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Webcam-travel: conceptual foundations

Dr David Jarratt

Introduction

Webcam-travel is 'the act of viewing places or attractions through a webcam' (Jarratt 2020). This essay builds upon the publication from which this definition was taken - the first to consider the experience of webcam-travel. It reported research findings relating to the COVID-19 lockdown, rather than suggesting a theoretical framework for this phenomenon, which is the aim here. The characteristics of webcam-travel, in contrast with other forms of physical and non-corporeal tourism, are considered and implications are discussed. In providing a theoretical framework and context, this essay hopes to stimulate further scholarly activity around an overlooked but increasingly common occurrence.

Many individual organisations stream place-based webcams; providing live and unedited video images which can be accessed online. Usually, the webcam is fixed on a certain point. Wildlife cameras are the best known but city-centres, holiday resorts, coastlines and landmarks often feature. These organisations include a variety of tourism and hospitality businesses, from local attractions to cruise-ships and well-known hotels. Some organisations host thousands of webcams on their websites, an example is Skyline webcams which hosts city-cams, resort-cams, beach-cams and more. In an e-mail to the author (11th May 2020), the company states that its website typically attracts over 70 million page views per month and this figure increased by 85% with the COVID-19 lockdown. Such increases in usage meant that webcam-travel recently attracted the media attention that it previously lacked. In addition, academics have shown an interest in images from place-based webcams as a source of data – crowd density, predicting visitor numbers based on weather etc. (Dallen and Groves, 2001). Yet, the only available study on the experience of webcam-travel was a recent one by Jarratt (2020), which employed an online survey during the lockdown. It suggested that during the pandemic people were using the cameras more frequently, to elicit a sense of freedom, a nostalgia for pre-COVID times and, above all else, a sense of connection. 90% felt a sense of connection to place or nature through Webcam-travel and 83% felt more positive afterwards. Wildlife cams and coastal scenes in tourism areas were especially popular. The survey also suggested that 69% of respondents were more likely to visit places they had viewed through webcams. Other than this, there appears a gap in the academic literature concerning the phenomenon of webcam-travel.

Webcam-travel, virtual-tourism, and other forms of non-corporeal travel.

Webcams link the material world and the virtual in a distinctive manner; they reflect the unedited material world, in real-time, through the internet. Indeed, Webcam-travel does not easily fit definitions of virtual-tourism – meaning an online experience facilitated through more complex technologies (often virtual-reality), designed to offer a substitute for a real visit and focusing on simulation, immersion, and/or interaction (Ankomah and Larson, 2019; Prideaux and Singer, 2005). Even the most basic level of virtual-tourism would involve electronic 3D simulations or depictions which could be manipulated by the viewer (Ankomah and Larson, 2019). So, virtual-tourism and virtual-reality often aim to replicate the human experience and are likely to be interactive, whereas webcam-travel merely provides a live image (and occasionally sounds) of whatever the camera is pointed at. It does not simulate or re-create an experience and, in general, does not offer any significant level of interactivity.

This implies one of two things. Firstly, that most definitions of virtual-tourism are too narrow and are biased towards virtual-reality; they need to be widened to accommodate other technologies that can only offer a portal to a 'real' place, as opposed to one which is amended, created or recreated - as is more common in virtual-tourism. Or, secondly, webcam-travel does not belong with virtual-tourism and fits into another category; this essay adopts the second of these responses. Webcam-travel can be considered a sub-category of virtual-tourism, made distinct by its live nature and relatively simple technology. The differences/characteristics between webcam-travel and virtual-tourism are summarised in Table 1. There are of course similarities too as both are accessed through the internet and, ultimately, a screen; they are both types of non-corporeal travel that collapse space.

Table 1 - Differences between webcam-travel and virtual-tourism.

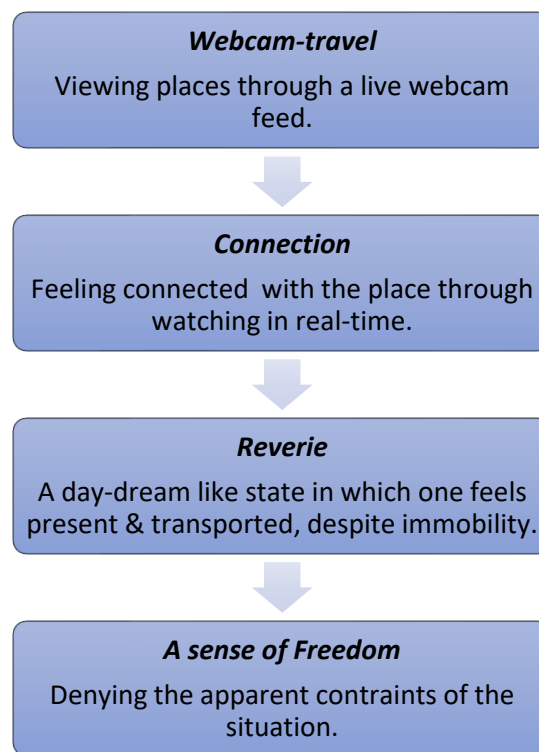
Webcam-travel	Virtual-tourism
Relies on relatively simple technology.	Relies on more complex technology (especially if one considers fully immersive 360-degree content).
Operates in real-time – 'live'.	Whilst virtual-reality can operate in real time, this is unusual in virtual-tourism.
Reflects the material world - 'real' places.	Virtual-tourism can reflect the material world but often relies on simulated or augmented virtual environments.
No interpretation present and is un-edited.	Interpretation is very likely.
No / very limited interaction.	Virtual-tourism is immersive, and the simulations tend to be interactive
Widespread / common	Novel – although participation is increasingly common.

