THE CURRENT STATE OF NEWS HEADLINES

Joshua M. Scacco and Ashley Muddiman*

SUMMARY

Headlines are the marquees of news stories. These short statements located at the beginning of an article frame the information that is to follow. They encapsulate a portion of the story, presenting a snapshot of reality. *The New York Times* headlines an article as "Climate Change Will Disrupt Half of North America's Bird Species." *National Geographic* frames the same story as "Climate Change May Put Half of North American Birds at Risk of Extinction." Headlines can distill reality, but with varying degrees of certainty, tone, and outcome.

For many outlets navigating the changes associated with digital journalism, news headlines have changed as well. In addition to traditional headlines that incorporate the essential elements of a story, more modern headlines also are written so as to instill curiosity, ask interesting questions, or lead to particular conclusions. Nontraditional headlines that attempt to drive visitors to a news page are called "Clickbait" by industry professionals. Academic researchers, like those overviewed in this paper, tend not to use the specific term "clickbait." They have, however, studied different types of headlines ranging from traditional to sensationalist and many types in between.

The Engaging News Project has begun conducting research on the content and effects of different types of headlines. As the first part of our research efforts, we investigated what we know about the functions and types of headlines, their content and use in news stories, and their effects on audiences as examined in previous research.

FUNCTIONS OF HEADLINES

The news headline can serve a variety of functions, including story summarization, interest generation, immediacy satisfaction, and attention direction.

Story Summarization

Headlines often eliminate surprises. Journalists use headlines as a means of conveying story information in a short, concise manner.[1] In research conducted more than 50 years ago, researchers considered headlines to be a "sample" or "thumbnail sketch" of the news story.[2] For example, *The New York Times* headline "John Boehner Will Resign from Congress" positions the story and the information included. By

> *Headlines offer a summary of the "major" information in a news story.*

summarizing the article, headlines can help readers to comprehend the news within an established frame or genre.[3]

Interest Generation

Headlines pique interest in order to "lure" audiences into a news story.

News headlines also may function to generate interest in a story.[4] If the goal of a news editor or journalist is to ensure stories are read, the news headline must convey interest to "lure" prospective readers.[5] Particularly for online newsrooms, interest generation is essential for the commercial side of engagement – page views. Communication scholar Matthew Hindman explains that one of the main reasons local newspaper sites lack stickiness is "flat headlines, often without accompanying photos or multimedia elements."[6] *The Huffington Post* headline "Boehner Bailing" takes the same information reported by other news sources, but packages it in a more arresting manner through a creative use of language.

Immediacy Satisfaction

Headlines satisfy audience needs for information in a quick manner.

For individuals with a low propensity to read news stories in full, headlines also satisfy an immediate need for information. Communication researcher Daniel Dor explains that headlines act as relevance optimizers by carrying "a contextual effect at a reasonable cognitive price."[7] Others have described news headlines as an important part of how individuals take cognitive shortcuts when encountering news.[8] Often matched with the inverted pyramid style of news writing, headlines and stories that begin with the most newsworthy information first satisfy immediacy needs. They aim to be maximally efficient for readers with little time for the news.

Attention Direction

Headlines act as traffic signs to direct audience attention to parts of a news story.

Whereas some headlines summarize a story, other headlines highlight particular facets of a news story to direct attention. This approach, often used in online news platforms, trades a broader context for story specifics, such as a quotation or detail.[9] One concern with headlines that attempt to direct attention is the possibility that the main context or understanding of a news event could become distorted.[10]

The main functions of headlines are not mutually exclusive. Many headlines attempt to summarize, generate interest, satisfy immediacy needs, and direct attention. As the first taste of a news story, the headline is a first impression and a critical barometer for news readers on the information that is to follow.

Headlines come in many shapes and forms. Traditional news headlines, for instance, summarize the news stories that follow them in a restrained fashion. But even traditional news outlets push the limits of headlines by using creativity and, sometimes, sensationalism in their headlines. Further, journalists and editors play with the way they outline a story in the headlines. Examples of each of these types of headlines are included below.[11]

Headlines can be Restrained and Traditional

Traditional news sources, like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, tend to post headlines that provide an overview of the main idea of a story.[12] In general, writers of traditional headlines are encouraged to use a "restrained tone,"[13] and keep the headlines short, clear, and unambiguous.[14]
- U.S. Soldiers Told to Ignore Afghan Allies' Abuse of Boys, *The New York Times*
- California Republicans confront long odds in race to fill Sen. Barbara Boxer's seat, *Los Angeles Times*

Headlines can use Creative Language

Journalists and editors often are less restrained than this in their choice of headline. Online, headlines that include creativity, sensationalism, and appeals to curiosity, are sometimes referred to as clickbait. Academic researchers approach their unique characteristics separately, rather than lumping each of these types of headlines together in one "clickbait" category.

