11 When War Cats Go Viral

Elena Korowin

This article is about the use and the role of cat content in the war in Ukraine since 2022. It might seem absurd to write about cats in the context of digital warfare, but I am fully convinced of the significance that images of cats have in digital culture and in the war of perception between Russia and Ukraine. Many researchers have already named the cat the "Spirit Animal" of the internet and the cat is omnipresent in digital space (cf. White 2020). The Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked a new wave of manifold cat content: from classic photography-posts of soldiers with cats, animal rescue operations in destroyed towns of Ukraine to new formats of "catfluencers", NFTs and Street art. The aim of this paper is to highlight why images of cats are so important for the internet community; how they are instrumentalized to provide a certain image of the war in Ukraine; and how this cat content differs (or not) from typical cat content found on the internet. The chapter discusses various forms of cat content, from catfluencers like Stepan to street art and NFTs, offering a broad perspective on how digital warfare utilizes cats. Coming from art history and visual studies, the methodological approach focuses on the distributed image, its messages and comparison to other similar images that are appearing online. The data sets were collected since 2022, where the first publication on visual strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian war appeared. The choice of Instagram as the main platform is due to its image-oriented appearance and because it is a common platform for posting cat content since the beginning of the conflict.

In my preceding publication *Krieg Geht Viral* (*The War Goes Viral*, 2023), I analyzed the first reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the urban and digital space. Among the diverse ways to cope with the catastrophe, I looked at war photography and how it was also frequently faked in the first weeks of the invasion (Korowin 2023). Other topics studied were the alleged war videos, which turned out to be video game sequences or memes that have appeared since February 2022, as well as the rise of crypto sales for the support of Ukraine. Another focal point of consideration were reactions from artists to the invasion of Ukraine and their posts on social media that showed how Ukrainian citizens tried to deal with the events as well as how they sought to gain attention from the international community by showing the atrocities of this war. The vast amount of material was hardly manageable, so cat content

was one particular theme that I consider to be characteristic of this digital war, and I shed light on it in this contribution.

The chapter starts with a historical contextualization of cat content related to warfare that is much older than we might think. This is followed by examples of different types of cat content produced during the war in Ukraine, including their impact on the public, and ends by explaining why cat content is a significant element of digital wars nowadays.

War Cats in History

Animals have been used in warfare since ancient times. It is quite easy to imagine what elephants, horses and dogs were used for, but cats that are difficult to train and hard to think of as loyal war companions. There is an ancient story about war tactics of Persian King Cambyses II, who used cats in a war with Egyptians. In the Battle of Pelusium (525 B.C.) the image of Egyptian cat goddess Bastet was applied to the shields of Cambyses' soldiers, and cats were also let out on the battlefield to confuse the enemy. Egyptians, who worshipped cats and were only allowed to kill them for sacred reasons, had to surrender (Mills 2024).

In modern times, cats returned to their old-fashioned function to control the vermin, because mousetraps were too dangerous in the trenches since they could hurt the soldiers. During the First World War, half a million cats were aboard ships, in barracks, military field offices, post offices and trenches not only for practical purposes, but also due to their natural charisma, they became companions, lucky charms and mascots. There are several individual stories of cats who saved lives or helped to overcome the hard times on the battlefields (Hughes 2024: 283–284). These stories were spread to lift the morale of the troops. At the same time, by 1917, the British army was utilizing around 500 cats as early detectors for poison gas.

A cat was sufficiently small and nimble to be thrust down tunnels and other confined spaces: if it died, or came back gasping, then it meant that the enemy had got there first with their lung-blustering mustard gas. Horses, being an indispensable part of the war effort, were counted as combatants and issued with their own gas masks (Ibid.: 285).

We see here an old ambivalent attitude towards cats in operation – they are useful and comforting and at the same time they are sacrificed easily for human's sakes. Common prejudices about cats flourished in the trenches, such as that they are animals loyal just to themselves and would switch sides just to get food. There are some reports on cats being convicted and executed on suspicion of espionage (Ibid.: 286). In the Second World War the history of war cats continued, one of their new tasks was detecting and warning about bombs. Felines were also used in experiments as bombs, but the testing phase showed that the animals passed out too quickly for

the bombs to explode successfully (Mills 2024). Still, the most common and less exciting story of cats during the war is that of countless companions and sometimes even famous war cats like Tiddles (not to be confused with the other famous fat cat from Paddington Station ladies' room), who traveled more than 30,000 miles with the Royal Navy in the 1940s or Simon, who was honored with a Dickin Medal, the highest British award an animal can receive in war (Ibid.).

