In the first half of 2020, Zoom – a form of video conferencing – has surged to global popular attention. As the COVID-19 pandemic has taken hold around the planet, and more and more people have been confined to home in semi-voluntary isolation or forced quarantine, so Zoom has flourished. Zoom provides an easy-to-use and inexpensive means of communicating simultaneously with colleagues, classmates, students, employees, family, and friends next door, in the next state, or in another country.

While video conferencing software has been available for some time (e.g. Skype since 2003; Apple FaceTime since 2010; Microsoft Teams since 2017), its capture of the geographical imagination has surely been awaiting the kind of juncture that the pandemic and Zoom have afforded. Given its implications for space, place, environment, and interconnection, the four fundamental concepts that Alaric Maude (2020) identified as making geography geographical in his June 2020 Royal Geographical Society of Queensland Thomson Oration, it seems self-evident that video conferencing has clear and tremendous geographical significance. Yet geographers have given little attention to it. There are some exceptions – such as Hracs and Pinch’s (2020) work considering the role of video conferencing in the nourishment and extension of knowledge communities; Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst’s (2017) work in Skype-based interviewing in geography, and Hynes et al.’s (2020) paper which includes discussion of the significance of virtual court hearings – but overall, the discipline seems surprisingly, even stunningly, quiet on the subject. And outside geography’s focus research appears to concentrate on just a few areas, in particular the technical aspects of teleconferencing (Clegg et al., 2017), its significance as an educational and research resource (Floyd et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2020), and its prospective value in the provision of medical care (Fisher et al., 2020; Moyle et al., 2020).

This brief commentary takes up the video conferencing lacuna in geography, offering a few preliminary and tentative observations on the relationship between Zoom and place, perhaps geography’s most fundamental concept.

Zoom, or more properly Zoom Video Communications, Inc., is a California-based video-communications company offering a free (for a basic package), easy to use, and recordable means of video conferencing for groups numbering up to 100 people (under the software’s default settings) United States Securities and Exchange Commission (US SEC, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom grew dramatically. In December 2019, prior to the pandemic, there were 10 million daily users in Zoom meetings. After the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020) Zoom’s daily use figure that month reached 200 million. In April, it had climbed to 300 million. Where Zoom was initially intended for business purposes (Yuan cited in Warren, 2020) during the pandemic it has come to be used to support family gatherings, weekly drink sessions, weddings and funerals, school and university classes, gym sessions, yoga, karaoke and ‘live’ music performances, public meetings, and religious worship.

While there is no doubt that Zoom has some very interesting implications for key geographical concepts, namely space (e.g. Zoom’s roles in time-space compression), environment (e.g. Zoom’s potential to reduce the need for polluting travel to attend face-to-face meetings across the city or across the planet), and interconnection (e.g. Zoom’s significance in reconfiguring social and business
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affiliations along time zones rather than political jurisdictions), I think its relationships to place are initially less obvious but worth serious consideration by geographers. Let me elaborate.

In its default settings, Zoom provides vision of each participant in their location/setting (e.g. office, study, kitchen table) to all other meeting attendees. There is an option to switch off the video but for most meetings this is not especially popular. After all, one of the reasons for video conferencing is to be able to see one another. A consequence of the use of video is that during COVID-19 lockdown and by means of Zoom, meeting participants are revealing aspects of their home lives and domestic environment, either voluntarily or somewhat reluctantly, to people who might never otherwise have access to those places. In prospectively problematic disclosures, academics and students are revealing parts of their homes to one another. Employees find themselves gazing into the home of their boss – and vice versa. Friends and acquaintances see aspects of one another’s homes and lives that might otherwise remain hidden.

For some people there are significant anxieties associated with such disclosures of personal and private places (Andrews, 2020) which can be addressed through use of Zoom’s standard ‘virtual backgrounds’. The three basic still backdrops available are ‘San Francisco’, featuring the Golden Gate bridge; ‘Grass’, depicting a few blades in a meadow; and ‘Earth’, which is a view of our planet from outer space. There are also two video backdrops: ‘Beach’ featuring a palm-fringed tropical coast and ‘Northern Lights’. These backdrops permit a user to display an image or video as their background during a Zoom meeting. Over and above the small range of backdrops available from Zoom are those now offered by a large number of other businesses and organisations for download. These backdrops have at least two geographically related implications.

