

The Curiosity Gap

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

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Curious Gap at Olinda Side Road © 2022 Sarah Wert

Picture this: it's 5:05pm, you've just finished listening to the afternoon news on CBC Radio – which is all you needed to hear before dinner – but you took *just* a little too long to turn off the radio, and now you've caught a few words from the announcer about the upcoming show on the secrets of better sleep, as revealed by new revolutionary research – “coming up next” they helpfully remind you... before you know it, you're halfway through a show you'd originally had no plan to listen to, but now can't seem to be able to walk away from.

What happened?

It's not your fault, that's simply the work of journalists using one of the oldest tricks in the book. In content marketing, this is known as *the curiosity gap*, often phrased as something like: “the gap between what people know and what they would like to know”.

In other words, whoever is writing the news or a show – and the advertising for it – expects that you already have at least some background knowledge about what they are going to talk about. But they also presume that they are going to give you some information you're unlikely to know – and will likely find fascinating. So, before the show even gets going, the announcer tells you... not exactly what

they're going to tell you later, but that they're going to tell you something *more* about what you already know, and are presumably interested in. That gap is a compelling force into keeping your attention.

And it's not just radio – TV news, print news, and online news, all employ this tactic. It's part of what can make learning about the world – and its many challenges – so addictive, even if it isn't always as inspiring, or pleasant, as the kind of entertainment media that you might be more likely to follow for relaxation or amusement.

The curiosity gap is a powerful force.

And, in the case of the internet, the marketing aspect of the curiosity gap is even more insidious – and potentially more harmful.

Online, the riskier version of the curiosity gap gambit has come to be known as *clickbait*, that is, headlines or links that are worded so that they can be irresistible to ignore, baiting you by promising to satisfy your curious mind, by hinting that they'll give an incredible answer to a question they have raised in the headline – if *only* you clicked.

Classic examples are phrasings such as “You won't believe how so-and-so keeps their house so clean” or “Are your recipes ruining your dinner parties?”

(By the way, there's a news media adage that, whenever a headline ends with a question mark, then the answer is almost always “no”.)

These kinds of headlines or article titles are especially difficult to ignore if they have tickled some sense of insecurity in you. This is often used by the makers of products that promote diets or beauty products, who often use clickbait in the form of sensationalistic banners that give promises of a body that is considered ideal by certain segments of our society, although the goal of this kind of body is often neither attainable

nor necessary for being able to love oneself and to be loved by others. There is also the risk of harmful products that underdeliver on their promises or which may be outright dangerous to one's physical or mental health.

Other times, the clickbait technique may simply lure you into wasting time on information that is nowhere as important (or interesting) as its headline may have made it out to be. This may seem like a minor hazard, but when that lost time reduces the time for you to connect more deeply with better content, or with those around you, the harm can be real.

So, yes, my friends, clickbait, and the manipulative use of the curiosity gap, can be harmful in many ways. It is little wonder that the action of following a seemingly endless thread of clickbaity content is often labeled as *doom-scrolling*. And a lot of doom-scrolling – even more of it than usual – happened during the pandemic, when our curiosity to find more and better information left a wide gap, which many content providers were vying to fill – some more responsibly than others.

Curiosity can be a powerful force.

Now, using the curiosity gap, or even some versions of clickbait, isn't always a bad thing, nor is it necessarily a nefarious tactic. After all, the job of journalists, and other kinds of content creators, is to make content that you *want* to follow and may indeed be information you need, or could at least find useful. And presumably, you are interested in following interesting content... at least some of the time.

One of my favourite content creators is Adam Ragusea – you've seen me reference him, or even play some of his videos, here before. A journalist by training, he describes himself as “man in a kitchen with a camera” and his channel is food focused. And while he does offer weekly recipes, he also has videos that are essentially food journalism,

exploring aspects about food production, preparation, commerce, and even the ethics around the food we eat, and how we get it.

