The Digital and Teh Cute

Abstract:

In discussions of online culture, nobody has yet given sufficient consideration to the importance of cute animal pictures. While there are perhaps obvious reasons for this aspect of online culture being and remaining understudied, from an objective stance we should consider it both surprising and noteworthy that, once given the means of mass communications and internationally accessible publication, a primary activity that people are interested in and committed to is the sharing of cute and funny pictures, especially of cats. This presumably unforeseeable outcome is made stranger yet by the relative lack of commercial motivation for a communications category that approaches the ubiquity of spam and pornography. This speculative presentation investigates three possible explanations of aspects of these phenomena.

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In theories of media prior to the digital age, it was imagined that a liberated or socialized media would result in a proliferation of communications for, of, and by the people. It would be possible for media to emerge directly from their publics, and to represent those publics in their fundamental or foundational values and projects. Theorists like John Dewey (1927), Ivan Illich (1973), and Hans Enzensberger (1970, 13) gave grounds to expect the general availability of mass communications to be a boon for humanist politics, either democratic or socialist.

It is unsurprising, of course, that theorists and political philosophers will be concerned only with a certain subset of communications, and this should not be understood as a general prediction of the kind of communications which we could expect to be prevalent, or even dominant. In the same way, the authors of the United States Constitution protected free speech for its social and political value, but it would be wrong to think that they were unaware that such speech would very often consist of communications having no such value.

In addition to the social and political interests that might provide the basis of and motivation for communications, we should also expect communications arising from and catering to commercial and prurient desires, and indeed we have seen a steady rise in advertisements and pornography as media have become increasingly cheapened and pervasive. Furthermore, just as theorists hoped that increasing access to means of mass

communication would result in social and political communications having less to do with the interests of centralized and established powers, and more to do with individual and particular needs and desires, so too have the interests represented in commercial and prurient communications become increasingly decentralized.

As communications shift from representing centralized power to representing individual interests, the content and nature of these communications has certainly changed as well. Music in an age of radio and payola is different from music in an age of YouTube and MySpace. Sales based on television and newspaper ads and brick-and-mortar storefronts continues to exist today, but new media have not only allowed smaller companies to reach a global market, but have also allowed for new kinds of commerce such as handcraft goods on Etsy or barter economies on craigslist. Similarly, the prurient interest continues to be served by pornographic images, just as it was prior to new media, but new kinds of communication serving this interest have emerged as well, ranging from people creating and displaying their own images and videos to writing yaoi Harry Potter slash fanfic to negotiating RL sexual encounters through bulletin boards.

What is consistent through these changes is the kind of motivation, interest, and desire that motivates these different forms of prurient, commercial, cultural, and political communications: sex, wealth, beauty, and freedom. What seems far less clear is why, when given access to the means of mass communication, it seems that a very significant portion of the online community is interested in creating, sharing, and enjoying cute pictures of animals, particularly cats.

There is a general consensus that the "cute" response is an evolutionarily established adaptive trait; one which was necessary to develop the large brain size of the

human species. A larger brain size required a larger period of helplessness during infancy, and, in the absence of the "cute" response, our primate ancestors would not have put up with an infant's inability to move, feed, and clean itself for a sufficiently long period. On this view, we would assume that the drive towards communications serving our interests in the cute would be similarly prevalent as those serving our interests in sex, wealth, and freedom. And yet, while communications based largely on our interest in the cute— especially when mixed with the funny, as in cartoons—certainly predates new media, it seems that there is a significant degree to which an emphasis on cuteness as a communicative motivation is peculiar to new media.

In the following, I will consider three possible explanations of the relative over-abundance of an interest in the cute within current new media communications, the first based on shifting demographics, the second based on human-computer interaction, and the third based on the process of repressive desublimation. I will argue that all of these explanations are plausible and helpful in understanding the role that the cute plays in online culture.

The Cat Lady Hypothesis

When considering the social impact of the increasing access to communications technologies provided by new media, most theorists and political philosophers are concerned with increased power given to those who have been previously under- or unrepresented in mass communications. This is surely not without reason. The most culturally and politically significant changes could be expected to emerge from the abilities of excluded voices to become efficacious, ranging from the relatively early use of new

media by Afghani women to publicize their subjugation to the currently expanding use of microphilanthropy to serve niche and underserved causes.

These groups, are however not the only new voices we see reflected in new media. By concentrating on politically active populations and tech-savvy youth culture, we tend to ignore the large number of older and more casual users online. Furthermore, there is a strongly gendered component to those older and non-politicized voices previously underrepresented: in centralized mass-media production, non-politicized communications intended for women have often, perhaps predominantly been written or produced by men. One important aspect of the recent widespread availability of means of mass communication is the significant and relatively sudden increase in the proportion of women involved in the production and popularization of content. If we consider that there may be a biological basis for the cute-response, we might expect that biological aspect to be more strongly present within women. Regardless, it is certainly culturally encouraged among women in a way in which it is not among men. Either way, we should not be surprised if a disproportionately male group of producers of women's content would produce content different from that which women themselves might produce and share once having gained access to the means of content creation and sharing.

