

On The Internet, Nobody Knows You're A Dog

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Peter Steiner's cartoon, as published in The New Yorker

"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" is an adage which began as the caption of a cartoon by Peter Steiner published by The New Yorker on July 5, 1993. The cartoon features two dogs: one sitting on a chair in front of a computer, speaking the caption to a second dog sitting on the floor. As of 2000, the panel was the most reproduced cartoon from The New Yorker, and Steiner has earned over US\$50,000 from its reprinting.

History

Peter Steiner, a cartoonist and contributor to The New Yorker since 1980, said the cartoon initially did not get a lot of attention, but later took on a life of its own, and that he felt similar to the person who created the "smiley face". In fact, Steiner was not that interested in the Internet when he drew the cartoon, and although he did have an online account, he recalled attaching no "profound" meaning to the cartoon; it was just something he drew in the manner of a "make-up-a-caption" cartoon.

In response to the comic's popularity, he stated, "I can't quite fathom that it's that widely known and recognized."

As a milestone for Internet awareness

The cartoon marks a notable moment in Internet history. Once the exclusive domain of government

engineers and academics, the Internet was now a subject of discussion in general interest magazines like The New Yorker. Lotus 1-2-3 founder and early Internet activist Mitch Kapor commented in a Time magazine article in 1993 that "the true sign that popular interest has reached critical mass came this summer when the New Yorker printed a cartoon showing two computer-savvy canines..."

As a commentary on Internet privacy

The cartoon symbolizes an understanding of the Internet that stresses the ability of users to send and receive messages in general anonymity. Lawrence Lessig suggests "no one knows" because Internet protocols do not force users to identify themselves, although local access points such as a user's university may; but this information is privately held by the local access point and not part of the Internet transaction itself.

As a commentary on Internet sociology

A study by Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2000) on compulsive or problematic Internet use discusses this phenomenon, suggesting the ability to self-represent from behind the computer screen may be part of the compulsion to go online. The phrase can be taken "to mean that cyberspace will be liberatory because gender, race, age, looks, or even 'dogness' are potentially absent or alternatively fabricated or exaggerated with unchecked creative license for a multitude of purposes both legal and illegal", an understanding that echoed statements made in 1996 by John Gilmore, a key figure in the history of Usenet. The phrase also suggests the ability to "computer crossdress" and represent oneself as a different gender, age, race, etc. On another level, "the freedom which the dog chooses to avail itself of, is the freedom to 'pass' as part of a privileged group; i.e. human computer users with access to the Internet." In 2007, the cartoon was used to illustrate how the 17-year-old founder of a website could be mistaken for a seasoned Internet professional, and as a metaphor for the program Wikiscanner that is able to link anonymous editors of Wikipedia to the organization owning that IP address. There may also be relevance to the possibility of using the internet for pedophilia.

Influences

The cartoon has inspired the play Nobody Knows I'm a Dog by Alan David Perkins. The play revolves around six different individuals unable to effectively communicate with people in their lives who find the courage to socialize on the Internet, protected by their anonymity.

The Apple internet suite Cyberdog was named after this cartoon.

An Internet social search phenomenon in China, known as "human flesh search", coined the

sentence "On the Internet, everybody knows you're a dog", due to the human effort-collaborated exposure and mass distribution of personal information.

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