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"It Belongs to the Internet": Animal Images, Attribution Norms and the Politics of Amateur Media Production

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Abstract

Cute pictures of animals feature as an inoffensive and adorable background to the contemporary online experience with cute content regularly shared on social media platforms. Indeed the demand for cuteness is so strong in the current cultural milieu that some animals become recognisable animal celebrities in the process (Hepola). However, despite the existence of this professionalisation in some sections of the cute economy, amateurs produce the majority of cute content that circulates online. This is largely because one of the central contributors to this steady stream of cute animal pictures is the subforum Aww, hosted on the online community Reddit. Aww is wholly dedicated to pictures of cute things and allows users to directly submit cute content directly to the site.

Aww is one of the default subforums that new Reddit users are automatically subscribed to and is immensely popular, featuring over 4.2 million dedicated subscribers as well as untold casual visits. The section is self-described as: "Things that make you go AWW! -- like puppies, and bunnies, and so on...Feel free to post pictures, videos and stories of cute things" ("The cutest things on the internet!"). Users upload cute animal photos that they have taken and wait for the Reddit community to vote on their favourite pictures. The voting mechanism helps users to acknowledge their favourite posts, with the most popular featured on the front page of Aww (for a detailed critique of this process see van der Nagel 2013). The user-generated model of the site means that instead of visitors being confronted with a formally curated selection of cute animal photos, Aww offers a constantly changing mixture of amateur, semi-pro and professional content.

Aww - and Reddit more generally - stand as an emblematic example of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), with users playing an active role in the production and curation of online content. However, given the commercial nature of many user-generated content sites, this amateur media activity is becoming increasingly subject to intellectual property claims and conflicts (see Burgess; Kennedy). Across the internet there are growing tensions between website operators and amateur producers. As Jenny Kennedy (132) notes, while these platforms promote a public rhetoric of "sharing", these corporate narratives "downplay their economic power" and imply "that they do not control the practices contained within their sites". Subsequently, the expectations of users regarding how content is managed and organised can differ substantially from the corporate goals of social media companies.

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature interested in the politics of amateur media production (see Hunter and Lastowka; Benkler; Burgess; Kennedy) by exploring the emergence of attribution norms and informal enforcement measures in and around the Aww online community. In contrast to professional content creators, amateurs often have fewer resources on hand to protect their copyrighted work and are also challenged by a pervasive online rhetoric that suggests that popular content essentially "belongs to the Internet" (Douglas). A number of communities on Reddit have questioned the company's handling of amateur content with users suggesting that Reddit actively seeks to de-contextualise original content and not attribute original creators. By examining how amateur creators and online communities regulate content online, I interrogate the power relations that exist between social media platforms and users and explore how the corporate rhetoric of participatory culture interacts with the legal framework of copyright law.

This article also contributes to existing legal scholarship on communities of practice and norms-based intellectual property systems. This literature has explored how social norms effectively regulate the protection of, among other things, recipes (Fauchart and Von Hippel), fashion design (Raustiala and Sprigman) and stand-up comedy routines (Oliar and Sprigman), in situations where copyright law does not function as an effective regulatory mechanism. Often these norms are in line with copyright law protections, but in other cases they diverge from these legal principles. In this paper I suggest that particular sections of Reddit function in a similar way, with their own set of self-governing norms, and that these norms largely align with the philosophical aims of copyright law. The paper begins by outlining a series of recent debates that have occurred between amateur media creators and Reddit, before exploring how norms are regulated on Reddit subforums Aww and Karma Court. I then offer some brief conclusions on the value of paying attention to how social norms structure forms of "sharing" (see Kennedy) and provide a useful way for amateur media producers to protect their content without going through formal legal processes.

Introducing Reddit and the Confused Politics of Amateur Content

Reddit is a social news site, a vibrant community and one of the most popular websites online. It stands as the most visible iteration of a long-standing tradition of user-generated and managed news, one that goes back to websites like Slashdot, which operated in the mid to late-90s. Founded in 2005 Reddit was launched after only one funding round of venture capital, receiving \$100k in seed funding from Y Combinator (Miller). Despite some early rivalry between Reddit and competitor site Digg, Reddit had enough potential to be purchased by Condé Nast for an estimated \$20 million (Carr). Reddit's audience numbers have grown exponentially in the last few years, with the site currently receiving over 5 billion page views and 114 million unique visitors per month ("About Reddit"). It has also changed focus significantly in the last few years with the site now "as much about posting interesting or funny pictures as it is about news" (Sepponen). Reddit hosts a number of individual subforums (called subreddits), which focus on a particular topic and function essentially like online bulletin boards. The front-page of Reddit showcases the most popular content from across the whole website, and user-generated content features heavily here.