This is by no means intended to imply that all women are interested in cute content, that many men are not similarly interested in cute content, that the interest in cute content is limited to older and less politicized users, or that additional consideration of the demographic of older, less politicized female online culture is sufficient to explain the emphasis upon cuteness observed in online culture. This is presented only as a possible partial explanation, and, even as a hypothesis that seeks only to be one of several factors, it

does not address all the relevant cases. Although I have not found empirical studies to support these claims, I find it reasonable to assume that this often ignored demographic is, for example, likely to send cute email forwards (even today, several years after this was a common form of new media communication among other demographics), perhaps less likely to go to Cute Overload, and less likely still to enjoy and share lolcat images.

Another compounding factor is that new media lend themselves to communications that appeal to users across different demographics, especially when blending together genuine and ironic interests in a given subject matter. Cute Overload and Cake Wrecks are blogs that exemplify this. I have heard from frequent visitors of these sites that they enjoy the sites in a genuine manner (i.e. have direct interests in cute animal pictures or in cake decoration), and from other frequent visitors that they enjoy the sites in ironic or absurdist manners. These sites encourage these dual modes of appreciation, as for example in the habit of Meg Frost, the proprietor and "Chief Cuteologist" of Cute Overload, of saying things like "this is so cute I could puke a rainbow;" or the general approach of Cute With Chris, a website and very highly-ranked YouTube channel, where Chris shows pictures of animals up for adoption and invites the viewer; "let's all feel guilty together," even as he intersperses cute animal pictures with comments about crazy cat ladies, his teen viewership and their impending pregnancies, and absurdist humor involving plastic horses and towels.

Sanrio creates a wide consumer base in a similar way; Hello Kitty is well-positioned to be desirable to girls as "cute," to adolescents as "cool," and to adult women as "camp" (McVeigh 2000, 225). Similar various and overlapping modes of enjoyment may be the best account of the wide audience found by icanhascheezeburger, where lolcats may be

valued as cute or funny animal pictures, or as a clever or in-group humor employment of such pictures, or as a language game capable of reflective irony.

It seems to me clear enough that the cultural and communicative empowerment of demographics roughly corresponding to the stereotypical "cat lady" play an interesting and unexpected role in the formation of online culture and new media communications, but this demographic is influential in dialog with other demographics, and is certainly neither the only source nor the only consumers and popularizers of cuteness-based communications.

Alienating technology hypothesis

There is a relatively consistent attempt to introduce a cuteness or a coolness into product and user-interfaces of digital technologies. We might perhaps see a connection between these design efforts and the more general interest in cute content. One possible such connection is that there may be a perceived inhuman or dehumanizing aspect to digital technologies in general which we instinctively attempt to mitigate by the transformation of digital technologies into exemplifications of the cute, sleek, or cool.

We certainly see this in the blobject and squircle design trends that emerged in the late '90s and early 2000s. As others have written (e.g. Holt and Skov 2005, Raven 2008), blobjects and squircles give smooth, soft lines to hard materials, and produce an appealing effect, sometimes more "cool" or "sleek," sometimes more "cute." We might look at the iPod as on the "cool" end of the spectrum, at the New Volkswagen Beetle as on the "cute" end,

and at the first- through fourth-gen iMacs as somewhere in-between. USB drives in particular have gone off the far end of cute into the "cutesy."

GUIs are certainly also interested in representations of this sort. It is remarkable that among Microsoft's most businesslike of business applications we see a cheerful talking paperclip. This particular example shows how the use of cute imagery does not itself make digital technology any less potentially frustrating and alienating.

Still, it seems natural to think that rounded and soft design elements and cartoon anthropomorphisms would mitigate user perceptions of digital technology as foreign, cold, and uncaring. And so, similarly, it is not an unreasonable hypothesis that users may independently seek out such images as a form of self-medication when the forms of interaction encountered with the computer are too different, uncomfortable, or impersonal. Boing Boing has initiated a practice employing "unicorn chaser" images with exactly this therapeutic effect in mind, albeit with regard to specific disturbing stories or images rather than the emotional distance and coldness of life on the screen itself.

With the explosive growth of Facebook, there has been renewed interest recently in the question of how digital communications alter interpersonal relations. Some have suggested that the speed and lack of context to communications prevents us from forming appropriate emotional responses (e.g. Immordino-Yang 2009); others that friendship is in part dependent upon physiological signals, and that a fully online maintenance of friendship is simply not possible (e.g. Thalos n.d.). If we put any stock in such claims at all, they would certainly support the idea that after a certain amount of mediated interaction with "friends," we would feel less emotional weight and connection than we would

normally expect, and might therefore be driven to seek out images which are specifically aimed towards the creation of a feeling of warmth and closeness.

The aesthetic theory of cuteness has been little explored, but it is unambiguously clear that a central element of the sentiment corresponding to the cute is one of *being needed*. As Daniel Harris put it,

> something becomes cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but because of a quality it lacks, a certain neediness and inability to stand alone, as if it were an indigent starveling, lonely and rejected because of a hideousness we find more touching than unsightly. (2000, p. 4)

We see this in the infant-like attributes that tend to mark an image as cute, such as large eyes and small ears relative to head size, and large head relative to body size. Foreshortened limbs and a general tininess are also relevant factors.

