



Taking animal news seriously: Cat tales in *The New York Times*

Journalism
2016, Vol. 17(3) 366–381
© The Author(s) 2014
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1464884914561577
jou.sagepub.com



Matthew C Ehrlich

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Abstract

‘Cute cat videos’ are often vilified for representing everything journalism is not and should not be. However, news about cats – cute and otherwise – has been fodder for *The New York Times* for more than 140 years. This article critically examines the *Times*’ cat tales in the context of the cultural history of journalism and the academic study of human–animal relations, also known as anthrozoology. Trends and themes in the coverage indicate that cats have been used and portrayed as commodities, heroes, villains, victims, women’s best friends, and urban symbols. The stories demonstrate how and why animal news should be taken seriously by journalism scholars. Not only does it offer insight into our evolving relationships with animals, it also provides a provocative means of thinking about where journalism has been and where it is heading.

Keywords

Animal news, anthrozoology, cultural history, human interest news, soft news, *The New York Times*

For all the disagreement over what today’s journalism should be, ‘cute cat videos’ has become an epithet representing what many believe journalism is not and never should be. The ubiquity of cats doing ‘cute’ things in social media (see, for example, Stein, 2012) has raised concerns about its implications for journalism. One observer says ‘real news’ concerning ‘war, and homelessness, and global warming’ is by definition ‘non-cat news’: ‘If real news dies, there’s no way people will be able to intelligently discuss issues and

Corresponding author:

Matthew C Ehrlich, Department of Journalism, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 119 Gregory Hall, 810 S. Wright St., Urbana, IL 61801, USA.
Email: mehrlich@illinois.edu

ideas with their fellow citizens. But then, maybe they'll just talk to their cats' (Barton, 2014). Professional journalism groups offer lessons on 'how news can compete with cat videos' (Ching, 2013) and with websites like BuzzFeed, which in 2013 hired an 'associate animals editor' responsible for posts like '16 Cats Interpret Margaret Thatcher Quotes' (*JimRomenesko.com*, 2013). Legacy news organizations distance themselves from all that cat news represents. The executive editor of *The New York Times* dismissed online media for aggregating 'celebrity gossip, adorable kitten videos, posts from unpaid bloggers and news reports from other publications', in contrast to the substantive journalism produced by elite newspapers like the *Times* (Keller, 2011: MM11).¹

However, the *Times* is hardly averse to publishing items about cats. It was in the *Times* that a critic (Schillinger, 2013) labeled 2013 'the Year of the Cat', pointing to the emergence of 'Grumpy Cat' as an Internet phenomenon, the popularity of TV reality shows like *My Cat from Hell*, and the publication of books like *The Cat Whisperer* (p. ST11). The critic also might have pointed to the *Times* itself after it printed a piece headlined 'From Cuddly Critter to Killing Machine' (Angier, 2013: A19). The article reported on a study indicating that cats killed billions of birds and small mammals every year. The web version of the *Times* story sparked nearly 1700 online reader comments from both cat critics and cat supporters. 'First they came for the communists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist', wrote one commenter (Ruibal, 2013). 'Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the cats, and boy, was there total outrage!'

The inclusion of such items in 'All the News That's Fit to Print' and the spirited responses to them provide the inspiration for this article. If scholars' task is to 'take journalism seriously' by studying not only its 'informative, civic, and rational sides' but also its 'pleasure-inducing [and] entertaining ones' (Zelizer, 2004: 190, 215), then animal news deserves to be taken seriously, especially when it appears in so self-consciously serious a news organ as *The New York Times*. As it happens, the *Times* has been publishing cat stories since the 19th century. Critically analyzing those stories in the context of cultural journalism history and the academic study of human-animal relations indicates that cats and other animals are more than 'cute': They can be provocative means of thinking about where journalism has been and where it is heading.

Literature review

The New York Times traditionally has been invested with gravity, with historians and critics analyzing the newspaper's coverage of momentous issues and events (see, for example, Diamond, 1994; Friel and Falk, 2004; *HuffPost Live*, 2014; Leff, 2005; Tiff and Jones, 1999). The consistent focus has been on the *Times* as a purveyor of serious news, in line with the 'journalism as information' tradition that the paper embraced after Adolph Ochs bought it in 1896 (Schudson, 1978: 88–120).

Some, though, observe that the *Times* always has included human interest elements. Shafer (2006) writes of the paper's fondness for 'bus plunge' stories – brief summaries of random bus tragedies across the globe. They filled out columns of type in a pre-digital era and amused the paper's editors, who made a game of summarizing the grisly details as concisely as possible. Darnton (2011), who worked in the *Times*' London bureau,

recalls how stereotypes shaped the paper's reporting: '[W]e wrote about the England of Dickens, and our colleagues in Paris portrayed the France of Victor Hugo, with some Maurice Chevalier thrown in' (p. 319). Lule (2001: 7, 11–26) asserts that ancient myths and archetypes repeatedly appear throughout the *Times*. As 'State Scribe' and 'privileged and preeminent storyteller', the paper reproduces 'master myths' including 'The Victim' and 'The Hero'.

Those studies suggest that the *Times* has followed a 'journalism as entertainment' tradition along with being a just-the-facts information provider (Schudson, 1978: 88–120). One critic (Schwarz, 2012) decries the paper's 'dumbing-down of its daily product to include vacuous features' that he brands '*Timeslite*' and '*Timetrash*' (p. 6). Such criticisms recall the assertion of Bourdieu (1998) that 'human interest stories create a political vacuum' that 'depoliticize and reduce what goes on in the world to the level of anecdote or scandal' (p. 51). In contrast, Lule (2001) argues that although journalists 'think they are in the *information* business', they 'are primarily in the *story* business. And news will remain a subject of crisis and concern as long as it strays from story' (p. 189). Schudson (2003) notes that journalists seek both to 'convey useful information efficiently' and to 'build a shared world with readers emotionally', shifting from 'neutral interpreters to hometown celebrators to guardians of social consensus' (pp. 192–193).

