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‘Can I click it? Yes you can’: Football journalism, Twitter, and clickbait

Jonathan Cable and Glyn Mottershead

This paper is part of an ongoing longitudinal analysis of the Twitter timelines of 15 major football media outlets from 2010 to 2017. It aims to demonstrate how over time the need for content has increased the scale and frequency of tweets, duplication of content and an increased focus on high profile football clubs, players and managers. The use of Twitter in this way is more directed at being a one-directional broadcasting medium, where content is increasingly homogenised – and where search engine optimisation and attractive headlines trump journalistic content. On the most basic of levels clickbait exists to generate traffic, increase site visitors and attract more advertising. As a result, this is reducing the quality of football journalism in a never-ending quest for easy content.

Key words: clickbait, football journalism, social media, sport journalism, Twitter

Introduction

Sport is an integral part of our lives, and how we find out about our favourite athletes, clubs and sports is through sport journalism. The focus of this paper is on the mechanisms used by media outlets to get us to read their sport news on social media, in particular Twitter. Sports journalism is understudied in this respect. There is clearly an ever-increasing competition for the attentions of fragmented audience and, in response, media outlets are resorting to using the techniques of clickbait. The inspiration for this paper comes from the football website *Football365* whose daily eye on the media section entitled ‘Mediawatch’ presents readers with the press’s take on current football issues (*Football365* 2017). This section of their website highlights clear examples of journalistic pandering to draw in audiences and generate clicks. It has regularly exposed the use of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), clickbait and other journalistic strategies (for work on the use of SEO see Dick 2011).

One such example it highlighted comes from the Twitter feed of *Mail Sport* in March 2016 where it tweeted: ‘Man Utd, City, Chelsea, Arsenal & Liverpool chiefs in secret meeting over Euro Super League’ (*Mail Sport* 2016). Once clicked it is revealed that the meeting related to the International Champions Cup, a pre-season tournament set to be held in America (Gill et al. 2016). What this example illustrates is how clickbait is designed to operate. The headline in this instance did not match the subsequent content. The term clickbait, however, is very contentious and there are several slight variations to its definition. For Chen et al. (2015), clickbait is a symptom of the digital news business model and the thirst for page views. More

pointedly, Silverman describes the process of clickbait as the ‘tendency for news sites to pair declarative headlines with body text that expresses skepticism about the veracity of the information’ (2015). Similarly, Kuiken et al. talk of ‘a vague headline that induces curiosity, which is then used to lure readers into clicking on the headline’ (2017: 4). These definitions do not necessarily point to the publication of outright lies – rather more key factual differences between headline and body of text.

Chen et al. provide an excellent breakdown to the types of cues and mechanisms utilised in typical clickbait headlines (2015: 5). These range from affective language and action words to forward referencing and reverse narratives (ibid). The mechanisms by which these work span across curiosity piquing, reading enjoyment, generating suspense and emotional appeal (ibid). In addition, there is the technique of ‘forward-referencing’, identified by Blom and Hansen, which is the way in which a headline gives reference to ‘forthcoming (parts of the) discourse relative to the current location in the discourse, e.g. “This is the best news story you will ever read”’ (2015: 1). This demonstrates that, while there are differences over the definition of the term ‘clickbait’, these arguments all highlight clickbait’s basic aim of generating clicks. At one end is the use of attractive headlines to generate traffic; at the other is the deliberate publishing of misleading information in a desperate search for reader attention. In the past, a titillating headline on a newspaper may have been called ‘readbait’, but the current use of clickbait is ultimately deceiving the consumer.

The increase in clickbait stems from changes in the newsroom and journalism practices around social media stemming from the incorporation of analytics software such as Chartbeat. This is a system used in newsrooms by major publishers such as Trinity Mirror, and its use led one of the editors at their *Cornwall Live* website to write an editorial defending the use of ChartBeat against accusations of clickbait (Merrington 2017). In it, Jacqui Merrington states that the ChartBeat screen is ‘what makes the newsroom tick’ but that this is leading to a culture where the audience is simply given the news they want, rather than information that they need:

So rather than guessing whether people are reading what we write, we have a pretty good idea based on the figures flashing on our screen all day every day. And to know whether they like it or not, we get an instant reaction via Facebook or Twitter or through comments on the site (ibid).