In a speech he gave to the Atlanta Writers' Club a couple years ago – during the height of the initial pandemic waves – he spoke about how he struggles to balance the need to inform right away and the need to get people's attention – and therefore onto the content he creates.

At the time, in the context of the pandemic, he made a video to emphasize that getting food through minimal contact with people was safer than riskier options, such as going to restaurants. He titled that video "People are more dangerous than food" – effectively offering the answer right in the title. He did this because he felt that playing the clickbait game, with a curiosity gap headline, was inappropriate at the time, wanting to prioritize giving as much of the answer as possible in the title itself.

But he noticed that this particular video had significantly fewer views than some of his videos with less urgent information that had more clickbaity titles.

Adam Ragusea wondered if he'd had gotten more views with a title like: "Can you get covid from food?" – a question for which you'd *have* to click in order to get the answer – thus enticing more people to click and get a fuller sense of the safety information he was looking to offer. He has reluctantly accepted that, if he cannot get people's attention, he cannot inform them, and thus makes some use of curiosity gap tactics to get people onto his content.

He balances this by giving away the most important information early in his videos (rather than make you wait to the end of the video, as some other YouTubers are prone to do), and he also ensures that he does intensive journalistic research before publishing, seeking to offer good quality information. In this way, he feels he has "earned" your click.

In fact, we do this kind of thing at church. When I write the blurbs for the upcoming month's sermons, my e-mails to the newsletter team are headed "Titles & Teasers". If you've ever wondered why my titles aren't more forthright, part of the reason is that I'm leaving a bit of the subject matter *deliberately* in the gap between what you know and what you want to know, hoping that this will pique your curiosity and you'd be more inclined to engage with the service.

If I worded my title and blurb something like "today I'm going to talk about how understanding star formation cycles can offer spiritual inspiration", you might be less keen to attend, or to click on the Zoom link. (Next week's sermon, by the way, is called "Stellar Apple Pie"... it's about how understanding star formation cycles can offer spiritual inspiration).

Of course, there is more than a simple marketing ploy at play. Because part of our tradition's practice is to inspire curiosity, so intentionally seeking the gap between what we know and what we want to know is precisely what we are often about – looking to bridge that gap, and then find the next one – because curiosity is a powerful motivator to make connections between the gaps, that we may explore how our fragmented world is far more connected than we might expect.

My friends, curiosity is a powerful force.

Last week, my friends, I spoke about some of the practices that we sometimes take, or which folks have suggested, to bring cheer and warmth into a season that might otherwise be cold and dark. These practices and suggestions included a mix of comfort in tradition, as well as excitement in seeking novelty. Our church is about that, finding a sense of grounding and guidance in the work and insights from our ancestors, while also pursuing the gap that our curiosity finds, that we may move toward bolder, deeper, and more connected ways of being.

My friends, in the spirit of the season, we encourage curiosity through an appeal to exploration, to search how we may stay connected or make new connections – with oneself or with others – as the cold season may invite warm opportunities to either gather together, or find comfort in our own places, in sometimes new and exciting ways.

My friends, curiosity is one of the drivers of our faith. And finding the gap in it is an invitation to practice that faith.

So may it be,
In the spirit of curiosity,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening #113 Where Is Our Holy Church?

Words: Edwin Henry Wilson, 1898-1993 ~-| © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

Music: Genevan psalter, 1551, adapt. By William Crotch, 1775-1847

ST. MICHAEL

Hymn #225 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Words: Latin c. 9th cent., trans. Composite based on John Mason Neale, 1818-1866, recast

Music: Adapt. by Thomas Helmore, 1811-1890, harmony by John Weaver,

1937- , harm. © 1990 John Weaver.

VENI EMMANUEL

Closing #354 We Laugh, We Cry

~-| Words & Music: Shelley Jackson Denham, 1950- , © 1980 Shelley Jackson Denham,

~-| harmony by Betsy Jo Angebrandt, 1931- , © 1992 UUA

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