Headlines can be quite creative when journalists use humor, figurative language, and wit:[15]
- Big rig carrying fruit crashes on 210 Freeway, creates jam, *Los Angeles Times*
- Two Political Operatives Walk Into A Bar... And One Throws A Punch, *NPR*

Headlines can Sensationalize Stories

The restraint drops away even further when journalists portray news stories as sensational events. Sensational headlines attempt to make news content seem "more interesting, extraordinary, and relevant" than it would seem with a traditional headline.[16] These headlines use some combination of warning news readers about a threat, passing judgments about the story, and making the story more personal and immediate.
- Overnight homicide stokes fears in Kansas City, Kansas neighborhood, *KMBC-TV Kansas City*
- Mom's Facebook warning: Kissing baby led to herpes, *CBS News*

Headlines can Pique Curiosity with Novel Storytelling

Headlines also can be altered by changing the way a headline tells a story. More traditional

news headlines follow the format of a chronological story, often with a beginning, middle, and end.

- House Speaker John Boehner Will Step Down From Congress In October, *Wichita Sun-Times*
- Prisoner worker who helped 2 killers escape gets up to 7 years, *Associated Press*

In order to pique curiosity, however, less traditional news headlines often switch around the order in which they tell the story.[17] For instance, they might start the headline with the ending to a story rather than telling the story in chronological order.

- Amputee Awarded Benefits in Rare Order, *The Texas Tribune*
- One year after alleged sexual assaults, fraternity is paying, but it's still unclear whether any individuals are, *Lawrence-Journal World*

Alternatively, the headline can be what Jonas Nygaard Blom and Kenneth Reinecke Hansen[18] call "forward referencing" where the headline mentions a future event or other information that readers will receive if they read the whole news article. The headlines often include vague referents and pronouns to prompt curiosity:

- Mike Huckabee claims refugees may be 'vicious people,' but that's not the dumbest thing he said, *The Huffington Post*
- Food stamps don't buy diapers, so one mom did this, *CNN*

These headline types are by no means exhaustive, but they do cover many headline types that have been examined by previous scholarly research. Other examples of headlines can be found in the *Headlines that Work* paper posted to the Engaging News Project website.

THE CONTENT AND USE OF NEWS HEADLINES

The dominant news headlines used by traditional media outlets, particularly by newspapers, are the result of changes in the form of news during the 20th century.[19] Newspaper designs integrated more white space and pictures. At the same time, headlines began to occupy more space on a page and were simplified. Communication scholars Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone aptly capture that, "Modernism changed the headline's function from a table of contents to a statement of the meaning of an event. No longer an outline, the headline instead gave a pointed summary of the news."[20] For example, some early newspapers organized front page stories based on location with headlines like "From Washington" or "From Chicago." Modern changes meant that the headline distilled the most important information in a news story, a hallmark of the inverted pyramid or lead style of writing.[21]

As traditional news outlets have moved information dissemination to digital platforms, the news headline again has evolved. Headlines are now tested by news outlets in real time to determine how they attract and keep website visitors.[22] A/B testing of headlines, where news site visitors are randomly shown one of several possible headlines, is being used more

frequently by news organizations such as *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Daily Beast*. Matthew Hindman reported that "*Upworthy*, a site that often promotes news and public affairs content, requires its staff to write 25 headlines for every story."[23] In interviews with digital news leaders, the Engaging News Project also has discovered that news organizations are manipulating headlines to varying degrees to gain page views for articles.[24]

Researchers have explored the content of news headlines and how they have been used for several decades. Exploring more traditional headlines, academic research has examined the extent to which headlines match the content of a news story. Although a seemingly elementary concern, headlines sometimes mislead individuals about story content. Journalism researcher F. T. Marquez investigated the accuracy of news headlines in four Philadelphia newspapers.[25] A quarter of the headlines examined were misleading (headline differed from the story) or ambiguous (unclear headline connection to story), particularly headlines in tabloid-focused publications. In later research, political scientist Blake Andrew conducted a content analysis of the headlines in five Canadian newspapers during a federal election. The research uncovered "dissonance between news headlines and their stories." [26] Extending previous research results, Andrew found a greater percentage of ambiguous headlines in tabloid-oriented publications. As news outlets continue to experiment with different types and functions of headlines, the fidelity of the headline–story connection will remain a prominent issue for journalists and researchers.

