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JONATHON TURNBULL
University of Cambridge

ADAM SEARLE
University of Cambridge

WILLIAM M. ADAMS
University of Cambridge

Quarantine encounters with digital animals: More-than-human geographies of lockdown life

ABSTRACT

Quarantine conditions led to the proliferation of digital encounters with nonhuman animals. Here, we explore three prominent forms: creaturely cameos, avatar acquaintances and background birding. These virtual encounters afforded during lockdown life generated novel and affective human–animal relations that could have lasting effects for humans and nonhumans post-quarantine, posing interesting questions for more-than-human scholarship.

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KEYWORDS

human–animal
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COVID-19
Chernobyl
peregrine falcons

1. Zoom: an online videoconferencing platform (<https://zoom.us/>).
2. Chernobyl: common Russian-English transliteration, Чернобыль. Chornobyl: Ukrainian-English transliteration, Чорнобиль.
3. Supplementary information was provided via e-mail.

INTRODUCTION

The viral emergence of SARS-CoV-2 led to the imposition of significant constraints on physical movement and social activity. The resulting physical confinement of ‘lockdown’ changed daily rhythms of human and nonhuman life. Confinement led to the emergence of new geographies of engagement and encounter with the nonhuman world, from a spike in garden birdwatching to a surge in balcony horticulture. Consequently, this afforded alternative modes of encounter with animals through digital media, which we explore in this article using a more-than-human geographical framework.

The power of digital technologies to capture and transmit information about the lives of nonhuman animals is well recognized (Benson 2010; Verma et al. 2016). Since the 1990s, digital photography and videography have made closed-circuit and remote trail cameras widely available (Adams 2019). Digitization has transformed the remote surveillance of animals, which in turn has affected understandings of animals’ geographies, ethologies and mobilities (Hodgetts and Lorimer 2020). Digital technologies apparently allow an increased intimacy with the everyday lives of animals (Buller 2015).

Visions of nature are always mediated in some way, although only sometimes electronically (Davies 2000). *Live* technologies, however, provide new modes of mediation. Here, we consider three forms of digitally mediated animal encounter that provide real-time glimpses into animal worlds, all of which were popular during lockdown. First, we discuss ‘creaturely cameos’: the live-streaming of rescued, sanctuary and farm animals in the United States and United Kingdom into private Zoom meetings for paying customers.¹ Second, we consider ‘avatar acquaintances’: human-guided virtual visits to the Chernobyl² Exclusion Zone organized by an NGO that feeds the dogs living on the site of the 1986 nuclear disaster. Third, we discuss ‘background birding’: the use of ‘nestcams’ to live-stream the nests of birds of prey – specifically urban peregrine falcons – 24 hours a day. We conducted twelve semi-structured or ‘digital walkalong’ interviews with animal sanctuaries, a Chernobyl NGO and nestcam hosts between March and May 2020.³ Interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymized and analysed. Quotes are italicized. In exploring these digital encounters, we consider their significance for how we relate to, live with and learn about animals in the future.

CREATURELY CAMEOS

Videos of domestic animals have always been popular online. During quarantine, however, they have reached newfound fame as they are live-streamed globally. Goats, sheep, chickens, cows and other historically farmed animals found their way into the videocalls of paying customers. From March 2020, certain US animal sanctuaries – closed to the public during quarantine – began offering ‘creaturely cameos’ where animals ‘drop-in’ to videoconferences to generate ‘missing revenue’ (Figure 1). Sanctuaries spoke of financial concerns brought on by the absence of visitors during lockdown. In response to these concerns, they began to use the personalities of their nonhuman ‘residents’ to raise income through the production of ‘virtual encounter value’ (Barua 2016). One sanctuary (sanctuary 1) noted, *‘we were so far behind in the revenue that I was like... I might have to lay people off... and how’re we gonna pay for supplies?... that was on a Friday... The Zoom call thing came out on Saturday and in one day we went from... “what were we gonna do?”, to “I think we can do this”’*.