There are hundreds of stories and photos showing soldiers playing, cuddling and posing with cats (Ibid.; Milzarski 2024; Kiser 2020). Today we can see millions of similar photos online, mainly showing Ukrainian armed forces with their cat companions or pictures of Ukrainian cats taken at bomb shelters, frontlines and other hotspots (e.g. @ukrainianwarcats). There are several accounts for animals in frontline cities and general animal rescue that post cat images from different areas in Ukraine. As in previous wars, cats are also "employed" to catch vermin in Ukrainian trenches. Many of them wandered into Ukrainian army positions from villages nearby that were destroyed, seeking protection and food.

The adopted felines fight their own battles against the mice that infest the trenches. The rodents chew Starlink satellite communications cables and car wiring, destroy food supplies and military gear, and even nip the fingers of sleeping soldiers (Melkozerova/Hartog 2024).

The cats thus protect Ukrainian soldiers and equipment, but they also give them comfort. Today, one of their many functions seems to be the war of ideas and perception online – Ukraine's social media channels are full of cats. There are countless pictures of felines that are cute and fluffy, but also injured or badly battered. Some of the cats look determined and combative, just like their fellow human companions. Again, there are famous ones among them, such as Syrsky the cat, who is accidentally named the same as the Commander of the Ukrainian Army Ground Forces Oleksandr Syrsky, one of the most effective combat leaders. After he was taken from his active work on the battlefields to Kyiv, Syrsky the cat increased his popularity on social media and acted as a conduit for the collection of donations for the Ukrainian armed forces (Ibid.).

There are many more similar stories that describe feline characters and their devotion to humans, supporting the idea that the war in Ukraine is not only a human war, but also suggests that animals and nature are fighting against Russian aggression too. Russian troops are aware of this symbolic advantage, so they try to combat it with their own cat content, such as showing the invading soldiers with their cats (Ibid.). This material is still quite similar to the analog photographs that were produced over a hundred years ago, so what is special about cat content in the war in Ukraine today?

The War in Ukraine

In the first months of the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine, different content went viral – memes, sayings, and people. Some things that were well received in the first months of the war quickly disappeared from view. The expansion of the Ukrainian war in 2022 is the most viral conflict we experienced in the European digital society before the violent attack of Hamas on Israel in October 2024 (cf. Korowin 2023). Due to this image escalation, there is an urgent need for reflection on the relationship between a catastrophe and its mediation.

From the beginning, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was widely covered in the digital space. Apart from news broadcasts, journalists and public figures posting content about the war, private accounts engaged in reporting events in Ukraine to the international community. Digital space became another platform for warfare and a very influential one. Ukrainian resistance and memes spread all over social networks and news platforms. Many artists and influencers used their ability to reach a broad public to post works and messages in support of the Ukrainian armed forces. In my previous research, I focused on artistic reactions to provide some deeper insights into the representation of war in digital and urban culture. I located a tension between visual communication, the image regimes of war, and their technical, media and artistic requirements. In the process, I provided valuable contemporary diagnostic insights into the relationship between the representation of the reality of war and its production.

The observations show that in 2022, the Ukrainian front in the digital war acted effectively in the presentation of their own views and opinions. Everything that could be learned from previous conflicts about social media and other digital platforms was successfully communicated online by Ukrainian representatives – official and private. The spread of Ukrainian anti-war memes was so widely and positively received that observers in 2022 were already convinced that the Ukrainians had won the meme war (cf. Ibid.). Memes are earwigs of the internet, and well-placed jokes can become a source of sympathy. But there are also downsides to receiving updates from a chaotic war through scattershot bits of digital media. On the Internet, all content follows similar laws of motion, whether showing a land invasion in Europe or a cat doing something funny. Whatever is engaging becomes more popular, regardless of its provenance or quality (Chayka 2022).