Another way in which we see the feeling of being needed as central to the experience of cuteness is in the proximity between the cute and the sad. It seems the only circumstance in which an image of an injured animal would evoke a pleasant and warm feeling—sadism aside—is within the context of feeling needed. Furthermore, the word cute itself originally meant cunning and manipulative, and seems to have acquired its present meaning in the early 20th Century as we increasingly accepted the idea that children should not be expected to behave, but ought to be indulged when they are sad, desirous, or petulant (Cross 2004). The sad eyes of a child are a form of manipulation, but it is a form of manipulation that we culturally value and reward, and which we tend to enjoy being the object of.

And so, even though it is surely an inadequate explanation on its own, it is not an unreasonable hypothesis that the feeling of being needed that is evoked by cute images is a

kind of supplement to the cooler and more distant experience of computer-mediated relationships.

Desublimation Hypothesis

As mentioned previously, questions have been raised about the effects which the speed of new media communications have upon our ability to form appropriate emotional responses to news and events, even among people known to us personally.   Another possible explanation of the prevalence of cute communications is that the cute is a category of expression requiring a minimal level of thoughtful engagement, and is for this reason an aesthetic having a natural fit with the speed of engagement on the part of the new media viewer.

If we compare, for example, the ornate and rich painting and music of the baroque period to the more dramatic romantic works, we see a change in the immediacy of response required of the audience appropriate to that time.   Baroque artworks are not necessarily quiet or subtle, but they require more patience of the audience; their intended emotional response takes longer to unfold.   Romantic works are more immediately engaging and involving. This shift is consistent with a general speeding up of European life, where time, through industrialization and the growth of city life, became divided up into ever-smaller intervals, more specifically regimented.

And so, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the aesthetic ideal of the beautiful began to give way to the aesthetic ideal of the sublime, and the immediacy of emotional expressiveness increased.   If we keep in mind particular artworks—most particularly Wagner's *Ring Cycle*—it will be clear that this is not a "speeding-up" of artworks in any

literal sense. The point is only that the artworks become more emotionally immediate, appealing to stronger and more direct feelings, and perhaps passing over more contemplative and quieter expressive content. This is an overgeneralization, of course, and there are abundant exceptions, but there is on the whole a movement of this kind.

With the rapid speeding-up of everyday life brought about through new media—not dissimilar in degree of change from that of the industrial revolution—it may not be surprising if we see expressions which draw upon those most emotionally immediate responses. This is a process of desublimation,[1] where basic emotional drives are appealed to in an increasingly direct manner, rather than in more complicated and sublimated forms.

Online life, for many, is governed by the search for lulz, with relatively little social or self-regulation. There is a general move towards what we might describe as a simpler emotional palette made only of the brightest colors. Cute images are immediately engaging, similar to other categories of communications that have become prominent in new media, such as the "hott" and the gross. Indeed, extreme images become objects of interest and appreciation for their very extremity, as exemplified by the popularity of the goatse image, as well as outgrowths such as the "First Goatse" Flickr Photo Pool.

This process of desublimation in communications does not emerge simply from an increasing speed and subdivision of time, but is also a natural result of user choice empowered by pull-oriented media and online anonymity. When we decide for others what they will see, as do those in broadcasting, we take on responsibilities to provide media with some pretense to redeeming value, if for no other reason than that it is we who

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[1] In using this term, I do intend to refer to, but not to use, Marcuse's notion of repressive desublimation (1964). For the purposes of this discussion, it is not necessary to ask whether this desublimation is part of the same process Marcuse was concerned with, or whether this form of desublimation is repressive at all.

will shoulder the blame if we catered simply and crassly to the simplest and lowest viewer desires. Within a pull-oriented media environment, the unsatisfying defense of the broadcaster—"if you don't like it, change the channel"—does not even have to be given. If the viewer does not like what she sees, in most cases, it is her own fault for searching for it, or clicking on the link. And so, freed from the responsibilities of choosing for others, content creators have provided extreme content, and, granted anonymous access, users have sought out extreme content.

The general movement towards extreme images may play a role in increasing the expectation in new media communications for immediately engaging and evocative content, and so, even though the cute is very different from the gross and the hott, all may play a role in determining the speed and level of desublimation typical within new media culture.

Concluding Remarks

In this speculative presentation, I have attempted to outline some possible reasons why we have seen an unexpected concentration on the cute within online culture. Due to the nature of the question, any answer would necessarily be quite incomplete and unverifiable, but I hope that the primary hypotheses I have addressed might help to think about and understand this aspect of online culture and new media communications.

I hope to expand these considerations further in preparing this work for publication. In particular, I think it would be useful to address the strong influence of Japanese culture and kawaii over new media cultures, to discuss the employment of cute imagery as a way of avoiding the uncanny valley, and to ask the question of why cats seem to play a special role

in online culture, rather different in distinctive ways from that of dogs, bunnies, pandas, or other animals.

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