Sanctuaries reported an overwhelming and immediate demand when they went online in March. Zoom calls were quickly pre-booked every day, 9–5,



Figure 1: Zoom-mediated views of ewes.

for three months. Extreme demand was *'almost certainly a product of being in quarantine; everybody being remote and not being able to see each other in person... needing an extra bit of relief'* (sanctuary 2). Creaturely cameos afforded viewers escape from the monotony of confinement. Normally lasting around twenty minutes, encounters could be tailored to particular audiences. One important audience was corporations, where according to one sanctuary manager, staff were *'overworked'*, or in *'a company where they're feeling very stressed just about their industry having been hit really hard, so the bosses, the managers, are just trying to bring a smile quickly to the faces of their employees'* (sanctuary 2). Additionally, creaturely cameos provided a digital spacetime for *'far-flung families to reconnect'*; they were *'about connecting people, too'* (sanctuary 3).

Creaturely cameos were often unannounced: *'one person will notice and be like "is there an animal here?" and everyone else is just like "what?! Is that a goat? Why is there a goat here?"'* (sanctuary 2). This novelty factor, or surprise, produces an affective encounter that not only impulsively distracts from quarantine – many reported people crying or laughing uncontrollably from sheer confusion – but also, we suggest, from the stresses of corporate capitalism. One viewer, for instance, jokingly asked one of the goats *'if she had any updates to bring to the budget meeting'* (sanctuary 4). The *'live'*, *'bespoke'* or *'personal'* qualities of the encounters were key to their popularity (sanctuary 4).

Drop-ins were often curated to enable sanctuaries to continue their activist missions, like promoting plant-based diets. Surprise animal appearances in videocalls with hundreds of participants reach people who might not otherwise visit a sanctuary and may be unaware of the issues they raise. These digital face-to-face encounters thus open a space for dialogue, encouraging compassion and care for animals. In the digital realm, the sanctuaries' message – to inspire people to make more compassionate choices by encountering

animals – is given new reach. Digital technologies can therefore recruit animals into a particular ideological frame, which was not always welcomed: *'we actually had somebody who made their background screen a steak... so I think there's a little bit of like defensiveness that pops up... there's always someone that's going to get like "don't-take-away-my-bacon-mad"'* (sanctuary 4).

Creaturely cameos affect animals, too. Lack of physical visitors reduced the regularity of haptic interactions for some animals, whilst others were more regularly petted as their comfortability in front of the camera suited them to being live-streamed more often. A football-playing cow in Colorado was a viewers' favourite. Specific animals were therefore enrolled in the production of encounter value more often and intensely than others, outside of their usual 'working hours' and at weekends: *'some miss having a lot of that hands-on time, some think it's the greatest thing that their Monday through Friday has extended to Saturdays and Sundays... it boils down to their personality'* (sanctuary 2). Some animals apparently became friendlier and *'less anxious'* due to increased contact time with familiar people – staff or volunteers rather than visitors – whilst others seemed resistant to technology in their space. How virtual encounters in such spaces might allow for the co-flourishing of humans and animals thus remains an open question (see Gorman 2019 on non-digital/in-person encounters on care farms), which should be explored in future research.

AVATAR ACQUAINTANCES

Virtual trips to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Ukraine became available during quarantine, allowing paying visitors to meet and 'feed' the dogs that roam the site of the 1986 nuclear disaster (Figure 2). Some of them are likely



Figure 2: Virtual dog-feeding in Chernobyl.

to be descendants of pets abandoned during the original evacuation of the Zone. The virtual tours were arranged by an NGO that manages, monitors and cares for the dogs. The 'virtual feeding programme' quickly became one of Airbnb's most popular virtual experiences globally, facilitating unique digital human–dog encounters. Some dogs – neither fully domesticated nor fully feral – only approach people they are familiar with. As our guide told us '*it's impossible to get within twenty metres of certain dogs*', whilst others are less cautious and are easily petted. The virtual feeding programme thus relies on the already-existing interpersonal relationship between this specific guide and these specific dogs to enable the multispecies encounter to be live-streamed. The guide's bodily presence and established familiarity with these 'semi-feral' dogs enable the human–dog proximity required to record the interaction.

Encountering the dogs in this way therefore blurs insider/outsider and actual/virtual dichotomies. Avatar acquaintances are dependent on both the technology and the uniquely situated relations between more-than-human bodies. The viewer's experience is shaped by their power to influence interactions between the on-screen human guide/feeder and dogs. The guide, therefore, is a gatekeeper for the more-than-human encounter, curating and narrating the Chernobyl dogs' stories. They provide a pseudo-physicality to the experience – an avatar-like quality – as viewers see dogs being petted from a first-person point of view (Figure 3), which they could not necessarily attain in-person themselves.