Most tellingly, Merrington adds: ‘It’s not just about “news” any more. It’s about informing people, entertaining them, engaging them’ (ibid). Given the editor’s rationale for the incorporation of this type of technology, there is a sense that it is not a completely clickbait-orientated organisation, but it does suggest that social media is being used in newsrooms as a traffic factory. It follows that these metrics are what the journalists are judged on. The ramifications in terms of content is a shift from public interest journalism to what is of interest to the public, in other words from news to entertainment. The market forces behind giving people what they want remove risk-taking and redefine what journalism is for.

These headlines work because, as psychologist George Loewenstein argues, our brains are hardwired to want to fill in gaps in information created by clickbait:

Such information gaps produce the feeling of deprivation labelled curiosity. The curious individual is motivated to obtain the missing information to reduce or eliminate the feeling of deprivation (Loewenstein 1994).

If a headline features a cliff-hanger, for instance, then we will be inclined to click because we want to find out the answers. It is this feeling of deprivation which provokes the reader into making these decisions. Take the following for example:

Five things we have learned from Manchester United's US tour (*Guardian Sport* 2014).

This example is typical of a form of sports article which claims to have uncovered new information through watching a sporting event, in this case football. The headline construction gives none of this new material away. The tweet is, in short, tantalising, a cliff-hanger and points towards a knowledge gap as it gives no answers. All of these are traits of clickbait. It plays on our emotions and impulses which are key in provoking online interaction. Berger and Milkman, in a study about what makes particular content go ‘viral’ online, highlight article traits containing either ‘emotionality, positivity, awe, anger, anxiety, disgust, and sadness’ (2011). All of which are characteristics of sports. Social media, on the other hand, is defined as having an underlying ‘emotional architecture’ exemplified by the

‘like’ button (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013, see also Bakir and McStay’s work on emotion and fake news 2017).

Methodology

The decision behind focusing on Twitter for this paper is because of its prominent usage among journalists and news outlets in general. A tweet is very similar to a headline in that it is textually dependent on the article it refers to. Traditionally headlines have been considered to be ‘a special kind of text; a text which cannot have an autonomous status. It is a text correlated to another text...’ (Iarovici and Amel 1989: 441). A tweet, therefore, acts as a sort of headline where the reader needs to choose to click a link before they see the rest of a story.

We sought to look at the different ways in which news outlets tweeted about sport, which tweets received the most engagement in terms of ‘likes’ and ‘favourites’, what hashtags were prominent and what were the most frequent combinations of words. To achieve this, we chose 15 Twitter accounts analysing tweets from the date the account opened to 31 March 2017:

Outlet	Twitter Handle
<i>BBC Sport</i>	bbsport
<i>Daily Express</i>	dexpress_sport
<i>Daily Mail Football</i>	mailfootball
<i>ESPN FC</i>	espnfc
<i>Guardian Sport</i>	guardian_sport
<i>Indy Football</i>	indyfootball
<i>Indy Sport</i>	indysport
<i>Metro Sport</i>	metro_sport
<i>Mirror Football</i>	mirrorfootball
<i>Mirror Sport</i>	mirrorsport
<i>Sky Sports News</i>	skysportsnews
<i>Sun Football</i>	thesunfootball
<i>Sun Sport</i>	sunsport
<i>Telegraph Football</i>	telefootball
<i>Telegraph Sport</i>	telegraphsport

Table 1: List of media outlets in the sample

The Twitter feeds chosen feature both general sport-related accounts as well as some outlets which dedicate an entire feed to just football. The high profile nature of football and especially the English Premier League had a major influence on the results. The implications of this will be discussed further on in this paper. The Twitter API (advanced programming interface) only allows searches to go back 3,200 tweets, meaning that a more limited time frame would be available to create the corpus. To get around this, an open-source Python web scraper (https://github.com/bpb27/twitter_scraping) was used on each target organisation in turn. This is a two-stage process: the first step automates the Twitter search, using the @username and a date range to find the ID for individual tweets by the target account. This does not require the Twitter API and is not rate limited – it is an automated web scraper.

