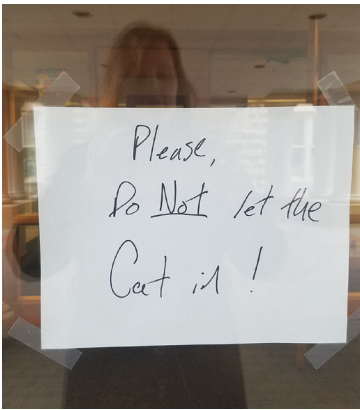


Rebecca S. Wingo, Alexis Logsdon, and Christopher Schommer

Going viral

Copyright lessons from Max the Cat

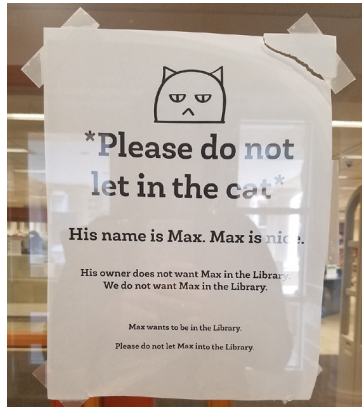
On November 29, 2017, a photo of a sign asking library patrons “please do not let in the cat” went viral. It wasn’t long before the Internet lore surrounding Max the Cat exceeded the scope of the original post. Until news agencies picked up the story and tracked us down, the image (and the cat) was largely divorced from its original context.



Handwritten sign and printed sign. Photo credit: Rebecca S. Wingo, used with permission.

Few knew it was taken at Macalester College, or in Minnesota even. Being nerdy librarian and historian types, we took this opportunity to learn some new lessons about what virality means for copyright and citation, and how we might reinforce best practices to our students. By examining our own viral moment, we discovered just how easily an image or story can be taken out of context and how hard digital excavation work can be. And if we trained professionals struggled, what does this mean for our students?

It took nearly three weeks for the photo of the sign to go viral. The original handwritten sign did not fare well on the high traffic door, so Chris Schommer scripted a new, improved sign. The photo of that sign went



viral in the least straightforward of ways. The photo had some small flare-ups (prepare yourself,

because we’re really going to nurse this viral pun for all it’s worth), but they were localized. The photo went from Rebecca S. Wingo’s Instagram to Tumblr to Twitter to

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Facebook to Reddit to Twitter to the *Washington Post*. Yes, the same newspaper that broke Watergate brought you Max the Cat, as one of Wingo's friends observed.

You didn't quite follow that? Weird. Let's break it down.

- *October 31*: Wingo posts photo of the handwritten sign on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

- *November 6*: Wingo posts photo of Schommer's sign on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

- *November 8*: A Tumblr user and Macalester student (lizardmanjr) posted the sign to their Tumblr account after seeing Wingo's Instagram post in Macalester's Mac Daily #heymac feed. Within the week, it had more than 20,000 notes.

- *November 14*: The post goes semi-viral on Twitter through a reposting account (@CutePics) with nearly 1,000 likes.

- *November 29, 10:24 p.m. CST*: Reddit user Kenneth Lee's girlfriend randomly shows him a picture of the Max the Cat sign on Facebook. Lee posts the picture to Reddit, and it goes viral with nearly 113,000 upvotes.

- *November 29, 2:28 p.m. CST*: Erin McGuire, a children's book illustrator, tweets out the picture from Reddit further spreading the virus with nearly 205,000 likes and more than 60,000 retweets.

- *November 30*: Max the Cat wins the Internet starting with the *Washington Post's* article. As of December 31, 2017, it was the sixth most read article on the Animalia blog.¹

Why did Max the Cat go viral? Wingo's original Twitter and Instagram hashtags #OpenAccess and #WorldCat pulled in a very specific library and digital humanities crowd, and the Internet loves cats, but this could hardly be considered a reliable viral DNA sequence.

libraries + cats ≠ viral

If that equation doesn't work, then we have an x-factor to define.