In an effort to better understand modern headlines, recent research has tackled what have been dubbed clickbait-style headlines designed to generate user engagement. Linguist Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska examined 120 headlines from online articles in the *Daily Mail* to understand the use of sensational content, including scandal, sex, and crime. The qualitative analysis showed that sensational headlines are largely negative and pass judgment. This strategy for attracting reader attention "may well be resorted to by both popular and quality outlets."[27] In another recent study, journalism scholars Jonas Nygaard Blom and Kenneth Reinecke Hansen explored the forward-reference headline, the style that references forthcoming information if the article is read. They analyzed 100,000 headlines on 10 Danish news websites, finding that 17% of headlines were forward-reference styled and were most common for soft news stories focusing on weather and sports.[28]

The current content of many headlines reveals the evolution of news writing from more traditional platforms to digital ones. Equally important is how particular types of headline styles and content influence how individuals view the news.

EFFECTS OF NEWS HEADLINES

Despite their limited word count, headlines influence news users. The characteristics of headlines – particularly when they direct readers toward certain parts of stories, include misinformation, or contain negativity – can have powerful effects on readers.

Effects of Headlines that Direct Attention

By necessity, news headlines cannot tell the whole news story. How a news headline directs attention to certain parts of a news story is an important topic of headline research.[29] Headlines can, for instance, influence how news readers think about a whether a suspect is guilty of a crime. An early study of news headlines conducted by Percy H. Tannenbaum found that headlines suggesting that a person on trial was guilty led people who read a news story to think that person was guilty. A headline suggesting that a person was innocent led people who read the exact same news story to think that the person was innocent. In other words, changing only the headline led news readers to reach different conclusions about a person's guilt or innocence.

More recently, communication researcher Michael Pfau was interested in how news stories influence readers' perceptions of protests.[30] Specifically, he wanted to know whether news headlines that emphasized race (by mentioning black protestors), socio-economic class (by mentioning labor union protestors), or neither changed what individuals thought about the level of violence in a protest described in a news article. When black protestors were mentioned in a headline, people perceived the protest to be more violent and the injuries people received to be more serious than when the headline mentioned union protestors or provided no information about the protestors. When the headline mentioned either black *or* union protestors, the protest tactics were perceived by readers as more justified than when no details were provided in the headline about the group protesting.[31]

Journalists and editors should take note that selecting unrepresentative information from a news story to compose a headline can unintentionally direct readers' attention away from the main points covered in the full news report.

Effects of Misinformation in Headlines

Headlines also can help (or hinder) learning from the news. Headlines lead to less learning than article ledes.[32] Yet headlines can *change* what people remember from full news stories.

Political scientists Ullrich Ecker, Stephan Lewandowsky and their colleagues examined this issue.[33] In their study, they tested the effects of a mismatch between the information presented in a headline and the more detailed information presented in the full news story. Specifically, they examined two factual news stories: one about burglaries and a second about death rates during natural disasters. In the full news stories, the burglary and fatality rates were described as spiking in the short term, but decreasing in the long term. When the headlines *only* emphasized that the burglary or fatality rate had increased recently, people who read the headline and news story did not remember the long term decreasing trend mentioned in the news article. The researchers found something similar with opinion articles. When a headline highlighted a partisan position about genetically modified foods or fluoride in drinking water that did not match the political position of the full opinion article, readers were likely to misremember whether the article was for or against GM foods and fluoride in water. On top of

influencing memory, Matthew Hindman also suggests that misleading headlines can hurt news brands, though more research on this point is necessary.[34]

The effects of mismatches between headlines and news stories might be troubling when put into context. In a study of Canadian newspaper headlines, Blake Andrew found that headlines and full articles consistently emphasized different types of content.[35] If the information presented in a news article and a news headline do not consistently match, readers might be mislead by the headlines they are skimming online.

Effects of Negativity in Headlines

Headlines can draw attention to negative events and portray issues in a negative light. Researchers often have raised concerns about negativity.[36] Indeed, negativity in headlines can affect public perceptions, particularly by encouraging negative feelings toward the U.S. economy.[37]

Yet most research about negative headlines points to the utility of this style. An early study of headlines, conducted by Floyd Allport and Milton Lepkin in 1943, examined how headlines affected citizens' attitudes toward participating in the World War II war effort.[38] When headlines stressed bad news, individual news readers said they felt like taking a more active role in the war effort than headlines that presented good news. For instance, "Americans Lose 5 Troopships in African Occupation" and "Major Attack on Guadalcanal Opened by Japan" prompted more desire to take part in the war effort than when a headline read "Germans Battle Futilely at Stalingrad." Higher morale came from negative headlines.

