



The cover of online publication *M/C Journal* that published Dr O'Meara's research on cat videos

Cats' indifference a crowd-pleaser

To most people they're cute and cuddly. To media studies lecturer Radha O'Meara videos of cats posted online also offer a rare insight into the appeal of animal indifference to the camera.

Dr O'Meara, a lecturer at the School of English and Media Studies at Massey's Wellington campus, says while humans and dogs are aware of being watched, cats appear oblivious to this.

"This I argue, is rare in a consumer culture dominated by surveillance, where we are constantly aware of the potential for being watched," she says.

"Cats appear to perform oblivious to the camera. That seems quite a contrast to other similar videos online. Especially other 'cute' videos ...things like videos of babies and dogs. Cat videos are comparably much more popular and cats don't seem to acknowledge the camera at all and just do whatever they like, they are oblivious to it. I think that's really appealing to audiences who are so used to being under the gaze of the camera these days."

The unselfconsciousness of cats in online videos offers viewers two key pleasures, she says. It first allows viewers to imagine the possibility of freedom from surveillance and also to experience the power of using surveillance without it causing problems for those being watched.

"Ultimately cat videos enable viewers to carry out their own surveillance, and we do so with the gleeful abandon of a kitten jumping in a tissue box." However, Dr O'Meara says this carelessness is an illusion for the viewer whose online viewing is

tracked and sold as consumer data.

Dr O'Meara developed a critical analysis of cute cat videos after closely watching hundreds of them online. Her research was recently published in *M/C Journal*.

Videos of cats generate millions of views on YouTube and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis now holds an annual Internet Cat Video Festival, Dr O'Meara says.

"Current representations of cats, including these videos, seem to emphasise their sociability with humans, association with domestic space, independence and aloofness, and intelligence and secretiveness."

Unlike dogs on video, that appear to look at the camera directly (though they are probably reading the eyes of the camera operator), cats typically seem unaware of their observers, Dr O'Meara says.

"This fits with popular discourses of cats as independent and aloof, untrainable and untameable. Cat videos employ a unique mode of observation: we observe the cat, which is unencumbered by our scrutiny.

The cats' apparent uninhibited behaviour gives the viewer the illusion of voyeuristically catching a glimpse of a self-sufficient world. This lack of self-consciousness and sense of authenticity are key to their reception as 'cute' videos."