The second stage to the data-gathering uses the Twitter API to turn the list of IDs returned by stage one into a CSV (spreadsheet) of tweets for the account which has the following headers: favourite_count, source, text, in_reply_to_screen_name, is_retweet, created_at, retweet_count, id_str. The API method for getting a single tweet (from the ID) is not limited in the same way as the search method – but the code does have a pause function to prevent the request being rejected by the Twitter site. The resulting spreadsheets were analysed in RStudio. The corpus is simply too large for Excel's limit (just over 1.08m. rows of data) at 1,353,460 rows. The next two major sections of the paper will discuss what was found in terms of the volume of tweets and the level of engagement with each Twitter.

Top top tweeters

This part of the paper will detail the overall demographics of the tweets gathered and will discuss the differences between each outlet's use of Twitter. The next table demonstrates the amount of followers, number of tweets since inception and when each respective media outlet joined the social media platform. What is obvious from the numbers is that the broadcasters have much higher follower counts than the newspapers: in the millions rather than the thousands. The BBC's position as trusted public broadcaster and Sky's historic relationship with sport, football and the English Premier League arguably exist outside of the political ideologies of the editorial stances of the newspapers. This, perhaps, gives them a much broader appeal at home and abroad. The Manchester United account is included as a comparison and to highlight the shifting media landscape in the coverage of sport. This type of sporting entity and their massive global reach mean that they are becoming media outlets

in and of themselves. The Manchester United fan base is one of the largest in the world and its follower count is more than twice that of *BBC Sport*. As a result, the Manchester United feed has the ability to reach potentially more eyeballs than the journalism produced by the BBC. In purely news terms, this is narrowing the view of world sport to a single club and away from the more critical insights a journalist provides.

One interesting difference between each account is the inception dates and the disparities between when certain newspapers created a dedicated football channel. The *Sun* and *Mirror*, for example, created their football feeds years before their more general sport accounts. On the other hand, the all-sport content feeds of the *Independent* and *Telegraph* existed on Twitter years before they created football-focused accounts. This, perhaps, reflects their readership demographics and the continuing perception of football as a working class sport.

Outlet	Twitter Handle	Followers	Tweets Since Inception	Joined Twitter
<i>BBC Sport</i>	Bbcsport	7,170,000	316,000	March-11
<i>Sky Sports News</i>	Skysportsnews	5,800,000	68,700	January-10
<i>ESPN FC</i>	Espnfc	1,660,000	123,000	December-08
<i>Guardian Sport</i>	guardian_sport	766,000	155,000	June-09
<i>Mirror Football</i>	Mirrorfootball	490,000	342,000	October-08
<i>Sun Football</i>	Thesunfootball	373,000	145,000	February-09
<i>Telegraph Football</i>	Telefootball	290,000	84,800	November-13
<i>Telegraph Sport</i>	Telegraphsport	219,000	137,000	April-10
<i>Sun Sport</i>	Sunsport	149,000	83,200	December-11
<i>Indy Football</i>	Indyfootball	83,000	83,700	March-12
<i>Metro Sport</i>	metro_sport	71,500	63,400	April-10
<i>Express Sport</i>	dexpress_sport	53,400	104,000	May-10
<i>Mirror Sport</i>	Mirrorsport	34,200	54,700	January-10
<i>Indy Sport</i>	Indysport	31,600	83,300	October-08
<i>Daily Mail Football</i>	Mailfootball	30,600	57,400	May-10
In comparison:				
<i>Man United</i>	ManUtd	16,800,000	43,300	April-12

Table 2: Media outlets listed by number of followers (data accurate as of 14 January 2018)

The most prolific tweeters are the *BBC* and the *Mirror*, with the *Mirror's* football account tweeting twice as much as most of the other accounts. Over time, however, there has been a collective increase in the sheer volume of tweets from these outlets. For instance, in 2011, all of these outlets produced just over 100,000 tweets, whereas in 2016 this number had increased to over 250,000. There are now many more people and outlets using Twitter and this has increased competition for attention. As a result, far more tweets are needed to be noticed. In addition, all content on an outlet's website is promoted on Twitter – not just select items.