Figure 3: Zoom-petting.

The uptake of virtual dog tours in Chernobyl has been rapid: *'no one could have predicted how fast virtual experiences would be taken up... we're learning what their value is'*. The virtual experience turned out to be more popular than in-person tours offered pre-quarantine, allowing paying viewers digital access to an otherwise relatively inaccessible place. Our guide *'saw the quarantine as a challenge'* and the virtual tours allowed them *'to adapt and overcome it'*. Lockdown stimulated an *'accelerated integration of technology into people's daily lives... These technologies were futuristic before COVID-19 – people expected them to become normal but never this quickly – they were forced upon us as a result of the quarantine'*. Our guide told us the success of these virtual experiences means they will continue offering them post-lockdown.

BACKGROUND BIRDING

In our third example, we consider images of peregrine falcons nesting on the spire of St. George's church, in the centre of Sheffield, South Yorkshire. The peregrines arrived in *'the late noughties'* and have become *'an established feature of Sheffield's skyline'*, a representative from Sheffield Peregrines told us. Since 2012, they have been live-streaming from two webcams – one offering a close view of the nest, the other of a perch facing the cityscape. During quarantine, online traffic soared more than tenfold, as the digitized peregrines found new audiences: *'Some people have a lot more time on their hands in lockdown. Anecdotally, I know people in both my real and online circles are having trouble sleeping and are therefore drawn to places such as the Sheffield Peregrines webcams'*.

The nestcams took on new significance under lockdown conditions, as people found comfort in watching life go on, particularly in urban spaces with which they were familiar: *'The city below the Peregrine platform may be deserted and quiet but the Peregrines are carrying on pretty much as they have (almost) every year... against the familiar backdrop of the cityscape which we know so well but cannot currently inhabit'*.

Quarantine also overlapped with the nesting season, when the site is usually most popular due to the *'aesthetic charisma'* of cuteness associated with fledglings (Lorimer 2007). Yet the level of online traffic during quarantine has still been exceptional. The webcam images of a peregrine perching with the Sheffield Skyline behind it *'has become quite iconic... especially the evening shot in the warm glow of sunset... It's quite a juxtaposition – the master of the skies against the built world'* (Figure 4).

In contrast to our other forms of quarantine digital animal encounters, background birding owes its attraction to its ability to offer insider perspectives into the ordinary lives of animals, free from human interaction and free of payment. Many other birds have been live-streamed during lockdown; coots, robins, treecreepers, jays, jackdaws, geese and others could be found on the BBC's *Springwatch Live* continuous streaming service. Nestcams, it seems, found new meaning during lockdown as they became intertwined with the quarantine's *'affective atmosphere'* (Anderson 2009) – a personal and collective feeling, spatiotemporally bounded by particular lockdown conditions. During prolonged indoor living, engaging them digitally allowed for nature-based escapism. The falcons became *'conceptual guides to alternative atmospheres'* (Lorimer et al. 2017: 39).

But as Alexander and Kerr (2020) note in the context of livestreams operated by zoos and aquariums during lockdown, live mediations and the *'omni-present surveillance'* of *'wild'* animals dangerously allow us *'to have our cake*



Figure 4: Peregrine falcon and cityscape streamed via webcam. Photo: Sheffield Peregrines.

and eat it'. Seeking entertainment or therapy from livestreams of nature-as-usual allow 'us' to distance 'ourselves' from the damage 'humanity' continues to inflict on the environment, including the significant environmental impacts of livestreaming technologies themselves (Alexander and Kerr 2020). There are also limits to the ability of nestcams to replace material in-person encounters as one digital birder explained: *'the digital realm can't really take up this slack. Nothing can replace holding a meet-up in the church grounds on a lovely sunny evening observing the birds and answering questions of passers-by'*.