If human interest reporting is an essential genre of journalism, animal news is an enduring subgenre. As early as 1911, Irwin (1911) observed that nothing 'succeeds better than a story about an animal' (p. 17). In a study first published in 1940, Hughes (1981) wrote that such stories had been popular at least since the penny press era: 'The same simple curiosity and wonder about their strangely human aspects that the circus showman exploits is the source of the animal story's perennial popularity' (pp. 192–194). That 2013 could be dubbed the 'Year of the Cat' and see a job posting for an 'associate animals editor' indicates that the popularity is as strong as ever.

Still, with the occasional exceptions of stories related to animal abuse and to the environment (see, for example, Coward, 2010; Denham, 2014), animal news has not received sustained attention in journalism studies, even though a whole academic discipline – anthrozoology – has developed around human–animal relations (see, for example, Herzog, 2011; Jerolmack, 2005). Following the dictum of Levi-Strauss (1963) that animals 'are "good to think [with]"', anthrozoology examines the contradictory ways in which people relate to their fellow creatures (p. 89). According to Daston and Mitman (2005), 'money, love, and power are all to be had by thinking with animals' (pp. 6–7). They are used for everything from selling products (Lerner and Kalof, 1999) to enhancing humans' sense of well-being, which may not always benefit the animals themselves. Baker (1993) writes of the 'unseriousness' of animal stories that serve only as 'light relief from serious news' or 'a form of sensationalist display' (p. 193). Molloy (2011) likewise asserts that animals are used 'as characters in the reworking of familiar cultural narratives' and are made to 'conform to whatever anthropomorphic devices are used to frame the narrative' (p. 7). Nonetheless, the foreword to an animal ethics reader says those stories have an upside. In playing to the public's 'endless fascination with animals and their behavior and treatment', they help lead to policies and laws that improve animals' conditions (Rollin, 2008: xvi).

Animal stories are useful for historians as well. Darnton (1984) shows how workers in 1730s France turned a cat roundup and massacre ‘into a witch hunt, a festival, a charivari, a mock trial, and a dirty joke’, using it to mock the bourgeoisie (pp. 89–90, 101). The unfortunate cats were associated with deviance and brutality against them was sanctioned. Darnton suggests that cats – with their ‘mysterious something that has fascinated mankind since the time of the ancient Egyptians’ – have ‘ritual value’, and how people have used and abused them provides unique insight into cultural mores.

Others make similar arguments. Lawrence (2003) writes that cats always have been ‘perceived as half-wild and half-tame – an image that can endear or demonize the cat according to the predisposition of the society with which the cat interacts’ (p. 634). Studies of cats’ portrayal in art, literature, and popular culture point to ‘an extraordinarily rich variety of interpretations’ (Rogers, 1998: 196) of them as ‘pets or strays, heroes or villains, kindly or brash’ (Frigiola, 2009: 37). The ways in which cats and other animals are treated illuminate broader societal concerns. Grier (2007) argues that pet ownership ‘is an integral part of the history of everyday life’ and reflects ‘changing ideas about human nature, emotional life, individual responsibility, and our society’s obligations to all kinds of dependent others, including people’ (pp. 11–12). It also relates to evolving mindsets regarding consumerism, urbanization, health, and the environment.

Moreover, ‘thinking with’ cats and other animals can deepen understanding of media and journalism. ‘LOLCats’ is a popular Internet meme featuring pictures of cats with deliberately misspelled captions. It has been invoked as a symbol of everything that serious journalism should shun (see, for example, Abad-Santos, 2011). However, in a study of its devotees, Miltner (2011) found that ‘LOLCats’ appeal is bound up in matters – such as emotional expression and belonging – that are fundamental elements of peoples’ lives’ (p. 37). Indeed, media fascination with cats long predated the Internet (Stein, 2012).

That in turn suggests that cats’ ritual value extends to media culture, in line with the premises of cultural studies of communication (see, for example, Carey, 1989; Pauly, 1991). News ‘reflects the culture of its creation, both within and outside of a news organization’ (Berkowitz, 2011: xv), whereas cultural histories of news ‘provide insight into the values, beliefs and experiences of a society’ (Brennen, 2013: 103). Those values and beliefs include our ‘assumptions about what matters, what makes sense, what time and place we live in, and what range of considerations we take seriously’ (Schudson, 2003: 190). Accordingly, a historical reading of animal news – in this case, cat stories in the ‘paper of record’, *The New York Times* (Schwarz, 2012: 3) – highlights change, continuity, and complexity not only in cultural attitudes toward animals, but also in the culture of journalism itself.

Method

The ProQuest Historical Newspapers database and the *Times* website were used to locate the newspaper’s cat stories via a keyword search of story subjects and titles/headlines. The search generated more than 2300 news reports, features, editorials, and online items from the 1870s to the present. Headlines for each were briefly examined. When the headline indicated that the story dealt only tangentially with cats, it was removed from the pool; other stories were deemed to be of marginal interest or redundant. The final

sample included nearly 700 items. They were examined using qualitative methods suggested by Pauly (1991): ‘immersion in the materials’ with an eye toward uncovering ‘recurring patterns of discourse’ as manifested by ‘the persistence of certain themes, phrases, rhetorical tropes, and plots’ (pp. 17–20). The cat stories were read for just such recurring themes and plots and also for changes over time. Historical and cultural context was garnered through secondary sources including scholarly studies of the *Times*, human interest reporting, and human relationships with animals.

Of course, cat tales represent only a minuscule portion of what has appeared in the *Times* over the years. The cat stories also rarely have been front-page news and frequently have been quite short. Nonetheless, distinct patterns emerge from the stories that reveal the varied ways in which journalism has used and thought about animals.

Cats as commodities

Today’s cat videos are said to be symptomatic of journalism’s obsession with ‘click-bait’ (Barton, 2014) – online content designed to lure consumers into clicking on it so that news organizations can generate revenue from it. Tandoc (2014) compares it to ‘twerking’ in that today’s journalism ‘dances in a provocative manner – publishing stories about the wildest celebrities, uploading adorable cat videos, highlighting salacious headlines – hoping to attract attention, to increase traffic’ (p. 572).