There also is some evidence that negative news headlines draw attention and increase the likelihood that people will read a news story. Psychologists have learned that negative information generally attracts more attention than positive information.[39] Politicians yelling at one another, for instance, is generally considered more entertaining than polite conversation.[40] This interest in negativity can translate into more clicks on negative headlines, at least in political campaign contexts.[41]

Finally, negativity in headlines might help people better remember those headlines. When negativity stimulates individuals, that arousal might increase the amount of information people remember.[42] With respect to headlines, political scientists John Geer and Kim F. Kahn found exactly that.[43] When participants in their study read negative headlines regarding a gubernatorial candidate, they remembered the information better than participants who read positive or neutral headlines about the candidate.

Negativity can affect morale and attitudes toward the economy, prompt selection of a news article, and even help people remember information from the headline. Although the potentially troublesome effects of negativity should be in the back of journalists' minds when they write headlines, negativity in the headlines themselves has some benefits for news users and news organizations.

Headlines have important effects on readers. Nearly all of the research cited above examines headlines in traditional – rather than digital – news contexts. There is no reason to believe that these effects will disappear as news (and the headlines that go with news stories) turns digital. In a digital news environment, however, headlines may prompt new effects. To close our discussion of headlines, we offer two areas of research that need more attention in relation to news headlines: news selection and news credibility.

How do headlines affect news selection?

In a digital news environment, headlines clearly play a major role in the news that people decide to read. Many news sites, including major media organizations like USA Today, list little more than a headline on their home pages. Further, in social media contexts, the headline may be all people see. Take Twitter, for example, where journalists have only 140 characters to get people to click on a news story. We know that negativity,[44] likeminded ideas,[45] and use of puns and metaphors[46] in a headline can increase the chance that a person clicks on a story. But whether the other types of headlines present online, like those that use sensationalism or forward references, influence click rates hasn't been tested. Headline type needs more attention to determine whether the way a headline is written can get people – and maybe even people who aren't inclined to read the news – to click on the news. Which headlines work may vary by audience, topic, even time of day. Although practitioners have developed numerous intuitions about how to craft headlines that attract users, more systematic research into what works and what doesn't would be a fruitful next step.

How do headlines affect news credibility?

Another issue that arises with new headline forms is whether the way a headline is written influences readers' perceptions of the news *source*. In the current media environment, traditional news sources have to compete with both digital news sources (e.g., Politico) and more entertainment-focused sources (e.g., Buzzfeed) for the attention of users. When traditional news sources move away from using the traditional news headline, does that influence what people think about the news source itself? For instance, NPR posted a story on September 20, 2015 with the following headline: The U.N. Wants You To Take A Selfie, Spin Around, Listen To A Llama. When readers see such headlines on NPR, do they think of the news outlet as a less serious and less credible news organization? The way headlines influence thoughts about the news organization itself is an important issue to examine as digital and traditional news compete online.

Headlines are nearly universal in the news. They summarize news stories, direct readers'

attention to certain facts over others, and help news users decide on which stories to click. Headlines arose out of formatting changes in the twentieth century and continue to hold importance as digital news gains prominence. Headline writing is big business. The right headline can help people learn from the news, and the wrong headline might gain clicks but encourage readers to remember incorrect information. Both academic and practical research needs to address headlines both for their ability to draw attention to a story and also for their potential to help people learn from the news.

·Joshua M. Scacco, PhD (jscacco@purdue.edu) is an Assistant Professor in the Brian Lamb School of Communication and Courtesy Faculty in the Department of Political Science at Purdue University. Scacco also is a Faculty Research Associate with the Engaging News Project. Ashley Muddiman, PhD (ashley.muddiman@ku.edu) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas and a Faculty Research Associate with the Engaging News Project. The Engaging News Project is grateful for funding and support from the Democracy Fund; the Hewlett Foundation; the Rita Allen Foundation; and the Department of Communication Studies, the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, and the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin.

[1] Dor, D. (2003). On newspaper headlines as relevance optimizers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *35*(5), 695–721.

[2] Tannenbaum, P. H. (1953). The effect of headlines on the interpretation of news stories. *Journalism Quarterly, 30*(2), 189-197.

[3] Andrew, B. C. (2007). Media-generated shortcuts: Do newspaper headlines present another roadblock for low-information rationality? *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 12*(2), 24-43.

[4] Andrew, 2007.

[5] Smith, E. J. (1999). Leadlines may be better than traditional headlines. *Newspaper Research Journal, 20*(1), 55.

[6] Hindman, M. (2015, April). Stickier news: What newspapers don't know about web traffic has hurt them badly – but there is a better way. Discussion Paper Series #D-93. Retrieved from http://shorensteincenter.org/stickier-news-matthew-hindman/

[7] Dor, 2003, p. 701.