Nestcams existed before – and will indeed exist after – the COVID-19 pandemic. The unique conditions of the quarantine, however, are embedding these digital human–animal relations into many people's daily rhythms with newfound intensity. What characterizes the affective relations afforded in these transmissions is their reliability, *'the birds are reliably always present on camera [at certain times] unlike the birds in our gardens, which are a little more ephemeral to those who aren't full-time birders'*. Twitter users reported checking in on the peregrines multiple times each day; some noting that without the regularities of outdoor life to attend to, this was the first year they have followed the peregrines closely. The team managing the popular peregrine nestcam at Salisbury Cathedral told us that digital birders regularly called to check on peregrines when they had not seen them in a while or when there were problems with the live-stream. Nestcams, therefore, allow for interpersonal relationships to form between viewers and individual animals, a form of digitally mediated multispecies care perhaps, albeit awkwardly entwined with more-than-human surveillance and the anthropocentric gaze.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Quarantine conditions have engendered new modes of attunement to, and commodification of, nonhuman life through digital encounters. We have explored three examples: creaturely cameos, avatar acquaintances and background birding. There may be many others. Digital animal encounters during quarantine, we suggest, have given people an experience of the *'unscripted realness of life going on'*, offering a glimpse of *'normality'* towards life after lockdown (sanctuary 2).

The sense of proximity to ongoing life provided by these experiences, however (paradoxically) relies on a physical and technological separation between watchers and watched. The encounters are mediated by technologies of visualization in important ways. First, they are dependent on – indeed they make obligate – the use of particular technologies, including mobile phones, laptops, multi-person conference software and the Internet (with its complex systems of data movement, storage and management and the physical infrastructure, energy consumption and human labour that comprises it). These technologies predate lockdown but have been given new importance by it. And second, these encounters also depend on particular constellations of capital and the services provided by multinational corporations, for example, Zoom, Google (Meet) and Microsoft (Teams).

Lockdown digital animal encounters comprise part of the *'spectacle'* of the new media (Büscher 2016), and are fraught with tensions – between inside/outside, presence/absence, actual/virtual. The different forms of digital encounter we have considered here are linked by their capacity to generate real-time, more-than-human affects. They differ from other digital representations of animals – such as those in social media posts – because they produce affects and interpersonal relations through *liveness*. Operating differently from produced and curated spectacles that can be replayed, this liveness, we suggest, is momentary, fleeting, felt, embodied, bespoke, impulsive and – above all – transient. To experience it demands *'being there'*, albeit not physically, but in the digital realm. This, in turn, has created new revenue-generating opportunities, implicating animals in novel forms of virtual encounter value production that warrants closer scrutiny.

As quarantines ease, it is likely that demand for digital animal encounters of the kind we describe is likely to decline. They will cease to seem novel, fewer videoconferences will take place, offline social lives will re-blossom and people will be afforded opportunities for unmediated physical encounters with the animal world. Despite this, however, all of our respondents intended to maintain their engagement with digital livestreaming technologies. Quarantine, therefore, is likely to have impacts on future patterns of animal encounter. The juxtaposition of technology and pandemic lockdown has created new affective channels for animal education, conservation and activism that foster emotional connectivity. The longevity of these digital encounters, and their influence on the forming of new affective alliances and movements, is an important topic for future research.

Future research, then, might critically engage with how live digital animal encounters have the potential to foster multispecies relationships and care whilst simultaneously furthering capital's infusion into animals' lives and geographies (Hodgetts and Lorimer 2020). It should be critical of how livestreaming technologies could reproduce dominant species hierarchies and asymmetrical power relations between subject and object of the human gaze/

viewer (Davies 2000; Alexander and Kerr 2020). Such research also provides opportunities to bridge between more-than-human geographies and media studies; geographers might engage critically with methodologies for analysing the production and consumption of media texts, whilst media researchers might borrow and develop conceptual toolkits for exploring the role of nonhumans in the mediation of more-than-human worlds.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jonathon Turnbull is a cultural geographer based at the University of Cambridge. His current research explores the human–animal relations and weird ecologies of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. He also writes on urban ecologies and the bovine geographies of India’s sacred cattle.

Contact: Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, 20 Downing Place, Cambridge, CB2 1QB, UK.

E-mail: jjt44@cam.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2430-9884>

Adam Searle is a cultural geographer at the University of Cambridge. His research explores how biotechnologies are creating new meanings in the extinction crisis, with a focus on the movement to ‘resurrect’ extinct animals.

Contact: Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, 20 Downing Place, Cambridge, CB2 1QB, UK.

E-mail: aeds2@cam.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5319-895X>

William M. Adams is Moran Professor of Conservation and Development and Fellow of Downing College at the University of Cambridge. His work approaches questions of environmental development and conservation from perspectives of political ecology and environmental history.

Contact: Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, 20 Downing Place, Cambridge, CB2 1QB, UK.

E-mail: wa12@cam.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1559-0379>

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