However, this is not an entirely new phenomenon. A search of ProQuest and *The New York Times* website shows how cat coverage in the paper has fluctuated over the decades. On average, fewer than five stories a year appeared from the 1870s through the 1910s. In the 1920s, the average jumped to more than 27 stories a year, and the number remained comparatively high into the 1940s. Story subjects from that era ranged from President Calvin Coolidge’s pet cat Blackie – who was given away after displaying a nocturnal ‘taste for blood’ on the White House grounds (*The New York Times*, 1925: 2) – to odd-but-true items like one headlined ‘Cat and Bird Declare Truce; Latter Uses Former as a Taxi’ (*The New York Times*, 1930: 13).

The increase in cat stories coincided with the emergence of new tabloid newspapers in New York and elsewhere. ‘Even the eminently respectable *New York Times* reflected the influence of the tabloid’, wrote one critic in 1938 while pointing to a dramatic increase in the *Times*’ use of light news items and photos over the previous two decades (Bessie, 1938: 230–231). Silas Bent (1927) had noted the same trend some years earlier and had branded it ‘ballyhoo’ (p. 372). He argued that the *Times* ‘resorts to ballyhoo beyond any of its contemporaries in order to build circulation and fatten its advertising rates’.

During the 1950s and 1960s, cat stories declined back to only a handful a year in the *Times*. Those years represented the heyday of what Hallin (2006) has called journalistic ‘high modernism’ devoted to ‘the conviction that the primary function of [the] press was to serve society by providing citizens with accurate, “unbiased” information about public affairs’. Some of the cat stories that did appear commented on an upsurge of postwar consumerism related to pets (see Grier, 2007: 300–409). ‘Any dog or cat event on television, it is said, sends crowds of people to pet shops on the following day’, the *Times* reported (Orgel, 1959: SM40).

Starting in the 1970s, the number of cat tales again increased. The *Times*' profits had suffered in comparison with those of other newspapers that had invested in increased feature and lifestyle reporting. In response, the *Times* created a four-section paper that accommodated more soft news and boosted revenue. The paper's target demographic became 'the young urbanite, a thirtysomething white-collar worker or professional' (Diamond, 1994: 84–106, 320–321; see also Tift and Jones, 1999: 505–519).

The *Times* subsequently paid frequent attention to goods and services aimed at well-to-do, city-dwelling cat owners – a story trend that has continued into the 21st century. The paper told of a specialist who 'rode her bicycle through the Upper East Side from one cat-grooming emergency to the next' (Geist, 1985: 27), wrote about Manhattan boutiques that catered to cats with pricey rhinestone collars (*The New York Times*, 1990), and reported on a 24-hour Westchester veterinary clinic that offered 'cheery cat condos with separate bathrooms, all in a room with Southwest décor' (Kilgannon, 2001: WE5). Since 2010, concurrent with cats' rise on the Internet, the *Times* has devoted an average of 45 stories a year to felines, including pieces on cat videos being used to sell kitty litter and other products (see, for example, Newman, 2013). Thus, cats and cat products have become consumer goods in their own right while having regularly served as bellwethers of change and competition in the media environment.

Cats must be more than 'adorable' to appeal to news consumers. Just as they do in literature and popular culture, cats in journalism play a wide range of anthropomorphized roles. In the process, they sometimes become hard news.

Cats as heroes

'The news daily brings us stories of the Hero, stories that proclaim – but also help define – greatness', writes Lule (2001: 23). Paeans to heroic cats have appeared in the *Times* for years. During World War I, they were honored as the 'emblem of the fighters in the tanks' that 'make war upon the black Prussian eagle' (*The New York Times*, 1918: 12); during World War II, they were celebrated for valor, as with a black cat named 'Captain Midnight' that flew in a Royal Air Force bomber over Germany (*The New York Times*, 1941: 3). Cats also have been commemorated for heroic treks, an example being a tortoiseshell named Holly who was accidentally separated 200 miles from her owners before arriving back home 'staggering, weak and emaciated' 2 months later (Belluck, 2013: A19).

Finally, cats have been honored for saving others from harm, including their own offspring. In 1996, a firefighter witnessed a calico stray rescuing her five kittens from a burning Brooklyn garage. She was named Scarlett for the red patches the fire left on her face, and she quickly became a global celebrity. 'The world can seem an endless story of bad luck and pain, and then, suddenly, something extraordinary happens', the *Times* wrote. 'A heroine emerges, a young mother named Scarlet[t]' (Martin, 1996: B6). The cat became the subject of books and magazine profiles. 'She has a lot to teach us all', said the woman who was chosen from among thousands of applicants to adopt Scarlett (Weir, 1998: CY11).

Cats as villains

Villains frequently appear in the news (see, for example, Campbell, 1991; Ettema and Glasser, 1998), and cats often have played the villain. Bradshaw (2013) writes that ‘despite their apparently effortless transformation into urban sophisticates’, cats ‘still have three out of four feet firmly planted in their wild origins’ and still repel a cadre of ‘confessed cat-haters’ (pp. xx–xxi). The animus was especially pronounced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when cats often were treated cavalierly, especially in the cities (see Grier, 2007: 45–46, 191–197). They were regarded as nuisance animals similar to the ways in which sparrows and pigeons have been viewed as urban problems (see Fine and Christoforides, 1991; Jerolmack, 2008). The *Times* published gleefully gruesome editorials about them. Concerning a cat that had caught its head in a tin can with eventually fatal results, the paper proposed such ‘canning’ citywide: ‘The midnight concerts of canned cats will make the whole city melodious, and after their swan song is sung the cats will die, and the whole feline race, so far as this city is concerned, will be exterminated’ (*The New York Times*, 1885: 4). The paper also proposed aiming ‘cat torpedo’ fireworks at noisy nocturnal felines (*The New York Times*, 1904: 6).