libraries + cats + x = viral

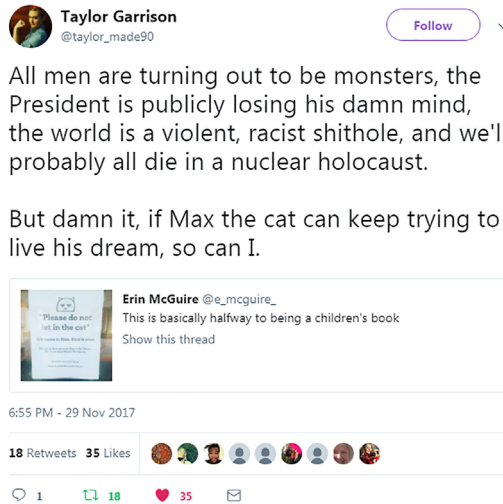
Max's Internet popularity was not geographically restricted, so we looked for national reasons that Max won America's heart. During the week the post went viral on Tumblr, there was a shooting in a Texas church, George Takei and Richard Dreyfus were accused of sexual assault, Roy Moore's predatory behavior continued to make headlines, and it was just over a year since the 2016 election. When Max hit Reddit on November 29, NBC

fired Matt Lauer, NPR fired Garrison Keillor, the House tax bill reached the Senate, Trump retweeted anti-Muslim videos, and North Korea launched a missile—*on that day alone*.

Was Max the hero we all needed during a terrible news week? What if,

libraries + cats + difficult news week = viral

You can try it and let us know. Personally, we've had enough of viral tweets.



Taylor Garrison's Twitter Post, November 29, 2017.²

In order to establish the timeline, we embarked on an archaeological expedition into the depths of Tumblr, Reddit, and Twitter to track the moments of Max's virality and see if we could trace it back to Wingo's original post. We did a reverse Google image search and sifted through 157 duplicate images from all corners of the Internet. We could not trace it back.

For we who rely on citation and provenance, this digital archaeology experiment was unnerving. Alexis Logsdon spent hours on Twitter giving credit to Schommer and Wingo and putting the context back in the picture. Provenance restored—sort of. But that only solved the smallest of issues. Max still had lessons to teach us about copyright.

The original artwork "Upset Cat" is the creation of Gamze Genc Celik.³ She shared it on the Noun Project, a hub for icons and other graphics, under a Creative Commons "By" license. CC BY means that you can use the image as long as you give credit. Schommer chose an open image but did not cite Celik on the sign. Upon the first sniffles of virality, he contacted Celik and told her about her newfound fame. She was understanding, and in every interview Schommer retroactively credited her. Schommer's mistake is a common one, and honestly no one would have been wiser 15 years ago before there was social media like Twitter, Reddit, or Facebook (or before that sneaky Wingo could snap a quality picture with a telephone).

What's the lesson here, besides don't be a copycat? Times have changed since we were undergrads. We must model good citation etiquette in everything we do, from our library signage to our presentations. We're all guilty of omissions like Schommer's. Imagine, it's 10:50 a.m. and your class starts in ten minutes. You just put the finishing touches on your PowerPoint. Do all your images have proper citations? Would Kate Turabian be proud? Probably not, but who cares? It's just a lecture. *Wrong*.

If students see your slides without citation, and yet you dock their final grade

because they didn't cite their sources, then you're not modeling good behavior—and it matters. It matters more and more in this digital age as students increasingly produce digital classroom projects, digital senior capstones, and digital dissertations.⁴

Modeling and reinforcing citation etiquette is essential for ensuring that our work, and that of our students, can go public—maybe even viral. Below are our three biggest takeaways and questions:

1. *Intellectual property*. Artwork aside, the sign is a product of Schommer's intellect. It seems obvious that any credit, fame, and monetary benefit belong to Schommer (and perhaps Max's humans). Except most work produced by staff at Macalester College's library belongs to the college. This is a can of worms we're not that interested in opening, except to say that intellectual property standards at many higher education institutions are unevenly applied across faculty and staff. This might not seem too significant when we're talking about a paper sign taped to a door. However, when it comes to collaboration (especially on digital humanities projects), staff vulnerability and credit is an important conversation to have up front. If you're faculty or administration, we encourage you to take Bethany Nowviskie's advice into consideration: "Give all the credit away. But make it clear to your team that you'll take any blame."⁵

