The History & Origin of Cat Memes: From the 18th Century to lolcats;

Or, How Cats have Basically Changed the Internet and the World Furever

Preprint Manuscript

Biographies

Jeanette Claire Sewell is the Database and Metadata Management Coordinator at Rice University's Fondren Library. She is actively involved in using metadata to promote library resources in unique and engaging ways, creating everything from digital timelines and coloring books to Twitter bots and libguides. Her other projects include writing The Golden Girls Fashion Corner blog and related essays that explore the impact of pop culture artifacts.

Spencer D. C. Keralis is Founder and Executive Director of Digital Frontiers, the largest and longest-running digital humanities conference in the U.S. southwest. A scholar of the past, present, and future of the book, Dr. Keralis's writing has appeared in *Book History*, *American Periodicals*, and the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) report *The Problem of Data*. He holds a Ph.D. in English and American Literature from New York University. He currently serves as Assistant Professor and Digital Humanities Librarian for the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign Libraries.

Abstract / Essay

Introduction

Animal trainer Vicki Hearne, following poet John Hollander, described cats as "infinitely interpretable texts," and authors and artists have inscribed meaning onto cats in a variety of media for centuries (235). On the Internet, cat memes gained popularity in the mid-2000s, but with this timeline we argue that their origins stretch back to at least the 18th century. Our timeline traces the evolution of cat memes from 18th century emblems through the rise of Internet popular culture.

What's in a meme?

"Meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) to describe cultural elements,"tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches," that are transmitted between individuals or groups through imitation (249). Dawkins proposed the term as an analogy between cultural transmission of ideas and values, and genetic transmission of physical traits.

Dawkins's genetic analogy works reasonably well for the slow processes of culture that precede the information age. The modern concept of virality, "the tendency of ... a piece of information to be circulated rapidly and widely" (Oxford), is enabled by accelerating media-transfer technology. Social networks, micro-publishing platforms, and other online communities become the host organisms for a dizzying array of viral media.

Memes proliferated in early print culture as emblems and verse mnemonics. Characterized by brevity and recognizability, the emblem and the couplet evolve into the jingle, the logo, the buzzword, the earworm. The Internet has proved particularly fertile ground for the creation and spread of memes, and cat memes in particular. These bite-sized sound-text-vision-bytes are engineered to stick with you and prove to be immediately identifiable and ultimately irresistible.

As our timeline demonstrates, after two centuries of cats memes in print, video, and graphic arts, computer users generated a proliferation of cat-themed memetic Internet content beginning in the early 90s.The "deceptively frivolous phenomenon" of internet cats was documented in 2015 with the *How Cats Took Over the Internet* show at the Museum of the Moving Image (MMI), which was sponsored by Purina and Friskies (Eppink). There are several generic forms around which this content tends to accrete, only some of which conform to the common <image + all-caps Impact font> formula. Limor Shifman has proposed nine broad "meme genres," of which LOLCats is one (110). But cat memes can occupy several of the genres Shifman identifies, including videos, gifs, and stock character macros, as can be seen from the diverse array of viral content we've curated in the timeline.

Why a timeline?

The interactive timeline provides both a chronological and visual mechanism for understanding the history of cat memes, mapping occurrences without necessarily implying a telos or genealogy. Our timeline was created using Timeline JS, a free, open-

source tool created and maintained by Northwestern University. Originally designed for journalists, the API is in use by CNN, TIME magazine, *Le Monde*, and other media outlets to generate interactive content. Timeline JS draws data from a Google Drive spreadsheet that allows for simple data and text entry, HTML formatting, and the ability to embed web content directly from Twitter, YouTube, SoundCloud, and other websites. Timeline JS has a low technical bar for entry that allows users to easily and quickly generate their timelines - enabling the move from content consumer to content producer.

Conclusion

We recognize that, in the years since the Museum of the Moving Image's *How Cats Took Over the Internet* show closed, the cat meme as a viral force has already become somewhat retro. "Doggo" and "pupper" memes had a brief heyday and, though we haven't done a statistical census, it seems like we're seeing a lot of otters and sloths lately. But, like the metaphoric virus that describes this mode of circulation, we're confident that felines will resurge, stronger and fluffier than ever, extending our timeline into the future.

References

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