

Are clickbait headlines like manipulative worship?

By [Kathryn Reklis](#)

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I'm grateful to Amy Frkyholm for her [thoughtful response](#) to my [media column on clickbait](#). I have a religious autobiography similar to Amy's: raised in a highly emotional evangelical/charismatic church, which I left in young adulthood for high liturgy. My response to liturgical forms of worship was very much the same feeling of relief and freedom within structure that Amy describes so well. I appreciate, and in many ways share, her experience with and insight into the pitfalls of coerced emotionality—in worship, church groups, or online.

I'm not sure, however, that the parallel between clickbait and worship really works. Part of the (potential) coercion of embodied worship experiences is the corporate, performative nature of them. At least for me, it was watching others and being watched in my responses that set up the "double cynicism" Amy so powerfully describes. Digital social networks create different kinds of performative community, but I'd argue they operate pretty differently from the closed community of evangelical worship.

For example, what really attracts me to a clickbait link is not just the catchy headline, and it's definitely not the promise of a definitive emotional response. It is watching the same post show up on my Facebook feed multiple times from a variety of people. The more people post it, the more I am curious. If a really diverse group of people from my friend network posts it (friends from high school alongside activists and graduate school colleagues), my curiosity grows. What I'm seeking, I think, is not so much the promised emotional response, but to know what all the fuss is about.

This is why I compared clickbait to gossip, not to worship. The value is in the sharing, not the emotionality. I know gossip gets a bad rap, but I mean it here in a relatively positive or neutral way: the chit-chat of close communities. My biggest concern with clickbait is that it can replace serious discussion of real issues, or of real difference. If our digital social networks consist only of sharing this kind of prepackaged content, we miss the opportunities to share the more nuanced texture of our lives, as well as the issues and topics that might take more than a link and a "like" to unpack. But the proclivity toward the superficial or gossipy (in the bad sense) is not a problem new to the digital age.

Of course, Amy is right in many ways. Not everyone will have the same experience of these videos, or of the subtle ways that sharing links might nourish relationships. But for those of us inclined to jump straight to a critique of popular culture practices—and many of the pastors and scholars I know fit this category, myself very much included—I want to cultivate a moment of appreciation in the midst of critical judgment. We might just learn something about our friends, family, parishioners, and communities by watching the clickbait videos that show up repeatedly in our newsfeeds—whether we cry or not.