First, the backdrops mean that “Even if you can’t travel, your Zoom meetings can” (Sachs, 2020). Zoom backdrops – whether software default and tailor-made – transport people from everyday, mundane home offices and kitchen tables to exotic beaches, dusk-lit megacities, and even into outer-space. They are, as Sachs (2020) also puts it, “your mental ticket to travel.” Users can create their own infinite range of backgrounds but cities (e.g. Adelaide, London, New York) and countries have seized the opportunity to market themselves through Zoom. For example, Tourism Australia (2020) has prepared backdrops depicting Canberra’s Floriade, Byron Bay, Uluru, the Great Barrier Reef and the Flinders Ranges encouraging users to “Get inspired to travel across Australia even in this world of virtual catch-ups” and “to keep the spirit of travel alive” (Fig. 1).

![Figure 1: Downloadable Zoom backdrop image. Surfers Paradise, Gold Coast, Queensland. Source: Tourism Australia (2020).](image-url)
And not to be left-out, universities have also seized the opportunities to promote themselves with institutions such as Colorado at Boulder, Monash, and Canterbury offering staff, students and alumni (or anyone else for that matter) free backgrounds showing logo-identified tropes featuring high-tech buildings, beautiful gardens bathed in dappled light, dreaming spires, and hallowed halls (see Fig. 2). Even the range and type of place-based images available and selected for use could form the basis of a fascinating study.

Second, Zoom backdrops provide opportunities for individuals to ‘re-place’ and therefore ‘re-present’ themselves. This is about both hiding an expression of one’s reality and replacing it with a new one – or a range of alternatives – depending on one’s audience. Instead...
of living in our own home, Zoom backgrounds invite us to live in an image of our choosing, where money and location are no object. Backdrops offer support to efforts to re-present ourselves as almost anyone we desire, be it an erudite scholar, sunbaked sea-god/goddess, or intrepid hiker. For example, REI, the high-end recreation equipment company, promises the opportunity for ‘Zoomers’ “to Take Your Next Conference Call from Your ‘Tent’” (Grothjan, 2020) (Fig. 3).

REI’s Zoom backgrounds mean that users can portray themselves as ‘glampers’, explorers, or folks in touch with, and connected to, the natural world. ‘Lifestyle’ retailer Anthropologie https://www.anthropologie.com/stories-community-zoom-backgrounds, where “outdoor style is second nature”, also offers free downloadable, branded Zoom backgrounds (see Fig. 4). Its backdrops give users opportunity to render themselves tasteful and affluent world citizens, in tune with the latest trends and fashions. In doing this, Anthropologie asks customers the truly fascinating question: “Ever wished you could live inside our catalog (sic)?” and offers the means

Figure 4: ‘Ever wished you could live inside our catalog?’ Downloadable Zoom backgrounds from Anthropologie.

to convey that impression. Of course, their invitation to *live inside the image* is not to be taken literally, but *Anthropologie* allows users, with the literal flick of a switch, to represent themselves as prosperous, suave, and sophisticated – even if the reality masked is one of overflowing sinks, leisure-wear, and household chaos. Given that context is critical to the shaping of identity (e.g. Anderson, 1988; Weiner, 2016), by using Zoom backdrops which situate us elsewhere, we are telling place-based stories about our preferred identity: who we would like to be and how we would like to be seen.

Zoom continues to transform the ways in which we communicate throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. And while it may still be too early to say whether these changes will endure, it certainly seems likely that video conferencing will have a much greater role in future social, educational and business activity. That geographers have given little to no attention to the significance of this communications medium since it first came into widespread popular usage over a decade ago seems remarkable. There certainly seems to be a rich and fascinating vein of inquiry here exploring not just the significance of Zoom and other video conferencing platforms for aspects of place such as those introduced here, but also for other key geographical concepts such as space, environment and interconnection.

References


