. Second, they encourage experimentation with formats—such as clickbait headlines or listicles—that perform well on platforms even if they depart from traditional notions of seriousness or public value.

#### 3.2 Filter bubbles, platform logics, and visibility

Pariser’s filter-bubble thesis highlights personalization as a threat to exposure diversity (Pariser, 2011). Bruns (2019) refines this view, arguing that platform algorithms interact with user choices and social networks, creating complex patterns of visibility rather than strict isolation.

For journalism, the key point is that platform logics mediate visibility. Stories optimized for engagement—through emotional framing, partisan cues, or clickbait—are more likely to be amplified by algorithms. Over time, this can produce a feedback loop where news organizations internalize platform incentives, leading to content strategies that privilege attention-grabbing material over slower, investigative, or context-rich reporting.

#### 3.3 Credibility and trust heuristics in digital environments

Metzger and Flanagin (2013) show that users frequently rely on cognitive heuristics—such as source reputation, endorsement cues (likes, shares), and design quality—when evaluating online information. These heuristics can sometimes substitute for careful scrutiny, particularly when users are overloaded or disinterested.

In a platformized news environment, trust heuristics operate across multiple layers:

- **Brand-level trust** (e.g., trust in BBC, Dawn, The New York Times).
- **Platform-level trust** (e.g., trust in Facebook, YouTube, TikTok).
- **Network-level trust** (e.g., trust in friends, influencers, or micro-celebrities who share news).

Fletcher and Park (2017) and Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) demonstrate that trust in news influences both source selection and participatory behaviors (sharing, commenting, recommending). The evaluative lens through which audiences judge clickbait therefore depends not only on the headline itself but also on the perceived integrity of the brand and the platform environment where it is encountered.

### 4. Research Questions and Propositions

Based on the literature, we propose the following overarching research questions (RQs) and propositions (Ps) for empirical investigation:

**RQ1:** How do clickbait-style headlines affect audiences’ perceptions of news credibility and trust across different types of outlets (legacy, digital-born, partisan, tabloid)?



**RQ2:** How do audience metrics and analytics practices within newsrooms influence the adoption of clickbait and engagement-optimizing strategies?

**RQ3:** How do platform algorithms and personalization features shape exposure to clickbait versus traditional headlines?

**RQ4:** How is trust in news redistributed among legacy outlets, digital-born news organizations, influencers, and platforms in different media systems, particularly in the Global South?

**RQ5:** Which audience heuristics (e.g., brand reputation, social endorsement, platform trust) moderate the relationship between clickbait exposure and perceived credibility?

From these questions, we derive provisional propositions:

- **P1:** Clickbait headlines are more likely to reduce perceived credibility when the underlying content is incongruent with the headline (i.e., overpromising), particularly for legacy brands that audiences expect to uphold traditional journalistic standards.
- **P2:** News organizations with high dependence on platform traffic and advertising revenue are more likely to institutionalize metrics-driven practices that favour clickbait and emotional framing.
- **P3:** In highly platformized environments, algorithmic amplification of engagement may disproportionately promote clickbait content, contributing to perceived sensationalism and news fatigue.
- **P4:** In media systems with historically low institutional trust, audiences may tolerate or even prefer clickbait from alternative or partisan outlets if these are perceived as more authentic or aligned with their identities.
- **P5:** Strong brand-level trust and transparent editorial practices can buffer the negative impact of clickbait headlines on perceived credibility, especially when headlines remain factually accurate and contextually proportional.

## 5. Proposed Methodology for Empirical Application

Although this paper is conceptual, we outline a mixed-methods design that future research could use to test the proposed framework.