Are you tweeting to me?

This section of the paper takes a closer look at the levels of interaction with the tweets from these outlets. Interaction with tweets represents an increased amount of emotional engagement with content. Even though it may seem like a small gesture to retweet or 'favourite' content, it still takes a conscious decision to do so. The 'in reply' part of this section is concerned with which accounts media outlets are responding to or tweeting at. Examining this function of the Twitter feed helps uncover whether or not these accounts are using Twitter as a one- or two-way communication tool.

First the follower counts: what is plain to see is that the accounts with the larger follower counts have a greater engagement, apart from *Mirror Football* and *Guardian Sport* which have switched places. Where the differences arise is when the number of tweets with no engagement is considered. *Sky Sports News* only had 183 tweets with no retweet. This suggests that their content is attractive enough to users that they will happily retweet the vast majority of tweets.

Twitter Handle	Total Retweets	Tweets with no Retweets
bbsport	11,449,413	1,930
skysportsnews	9,286,487	183
espnfc	4,899,689	8,668
mirrorfootball	2,805,117	34,677

guardian_sport	1,439,173	46,633
telefootball	1,160,156	2,297
thesunfootball	802,287	17,009
telegraphsport	416,016	16,160
metro_sport	368,992	10,972
indyfootball	319,241	24,290
sunsport	298,931	9,154
dexpress_sport	187,696	43,679
indysport	130,821	46,294
mirrorsport	149,969	26,423
mailfootball	45,748	38,842
Total	22,310,323	327,211

Table 3: Number of retweets per outlet (data accurate on 31 March 2017)

The following identifies the top five retweets from *BBC Sport*:

Tweet	Number of Retweets
Manchester United will appoint Jose Mourinho as their new manager, <i>BBC Sport</i> understands (<i>BBC Sport</i> 2016a)	12,771
For the next 10 days, Chelsea's Fernando Torres is a reigning World Cup, European Championship, Champions League & Europa League winner, #CFC (<i>BBC Sport</i> 2013a)	10,710
David Beckham: 'I won't receive any salary during my time at Paris Saint-Germain, my salary will go to a children's charity in Paris', #PSG (<i>BBC Sport</i> 2013b)	10,589
Amazing scenes in the studio after #ENG's winner against #WAL! (<i>BBC Sport</i> 2016b)	10,312
What a fantastic gesture from the Dortmund fans (<i>BBC Sport</i> 2017)	8,518

Table 4: Top five retweets for *BBC Sport* Twitter feed

This helps illustrate the fact that the retweets are dominated by football. The *BBC Sport* feed, it must be noted, is about general sporting news but football is clearly the most popular. What is also evident is that these tweets are emotionally very positive in nature whether it is celebrating the successes of an athlete or praising a set of fans. The ‘favourite’ count is somewhat similar to the retweets but it is clear that fewer people are inclined to ‘favourite’ a tweet compared to retweeting:

Twitter Handle	Total Favourites	Tweets with no Favourite
bbcsport	10,104,480	12,951
skysportsnews	5,734,016	2,586
espnfc	4,904,065	16,532
mirrorfootball	1,216,454	78,398
guardian_sport	909,226	65,963
telefootball	850,443	3,171
thesunfootball	579,707	25,532
metro_sport	173,050	18,326
telegraphsport	217,414	30,944
indyfootball	197,035	27,461
dexpressport	114,615	48,216
sunsport	115,211	18,465
indysport	88,248	53,848
mailfootball	71,506	43,184
mirrorsport	70,089	28,041
Total	1,529,3075	473,618

Table 4: Number of ‘favourites’ per outlet (data accurate on 31 March 2017)

In contrast, the *Mirror Football* feed had the following top five ‘favourites’:

Tweet	Number of Favourites

Missing: 23-year-old French midfielder. Answers to Paul. Last seen dancing. If found, please call 1-800-JOSE (<i>Mirror Football</i> 2016a)	2,504
Paul Gascoigne reveals 14 lines of cocaine made him think killer Raoul Moat was his brother (<i>Mirror Football</i> 2015)	1,216
Richard Keys: ‘I accept our prehistoric banter is not acceptable in a modern world’ (<i>Mirror Football</i> 2011)	1,008
Four years after being diagnosed with leukaemia, Stan Petrov is set to return to training (<i>Mirror Football</i> 2016b)	981
BREAKING: Sunderland drop points against Man United (<i>Mirror Football</i> 2014)	796