In addition, especially before World War II, the *Times* reported on incidents of cat violence against humans, as with a front-page story: ‘Pet Angora Cat Attacks Woman in Auto; Clings with Teeth until Choked to Death’ (*The New York Times*, 1921: 1). However, it is cat attacks against birds that have garnered the most attention. As far back as 1876, the *Times* quoted a woman lamenting ‘the number of birds and bird’s nests destroyed in one year by one cat’ (*The New York Times*, 1876: 3). Such concerns have persisted to the present, as indicated by the *Times*’ ‘From Cuddly Critter to Killing Machine’ story. In an editorial, the paper called the cat a ‘kind of superpredator, camouflaged by its affinity for humans, its playfulness, its ingratiating independence’ (*The New York Times*, 2013: A22).

Cats as victims

Stray and feral cats demonstrate how the place of animals ‘is uncertain and often contested’ (Griffiths et al., 2000: 61). On one hand, the cats are vilified for preying on wildlife; on the other, they are seen as victims of human abandonment and callousness (see Peterson et al., 2012). Questions of how to handle them have ranked ‘as high in emotional implication as abortion’, according to the *Times* (Gambino, 1997: LI8). ‘They just want to kill them’, one cat supporter has said of those who want to capture and presumably euthanize the animals. Programs that instead trap the cats, neuter them, and return them to where they were found are presented as alternatives. ‘We want them to live out their lives’, another cat advocate has said. ‘It’s a very sad life for them, and we’re trying to make the best of a bad situation’ (Kilgannon, 2006: B4; see also Shutler, 2014).

Such controversies indicate that animals can enter the journalistic ‘Sphere of Legitimate Controversy’, as Hallin (1989: 116–118) describes it; they become centers of public policy debates with clearly defined opposing sides (see Herda-Rapp and Goedeke, 2005). The controversies also suggest that villains and victims go hand in hand in the

news (see Ettema and Glasser, 1998; Lule, 2001: 41–59). Innocent birds are victimized by villainous cats, or else innocent cats are victimized by villainous people or institutions. By the 1970s, violence toward cats had long ceased being socially acceptable and stories of their mistreatment increasingly made the *Times*. Examples included charges of abuse leveled at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Carmody, 1971) and at the American Museum of Natural History, which had performed experiments on cats (*The New York Times*, 1976). The paper subsequently has covered debates over cloning, declawing, and drugging felines (see, for example, Broder, 2003; Kolata, 2002; Vlahos, 2008). Tales of cat torture and murder also have regularly appeared (see, for example, Santora and Schweber, 2014).

One victim subgenre is more lighthearted: the stuck cat story. The cat suffers fright and discomfort, but enjoys a happy ending due to human intervention. Although Schudson (2003) has suggested that cat rescues usually do not qualify as ‘news’ except for a child’s homemade newspaper, they have been regular fodder for the *Times* (pp. 178–179). Readers have learned about felines extracted from trees, ledges, cars, chimneys, piers, sewers, subways, packing crates, revolving doors, store windows, street excavations, airplane cargo holds, and building walls. ‘Want to Captivate New Yorkers? Try the (Latest) Trapped-Cat Story’, one story was headlined, and the *Times* quoted a New York University professor as saying that many city dwellers seemed more enthralled by tales about distressed animals than by those about distressed people (Fernandez, 2006: 30).

Cats as women’s best friends

Cat stories often focus on the animals’ relationships with women, reflecting longstanding gendered cultural attitudes toward cats (see, for example, Arluke and Rolfe, 2013: 78–94; Herzog, 2011: 129–147; Lawrence, 2003). Simon (2002) observes that ‘the lonely single woman who sees her cat as her mistress, her lover, or her boss is the stuff of endless jokes and urban legends’, as is ‘the “crazy old cat lady” who collects felines like her peers collect porcelain knickknacks’ (p. 3). The *Times* often has perpetuated such stereotypes. In the 1920s, it referred to cats as ‘the especial pet of elderly spinsters, who adopt the animals as companions in loneliness’ (*The New York Times*, 1927: SM16). Eighty years later, the *Times* quoted a psychiatrist as saying that cat hoarders most often were ‘little old ladies or middle-aged ladies who are alone and kind of losing it’ (Jones, 2007: B4).

Some stories put a more positive spin on women as cat guardians or advocates, but occasionally those items also reproduce stereotypes, in particular that of the ‘Good Mother’ as represented by ‘good and kind people who comfort and care for others’ (Lule, 2001: 24). For example, the *Times* profiled a woman who had opened a home for 300 cats and other creatures. ‘These are my babies’, she said of them, and an admirer called her ‘the Mother Teresa of animals’ (Raver, 2013: D6).

In some recent instances, the stereotypes have been subverted. Rogers (1998) notes that ‘the untamable cat [has] seemed to supply a perfect metaphor for the woman who refused to accept the wisdom and righteousness of male authority’ (p. 195). Writing in the *Times* in 2014, a cat owner proudly embraced the ‘cat lady’ label. She asserted that women like her were ‘young, sociable and ambitious’, and their cats were ‘not signs of spinsterhood, but of independence’ (Butnick, 2014: ST13). Men also have revealed

themselves to be powerfully bonded to cats. ‘I lived with the same cat for 19 years – by far the longest relationship of my adult life’, one man wrote in the *Times*. ‘Under common law, this cat was my wife’ (Kreider, 2014: SR1).