Cats on the Internet

When talking about sympathy and memes, the first thing that we must consider is the first viral memes that taught the internet community how to like, transform and share image micros. The key example is undoubtedly the "Lolcats" of the early

2000s. The format originated from the image board *4chan*, established in 2003 by the 15-year-old Christopher Poole. As a hub for internet subculture, it functioned as a platform for anonymous image exchange that made it "lunatic, juvenile (…) brilliant, ridiculous and alarming" (Michaels 2008). Pictures of cats functioned as a symbol of distinction since the early days of the internet; they built communities, trolls used them to shock cat fans online and, ultimately, they became iconic with "Lolcats" (cf. White 2020).

Cats have been a vehicle of human projection since they came to live with us in ancient times. Since then, the perception of the cat oscillated between idolization and hate throughout human history. This pattern has been replicated in the digital space since the 1990s (cf. Korowin 2024). Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that animals are "good to think with"; cats are also good to feel with, since their mimicry is multi-faceted, unlike any other animal. The anthropomorphization of the cat, as we know it from fables of Aesop (620–564 BCE), led to the cat becoming a human avatar – many people are more likely to post images of cats to express their emotions than selfies (Korowin 2024: 36–39).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked a new wave of cat content that is multifarious and posted within both official and private channels. In addition to the already mentioned cat rescue operations in the destroyed villages and cities in Ukraine (de Herrera 2022) as well as humans and cats in heroic harmony during wartime, new formats of digital figures appeared. Catfluencers, NFT-sales and Street Art postings are just a few examples of this tendency. So, it seems a worthy aspect to elaborate on in terms of cat content's meaning for digital warfare.

Cute Cat Theory of Digital Warfare

"The Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism" is a theory uniting Internet activism, Internet censorship, and "cute cats" (a term used for any low value but popular online activity) developed by Ethan Zuckerman in 2008. It claims that most people online are not interested in activism; instead, they want to use the internet for simple activities, including shopping, surfing for pornography, cat content and communication. But the tools that are developed for that (such as Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, Blogger, Twitter, and similar platforms) are very useful for social movement activists, who may lack the resources to develop their own dedicated tools. This, in turn, makes the activists more immune to reprisals by governments than if they were using a dedicated activism platform because shutting down a popular public platform provokes a larger public outcry than shutting down an obscure one (Zuckerman 2008). The "Cute Cat Theory of Digital Warfare" proposed at this point will go a step further and proclaim that activists today not only use the platforms, but also popular inter-

net subjects, such as "Lolcats" or cat content in general, to attract more attention to their causes.

Cat content proved helpful in 2015 during the lockdown in Brussels. After the attacks in Paris, Brussels was under the highest level of emergency during the search for the suspected gunman Salah Abdeslam. The atmosphere was tense, and #BrusselsLockdown was established on Twitter to exchange information on what was happening in the city. The hashtag was meant to prevent terrorist attacks and help to operate in a city under threat. When the problem of public visibility of operational details were shared, the Belgian police asked people to stop posting information that could be accessible to terrorists and would endanger the operation. To ease the tension, users started to post cat content and overwhelmed the platform with cat pictures to prevent any information used by the suspects ("Belgians tweet cat pictures during #BrusselsLockdown" 2015). In this way #BrusselsLockdown was one example of politically and socially valuable use of cat content. This example leads us to a better understanding of the use of cat content during the Russian invasion of Ukraine; in particular, how new formats are shaping aspects of the digital war. In the historical use of cats, as well as in current viral content, NFTs and street art cats function as avatars for human emotional projection in wartime.

Catfluencer Stepan

Another lockdown was the starting point for the digital career of catfluencer Stepan, bringing us back to the topic of mimicry and anthropomorphization. Stepan (*2008) is one of the most internationally famous "catfluencers", who went viral during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Stepan's signature is his nonchalant, phlegmatic, or even crotchety expression. With that image, he became the descendant of the most influential cat internet has ever seen – Tadar Sauce, also known as "Grumpy Cat" (2012–2019).

The first videos showed Stepan sitting with his forepaw on the table, a glass of wine or a cocktail in front of him, looking drowsy into the camera, accompanied by disco lights and different pop songs about loneliness. This utterly anthropomorphic image was the perfect comment on the lockdown and the way people around the world felt at home all by themselves, having lonesome parties for one. One of these first videos of Stepan with a glass of wine, cake, and Stevie Wonder's "I Just Called to Say I Love You" playing in the background had reached over 27 million views in a few days (Korniienko 2021). First posts with Stepan appeared in July 2020 on different platforms (TikTok, Instagram), and by the end of the year the cat had gathered 875,000 followers on both platforms.