Webcam-travel is also distinct from other forms of non-corporeal travel, or imaginative travel, such as travel writing or television (Larsen et al, 2006; Gale, 2009). These webcams are not 'thinking', they do not offer a perspective on the past and they do not necessarily need interpretation of any kind. Nor is there a performance, for the subjects of these cameras are usually oblivious to their presence, for example, pedestrians in Time Square or nesting Ospreys. Any drama is un-staged; there is no front stage or backstage - 'where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted' (Goffman, 1969: 114). Nor do they capture a single moment in isolation, a trace, a memory - like photography in which the gaze is anything but fixed and the input of the photographer is essential (Berger, 1980), even if both offer images of the world.

The appeal of webcam-travel and parallels with physical travel.

So, the fact that webcam-travel collapses space but not time sets it apart from most other forms of imaginative travel and appears to bound up with the appeal of this experience. For operating in real-time facilitates a sense of connection - one can easily imagine oneself present at the scene; viewers are then transported to another place, despite their immobility. Through webcam-travel a daydream-like reverie can be momentarily experienced, the impossible is achieved and we arrive at our destination without moving (this transported immobility is a concept which is explored in more detail subsequently). According to Bachelard (1971), a reverie is a fleeting and fanciful musing that can be so deep that it has the potential to transcend space and time and which is often associated with freedom. That is the case here as the reverie, in which we travel without moving, has the potential to facilitate a sense of freedom, as our physical constraints are overcome and we arrive at the destination of our choice. Figure 1 summarizes webcam-travel as described here.

Fig. 1. The webcam-travel experience.



The differences between physical travel and their virtual equivalents seem obvious, as one is a multi-sensory haptic experience in a new environment and the other simply involves the visual consumption of an image. Furthermore, Urry (2003) saw the internet as little more than an accessory to physical travel and Jansson (2002) suggested that on-line experiences reinforce the desire for physical travel – neither saw virtual-tourism as a substitute. Yet social media is increasingly shaping the visitor economy experience (Korin, 2016) and there have been recent developments in virtual-reality technologies, which now aim to replicate travel-related experiences (Ankomah and Larson, 2019; Krug, 2006; Prideaux and Singer, 2005). Furthermore, there are some similarities between travels in cyberspace and physical space and both be considered as part of the heightened mobility of the 21st century, in which space/distance appears less significant than it used to be (Bauman, 1998; Larsen et al, 2006). Through webcam-travel one can consume the visual with the minimum physical effort

or risk, something which is symptomatic of mass tourism more generally, as Virilio (2008: 16) explains,

We are seeing the beginnings of a '*generalized arrival*' whereby everything arrives without having to leave, the nineteenth century's elimination of the journey (that is, of the space interval and of time) combining with the abolition of *departure* at the end of the twentieth, the journey thereby losing its successive components and being overtaken by *arrival* alone.

Webcam-travel and virtual-tourism can be considered the illusion of arrival without physical travel. This is certainly paradoxical for anyone who draws a clear distinction between the virtual and corporeal world, but could this paradox be part of the appeal of such experiences? For it is, arguably, already a part of corporeal tourism experiences. It takes the form of transported immobility, that is the spectacle of stability, against the backdrop of a new landscape or, perhaps, the appeal of travelling but without moving (or at least without the amount of movement that one would expect). Barthes (1979) uses the example of a railway dining car speeding through new landscapes as the traveller leisurely consumes a freshly cooked meal in comfort, thereby denying the apparent constraints of the situation. Tourism aims to achieve such an 'illusion of immobility: in the panic and pleasure of transplantation' (Barthes, 1979: 144). Webcam-travel and virtual-tourism can be considered an extension of this - modern technology highlighting the transported immobility of tourism (see Krug, 2006). So, whatever one's views on the distinctions between physical travel and the online equivalents, there are also similarities, for the tension between stasis and freedom is part of their appeal.

Implications.

Webcam-travel has generally been overlooked by tourism scholars, who have favoured the promise of virtual-reality. Yet it offers fertile ground for future scholarship, not least re-conceptualising virtual-tourism to accommodate webcam-travel alongside virtual and augmented realities. Its effectiveness as a marketing tool to influence travel decision making warrants future research - in particular, the relationship between webcam travel and place attachment. It seems that webcam-travel is significant to the tourism industry because the sense of connection it engenders translates into increased motivation for physical visits. For it is now widely accepted that online experiences can reinforce the desire for physical travel and destination identity can be effectively communicated through online images (Jansson, 2002; Govers and Go, 2006). Furthermore, virtual-tourism can engage potential visitors whilst highlighting unique selling points. It seems that webcam-travel can offer something similar, as well an appealing real-time element (summarised in Figure 1) and a lower financial commitment. During a period of economic recovery, in which further lockdowns may take place, the humble webcam offers a simple but effective way for providers to connect to visitors. The appeal of the real-time element of webcam-travel may also interest futurologists considering tourism/mobilities and technology.

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