### 5.1 Comparative survey of news users

A cross-national online survey could sample adult internet users in several countries representing diverse media systems (e.g., one or two Western democracies plus multiple Global South contexts). Building on measures from the Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2015; 2023), the survey would capture:

- Trust in news (overall, in specific outlets, and on platforms).
- Frequency and mode of news use (TV, print, online, social media, messaging apps).
- Perceptions of clickbait (e.g., frequency noticed, perceived acceptability, perceived harm).
- Cognitive heuristics used in credibility judgements (e.g., reliance on brand, peers, platform).
- Attitudes toward platforms and algorithmic personalization.

Vignette-based experiments embedded in the survey could manipulate headline style (clickbait vs. conventional) and outlet type (legacy vs. digital-born vs. influencer brand), then measure perceived credibility, trust, and intention to share.

### 5.2 Content analysis of headlines and metrics

A quantitative content analysis could sample front-page or most-read stories from major news websites and platform feeds (e.g., Facebook pages, YouTube channels, news sections of TikTok) over a defined period. Headlines would be coded for clickbait features (curiosity gaps,



emotional language, ambiguity, listicle structure) using established coding schemes (Kuiken et al., 2017; Jung et al., 2022).

Where possible, engagement data (clicks, shares, comments, likes) would be collected to examine how clickbait features relate to user responses. This would allow tests of whether clickbait yields higher engagement and whether such patterns differ across outlet types and countries.

### **5.3 Newsroom interviews and ethnography**

Qualitative interviews with editors, social media managers, and reporters would explore how metrics and platform relationships influence editorial decisions. Building on Tandoc's (2014) work on web analytics and gatekeeping, researchers could document how metrics are used in daily routines, which metrics matter most, and how journalists negotiate tensions between attention and public-interest commitments.

Short ethnographic observations or "newsroom shadowing" could complement interviews, revealing how dashboards and platform interfaces shape editorial meetings, story promotion, and headline experimentation in real time.

### **6. Expected Patterns and Conceptual "Results"**

Without empirical data, we cannot present statistical findings, but the literature allows us to anticipate plausible patterns that an empirical study might reveal:

#### **1. Ambivalent audience responses to clickbait.**

Prior studies indicate that clickbait can increase click-through rates but also elicit feelings of deception when users feel "tricked" (Kuiken et al., 2017). We therefore expect a mixed response: some users accept mild clickbait as a normal feature of online news, while others see it as evidence of declining quality.

#### **2. Outlet-type differences.**

Legacy outlets may suffer more reputational damage when they adopt aggressive clickbait styles, because audiences hold them to higher standards rooted in traditional norms of seriousness and proportionality (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Conversely, digital-native or tabloid outlets may be judged primarily on entertainment value, so clickbait may be less damaging to their credibility, provided that basic factual accuracy is maintained.

#### **3. Platform amplification of engagement-optimized content.**

Algorithmic curation tends to privilege content that generates strong engagement signals. As Lischka (2023) argues, this creates a strategic environment where newsrooms are incentivized to adopt engagement-oriented styles, including clickbait. We expect to find that stories with clickbait features receive disproportionate algorithmic visibility, particularly on social platforms.

#### **4. Trust reallocation rather than uniform decline.**

Echoing Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019), we anticipate that trust in news becomes more fragmented: some segments maintain high trust in a small set of institutional brands; others shift trust toward influencers, partisan outlets, or peer networks; still others become "news avoiders" disengaged from most news sources.

#### **5. Heuristics as moderators.**

Consistent with Metzger and Flanagin (2013), we expect that users who rely heavily on social heuristics (e.g., "my friends shared it") may be less sensitive to headline style and more prone to share clickbait, whereas those who rely on brand reputation may react more negatively to perceived sensationalism from trusted outlets.



These anticipated patterns reinforce the need to conceptualize the evolution of journalism as a multi-layer process shaped by newsroom practices, platform architectures, and audience cognition.

### 7. Discussion

The evolution “from credibility to clickbait” does not mean that journalism has abandoned its normative ideals, nor that audiences no longer care about accuracy or fairness. Rather, digital transformations have layered new economic and technological pressures onto existing professional norms. Gatekeeping now operates in a hybrid environment in which editorial judgement is constantly negotiated with real-time audience metrics and opaque platform algorithms (Tandoc, 2014; Thurman, 2019).

