

The most interesting article on digital diplomacy you'll read all day

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You're browsing a news site, and see the following link: *12 risky British discoveries that changed our world*. Do you click it? Even though it's recognisably link bait, carefully crafted to entice you into spending more time on a site, research suggests that you would.

Captivating headlines are in some ways an expected response to the fire hose of new information on the Web. With over 2 million blog articles and 50 million tweets posted every day, content creators need to deploy every technique they can to make their stuff stand out from everything else. According to viral media site Upworthy, traffic on an article can vary by up to 500% depending on the headline – and more traffic means more potential advertising revenue.

... communicate British science ...

In digital diplomacy, we're less interested in making money (though saving money by delivering government services through digital channels is a big priority) and more interested in making sure that information is easily findable and widely read. Here in the UK Science and Innovation Network, one of our aims is to communicate British science – discoveries, announcements, policy – to our stakeholders. In the past, we have relied on press releases and speeches to get our message out; today, we have a vast array of digital tools to reach a much wider audience.

A 2013 University of Bristol study looked at the differences between several new websites' "Top Stories" (what editors think is important) and "Most Popular" (what people are actually reading) lists. Perhaps unsurprisingly, serious topics like politics and business were poorly-read, while the tabloid staples of crime, natural disasters, celebrity and the weather were universally popular. Similarly, a Conductor survey found that headlines containing numbers (*10 Female British Scientists You Should Know About*) were far more popular than other ways of expressing the same information, as were headlines with fewer superlative statements (*10 Female British Scientists You Really Should Know About*).

This is a tendency that viral media platform BuzzFeed has exploited mercilessly. Virtually every headline on the site is strategically written to maximise the chances of you reading it, with about half being of the "number" type. And while you may sniff at the déclassé subject matter (*12 Celebrities Whose Facial Hair is Worse Than Yours*), you may be in the minority – BuzzFeed attracts over 85 million unique visitors per month, more than the BBC, CNN, New York Times and Reuters combined.

Does this mean that, in order to maximise readership, we should be publishing most of

our messaging through high-traffic platforms? It's an intriguing thought (*15 Important Reasons to Collaborate with the UK on Regenerative Medicine Research*), but there isn't really a one-size-fits-all approach to science communications. We use tools like Twitter to add a very personal touch to civil service duties; Tumblr to deliver

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visually rich content to a different audience; Facebook to answer questions from another audience. BuzzFeed has a place too – our colleagues in Washington DC run a popular channel about life in the UK (*11 Stats That Prove British Music Rules*) and the USA (*Baseball: You're Doing It Wrong*).

Government communications have not disintegrated into anarchy with the advent of digital tools; most official channels – as anyone who's worked on an intergovernmental agreement will know – are still rigorously shaped and refined. However, we now have a more human element to communications, with a multitude of individual employees working on engagement as a part of their job that's slightly separated from the official machinery of the organisation. The Government Digital Service's *Inside GOV.UK* blog (formerly *Inside Inside Government*) is a good example of an initiative to engage citizens and let them take a peek behind the frontend of their digital services.

Strategies like these ultimately serve prosperity goals. In the Science and Innovation Network, we are aiming to communicate British excellence and expertise so well that when someone thinks of science – for research collaborations, study, policy advice or anything – they think of the UK and come to us. We also aim to communicate our

own activities and successes, to raise our profile in the countries in which we work and inspire new scientists and research groups to work with us. For example, here in Canada we have taken advantage of the fact that official FCO blogs appear quite high in Google search results to showcase our collaborative projects and allow British and Canadian scientists to talk informally about their work. We are also working on creating a somewhat rarefied reputation on Twitter for science diplomacy with the UK and on public outreach through digital events (such as our recent Google Hangout on open data). While we are not setting up randomised controlled trials of these channels, they are something of an experiment and we will be looking closely at the results to see if they deliver what we want them to.

And congratulations on your engagement and attention span if you read this far – research also suggests that only 20% of readers get past the headline.