Figure 1: Stepan, the viral cat from Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, sits next to a purse by Valentino Italian luxury brand. Photo posted on his Instagram on Nov. 30, 2021.
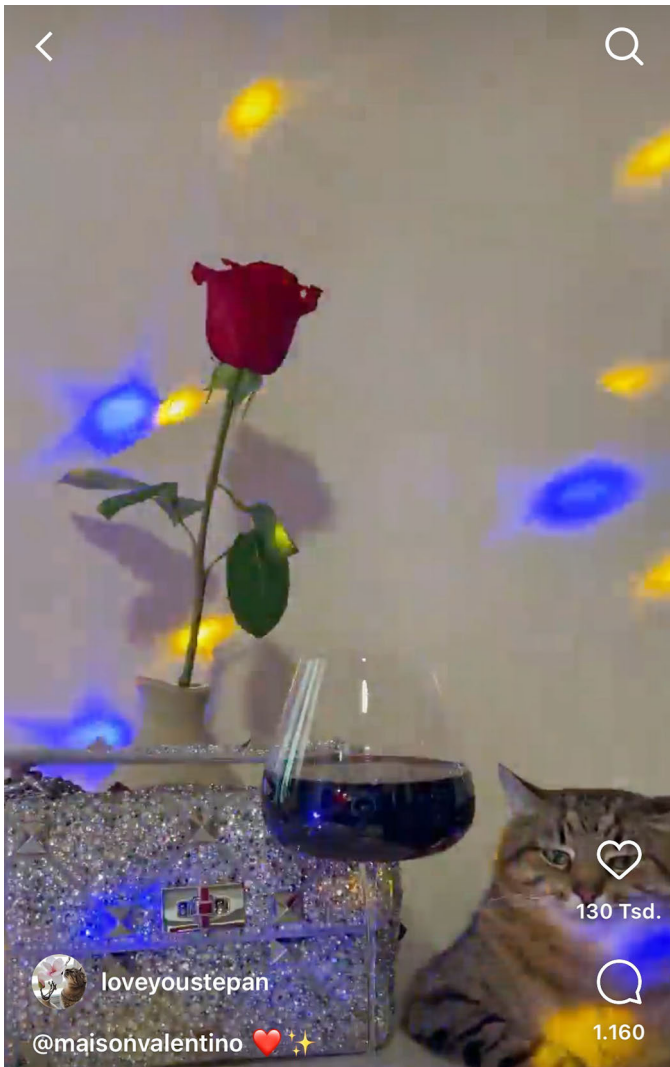
Source: (@LoveYouStepan / Instagram.

In 2021, a repost of Stepan's picture by Britney Spears, who returned into the spotlight after winning a legal battle against her father's conservatorship, made the cat a real celebrity. In one day, Stepan gained over 15,000 followers on Instagram

and the numbers kept growing. Later, the Italian high-end design label Valentino used a photo of Stepan and the label's handbag for advertising ("Eine neue Grumpy Cat..." 2021). Among his other famous followers are Diane Kruger and Hailey Bieber (Lorenz 2022).

Before 2022, it did not matter where Stepan came from, even though the war in Ukraine had already been going on for several years. Followers liked his looks and how his owner presented the cat online. He mirrored a lonesome, middle-class person, drinking at home in the evenings after an exhausting day at the office. But the Russian invasion changed Stepan's account within days. First of all, in the early days of the war in 2022, his hometown, Kharkiv, came under attack, and his account went black. This was due to the loss of electricity in many parts of the city; residents had to flee or search for shelter in basements. Stepan's account was not activated for over ten days in March 2022. This led to a panic among his followers, who feared the cat was injured or even dead, so they started search operations. Many posted comments betraying fear, frustration and desperation. The question is, were these emotions triggered by Stepan's disappearance as the cat? Or is it more about the phenomenon itself, about an endangered individual suffering from a war? In any case, it is obvious how a digital connection with an influencer can trigger equally strong emotions to the phenomenon of fandom of pop and rock stars.