Cats as urban symbols

Historically, the *Times* has not found the ‘unbeautiful city of the poor and the dispossessed’ of much interest, according to Diamond (1994: 149). With cat tales, however, the *Times* has often commented on changes in New York while making the cat a metaphor for the city and its denizens, including its less fortunate ones. *Times* columnist Anna Quindlen (1982) wrote that cats

possess some of the salient traits of New Yorkers: a sleek self-assurance, a slight attitude of arrogance, an unconcern with public opinion, a nose in the air. It is also true that, like some New Yorkers, some cats have wound up on the streets, lost or abandoned. (p. B3)

Over the years, the *Times* has presented vignettes of the sometimes troubled lives of cats across the city. It has told of waterfront cats displaced by the closure of piers and shipyards (*The New York Times*, 1966). It has used cats to indicate urban decay, with an East Harlem block described as ‘A Place Where Rats Swagger, and Cats Travel in Packs’ (Vasquez, 2006: B4). It also has traced Brooklyn’s evolution from a working-class borough to the increasingly gentrified community of today. Tales of Brooklyn ‘alley cats’ like ‘The Battler’, a ‘tough guy’ who got his comeuppance from picking a fight with a vending machine (*The New York Times*, 1936), have given way to stories about cats like ‘Foster’ and ‘Curmudgeon’ who live in a pet supply store and symbolize a new ‘wave of money’ flowing into Brooklyn (Brick, 2004: CY6).

Nonetheless, the streetwise cat has endured into the present century as a New York symbol. A *Times* article about the ‘killer deli cats’ that protect city delicatessens from vermin described them as ‘four-legged tough guys [and] urban stalkers, typically rangy and gray, with nicked ears and a don’t-mess-with-me attitude worthy of Clint Eastwood on a bad day’ (Campion, 2002: CY4). A piece about the death of a Brooklyn alley cat named Fred who had assisted in a police sting seemed inspired by film noir: ‘In his time, he etched a parable of the city streets that hate you so blithely and without knowing, that hate us all. He was born to these streets, and what drew him back none could say’ (Brick, 2006: B1).

Alongside such hardboiled creatures have been cats venerated as mascots and best pals, similar to depictions of cats as good citizens that have appeared elsewhere in popular culture (Arluke and Rolfe, 2013: 95–112). The newspaper has told of resident felines at offices, clubs, hotels, theaters, municipal buildings, police and fire stations, transportation hubs, and even the *Times* itself – familiar city dwellers who were much loved while alive and much mourned once departed. A cat named Pretty Boy in the East Village was pronounced ‘the Mayor of Seventh Street’, and when he died, a neighbor eulogized him: ‘You get so hard living here. But pets open up that heart center. There is something about the unconditional love; they clean the blues off of you. That’s their mission. That’s why a lot of New Yorkers have pets’ (Haughney, 2009: A15).

Discussion

That the 21st century *New York Times* devotes space to cat stories might appear silly, if not pathetic. It can seem symptomatic of what Schwarz (2012) calls the ‘dumbing down’ of the *Times* in a misguided effort to ‘be all things to all people’ and keep readers by any means possible (pp. 222, 312). It also can seem hypocritical, given that a *Times* executive editor belittled media outlets that featured cat news even as the *Times* itself indulged in such news. However, the newspaper’s cat tales represent more than just a halfhearted sop to the latest media trends or a depoliticization of public life, as Bourdieu (1998) feared. They are rooted in history, and they point to intensely political debates over how animals should be treated and what journalism should be.

Over the past 140 years, *Times* cat stories have recycled familiar tropes of heroes and villains and victims, of fierce alley cats and ‘crazy cat ladies’, and steadfast feline companions who cure the urban blues. Cats’ ambiguous place in our culture allows the news to anthropomorphize them in multiple ways – as friend, as enemy, or as the alluring, threatening ‘Other’ (see, for example, Lawrence, 2003). Thus, cats continually demonstrate ‘ritual value’ (Darnton, 1984: 90), consistent with a cultural studies understanding of journalism. News regularly ‘draws upon archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models that represent shared values, confirm core beliefs, deny other beliefs, and help people engage with, appreciate, and understand the complex joys and sorrows of human life’ (Lule, 2001: 15) – including human relationships with animals.

The myths and archetypes that journalism presents are mixed blessings. According to Lule (2001), they ‘most often serve and preserve social order’ and the ‘dominant social consensus’, including gender stereotypes about ‘crazy cat ladies’ (pp. 191–192). From the perspective of anthrozoology, anthropomorphizing animals can do them injustice. Serpell (2005) charges that ‘instead of accepting and appreciating companion animals for what they are’, we ‘render them in our own “image,” and transform them in the process into a motley collection of deformed or mutilated cultural artifacts’ (p. 132). Rather than focusing on substantive issues of cat well-being (see, for example, Alger and Alger, 2003), the media are more apt to present ‘clickable’ items like a video of a taxidermied cat turned into a helicopter (see Ingram, 2013; Phelps, 2012).

Still, news archetypes also ‘can be used to alter or shape social order’ (Lule, 2001: 192). For example, ‘crazy cat lady’ can be appropriated as a badge of pride and nonconformity. Moreover, Serpell (2005) acknowledges that ‘the bond of sympathy engendered for nonhuman animals by anthropomorphic thinking’ has its benefits, as shown by the news stories that do appear concerning cat treatment and protection (p. 132). Writing in the *Times* in 2014, Bruni (2014) observed that the most frequently emailed *Times* story for the previous week had focused not on ‘kittens doing the darndest things’, but instead on how humans could better understand and respect cats (p. A27). Bruni argued that it highlighted ‘a broadening, deepening concern about animals that’s no longer sufficiently captured by the phrase “animal welfare.” An era of what might be called animal dignity is upon us’.

From a political economic perspective, though, the occasional ‘serious’ story does not negate the commercial bias of most animal news. Spikes in the *Times*’ cat coverage have occurred when the paper has felt compelled to soften its product to meet marketplace

challenges, as with the rise of tabloid news in the 1920s, feature journalism in the 1970s, and the Internet in the present century. 'When the New York Times launched its Styles section in the '70s, people were horrified. It was done for advertising reasons and was a huge commercial success', BuzzFeed editor-in-chief Ben Smith (2014) has said:

[M]aybe people who read The New York Times want to read questionable trend pieces in the Styles section, or features in the Real Estate section about \$9million mansions in Venice ... People of my generation, maybe, are more interested in Instagrams of cats.

Yesterday's 'ballyhoo' has become today's 'click-bait', which to critical scholars reflects a crisis in contemporary journalism and a threat to democracy (see, for example, McChesney and Scott, 2004; Nguyen, 2012; Thussu, 2010).