2. *The original photograph*. As we mentioned earlier, it is nearly impossible to trace the image back to Wingo's original post. Even a reverse Google image search will not reveal Wingo's Twitter or Instagram post, both of which are public. "Finding Wingo" is an exercise in frustration, but a poignant commentary on the Internet culture in which our students find images. Maybe we can translate what we say about Wikipedia to the Google image search: *It's a great place to start, but a horrible place to finish*. Students need to know how to do research online, what methods are disciplinarily acceptable, how to find reputable

sources, and how to cite them. Librarians and faculty have a large role to play in preparing students to succeed in a world we ourselves were not necessarily trained to master.

3. *FanFiction*. The Reddit thread about Max the Cat and responses to McGuire's Twitter post were filled with artwork,⁶ jewelry,⁷ poetry,⁸ puns,⁹ rhymes,¹⁰ and too many plots to count. If (wittingly or not) Schommer is inspired by any of these storylines for his children's book, what sort of responsibility does he have to cite Max's fans? It is hardly feasible to sift through the thousands of comments about Max and search for plotlines that resemble the book. Would a general thank you suffice?

When the photo of the sign went viral, Max was vaulted from a rambunctious, charming campus character to a revered member of Internet lore. His admission to the Viral Club (it's inadvisable go to a club with that name, by the way) also revealed some interesting dilemmas regarding copyright, institutional support, our digital habits, and those of our students.

Max and his owners have enjoyed his fame, and Max has been busy making celebrity appearances at local bookstores. The real story is a far cry from the hilarious she-nigans Reddit and Twitter users imagined.

As the saying goes, "This is the Internet, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend (but make sure you cite it)." Or something like that.

Notes

1. Karin Brulliard, "Meet Max, the cat who lost the library but won the Internet," *The Washington Post*. November 30, 2017, accessed May 24, 2018, [\[post.com/news/animalia/wp/2017/11/30/meet-max-the-cat-who-lost-the-library-but-won-the-internet/\]\(http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2017/11/30/meet-max-the-cat-who-lost-the-library-but-won-the-internet/\). Information about the popularity of the article provided by Karin Brulliard, e-mail message to Rebecca S. Wingo, January 2, 2018.](http://www.washington-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

2. Garrison, Taylor, Twitter Post, November 29, 2017, https://twitter.com/taylor_made90/status/936020821113524225.

3. Gamze Genc Celik, "Upset Cat," The Noun Project, accessed May 24, 2018, <https://thenounproject.com/term/upset-cat/1194580/>.

4. For more about the first born-digital history dissertation by Celeste Sharpe, see Kritika Agarwal, "A History Dissertation Goes Digital," AHA Today, August 28, 2017, accessed May 24, 2018, <http://blog.historians.org/2017/08/a-history-dissertation-goes-digital/>.

5. Bethany Nowviskie, "Ten rules for humanities scholars new to project management," Scholar's Lab, 2012, accessed May 24, 2018, <http://nowviskie.org/handouts/DH/10rules.pdf>.

6. Rachel Suzanne, Twitter Post, December 1, 2017, <https://twitter.com/RSillustrations/status/936660514448568320>.

7. Jennifer Brooks, Twitter Post, December 1, 2017, <https://twitter.com/stribrooks/status/936574099140284417>.

8. Finn, A Human, Twitter Post, November 29, 2017, <https://twitter.com/relsqui/status/936004617703272448>.

9. Joannie, Twitter Post, November 30, 2017, <https://twitter.com/Crittercat1966/status/936282161874984960>.

10. Iain Overton, Twitter Post, November 30, 2017, <https://twitter.com/iainoverton/status/936257107611078657>. ZZ



Alexis Logsdon
@librarianrover



Replying to @jendaviswilson @EaterofSoles and 2 others

Well, mostly he just blocks the door to the library and tries to run in as soon as someone opens the door. The legend of Max might end up being a LOT more fun than the real Max. ;)

5:19 PM - 29 Nov 2017

Alexis Logsdon, Twitter Post, November 29, 2017.