"I started checking the account every single day to make sure they were okay", Kalina Newman, 24, a graduate student in Washington, said. "It's a testament to how powerful these Internet figures can be." (Ibid.)

Finally, the World Influencers and Bloggers Association, as well as his active follower-community helped Stepan and his owner Anna to flee from Ukraine via Poland to Paris. This journey became a "symbol of escape" (Böck 2023). Given the widespread suffering in Ukraine, it may seem inappropriate to rejoice over the rescue of a cat, but any happy end is encouraging and Stepan is not just "a cat" in the virtual world. Shortly after Stepan's escape, the World Influencers and Bloggers Association in Cannes gave their annual award to the cat and its owner. This organization was founded in 2019 and operates globally to unite and support high profile influencers. Since 2022, it has also encouraged top content creators to use their voices and speak out against Russia's aggression.

> "Influencers are the new media," the founder and CEO of the association Maria Grazhina Chaplin said. "We have to emphasize that in the 21st century, the world can't turn a blind eye to the insane actions of villains and violent dictators making other humans endure suffering, devastation and death. We call on influencers and all our members to support an initiative to address the needs of those affected by the Russian military attack in the very heart of Europe." (Lorenz 2022)

Stepan is the latest example of how influencers in conflict regions — even nonhuman ones — can tap into their audiences to escape danger, and how a community that creators usually may rely on to source brand deals or sell merchandise can transform into a lifeline overnight.

"When you've got that many followers, you can use them as a network to provide aid, find shelter or even help find escape routes in a war zone," said Mohamad Taufiq Morshidi, a former fundraiser for Muslim Aid Malaysia who has worked extensively with refugees. "Having an online network will help you survive difficult times." (Ibid.)

Content creators can share their stories and seek aid from followers from anywhere; they can do it on the battlefield or abroad, and with huge communities of followers, they are capable of shaping the narratives about the war. After the Russian invasion, Stepan's social media posts switched to Ukrainian. In August 2022, Anna adopted a kitten, Stephania; a tabby which looks a lot like Stepan and has her own account. This family addition led to many posts of the two cats in love or otherwise shown in daily routines, mocking human relationships. Stepan's influential account (1,4 million followers) was used for promoting and uplifting the Ukrainian armed forces. The cat returned to Ukraine, and on its account, various fund-raising campaigns started for animals who have suffered in the war. Also, Stepan's followers helped to collect funds for the evacuation of animals in flooded areas after the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in southern Ukraine (Shevchenko 2023)

In November 2022, Stepan was officially appointed as an 'ambassador' by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy as part of its 'Save Ukrainian Culture' campaign ("Cat Stepan becomes…" 2022). On January 26, 2024, Stepan's posts became bilingual. We were confronted by a picture of the cat at the veterinary office saying that the shelling from January 23, 2024 made the cat feel bad, so it had to get several injections and feels better now. It was presented both in Ukrainian and English. On March 10, Stepan and his family again had to flee Ukraine and find a home in Germany. Since then, Stepan's account sells merchandise, shares posts of patriotic videos, and of course continues to feature the grumpy cat faces.

Bandera the Cat

It is difficult to figure out whether Stepan is named after Stepan Bandera, a controversial figure in public discussions and memory studies in Ukraine. He is considered a national hero and fighter for independence, but also a problematic and contradictory historical figure. Bandera the cat's account (@kit_bandera) has around 8000 followers and is based in Ivano-Frankivsk, which was considered a safe place in Ukraine for a long time. Bandera the cat is dressed up in costumes made by his owner, which include military garb, the iconic pink hat worn by Oleh Psiuk, the frontman of Eu-

rovision winners, Kalush Orchestra, and that of a Bayraktar drone – the unmanned aircraft that has wreaked havoc from the air on Russian military vehicles. He even posed with the Javelin anti-tank weapon, known as "St. Javelin", thanks to its effectiveness against Russian forces. Bandera is also pictured with a felt Molotov cocktail in front of a drawing of the Kremlin. Recent photos in military kit celebrate Ukraine's Day of Heroes (May 23rd). He also wore an embroidered shirt for Vyshyvanka Day – on which Ukrainians celebrate their national dress – on the third Thursday of May. The cat Bandera appeared for the first time on April 9, 2022. The posts are aimed at a Ukrainian audience as most are written exclusively in Ukrainian. It is possible to discern that Bandera is based far from the front lines since the posts are not about destruction or war atrocities, but rather feature a dressed-up patriotic cat. Ukrainian patriotism and cultural heritage became important topics for postings even by "catfluencers". The difference between Stepan and Bandera is that the former had already had a huge number of followers before the Russian invasion, which could be activated easily, even though Stepan was in danger, whereas Bandera appeared as a catfluencer after the beginning of the war without being in actual danger. The patriotic posts of Bandera still find a public, but since they are aimed at the Ukrainian audience, their impact is much smaller than Stepan's. In addition to individual cat accounts, another example shows how sympathy for this animal can gain more public attention.