Other scholars (see, for example, Zaller, 2003) suggest that such concerns may be overblown and that a single-minded focus on 'hard' news and information overlooks the ways in which journalism engages people 'as much with their hearts and guts as with their brains' (Zelizer, 2010: 326). From that perspective, the passion surrounding cats and other animals is instructive. The Internet provides a heretofore unavailable meeting ground for 'very intense communities of cat owners, who gather to share stories and seek answer[s] about their pets' (Stein, 2012). In her analysis of LOLCats, Miltner (2011) emphasizes 'how seemingly trivial pieces of media – pictures of cats with captions – can act as meaningful conduits to central elements of our humanity' by encouraging people to create and share that media content for mutual benefit (p. 39). At a time when journalists are called upon to maintain their relevance and help sustain civil society by cultivating 'shared interests and common goals' (Christians et al., 2009: 158) and promoting 'positive reciprocity' with citizens in a way that 'encourages more active discourse and participation' (Lewis et al., 2014: 230), animal-centered media provide examples of how those ends might begin to be realized.

At the least, criticisms of legacy journalism as embodied by *The New York Times* – that it presumes to offer a 'View from Nowhere', seeking not to 'stake out positions or betray a point of view' while avoiding 'voice, attitude and personal expression' and being 'optimized for low participation' (Rosen, 2013) – are much less valid for the likes of cat stories. They do encourage points of view and personal expression. For the journalists who write and edit them, they offer respite from the strictures of 'objectivity', allowing a chance to be more creative, playful, and engaged. Cat stories also encourage citizen participation, as evidenced by the more than 1700 comments responding to the *Times* story about cats' impact on wildlife.

Finally, the stories indicate that animal news cannot always be separated from 'real' news – indeed, 'hard' and 'soft' news genres and organizations continually influence each other. In 2014, the *Times* added a 'Menagerie' section to its online 'Opinionator' blog. It was devoted to exploring 'the strange and diverse ways the human and animal worlds intersect' (Kreider, 2014). At the same time, BuzzFeed was investing in hard news coverage, moving at least partially 'from amassing eyeballs with cool stuff, toward an old-fashioned desire to make a difference' (Fisher, 2014). Even homemade animal videos can make a difference, according to Bruni (2014: A27). They can allow us to see not only animals being cute, but also being abused: 'It's all documented, it all goes viral,

and we can't turn away, or claim ignorance, as easily as we once did'. Potentially, the same can be true of stories addressing the more traditional hard news categories of politics, business, and global affairs: journalists and non-journalists alike can increasingly document abuses and misdeeds in such a way that they are harder to ignore.

Regardless, animals will continue to find a place in journalism. As Daston and Mitman (2005) note, 'pitched battles are being waged over wildlife management, livestock farming, scientific and medical experimentation on animals, the rights and responsibilities of pet owners, and forms of animal entertainment ranging from animated films to dolphin shows at aquariums' (p. 5). Meanwhile, news websites dedicated solely to animals have begun to appear (see, for example, McHugh, 2014). That is why we should take animal news seriously, not only for its usefulness in thinking about journalism and our relationship to our fellow creatures, but also for its sheer pervasiveness and enduring popularity. If history is any indication, users of both legacy news organizations and startups will continue to respond to stories about cats and other animals, and those stories will continue to be told in familiar ways even as they also accommodate changing times. Just like cats themselves, cat tales – and animal tales generally – seem to have nine lives.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. In each instance in this article, 'the *Times*' refers to *The New York Times* and not *The Times* of London.

References

- Abad-Santos A (2011) Lolcats could save the Washington Post. *The Wire*, 28 October. Available at: <http://www.thewire.com/business/2011/10/lolcats-could-save-washington-post/44285/>
- Alger JM and Alger SF (2003) *Cat Culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Angier N (2013) From cuddly critter to killing machine: Cats are much deadlier than once thought. *The New York Times*, 30 January, p. A19.
- Arluke A and Rolfe L (2013) *The Photographed Cat*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Baker S (1993) *Picturing the Beast*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Barton J (2014) If BuzzFeed is 'news', do dancing cats belong in politics or on the opinion page? *NativeMobile.com*, 17 June. Available at: <http://nativemobile.com/buzzfeed-news-dancing-cats-belong-politics-opinion-page-9120>
- Belluck P (2013) A cat's 200-mile trek home leaves scientists guessing. *The New York Times*, 20 January, p. A19.
- Bent S (1927) *Ballyhoo*. New York: Boni and Liveright.
- Berkowitz DA (2011) Introduction: From sociological roots to cultural perspectives. In: Berkowitz DA (ed.) *Cultural Meanings of News*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. xi–xxii.

