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Should we regard question-based media headlines as clickbait?

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A discussion of Betteridge's Law and related issues

Introduction

In an article published a little over a decade ago (Betteridge, 2009), the journalist Ian Betteridge offered some scathing comments about a piece published a few days earlier in TechCrunch by Erick Schonfeld (Schonfeld, 2009). Amongst other things, Betteridge suggested that the headline concerned ('Did Last.fm Just Hand Over User Listening Data to the RIAA?') was 'a great demonstration of my maxim that any headline which ends in a question mark can be answered by the word "no".' Readers of *English Today* will realise immediately that this 'maxim' cannot possibly be watertight as expressed by Betteridge, since only polar questions can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no'. For example, WH-questions (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973: 196) such as 'Who opened my letter?' and 'How long have you been waiting?' obviously cannot be responded to in any sensible way with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Furthermore, it is not difficult to find media headlines taking the form of non-polar questions: for example, "What would a no-deal Brexit mean for business?" (O'Dwyer et.al., 2020).

This article looks at recent media headlines that are grammatically interrogative and asks whether any general conclusions can be reached about why the question form was chosen, and how or to what extent the question is answered. For instance, when an article has a question as heading, do the writers generally provide an answer (as one might reasonably expect)? When the headline truly is a polar question, is the answer indicated by the accompanying text generally 'no', in fulfilment of the maxim referred to above, which is now sometimes called Betteridge's Law (Cook & Plourde, 2016)? And finally, is it safe to assume that question-based media headlines constitute examples of what is now often called 'clickbait' (Mormol, 2019)?

Clickbait

As Potthast et al. (2018: 1501) point out, clickbait is a rather 'elusive concept' for which a clear-cut definition is problematic. These authors suggest several characteristics of texts that might be regarded as clickbait, and among these is that their headings withhold crucial information, thus creating a 'curiosity gap' (Loewenstein, 1994) that arises when an individual perceives that there is something missing in his or her knowledge or understanding. A possible example of a media headline that meets this criterion (and is also formulated as an interrogative) is 'Could Bigfoot really be out there?' (Blitz, 2019). This headline ignores the fact that serious scientific investigation

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has found no convincing evidence of the existence of Bigfoot – see, for example, Sykes et al. (2014). Simultaneously it holds out the possibility, particularly to readers who might be intrigued by stories about Bigfoot, that the answer to the headline question might be in the affirmative. As it turns out, a full reading of the article leaves the answer open, though towards its conclusion it is stated that a reporter for National Public Radio in the United States who has worked on stories about Bigfoot sightings acknowledges that 'a lot of people who think Bigfoot is out there, they realize . . . that there's a lack of evidence.' It is noticeable that this online article is accompanied by an advertisement showing pictures of a wide range of equipment you might like to purchase if 'camping out to find Bigfoot.' This may increase the suspicion that the heading ('Could Bigfoot really be out there?') is an example of clickbait, with the ulterior motive being to lure readers towards advertising specially designed to accompany the text.

Do headline questions receive an answer?

The Bigfoot headline and article bring us to the issue of whether headline questions are generally answered by the texts beneath them. What follows is an analysis of 20 examples, all published in 2020 or 2021. The examples were found in two main ways: by searching recent articles in the *Daily Mail* archive (see References) and through an appropriate internet search. A small number of examples arose when I was reading various media outlets to keep up with current events, rather than with the present project in mind. The small group of examples I have gathered may therefore be considered as essentially a convenience sample.

Ten examples were identified via the *Daily Mail* website in early December 2020. These are numbered 1–10 in Table 1 below. Once one begins to examine examples of headlines that are grammatically interrogative, it rapidly becomes clear that a single simple rule such as Betteridge's Law can never account for all the possibilities. I have divided the headline questions in Table 1 into three categories: polar questions (used here to mean only those that can potentially be answered with a 'yes' or 'no'); dual option questions (that put forward two possibilities – for example, 'monolith or just trash?'); and WH-questions (see headline five in the table). Reading the texts that accompany these headlines reveals that the headline questions are responded to in a variety of ways. They are either conclusively answered (for example, see headline ten); or addressed through texts that imply answers indirectly, but with varying degrees of strength; or answered directly, but with hedging. For instance, the text about Tyson Fury (headline three) does not directly answer the polar question in its headline, but it is stated that investigations are underway into drug-taking accusations, and it is implied that these might make him unworthy of consideration for a BBC award for sports people. A hedged example is headline two, which is answered but only through a statement suggesting what NASA 'may find.'