[8] Andrew, 2007.

[9] Bronzan, N. C. (2015, June 22). Headline writing with an NYT guru. Retrieved from https://www.propublica.org/podcast/item/headline-writing-with-nyt-guru

[10] Smith, 1999.

[11] More examples can be found in Cynthia Peacock and Alex Curry's overview *Headlines that Work*, also posted to the Engaging News Project website.

[12] Andrew, 2007.

[13] Bronzan, 2015.

[14] Dor, 2003.

[15] Ifantidou, E. (2009). Newspaper headlines and relevance: Ad hoc concepts in ad hoc contexts. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *41*(4), 699–720.

[10] Molek-Kozakowska, K. (2013). Towards a pragma-linguistic framework for the study of sensationalism in news headlines. *Discourse & Communication*, *7*(2), 173–197, p. 173.

[17] Molek- Kozakowska, 2013; Knobloch, S., Patzig, G., Mende, A.-M., & Hastall, M. (2004). Affective news: Effects of discourse structure in narratives on suspense, curiosity, and enjoyment while reading news and novels. *Communication Research*, *31*(3), 259–287.

[18] Blom, J. N., & Hansen, K. R. (2015). Click bait: Forward-reference as lure in online news headlines. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *76*, 87–100.

[19] Barnhurst, K. G., & Nerone, J. (2001). *The form of news: A history*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

[20] Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, p 198.

[21] Pottker, H. (2003). News and its communicative quality: The inverted pyramid—when and why did it appear? *Journalism Studies, 4*(4), 501-511.

[22] Hindman, 2015.

[23] Hindman, 2015, p 20.

[24] Stroud, N. J., Scacco, J. M., & Curry, A. (2014). News engagement workshop report. White paper. Retrieved from: http://engagingnewsproject.org/enp_prod/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/ENP_Workshop_Report.pdf

[25] Marquez, F. T. (1980). How Accurate Are the Headlines? *Journal of Communication, 30*(3), 30-36.

[26] Andrew, 2007, p. 36.

[27] Molek-Kozakowska, 2013.

[28] Blom & Hansen, 2015.

[29] Information in the headline does not always override information presented in a news story, however. See, for an example of headlines no affect on perceptions of a topic, Condit, C. M., Ferguson, A., Kassel, R., Thadhani, C., Gooding, H. C., & Parrott, R. (2001). An exploratory study of the impact of news headlines on genetic determinism. *Science Communication, 22*(4), 379–95.

[30] Pfau, M. R. (1995). Covering urban unrest: The headline says it all. *Journal of Urban Affairs, 17*(2), 131–41.

[31] Similar findings arose in a political campaign setting. A study conducted by Geer and Kahn that varied the aspects of a political campaign – either candidate trait, horserace coverage, or issue coverage – in a headline also found that news headlines may change the favorability with which individuals rated gubernatorial candidates. Their finding was not statistically significant, however. See, for more details, Geer, J. G., and Kahn, K. F. (1993).

Grabbing attention: An experimental investigation of headlines during campaigns. *Political Communication, 10*(2), 175–91.

[32] Smith, 1999.

[33] Ecker, U. K. H., & Lewandowsky, S. (2014). The effects of subtle misinformation in news headlines. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, *20*(4), 323–335.

[34] Hindman, 2015.

[35] Andrew, 2007.

[36] Jamieson, K. H. (1992). *Dirty politics: Deception, distraction, and democracy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.; Mutz, D. C. (2015). *In-your-face politics: The consequences of uncivil media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[37] Blood, D. J., & Phillip, P. C. B. (1995). *Recession headline news, consumer sentiment, the state of the economy and presidential popularity: A time series analysis 1989–1993. International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 7*(2), 2–22.

[38] Allport, F. H., & Lepkin. M. (1943). Building war morale with news-headlines. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 7(*2), 211–21.

[39] Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, *5*(4), 323–370.

[40] Mutz, 2015.

[41] Meffert, M. F., Chung, S., Joiner, A. J., Waks, L., & Garst, J. (2006). The effects of negativity and motivated information processing during a political campaign. *Journal of Communication*, *56*(1), 27–51.

[42] Mutz, 2015.

[43] Geer, & Kahn, 1993.

[44] Meffert et al., 2006.

[45] Stroud, N. J. (2011). *Niche news: The politics of news choice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

[46] Lagerwerf, L., Timmerman, C., & Bosschaert, A. (forthcoming). Incongruity in news headings. *Journalism Practice*. http://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2015.1063446