Amateur media cannot spread without the structural support of social media platforms, but this support is qualified in particular ways. Reddit stands as a paradigmatic case. Users on Reddit are "incentivized to submit direct links to images, because viewers can get to them more easily" (Douglas) and the website encourages amateur creators to use a preferred content server - Imgur - to host images. The Imgur service provides a direct public link to an image - even bypassing the Reddit discussion page - and with its free hosting and limited ads it has become a popular service and is used by most Reddit users (Slater-Robins). For the majority of Reddit users this is an unproblematic partnership. Imgur is free, effective and fast. However, a vocal minority of Reddit users and amateur creators claim that the partnership between Reddit and Imgur has created the equivalent of an online ghetto (Douglas).

As Nick Douglas explains, when using services like Imgur there is no requirement to either provide an external link to a creators website or to attribute the creator, limiting the ability for an amateur creator to gain exposure. It also bypasses existing revenue streams that may have been set up by creators, including ad-supported websites or online stores offering merchandise. As a result creators have little opportunity to benefit either economically or reputationally from this system. This occurs to such an extent that "there are actually warnings *against* submitting your own [original] work" to particular subforums on Reddit (Douglas). For example, some forum moderators require submissions to either "link directly to a specific image file or to a website with minimal ads" ("Reddit Pics"). It is in this context, that the posting of original content without attribution is not actively policed. There are a number of complaints circulating within the Reddit community about these practices (see "Ok, look people. I know you heart Imgur, but webcomics? Just link to the freaking site"; "The problem with reddit").

Many creators have directly protested against this aspect of Reddit's structural organisation. Blogger Benjamin Grelle (a.k.a The Frogman) and writer Chris Menning are two notable examples. Grelle's protest was witty and dramatic. He wrote a blog post featuring a picture of an email he sent to Imgur offering the company a choice: send him a huge novelty check for \$10,000 or alternatively, add a proper attribution system that allows artists, photographers and content creators to properly credit their work. Grelle estimates that his work generated around \$20,000 in ad revenue for Imgur; however the structure of Reddit and Imgur meant he earned little income from the "viral" success of his content. Grelle claimed he was happy for his work to be shared, but attribution meant that it was more likely a fan would follow the link to his website and provide him with some financial recompense for his work. Unsurprisingly, Grelle didn't receive a paycheck and so in response has developed a unique way to gain exposure. He has started to insert himself into his work, "[s]o when you see a stolen Frogman piece, you still see Ben Grelle's face" (Douglas).

Chris Menning posted a blog about being banned from Reddit, hoping to bring to light some of the inequalities that persist around Reddit's current structure. He began by noting that he had received a significant amount of traffic from them in the past. He had responded in kind by looking to create original content for particular subforums, knowing what a particular community would enjoy. However, his habit of providing the link to his own website along with the content he posted saw him get labelled as a spammer and banned by administrators. Menning chose not to fight the ban:

It seems that the only way I could avoid [getting banned] is if I were to relinquish any rights to my original content and post it exclusively to Imgur. In effect, reddit punishes the creation of original content, and rewards content theft (Menning).

Instead he decided to quit Reddit, claiming that Reddit's approach would carry long-term consequences as the platform provided little incentive for creators to produce wholly original content.

It is worth noting that neither Menning nor Grelle turned to legal avenues in order to gain financial restitution. Considering the nature of the practices they were complaining about, compensation in the form of an injunction or damages would have certainly been possible. In Benjamin's case, a user had combined a number of his copyrighted works into one image and posted the image to Imgur without attribution --this infringed Grelle's copyright in his work as well as his moral right to be attributed as the creator of the work. However, the public comments of both creators suggest that despite the possibility of legal success, their issue was not so much to do with their individual cases but rather the broader structural issues at play within Reddit. While they might gain individually from a successful legal challenge, over the long term Reddit would continue to be a fraught place for amateur and semi-professional content creators.

Certain parts of the Reddit community appear to be sympathetic to these issues, and the complaints of dissenting users like Menning and Grelle have received active support from some users and moderators on the site. This has led to changes in the way content is being posted and managed on Aww, and has also driven the

emergence of a satirical user-run court entitled Karma Court. In these spaces moderators and members establish community norms, regularly police the correct attribution of works and challenge the de-contextualisation of content overtly encouraged by Reddit, Imgur and other subforums. In the following section I will examine both Aww and Karma Court in order to explore how these norms are established and negotiated by both moderators and users alike.

reddit.com/r/aww: The Online Hub of Cute Animal Pictures

As we have seen, the design of Reddit and Imgur creates a number of problems for amateur creators who wish to protect their intellectual property. To address these shortcomings, the Aww community has created its own informal regulatory systems. Volunteer moderators play a crucial role: they establish informal codes of conduct for the Aww community and enforce various rules about how the site should be used. One of these rules relates to attribution. Users are asked to "post original content whenever possible or attribute original content creators" ("The cutest things on the internet!"). Due to the volunteer nature of the work and the size of the Aww sub-reddit, moderator enforcement is haphazard. Consequently, responsibility falls on the wider user community to self-police.