Street Art War Cats – LBWS

"This is the only option we have. Some are volunteers, some fight on the frontlines. Some raise their spirits with cats" ("Ukrainian graffiti artists…" 2022), says Ihor Matroskyn, who is named after the famous cartoon cat character from the Soviet Union (Ibid.). *LBWS_168* is a street art Group from Odesa (@lbws_168) and they have been active on Instagram since May 2017. The acronym stands for the first letter of four words in Russian: "Лучше (Better), быстрее (Faster), выше (Higher), сильнее (Stronger)." *LBWS* added that "This is a reference to the time when we practiced sports." (Ibid.)

Alexander Voropaev, a photographer from Odesa, shot images of their street works and presented them online on his website. He declared that Ihor Matroskyn and Andrii Bilyi, both from Odesa, are part of *LBWS_168*, which in 2022 consisted of five people, even though they want to stay anonymous (Voropaev 2022). Matroskyn and Bilyi started doing graffiti in 2004 in different places in Ukraine and later began to produce more street art and murals. In 2010, Matroskyn made his first work on a wall in Odesa with the hashtag #Animallbws. Together with Bilyi, he started the group *LBWS Animal* in 2017. Concerned with the extinction of endangered species, they travelled widely and made artworks in Ukraine, Germany, Greece and Azerbai-

jan. From this point on, their street art contained a special message regarding animal rights, and thus they became street art activists (Stodolinska 2023).

One of their motifs was the European wildcat, which soon would become their signature animal for patriotic street art during the war with Russia (Ibid.). According to Stodolinska, the figure of the cat was developed in 2021 as a "symbol of independence, sophistication, and strength" (Ibid.).

"Besides, one of the unofficial symbols of the city of Odesa is a cat", the artist added. "Odesa is indeed known as a city of old yards and streets commonly populated with cats who are fed and well regarded by the local inhabitants." (Noubel 2022)

The first characteristic cat from *LBWS_168* appeared on February 3, 2022, on Instagram (484 likes). It was just the head of the cat, painted in a minimalistic way, colored blue and with a collar inscribed with *LBWS*. Subsequent postings in the following weeks reveal how the artists developed the character by playing with positions and arrangements of the cat figure with their tag. On March 13, 2022, the cat becomes utterly patriotic, wearing a vyshyvanka-shirt and proclaiming: "Razom Peremozhemo" ("Together we will win"). The cat has an optimistic and strong character, it is always smiling and is intended to boost people's spirit with its motivational slogans. *LBWS_168* state: "Our main mission is to help Ukraine win and support the army that fights our battle." (Cherkasov 2022) The colorful images of smiling cats are also meant to bring hope into the devastated areas of Ukraine. Their works appear all over Ukraine, but they mainly stay in Odesa and post them on social media like Instagram.

According to Geert Hofstede's cultural model (Hofstede 2005: 7), known as the "Onion model", Yuliya Stodolinska analyzes *LBWS*' street art, which in her view shapes the cultural memory of Ukrainians (Stodolinska 2023). Hofstede's model consists of four layers: symbols, heroes, rituals, and values, which are all featured in the works of *LBWS_168*. According to Stodolinska, the street art group actively shapes cultural identity in Ukraine by picking up different narratives and promoting them on the walls of the cities and into the digital space. They work with national symbols, such as yellow and blue colors, the trident, national clothing or dishes like borshch. *LBWS_168* also depicts weapons, national and international figures, and events that played a role in the war since 2022. Symbolic phrases became legendary as an important part of their work. "Kazhy *Palianytsia*" ("Say *Palianytsia*"), for example, was used as a funny code phrase to 'check' if the person can pronounce it right, which was taken as a 'proof' of being Ukrainian. It became a new Shibboleth.

