

# Emotional clickbait always wins

By  Chris Botha

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Can you say 'corona mania?'

Audience = Income.

This equation has been true in the media game for years. In theory, it all makes sense. Editors and producers are incentivised to make content that appeals to the pallet of the majority of the population. Media owners pay top dollar to get the best writers, producers and editors who have the closest feel for what works in the world out there. The scary thing in modern media though is “what works”, and what works is eliciting an emotional response from an audience.



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We're all familiar with the concept of “clickbait” (content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page, regardless of the accuracy of the content). I think we are moving into an era of “emotional clickbait” where media owners produce content that will shock/anger/upset readers – as it is the most likely to be viewed.

## Coronavirus, our current emotional clickbait topic

Emotional clickbait is all around us. All you have to do is go onto any major news or social platform, and you will see that the most commented on, most trending, hottest topics are the ones with the most emotional sting, and often very little substance.

The appeal in media is no longer necessarily what makes for good content – but what makes for content that attracts views/comments/likes. Emotive content.

The current emotional clickbait topic in South Africa is the coronavirus. It is the number one trending topic on Twitter today (and yesterday, and probably for the rest of the month and into April) and for good reason. I am not an expert so will completely refrain from commenting on the virus itself. As a media expert though, I am worried about the tone of the communication out there.



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Some media platforms are all of a sudden professing opinions ranging from “this is a common cold, ignore it” – to “It’s the end of the world, panic!!!”. These views are not backed up by science. Not backed up by statistics. They are typical of the extremism that emotional clickbait is associated with. But because of the emotional clickbait, it is impacting markets, share values, and the price of oil!

The media do this the world over. I’ve been following the circus which is American politics with great interest over the past few months. Some of the Democratic Party debate has been taken up by candidates literally close to exploding and hanging campaign promises on being called by their “preferred pronoun”. This is a matter I would imagine is largely irrelevant to the majority of Democratic Party supporters, who actually only want to know how they can get President Trump out of the White House!

## Emotional clickbait!

In South Africa, I would love to know how much air time the EFF receives relative to their political peers. I would guess far more (relatively speaking). Why? They ride the wave of Emotional clickbait. Whatever the issue is, big or small, the EFF are often there to turn it into a race-related matter. And the media will report on it to their hearts content. Why - yep, Emotional clickbait.

The EFF has done very many great things for our country, and are an important stakeholder in the national narrative. At last count, they received 1,8 million votes to the ANC’s 10 million, yet they play the online news game far better than anyone else. Kudos to them.

It’s a fact that consumers are more attracted to news that shocks or elicit an emotional response. So what do the media do? They try and outdo each other when it comes to news that shocks and elicits an emotional response. Does anyone remember a business called Bell Pottinger? There’s an organisation that was built on emotional clickbait.



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## Become more aware of emotional clickbait

Each media knows its audience and what will and won’t work and correctly, adapts their editorial policy accordingly. A

website called “The Edit” learnt an interesting lesson not too long ago. A junior journalist wrote an article on why she thinks the music of *Beyoncé* is “*overrated AF*”. The article became the most clicked on and commented one on the site. You can imagine how the publishers of the site are relooking their reviewing criteria right now.

I once read an interesting article about a book entitled *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. The book is among the many by the author stating that God doesn’t exist. Dawkins holds a strong atheistic angle throughout.

The author of the article postulated that the book will be most read by Christians. Why, because they disagree with it, and want to argue the point. Atheists who don’t believe in God are less likely to read a book that affirms what they already think to be true. So inadvertently Christians are often the ones funding the writings of Mr Dawkins. It’s the supreme irony of emotional clickbait.

As South Africans, we need to become more aware of emotional clickbait and actively work to avoid it. It doesn’t give a real perspective of reality. It is a negative incentive for media owners and drags the fourth estate to the lowest common denominator. Let’s look at the facts and figures. Let’s crack a book open and do some of our own homework on a topic before being dragged down an emotional rabbit hole.

## ABOUT CHRIS BOTHA

Chris Botha is Group Managing Director, The MediaShop, Johannesburg. Chris started his life in media when he was a student at the University of the Free State. He ran the local campus radio station (RSM) and was the proud presenter of the sport show.

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