It is also evident from the *Daily Mail* sample that, contrary to Betteridge's Law, polar questions in headlines are often answered with a clear or implied 'yes'. This is so in the cases of headlines seven, eight and ten. There are two cases of 'dual option' questions (headlines one and nine). Neither question is directly answered, but given a sample of just two, nothing should be read into this.

In Table 2, a further ten recent examples from other media sources are provided (items 11–20). Examples 11 to 19 are polar questions, while example 20 is a WH-question. The question in headline 14 is answered with a clear and unequivocal 'yes'. In other cases (for example, items 12 and 16) a 'yes' answer is implied. These can all be seen as counter examples to Betteridge's Law. Examples where the headline question is conclusively answered are relatively rare; the texts tend to imply an answer rather than stating it explicitly. However, item 20 (non-polar) is noteworthy because, unusually, the headline question receives a direct and detailed answer. It evidently arises from one of those situations – quite common in contemporary political journalism – where a journalist appears to have been briefed beforehand on the contents of a government announcement.

Three additional issues

While questions must necessarily be polar (yes/no) or non-polar, there are three other complicating factors that I should like to mention. It is possible to find, among media headlines, examples of rhetorical questions, punning questions, and questions addressed directly to the reader. Headlines of all three types receive no answer in the accompanying text. We shall deal with these each in turn.

The *Collins English Dictionary* (1983: 1250) defines 'rhetorical question' as follows:

> A question to which no answer is required: used esp. for dramatic effect. An example is *Who knows?* (with the implication *Nobody knows*).

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Table 1: Daily Mail examples (December 2020)

Headline, Publication Date	Question Type	Question answered?	Notes
1. Monolith or just trash? Metal sculpture in Utah appears to have been demolished . . . Dec 1, 2020	Dual option	Not directly	The text merely states that a group of men who knocked down the monolith and took pieces of it away in wheelbarrows considered it to be trash.
2. Has NASA's rocket come home? Dec 1, 2020	Polar	Not conclusively	The last sentence of the text states that 'NASA and other astronomers <u>may</u> find that it has come home for a brief visit.' (My underlining)
3. So, should drug probe Tyson Fury be on the shortlist for BBC's Sports Personality of the Year . . . ? Dec 1, 2020	Polar	Not directly	The question is not directly answered, but the text implies at several points that the answer is 'no' – for example, it is stated that Tyson Fury is 'understood to be under investigation by UK Anti-Doping.'
4. Can you ever make your hair grow faster? Top celebrity hair stylist shares his tips . . . Dec 8, 2020	Polar	Yes, via 'may not'	The headline implies that the answer is 'yes', because 'tips' are offered. But in fact the text states that 'Although the hair may not actually be growing at a faster rate, it feels as though it is . . . '
5. Which Americans will get the Covid vaccine first? Dec 1, 2020	WH	The question is answered, but only in the sense that it is made clear that no answer can be provided.	The text asserts in the first few lines that 'nothing has yet been decided' and that 'there won't be one single set of rules.'
6. If NS&I axes cheques, what's to stop other banks from following suit? Dec 1, 2020	Open	No answer is provided in the text.	Perhaps rhetorical?
7. Iran's Achilles' heel? Security gaps and possible enemy infiltration Dec 1, 2020	Polar	Not conclusively.	The article begins by stating that 'the killing of Iran's top nuclear scientist has exposed security gaps which suggest its security forces may have been infiltrated and that the Islamic Republic is vulnerable to further attacks.' Examples of concern from anonymous Iranian officials are given.
8. Could Covid knock out flu in Europe this winter? Dec 1, 2020	Polar	Yes, though weakly	It is suggested that the answer may be 'yes'. The articles states that 'some doctors' think that the existence of the Covid epidemic has 'hampered transmission of the flu.'