Despite its informal nature, this process manages to facilitate a fairly consistent standard of attribution. In this way it functions as an informal method of intellectual property protection. It is worth noting however that this commitment to original content is not solely due to the moral character of Aww users. A significant motivation is the distribution of karma points amongst Reddit users. Karma, which represents your good standing within the Reddit community, can be earned through user likes and votes – these push the most popular content to the front page of each subforum. Thus karma stands as a numerical representation of a user's value to Reddit.

This ostensibly democratic system has the paradoxical effect of fuelling intellectual property violations on the site. Users often repost other users' jpegs, animated gifs, and other content, in order to reap the social and cultural capital that comes with posting a popular picture. In some cases they claim authorship of the content; in other cases they simply re-post content that they feel "belongs to the internet" (Douglas). Some content is so popular or pervasive online (this content that is often described as "viral") that users feel there is little reason or need to attribute content. This helps to explain the persistence of ownership and attribution conflicts on Reddit. In the eyes of some users and moderators the management of these rights and the correct distribution of karma are seen to be vital to the long-term functioning of site. The karma system offers a numerical representation of each contributor's value. Re-posting already successful content and claiming it as your own challenges the proper functioning of the karma system and potentially 'inhibits the innovative potential of contributions' (Richterich).

On Aww the re-posting of original content is viewed as a taboo act that breaches these norms. The poster is seen to have engaged in deceptive conduct in order to gain karma for their user profile. In addition there is a strong ethic that runs through these comment threads that the original creator deserves attribution. There is a presumption that this attribution is vital in order to increasing the possible marketability of the posted content and to recognise and encourage creators within the community. This sort of community-driven regulation contrasts with the aforementioned site design of Reddit and Imgur, which frustrates effective authorship attribution practices. Aww users, in contrast, have shown a willingness to defend what they see as the intellectual property rights of content creators.

A series of recent examples outline how this process works in practice. User "moonlikeme123" posted a picture of a cat with its hands on the steering wheel of a car. The picture was entitled "we don't need to ask for directions, Helen". During the same day, three separate users had identified the picture as a repost, with one noting that the same picture was already on the front page of Aww. "moonlikeme123" received no karma points for the picture. In a second example, the user "nibblur" posted a photo of a kitten "hunting" a toy mouse. Within a day, one enterprising user had identified the original photographer – "torode", an amateur photographer – and linked to his Reddit profile (see fig. 2) ("ferocious cat hunting its prey: aww."). One further example: on 15 July 2013 "Cuzacelmare" posted a picture of two dogs comforting each other – an image which had originally been posted by "lauface". Again, users were quick to point out the lack of attribution and the attempt to claim someone else's content as their own ("Comforting her sister during a storm: aww").



It is worth noting that some Reddit users consider attributing content to be entirely without benefit. Some deride karma as "meaningless" and suggest that as a significant amount of content online is regularly reposted elsewhere, there is little harm done in re-posting what is essentially amateur content destined to be lost in the bowels of the internet. For example, the comments that follow Cuzacelmare's reflect an ambivalence about reposting, suggesting that users weigh up the benefits of exposure gained by the re-posting against the lack of attribution granted and the increasingly decontextualized nature of the photo itself:

Why does everyone get so bitchy about reposts. Not everyone is on ALL the time or has been on Reddit since it was created. I mean if you've seen it already ignore it. It's just picture you aren't forced to click the link. [sic]
("Comforting her sister during a storm: aww")

We're arguing semantics, but any content that gets attention can benefit the creator, whether it's reddit or Youtube ("Comforting her sister during a storm: aww")

Such discussions are common on comment threads following re-posts by other users. They underline the conflicted status of this ephemeral media and the underlying frictions that are part of these processes. These discussions underline the fact that on Reddit the "sharing" (Kennedy) and "spreading" (Jenkins et al.) of content is not seen as an unquestioned positive but rather as a contestable structural feature that needs to be constantly negotiated and discussed.

