

There have been a lot of cats in *The New York Times*, and not all just for fun

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University of Illinois journalism professor Matthew Ehrlich found hundreds of cat tales, both fun and serious, over 140 years of *New York Times* history. In the process, he also found evidence of our evolving relationship with animals and reasons to "take animal news seriously." Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

The cute cat video seems to be everywhere online, and it's become a handy epithet for everything that journalism should not be. So what should we make of the fact that *The New York Times*, that paragon of

journalism, has written a lot about cats over 140 years?

That's the question posed by University of Illinois journalism professor Matthew Ehrlich after compiling hundreds of cat-related tales from the *Times'* digital archive.

In his search, Ehrlich found hero cats and nuisance cats and victimized cats; street-wise alley cats, abandoned waterfront cats, killer deli cats and pampered office cats. He found numerous stories on cats versus birds, cats and women, cats as urban symbols, and story after story about cats getting stuck and then usually extracted from almost every conceivable place - including trees, ledges, chimneys, piers, sewers, packing crates and airplane cargo holds.

"Cat stories have been part of the news diet that the paper of record has been serving up almost since its beginnings," according to Ehrlich, whose paper on the subject was posted online by the [journal](#) *Journalism*.

The commercial reasons for writing about cats seem apparent based on the ebb and flow of stories over the years, he said. The stories began to appear in the 1870s, and increased during periods when the *Times* faced increased competition - in the 1920s from tabloids, in the 1970s from papers with new lifestyle and feature sections, and more recently from the Internet. In recent years, cat stories in the *Times* have averaged almost one a week, he said.

That doesn't mean, however, that the stories should be dismissed as just "click-bait" - or, to use an earlier term, "ballyhoo" - Ehrlich writes. "(Those stories) are rooted in history, and they point to intensely political debates over how animals should be treated and what journalism should be."

The *Times* coverage, for instance, shows that cats were more despised

than fawned over in the late 1800s, especially in cities, Ehrlich said. They were regarded then as an urban nuisance.

This is demonstrated in a "gleefully gruesome" 1885 editorial concerning a cat that wedged its head in a tin can and eventually died. The paper suggested it would like to see the same happen 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."

Even tongue in cheek, "you couldn't possibly get away with that today," Ehrlich said. "What it suggests, obviously, is that cultural attitudes toward cats have changed dramatically."

Ehrlich has no pets and is a self-described "cat agnostic." But he was drawn to the subject after seeing two stories in the *Times*, one about a cat video festival and another several months later about cats as killers of wildlife. The latter drew a heated online response, quickly becoming the most-emailed and most-commented-upon story that day on the *Times* site.

Given the way that "cute cat videos" had been vilified by critics, Ehrlich got curious about the extent of cat stories over the years in the "self-consciously serious" *Times*.

He did a ProQuest search of the paper's [digital archive](#) for references to cats in story subjects, titles and headlines, and found more than 2,300 items over 140 years, starting in the 1870s. After sifting out stories that were redundant or of marginal interest, he had nearly 700 stories that would become the focus of his study.

Along with the cat tales that seemed purely for entertainment, Ehrlich found many stories, especially in the 1970s and after, that raised

concerns about cats' treatment - in the form of abuse, torture or killing, and their use in experiments. He also found coverage of debates over cloning, declawing and drugs for cats.

Those stories demonstrate that cat and animal news is not all just for fun, Ehrlich said. Many ongoing issues relate to human-animal interaction, ranging from livestock farming to animal experimentation to the rights and responsibilities of pet owners, he said.

"These relationships are very complicated and they're rooted in history and culture, and we don't think about them," Ehrlich said. "The news is one way of helping us think about them."

Ehrlich also thinks that animal news, cute and otherwise, may have lessons for the future of journalism - and the academic study of journalism - given that even "serious" newspapers have always included stories appealing to the heart as well as the head.

"Clearly, people respond very powerfully to animals. We should probably think about why people respond so powerfully to them, and the ways in which journalism can learn from that," Ehrlich said.

"It's not that animal news is something that is an exemplar for what all of journalism should be. It's just that we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss it as trivial, when so many people care so deeply about it."

More information: "Taking Animal News Seriously: Cat Tales in The New York Times" jou.sagepub.com/content/early/.../84914561577.abstract

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