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Table 1:. Continued

Headline, Publication Date	Question Type	Question answered?	Notes
9. Mystery monolith vanishes in Romania - alien action or local prank? Dec 1, 2020	Dual option	Strongly implied answer	It is strongly implied (but not proved) that the monolith was erected by 'a bad local welder.'
10. Is it still worth investing in buy-to-let? Manchester ranked a top prospect . . . Dec 3, 2020	Polar	Yes	The question is answered. It is asserted that annual yields of up to 9% can be achieved.

Thus, as Quirk & Greenbaum (1973: 200) point out, in many cases rhetorical questions actually function as forceful statements. For example, a speaker in a debate might ask 'Who here today has never contemplated the benefits of retiring at 50?', with the strong implication that everyone has done so, and that the benefits are plain for all to see. A *Daily Mail* headline, concerning published reactions to a particular TV thriller asks, 'Were the critics watching a different show?' (Dec 1, 2020). The reader understands this headline to imply very strongly that the *Daily Mail* writer considers that the critics' evaluations of the show were greatly misguided – and indeed a reading of the article shows that one newspaper critic called the thriller 'silly' and another called it 'absurd', while the *Daily Mail* journalist appears to have enjoyed it. The writer was certainly not suggesting that all the TV critics reviewed the wrong thriller. Instead, the headline question functions rhetorically as a means of signalling that their views are misguided.

Rhetorical questions in headlines are, by definition, not answered, and therefore do not observe Betteridge's Law. However, this brings us to the issue of exactly how 'rhetorical question' is defined and whether there is an overlap between this category and others. A *Daily Mail* article (Dec 1, 2020) carries the headline question 'What planet are they living on?' The text of the article discusses a TV programme in which possible Christmas presents were discussed. One of the presents was a pair of pyjamas costing £89 and the writer of the article feels that this kind of price is out of the reach of most people in the UK, particularly because 'in the current times, viewers may not have a lot of disposable income.' This therefore seems to be a clear example of 'a question to which no answer is required' – a rhetorical question. But what about, for example, headline six in the current data? It asks whether anything can prevent other banks from following National Savings & Investments (formerly the UK Post Office Savings Bank) in abolishing the use of cheques. Instinctively, the lay reader, probably knowing very little about banking regulations, may guess that the answer is 'no, nothing'. Actually, in the text no attempt is made to answer the literal question. So was this a rhetorical question all along?

Punning questions also appear in newspaper headlines. An example is the *Daily Mail*'s headline 'More tree vicar?' (Dec 1, 2020). The origins of the phrase 'More tea, vicar?' are disputed, but Cresswell (2007) states that it has been in use since the 1950s, and it is certainly well known to most speakers of British English, who may have encountered it when used as a humorous reaction to uncouth behaviour in a social setting, such as belching. *Daily Mail* readers are likely to pick up the allusion and read the headline as a pun; and it turns out that the article is in fact about an abandoned church that has become overgrown with trees and other vegetation. Note that 'more tree' is in fact ungrammatical, because if 'more' is followed by a countable noun, that noun must be plural ('more trees'). The ungrammaticality may act as an additional signal to readers that a galumphing pun is at work.

A third issue is questions in media headlines that are addressed to the reader. These are quite common in the *Daily Mail* archive. For example:

- Would you try it? Incredible 1.1 kilo mega burger (Dec 2, 2020)
- Missed out on the Black Friday sales? (Dec 2, 2020)
- Would you pay $5000 for a fridge? (Dec 2, 2020)
- Dreaming of a delicious Christmas? (Dec 13, 2020)

It is self-evident that these polar questions cannot be answered in the text, because they are posed to the reader. For this reason, questions of

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Table 2: Examples from other media sources (2020–2021)

