Grumpy Cat’s death marks the end of the joyful Internet



Enlarge / Grumpy Cat poses on the set as she makes her broadway debut in “Cats” on Broadway at The Neil Simon Theatre on September 30, 2016 in New York City.

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In 2012, America was halfway through President Obama’s time in office. The first *Avengers* movie came out, and *Hunger Games* premiered. Hope was high, and Reddit—the Web’s “front page”—was where anyone with a cute pet could get thousands of upvotes. Cats were the most popular, but occasionally a dog or two would slip in. Then, in September of that year, Bryan Bundesen posted a picture of his sister Tabatha’s cat, Tardar

Sauce, an 11-month old tabby with feline dwarfism that perpetually looked annoyed. The Internet was enraptured with Grumpy Cat.

That's how life on social media used to be. The biggest memeswere funny looking cats like Tardar and Lil Bub, or Mohawk Guy, and "Call Me Maybe." Memes weren't yet weapons of mass disruption (at least not on the scale that they came to be in 2016) and we still knew what a troll was. Now, Grumpy Cat is dead—the feline's owners announced her passing today on Twitter—and with her goes an era in which the Internet was more a place of joy than hate, uplift rather than harassment.



Obviously, this isn't all about Grumpy Cat. Scores of other memes and videos and animals were a part of the early-2000s Internet. But, just like many pop stars before her, Grumpy Cat is an avatar for her generation, a time when a cat could have a wildly successful online presence and be the hottest photo op at South by Southwest. Sure, 4chan was a little dicey back then, but for the most part, the lulz were harmless. (Or at least they seemed to be.) Back in 2012, and the years before, one of the Internet's central themes was that it was a place we all went to watch stupid videos and read Texts from Hillary. The most sexist thing presidential candidates said back then were blundered statements like "binders full of women." Years later, the videos are largely sponcon and the memes about Clinton are no longer funny—and might have cost her a presidential election.

It's (sadly) fitting that Grumpy Cat's death comes so close to the shuttering of the website YTMND. You're the Man Now Dog, like Reddit or Know Your Meme, was a place where, not too long ago, people went online for collective amusement. You could share a laugh and leave. The "Don't Read the Comments" rule applied, but the comments didn't automatically show up in your

Twitter mentions. The challenges were about ice buckets and “Gangnam Style”—things far less dangerous than eating Tide Pods. Yes, we still have Drake and Beyoncé to give us challenges—some stars will always burn bright—but even their presence online only feels like small shafts of light in an otherwise shadowy, and shady, abyss.

Was Grumpy Cat the most important figure on the Internet ever? No. But her passing is a reminder of a time that already feels like decades ago, even though it’s only been the length of most people’s college education. There was an era when a lethargic cat—or a dance, or *Ecce Homo*-ing a painting—could be a token of collective happiness for months. Nostalgia can be dangerous, and I know this might make me a curmudgeon, but I believe those days are gone.

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