- Bessie SM (1938) *Jazz Journalism*. New York: Dutton.
- Bourdieu P (1998) *On Television*. New York: New Press.
- Bradshaw J (2013) *Cat Sense*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brennen BS (2013) *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Brick M (2004) The practical cats of Court Street. *The New York Times*, 2 May, p. CY6.
- Brick M (2006) Undercover agent. Celebrity. And that was just life no. 1. *The New York Times*, 12 August, p. B1.
- Broder JM (2003) In West Hollywood, a cat's right to scratch may become a matter of law. *The New York Times*, 25 January, p. A12.
- Bruni F (2014) According animals dignity. *The New York Times*, 14 January, p. A27.
- Butnick S (2014) I'm a cat lady? Thank you. *The New York Times*, 30 March, p. ST13.
- Campbell R (1991) *60 Minutes and the News*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Campion CF (2002) They call me assassin. *The New York Times*, 24 November, p. CY4.
- Carey JW (1989) *Communication as Culture*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Carmody D (1971) Critics assert ASPCA here is guilty of cruelty to animals. *The New York Times*, 23 June, p. 1.
- Ching C (2013) How news can compete with cat videos: 6 lessons for multimedia journalists. *Poynter.org*, 10 April. Available at: <http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/digital-strategies/209339/how-news-can-compete-with-cat-videos-6-lessons-for-multimedia-journalists/>
- Christians CG, Glasser TL, McQuail D, et al. (2009) *Normative Theories of the Media*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Coward R (2010) The environment, the press and the missing lynx: A case study. *Journalism* 11(5): 625–638.
- Darnton R (1984) *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Basic Books.
- Darnton R (2011) Writing news and telling stories. In: Brennen B and Hardt H (eds) *The American Journalism History Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 303–322.
- Daston L and Mitman G (2005) Introduction: The how and why of thinking with animals. In: Daston L and Mitman G (eds) *Thinking with Animals*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1–14.
- Denham BE (2014) Intermedia attribute agenda setting in the *New York Times*: The case of animal abuse in U.S. horse racing. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91(1): 17–37.
- Diamond E (1994) *Behind the Times*. New York: Villard.
- Ettema JS and Glasser TL (1998) *Custodians of Conscience*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fernandez M (2006) Want to captivate New Yorkers? Try the (latest) trapped-cat story. *The New York Times*, 16 April, pp. 27, 30.
- Fine GA and Christoforides L (1991) Dirty birds, filthy immigrants, and the English sparrow war: Metaphorical linkage in constructing social problems. *Symbolic Interaction* 14(4): 375–393.
- Fisher M (2014) Who cares if it's true? *Columbia Journalism Review*, 3 March. Available at: http://www.cjr.org/cover_story/who_cares_if_its_true.php?page=all
- Friel H and Falk R (2004) *The Record of the Paper*. London: Verso.
- Frigiola HN (2009) *The meanings of dogs and cats in US American culture based on movies, cartoons, and consumer goods*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.
- Gambino EL (1997) East end faces a growing abandoned domestic cat problem. *The New York Times*, 12 October, p. L18.
- Geist B (1985) When east side felines require pampering. *The New York Times*, 16 February, p. 27.
- Grier KC (2007) *Pets in America*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

- Griffiths H, Poulter I and Sibley D (2000) Feral cats in the city. In: Philo C and Wilbert C (eds) *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places*. London: Routledge, pp. 56–70.
- Hallin DC (1989) *The 'Uncensored' War*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hallin DC (2006) The passing of the 'high modernism' of American journalism revisited. *Political Communication Report* 16(1). Available at: http://www.jour.unr.edu/pcr/1601_2005_winter/commentary_hallin.htm
- Haughney C (2009) Mourning the mayor of Seventh Street. *The New York Times*, 20 June, p. A15.
- Herda-Rapp A and Goedeke TL (eds) (2005) *Mad about Wildlife*. London: Brill.
- Herzog H (2011) *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- HuffPost Live (2014) Glenn Greenwald on Dean Baquet: A 'disturbing history' of journalism 'subservient' to national security state. *Huffpost Live*, 16 May. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/16/glenn-greenwald-new-york-times_n_5337486.html
- Hughes HM (1981) *News and the Human Interest Story*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Ingram M (2013) The soul of a new machine: Gawker struggles with the slippery slope between viral and true. *Gigaom*, 4 October. Available at: <http://gigaom.com/2013/10/04/the-soul-of-a-new-machine-gawker-struggles-with-the-slippery-slope-between-viral-and-true/>
- Irwin W (1911) The American newspaper. *Collier's Weekly*, 18 March, pp. 16–18.
- Jerolmack C (2005) Our animals, our selves? Chipping away the human-animal divide. *Sociological Forum* 20(4): 651–660.
- Jerolmack C (2008) How pigeons became rats: The cultural-spatial logic of problem animals. *Social Problems* 55(1): 72–94.
- JimRomenesko.com* (2013) Follow-up: Hundreds applied for BuzzFeed associate animals editor position. *JimRomenesko.com*, 2 May. Available at: <http://jimromenesko.com/2013/05/02/follow-up-hundreds-applied-for-buzzfeed-associate-animals-editor-opening/>
- Jones RG (2007) Bid was blind for a house full of needy cats and dogs. *The New York Times*, 29 August, p. B4.
- Keller B (2011) All the aggregation that's fit to aggregate. *The New York Times*, 13 March, p. MM11.
- Kilgannon C (2001) Where cats purr and heal to music. *The New York Times*, 23 December, p. WE5.
- Kilgannon C (2006) On Long Island, cats and birds clash, and people take sides. *The New York Times*, 20 March, p. B4.
- Kolata G (2002) What is warm and fuzzy forever? With cloning, kitty. *The New York Times*, 15 February, p. A1.
- Kreider T (2014) A man and his cat. *The New York Times*, 1 August. Available at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/01/a-man-and-his-cat>
- Lawrence EA (2003) Feline fortunes: Contrasting views of cats in popular culture. *Journal of Popular Culture* 36(3): 623–635.
- Leff L (2005) *Buried by the Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lerner JE and Kalof L (1999) The animal text: Message and meaning in television advertisements. *The Sociological Quarterly* 40(4): 565–586.
- Levi-Strauss C (1963) *Totemism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Lewis SC, Holton AE and Coddington M (2014) Reciprocal journalism: A concept of mutual exchange between journalists and audiences. *Journalism Practice* 8(2): 229–241.
- Lule J (2001) *Daily News, Eternal Stories*. New York: Guilford.
- McChesney RW and Scott B (2004) Introduction. In: McChesney RW and Scott B (eds) *Our Unfree Press*. New York: New Press, pp. 1–30.