Headline, Publication Place, Date	Question Type	Question answered?	Notes
11. Can you really blame Trump supporters for refusing to accept the election result? *Spectator USA*, Nov 13, 2020	Polar	Yes	The article's last sentence is as follows: 'When every institution has been against the President at every turn, it seems not so crazy that the election could have been rigged against him too.'
12. Could Boris Johnson be eyeing another snap election? *Guardian*, Jan 12, 2021	Polar	Yes	The article's sub-heading is 'Don't bet against it' and the argument is that he could (not that he definitely will).
13. Have British scientists solved the problem of plastic pollution? *Sunday Times*, Jan 3, 2021	Polar	Not conclusively	It is argued that a new technology 'may hold the key', but there is no 100% clear answer.
14. Will swimming pools close during lockdown? *Independent*, Nov 6, 2020	Polar	Yes	The text's first sentence is: 'Swimming pools will be closed to the public when the new coronavirus lockdown restrictions are enforced from Thursday.'
15. 'Maybe death isn't the end': can a TV series prove the existence of an afterlife? *Guardian*, Jan 7, 2021	Polar	Yes.	It is argued that no objective evidence can be provided of life after death. However, the possibility is still left open in the article's last sentence: 'Maybe death isn't the end.'
16. Is grade inflation weakening the value of higher education? *Times Higher Education*, Jan 14, 2019	Polar	Not conclusively.	The last sentence implies that the answer is 'yes': '…perhaps nothing so weakens the value of higher education as persistent inflation.'
17. Is Britain heading towards civil war? *The Conservative Woman*, Sept 16, 2020	Polar	Yes, fairly conclusively	The text strongly implies that the answer is 'no'. ' . . . outright civil war still seems somewhat unlikely . . . '
18. Is Trump the worst US president ever? *Sydney Morning Herald,* Jan 15, 2021	Polar	Yes.	'Historians say so' – in a poll of 55 historians by Life magazine.
19. Is eating fish healthy? *BBC website*, Dec 13, 2020	Polar	Not conclusively.	The article concludes, on the basis of expert evidence, that 'it's difficult to definitively say that fish is essential to overall human health.'
20. What will be in Rishi Sunak's mini-budget? *Guardian*, Nov 25, 2020	Non-polar	Yes	The fourth line of the article is: 'Here is what to expect from the chancellor's mini-budget on Wednesday.' This is followed by a list of detailed points.

this kind in media headlines contravene Betteridge's Law.

Conclusion

The title of this article is a question, so I shall attempt to provide an answer. If one characteristic of clickbait is that the headline withholds information from the reader, then only a small proportion of question-based media headlines qualify. Headline 5 in Table 1 could count as an example. Many readers – especially Americans – might be lured by the headline's question to read the text, only to learn that it is not possible for an answer

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to be provided. Similarly, headline questions related to highly unlikely propositions, such as 'Is Queen Elizabeth an extra-terrestrial reptile?' (Parker, 2020) could be categorised as clickbait since they may give some readers the impression that the question can seriously be debated. Indeed, since there is currently much interest around the world about misleading information in the mainstream media as well as on social media, it might be valuable for language experts to continue to develop theories in such areas. Of course, reader interpretation of media headlines involves not only linguistic knowledge but also knowledge, or personal perceptions, about the external world. Headline questions querying the legitimacy of the result of the 2020 US presidential election might seem redundant or absurd to some readers, while perfectly justified to others. Serious research into the content and interpretation of media headlines must take into account not only semantics but also pragmatics.

It is my impression from looking at the data that journalists and editors may sometimes choose question-based headlines for one of two main reasons. The first is that the writer feels that he or she does not have enough evidence to use an assertive headline. Thus, rather than 'Boris Johnson is eyeing a snap election' we get 'Could Boris Johnson be eyeing another snap election?' (headline 12). This type of hedged polar question is probably one of the phenomena that Betteridge had in mind when he framed his maxim. He may well also have noticed the Queen Elizabeth/reptile type. The second reason for choosing a question-based headline may be a feeling among media professionals that a question-based headline will, on average, create more interest or reader engagement than a statement. Perhaps the belief is that the headline 'Is eating fish healthy?' (headline 19) may lure more readers to its accompanying text than one flagged as 'Eating fish is healthy' or even 'Eating Fish is not healthy'). The motive of attracting more readers to a text is not in itself reprehensible. The derogatory term *clickbait* probably only applies if the headline hides or distorts factual information ('Can you ever make your hair grow faster?' – headline 4).

Finally, Betteridge's Law is not really of value. It can only apply to polar questions in headlines, rather than to questions as a whole. What is more, it is only in a proportion of cases of headline polar questions (such as the Queen Elizabeth / reptile one above) that the reader might be justified in immediately reacting with a 'no'.

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