The anthropomorphized cat slips into the role of war heroes, like Valerii Zaluzhnyi, displaying his characteristic gesture "V" for victory or others who wrote themselves in the history of this war.

Figure 2: lbws_168, LBWS CAT 54 Will be good, 2022

Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CcunbOWsanf/?hl=en.

The works of street art in Ukraine have become new forms of social activism and actively contribute to the construction of identity in wartime by making famous different motifs of wartime. *LBWS CAT UKRAINE*'s artworks highlight significant people and important events; they also depict symbols which will help people to remember those current events, and their digital records serve as documentation of historical evidence for the future (Ibid.).

The friendly, self-confident cat on the walls of Ukrainian cities demonstrates the hope and resilience of the people in the country and, through social media, communicates this message to the world to gain further support. Stepan is also a follower.

Cats prove to be the best choice for transmitting different content. Not only did artists and content creators grasp this potential, but the Ukrainian government also made use of cats to get broader digital support.

NFT-Sales: Ukrainian War Cats Division

There was another way anthropomorphized cats were used for warfare in Ukraine; they were not only supportive, uplifting companions, but also became actual avatars for fighters with the NFTs of the *Ukrainian War Cats Division*.

Besides being referred to as the "cell phone war" or "TikTok war" due to the handling of images, the war in Ukraine has been described as the most viral war in history. A tweet from the *Washington Post* dated February 25, 2022, dubbed it the "first crypto war in the world" (Schleuning 2022). This was mainly because both the Ukrainian and the Russian governments turned to cryptocurrencies when traditional financial resources were temporarily inaccessible. In Russia, Western sanctions were circumvented by legalizing cryptocurrencies. This is not a new tactic, as states such as Iran and North Korea have long been taking advantage of alternative forms of finance. In Ukraine, on the other hand, large sums of money were donated to non-governmental organizations via cryptocurrencies, and many Ukrainians turned to Bitcoin because ATMs were overrun due to general panic or broken due to infrastructure damage (Ibid.).

Ukrainian Vice Prime Minister Mykhailo Fedorov's tweet on February 26, 2022, announced that the government was now allowing crypto donations. The post contained respective wallet addresses for the currencies BTC, ETH, and USDT and it called for support of the war-torn country. According to the Ukrainian government, 40–60 million US dollars (USD) in crypto donations had already been collected at the beginning of March 2022 (this information varied depending on the reporter) ("Ukraine erhält…" 2023; Steinschaden 2022). and 7 million USD were raised through NFTs alone. This is the first time that such a large amount of crypto donations has been raised in response to a crisis. Ethereum founder, Vitalik Buterin, alone donated 1,500 Ether (around $5 million USD) to the Ukrainian government and local aid organizations (Levinson 2022).

A few months later, the Ukrainian government began producing their own NFTs and launched a website to sell them to support its warfare (Korowin 2023: 150–165). These quick reactions and millions in donations prompted the Ukrainian government to create a central donation platform – "UNITED24". One NFT project launched in 2023 is supported by both "UkraineDAO" and "UNITED24" and is called

"UA Cats Division". Following the principle of Cryptopunks, BAYC and CryptoKitties, a collection of 10,000 cat NFTs was released. The cats are depicted in various military clothing and were intended to represent the fight for the freedom of Ukraine. Each of these cats is intended to be portrayed as unique, with different clothing and emotions on demand. Their artistic value or even the significance for the art history of NFTs is not important; they are what Julian Reichelt calls "the kitsch of the Internet". The individual cats are sold for 0.065 ETH (around 103 euros, as of October 05, 2023, 3,488 cats sold) to finance four water drones for Ukraine. NFTs have proven to be an effective means of supporting both the military and the population during war. And as we already learned from the history of the internet: Cats sell.