These informal methods of identification, post-hoc attribution and criticism in comment threads have been the long-standing method used to redress questions of attribution and ownership of content on Reddit. However in recent times, Reddit users have turned to satirical methods of formal adjudication for particularly egregious cases. A sub-reddit, Karma Court, now functions as an informal tribunal in which punishment is meted out for "the abuse of karma and general contemptible actions heretofore identified as wrongdoing" ("Constitution and F.A.Q of the Karma Court"). Due to its double function as both an adjudicator and satire of users overly-invested in online debates, there is no limit to the possible "crimes" a user may be charged with. The following charges are only presented as guidelines and speak to common negative experiences on online:

- (1). Douchebaggery - When one is being a douche.
- (2). Defamation - Tarnishing another redditor's [user's] username.
- (3). Public Indecency - When a user flexes his or her 'e-peen' with the intent to shame other users.
- (4). OhShit.exe - Intentional reposting that results in reddit Gold.
- (5). GrandTheft.jpg - Reposting while claiming credit for the post.
- (6). Obstruction of Justice - Impeding or interfering with an investigation, such as submitting false screenshots, deleting evidence, or providing false evidence to the court.
- (7). Other - Literally anything else you want. We like creative names for charges.
("Constitution and F.A.Q of the Karma Court")

In Karma Court, legal representation can be sourced from a list of attorneys and judges, populated by users who volunteer to help adjudicate the case. They are required to have been a Reddit member for over six months. The only punishment is a public shaming.

Interestingly Karma Court has developed a fair reposting clause that attempts to manage the complex debates around reposting and attribution. Under the non-binding satirical clause, users are able to repost content if it has not featured on the front page of a sub-reddit for seven or more days, if the re-poster acknowledges in the title or description that they are re-posting or if the original poster has less than 30,000 link karma (which means that the original poster has not substantially contributed to the Reddit community). If a re-poster does not adhere by these rules and claims a re-post as their own original content (or "OC"), they can be charged with "grandtheft.jpg" and brought to trial by another Reddit user. As one of the most popular subforums, a number of cases have emerged from Aww.

The aforementioned re-poster "Cuzacelmare" ("I am bringing /U/ Cuzacelmare to trial ...") was "charged" through this process and served with a summons after denying "cute and innocent animals of that subreddit of their much deserved karma". Similar cases to do with re-posting without attribution on Aww involve "FreshCorio" ("Reddit vs. /U/FreshCorio ...") and "ninjacollin" ("People of Reddit vs. /U/ ninjacollin") who were also brought to karma court. In each case prosecutors were adamant that false authorship claims needed to be punished. With these mock trials run by volunteers it takes time for arguments to be heard and judgment to

occur; however "ninjacollin" expedited the legal process by offering a full confession. As a new user, "ninjacollin" was reprimanded severely for his actions and the users on Karma Court underlined the consequences of not identifying original content creators when re-posting content.

Ownership and Attribution: Amateur Media, Distribution and Law

The practices outlined above offer a number of alternate ways to think about amateur media and how it is distributed. An increasingly complex picture of content attribution and circulation emerges once we take into account the structural operation of Reddit, the intellectual property norms of users, and the various formal and informal systems of regulation that are appearing on the site. Such practices require users to negotiate complex questions of ownership between each other and in relation to corporate bodies. These negotiations often lead to informal agreements around a set of norms to regulate the spread of content within a particular community, suggesting that the lack of a formal legal process in these debates does not mean that there is an absence of regulation.

As noted throughout this paper, the spread of online content often involves progressive de-contextualisation. Website design features often support this process in the hopes of encouraging content to spread in a fashion amenable to their corporate goals. Considering this tendency for content to be decontextualized online, the presence of attribution norms on subforums like Aww is significant. Instead of remixing, spreading and re-purposing content indiscriminately, users retain a concept of ownership and attribution that tracks closely to the basic principles of copyright law. Rather than users radically redefining concepts of attribution and ownership, as prefigured in some of the more utopian accounts of participatory media, the dominant norms of the Reddit community extend a discourse of copyright and ownership.

As well as providing a greater level of detail to contemporary debates around amateur media and its viral or spreadable nature (Burgess; Jenkins; Jenkins et al), this analysis offers some lessons for copyright law. The emergence of norms in particular Reddit subforums which govern the use of copyrighted content and the use of a mock court structure suggests that online communities have the capacity to engage in forms of redress for amateur creators. These organic forms of copyright management operate adjacent to formal legal structures of copyright law. However, they are more accessible and practical for amateur creators, who do not always have the money to hire lawyers, especially when the market value of their content might be negligible. The informal regulatory systems outlined above may not operate perfectly but they reveal communities who are willing to engage foundational conversations around the importance of attribution and ownership. Following the existing literature (Fauchart and Von Hippel; Raustiala and Sprigman; Schultz; Oliar and Sprigman), I suggest that these online social norms provide a useful form of alternative protection for amateur creators.

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