Our framework suggests that trust is both structural and relational. Structurally, the shift to platform-dominated distribution undermines the direct relationship between news organizations and audiences. Relationally, trust is redistributed across brands, platforms, and individuals. Audiences may trust a piece of content because it aligns with their worldview, because it comes from a familiar influencer, or because it carries a respected logo—sometimes irrespective of its actual quality.

Clickbait occupies an ambiguous position within this system. On one hand, modestly curiosity-inducing headlines can help under-resourced outlets reach audiences and highlight important stories. On the other hand, persistent reliance on misleading or sensationalist clickbait risks eroding both brand credibility and wider trust in the news ecosystem. When audiences repeatedly experience a mismatch between headline promises and story substance, they may generalize this disappointment to journalism as a whole.

In the Global South, these tensions are often intensified by economic precarity and weak regulatory frameworks. Commercial pressures, political interference, and digital divides can push news organizations toward attention-maximizing strategies, even as they seek to maintain their watchdog role. Comparative research is essential to understand how clickbait and trust dynamics play out in media systems where legacy institutions are fragile, platform governance is uneven, and citizens have limited alternatives for reliable information.

### 8. Normative and Practical Implications

Our analysis suggests several strategies for realigning digital journalism with trust and public value:

#### 1. **Redesigning metrics toward public-interest indicators.**

Instead of privileging clicks and shares alone, newsrooms can experiment with metrics such as time spent on in-depth stories, completion rates for explanatory formats, or engagement with solutions-oriented reporting. Such metrics may better capture meaningful use and help protect high-quality content from being crowded out by sensationalism (Fürst, 2020).

#### 2. **Transparent editorial and algorithmic practices.**

News organizations can explain how they choose stories, write headlines, and use audience data, while platforms can provide clearer information about how news is ranked or recommended. Transparency may not fully restore trust, but it makes editorial and algorithmic decisions more accountable.

#### 3. **Headline guidelines that balance engagement and integrity.**

Internal style guides can set boundaries for acceptable curiosity-based headlines, emphasizing accuracy, proportionality, and avoidance of deception. Training programs can help journalists and social media editors craft engaging but honest headlines.

#### 4. **Strengthening brand-level trust and distinctiveness.**



In a crowded, platformed environment, news organizations must emphasize their distinct value: investigative reporting, local knowledge, expertise, or explanatory depth. Building strong brand identities around these strengths can buffer against the reputational risks of moderate engagement optimization.

#### **5. Media literacy and trust literacy.**

Audience education initiatives can help users recognize clickbait, understand platform incentives, and develop healthier heuristics for evaluating news. Rather than simply warning against “fake news,” such efforts can focus on how to navigate a spectrum of sources and signals.

#### **9. Conclusion**

Journalism in the digital age inhabits a paradox. The same technologies that allow unprecedented access, interactivity, and diversity of voices also incentivize sensationalism, fragmentation, and distrust. The move from a credibility-centred to a click-centred news economy is not absolute, but the pressures of metrics and platforms are substantial.

This paper has synthesized research on clickbait, audience metrics, algorithmic curation, and trust to propose a framework for understanding how audience trust is reshaped across three layers: newsroom practices, platform architectures, and audience heuristics. We have articulated research questions and propositions to guide empirical work examining when and how clickbait undermines or coexists with credibility, and how trust is redistributed among legacy media, digital-born outlets, influencers, and platforms.

Ultimately, the evolution of journalism in the digital age is not predetermined. News organizations, platforms, regulators, and audiences all play roles in shaping its trajectory. By foregrounding trust as a central evaluative lens and by designing practices and policies that reward substance rather than pure attention, it remains possible to harness digital affordances without sacrificing journalism’s core democratic mission.

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