The difference to *BBC Sport* is clear with more a mix of positive and negative emotional sentiments. The football feed is playing more into fan rivalries and football culture by targeting certain clubs, players and events. But the numbers are still very small when compared to the total number of tweets sent out by *Mirror Football*. Finally for this section is ‘in reply to’, in other words ‘direction interaction’ with other Twitter users. Overall, this is very minimal. When an @ is included in a tweet it is usually self-referential of the outlet or writer of an article. For instance, *Mirror Football* tweeted @ its own name 2,443 times. These feeds are not used to interact with other uses. It is much less a social use of a digital platform and more of a broadcast, one-way conversation.

A game of words

This next section aims to highlight what these accounts are tweeting about. Looking at the hashtags used will show the key words targeted by these outlets to increase tweet engagement and appeal to a wider audience. The paper will then move on to discuss the most common pairs and triplets of words. From this the main topics mentioned will be identified. Firstly, it is abundantly clear that the Manchester United-related #MUFC is the most popular hashtag. Moreover, only three of the top 30 hashtags related to sport feature something other than football. The three non-football-related hashtags were #ashes, #bbccricket and #Wimbledon. And in the football category, it is the elite, extremely wealthy teams of the English Premier League which dominate with 16 out of the 30 most popular hashtags related to just this league.

It is also apparent that the accounts are used for self-referential attention, such as the previously mentioned #bbccricket or #ssn (which stands for *Sky Sports News*). The self-referential approach to the use of social media is not restricted to hashtags. In the various popular combinations of words found in the content we see that 'via guardian' is the third most common pair of words, and 'espn soccer net' is the most popular triple word combination. When this is combined with the @ in reply results some of these media outlets appear to be merely talking to themselves. Similar results were found in Chorley and Mottershead's analysis of tweets by news organisations and journalists where self-referential tweeting was far more common than conversations between users (2016).

As with the hashtags, football dominates these exchanges. Prominent football clubs, high profile managers and even scores appear regularly. Indeed, it is clear from the triple combination of words that Twitter is being used by the organisations like a broadcast tool. Terms such as 'you need to', 'need to know', 'things we learned' and 'follow it live' are all prominent and point towards the most popular content of match previews, match reports and live coverage. Added to this, there is football transfer news, often accompanied with tantalising headlines.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates clearly that, as Twitter is increasingly adopted by media outlets, its usage is focused on providing an electronic funnel to an outlet's home website. This is at the expense of the social interaction aspects of Twitter. This is in contrast to the comparable media of the live-blog, the use of which Thurman and Walters (2013) found to incorporate much higher levels of interactivity and connection with the audience. The key difference here is that perhaps it is a journalist who controls the live-blog while tweets on an official feed may be automated. That aside, the levels of retweets, 'favourites' and lack of @ replies demonstrate that Twitter is used by these official accounts as a traditional broadcast platform and not as a vehicle for encouraging conversations. In many ways this amounts to a severe undervaluing and underuse of the Twitter platform. If the competition is for eyeballs then surely the way to build a community and audience is to interact and not to churn out unsatisfying yet tasty morsels of clickbait for the audience to gorge themselves on.

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Note on the contributors

Jonathan Cable is a Lecturer in Sport Journalism at the University of Gloucestershire. He joined them from Cardiff University where he was a lecturer and researcher. He attained his PhD in Journalism Studies from Cardiff University in 2012. His research interests lie in football culture, protest, and sport media. His first book, *Protest campaigns, media and political opportunities*, has just been published.

Glyn Mottershead is a former regional newspaper journalist with more than 20 years in journalism and journalism training. He is co-director of the MSc in Computational and Data Journalism at Cardiff University and a co-author of the 21st Century Journalism Handbook. His work involves teaching people that numbers and data sets aren't anywhere near as scary as they might first appear.