Figure 3: Ukrainian Cats Devision
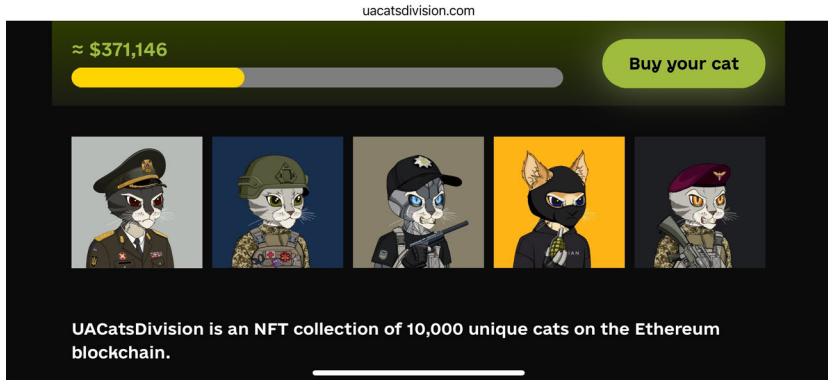
Source: https://uacatsdivision.com/. Public domain.

Cats, Cats, Cats – Conclusions

The war in Ukraine reinforced many modern symbolic and functional uses of the cat. On the one hand, the cat served as a companion, giving comfort and guaranteeing well-being, and on the other, it served as a killing-machine for mice, rats, and other vermin. In addition, fighters who are photographed with a cat on their arm or lap immediately appear more human and likeable. That is why cat pictures have served a useful propaganda role since at least the First World War.

Cats are "cute freaks" making them the perfect animal for social media, and they have also become a proven lingua franca of internet communities. By posting cat content, a user is assured of gaining sympathy and, if one knows how to use internet

tools in his or her favor, can even go viral. This is why cat content also became a crucial part of Ukraine's information war. Russia's invasion of Ukraine 2022 is not the first conflict to be observed on social media, but since the Arab Spring, social platforms have become even more elaborate and popular. The cameras of mobile phones have become our third eye, and it is not going too far to conclude that quite a few people seem to lead their actual professional and private lives online. And here, the cats are the kings and queens of communication channels, which is why cat content has necessarily become a part of Ukraine's online liberation program. As war content became viral, it was natural to combine it with one of the most viral contents online. Cat content gains sympathy: it tends to go viral, it unites, and creates single-mindedness around a collective cause that is so important for Ukraine. Not only among their own people but also among others, which is why the phrase, "We love cats!" has echoed loudly in digital space since the beginning of the Russian invasion.

The war in Ukraine takes cat content even further; it is so much more than the usual videos of pure cuteness flourishing on the platforms in recent years. Sasha Archibald wrote that the cutest videos are those that depict a cat in predicament: "The index of cuteness is the degree to which an object sheds its power."[8] When the shelling of Kharkiv started, the Instagram account of Stepan the cat shifted from sharing goofy pet portraits to posting photos of missile attacks. The hard evidence of the invasion reminds viewers that they are watching a real living predicament. And since the followers of Stepan were already attached to the cat and its well-being, it was a relatively simple process to appropriate or modify the image to foster community solidarity for fundraising and other charitable projects.

Street art from *LBWS_168* also showed that the changes between real-life locations and digital spaces can be blurred to advantage. With the murals of *LBWS CAT UKRAINE*, they placed motivational artworks on the streets and, at the same time, spread them on social media platforms. In their cat pictures, artists picked up the meme aesthetics of cute cat content and accompanied it with a message. *LBWS_168* took this process further than the usual joke or statement when they started to create war chronicles in their own artistic language.

In all these examples, the image of the cat functions as an avatar for people's emotions and wishes. Stepan, *LBWS CAT* or the *Ukrainian War Cats Division* are all anthropomorphized cats regarded as "good to think" and to feel with. They seem to gain even more viral power than the representation of people, probably because they seem to bring in a meta-reflexive level; the cats as avatars are less direct than humans. Yet, let's not forget that most of the cats shown are simply avatars for human communication, a form of a new world fable. "The Cute Cat Theory of Digital Warfare" is proven in the digital fields of social media after Russia's invasion in 2022 – the attention and sympathy that Ukrainians were able to gain were supported by cat content and the different possibilities to use it that go far beyond the ones that existed before. Cat Content seems to guarantee attention and sympathy online, but

it is a blurred and uncertain source of real information for covering the war, although a very cute one.

There are obvious downsides to receiving updates from a chaotic war through scattershot bits of digital media. TikTok's algorithmic feed, in particular, makes it easy to passively consume one video and move on to the next. Social media is an imperfect chronicler of wartime. In some cases, however, it may also be our most reliable source.

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