- McHugh M (2014) Beyond cute: How the Dodo wants to elevate animal journalism. *The Daily Dot*, 3 February. Available at: <http://www.dailydot.com/technology/dodo-cute-journalism/>
- Martin D (1996) 8 lives left, 5 cats get new homes. *The New York Times*, 28 June, p. B6.
- Miltner K (2011) Srsly phenomenal: An investigation into the appeal of LOLCats. Unpublished Master's Thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science. Available at: <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/37681185/MILTNER%20DISSERTATION.pdf>
- Molloy C (2011) *Popular Media and Animals*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Newman AA (2013) Using silly cat videos to sell litter-box products. *The New York Times*, 12 February, p. B3.
- Nguyen A (2012) The effect of soft news on public attachment to the news: Is 'infotainment' good for democracy? *Journalism Studies* 13(5–6): 706–717.
- Orgel I (1959) Our expanding pet set. *The New York Times*, 18 January, p. SM40.
- Pauly JJ (1991) A beginner's guide to doing qualitative research in mass communication. *Journalism Monographs* 125: 1–29.
- Peterson MN, Hartis B, Rodriguez S, et al. (2012) Opinions from the front lines of cat colony management conflict. *Plos One* 7(9): 1–8.
- Phelps A (2012) What makes something go viral? The internet according to Gawker's Neetzan Zimmerman. *Nieman Journalism Lab*, 11 June. Available at: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2012/06/what-makes-something-go-viral-the-internet-according-to-gawkers-neetzan-zimmerman/>
- Quindlen A (1982) Feline aid and comfort on West 25th Street. *The New York Times*, 6 January, p. B3.
- Raver A (2013) 300 cats, yes. Crazyness, no. *The New York Times*, 10 January 10, p. D6.
- Rogers KM (1998) *The Cat and the Human Imagination*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Rollin BE (2008) Foreword. In: Armstrong SJ and Botzler RG (eds) *The Animal Ethics Reader*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge, pp. xiv–xvii.
- Rosen J (2013) Out of the press box and onto the field. *PressThink*, 17 November. Available at: <http://pressthink.org/2013/11/newco/>
- Ruibal S (2013) First they came for the communists [online comment]. *The New York Times*, 29 January. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/science/that-cuddly-kitty-of-yours-is-a-killer.html>
- Santora M and Schweber N (2014) 25 dead cats found hanging in Yonkers trees. *The New York Times*, 25 April. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/26/nyregion/25-dead-cats-found-hanging-in-trees-in-yonkers.html?_r=0
- Schillinger L (2013) The year of the cat. *The New York Times*, 18 February, p. ST11.
- Schudson M (1978) *Discovering the News*. New York: Basic Books.
- Schudson M (2003) *The Sociology of News*. New York: Norton.
- Schwarz DR (2012) *Endtimes?* Albany, NY: Excelsior Editions/State University of New York Press.
- Serpell JA (2005) People in disguise: Anthropomorphism and the human-pet relationship. In: Daston L and Mitman G (eds) *Thinking with Animals*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 121–136.
- Shafer J (2006) The rise and fall of the 'bus plunge' story. *Slate*, 13 November. Available at: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/press_box/2006/11/the_rise_and_fall_of_the_bus_plunge_story.single.html
- Shutler N (2014) Taking no-kill approach with feral cat population. *The New York Times*, 15 April, p. A21.
- Simon C (2002) *The Feline Mystique*. New York: St. Martin's.

- Smith B (2014) The joy of scrolling. *Nieman Reports* 68(2). Available at: <http://niemanreports.org/articles/the-joy-of-scrolling/>
- Stein P (2012) Why do cats run the internet? A scientific explanation. *The New Republic*, 1 March. Available at: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/101283/cats-internet-memes-science-aesthetics>
- Tandoc EC Jr (2014) Journalism is twerking? How web analytics is changing the process of gate-keeping. *New Media & Society* 16(4): 559–575.
- The New York Times* (1876) Concerning cats. *The New York Times*, 17 July, p. 3.
- The New York Times* (1885) Modified cats. *The New York Times*, 10 January, p. 4.
- The New York Times* (1904) The cat torpedo. *The New York Times*, 25 June, p. 6.
- The New York Times* (1918) The harmless, necessary cat. *The New York Times*, 10 April, p. 12.
- The New York Times* (1921) Pet angora cat attacks woman in auto; clings with teeth until choked to death. *The New York Times*, 4 July, p. 1.
- The New York Times* (1925) Gov. Smith gives 2 hungry cubs to zoo here; Coolidge finds a home for White House cat. *The New York Times*, 13 June, p. 2.
- The New York Times* (1927) Cats the great have loved. *The New York Times*, 3 April, p. SM16.
- The New York Times* (1930) Cat and bird declare truce; latter uses former as a taxi. *The New York Times*, 25 June, p. 13.
- The New York Times* (1936) Cat hurt in ‘fight’ with soda machine. *The New York Times*, 6 December, p. 13.
- The New York Times* (1941) Bomber to tote black cat across the path of Hitler. *The New York Times*, 2 August, p. 3.
- The New York Times* (1966) Death of 1,500 cats forecast in closing of naval shipyard. *The New York Times*, 24 June, p. 39.
- The New York Times* (1976) 200 stage protest at Gracie Mansion over cat research. *The New York Times*, 22 August, p. 4.
- The New York Times* (1990) Cat-only firms have proliferated. *The New York Times*, 22 July, p. F11.
- The New York Times* (2013) Soft and deadly. *The New York Times*, 31 January, p. A22.
- Thussu DK (2010) Television news in the era of global infotainment. In: Allan S (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*. London: Routledge, pp. 362–373.
- Tiftt SE and Jones AS (1999) *The Trust*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Vasquez E (2006) A place where rats swagger, and cats travel in packs. *The New York Times*, 29 June, p. B4.
- Vlahos J (2008) Pill-popping pets. *The New York Times*, 13 July. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/magazine/13pets-t.html?pagewanted=all>
- Weir R (1998) Fans, and fancy feast, for Scarlett the hero cat. *The New York Times*, 27 December, p. CY11.
- Zaller J (2003) A new standard of news quality: Burglar alarms for the monitorial citizen. *Political Communication* 20: 109–130.
- Zelizer B (2004) *Taking Journalism Seriously*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Zelizer B (2010) *About to Die*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Author biography

Matthew C Ehrlich is Professor of Journalism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research focuses on cultural and historical studies of journalism. His books include *Journalism in the Movies*, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest*, and *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture* (coauthored with Joe Saltzman).