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Essay

The use of visual media as a tool for investigating animal behaviour

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In this essay we outline how video-related technology can be used as a tool for studying animal behaviour. We review particular aspects of novel, innovative animal behaviour uploaded by the general public via video-based media on the internet (using YouTube as a specific example). The behaviour of animals, particularly the play behaviour focused on here, is viewed by huge audiences. In this essay we focused on three different kinds of media clips: (1) interspecies play between dogs and a range of other species; (2) object play in horses; and (3) animal responses to stimuli presented on iPads, iPods and iPhones. We argue that the use of video is a good means of capturing uncommon or previously unknown behaviour, providing evidence that these behaviours occur. Furthermore, some of the behaviours featured on YouTube provide valuable insights for future directions in animal behaviour research. If we also take this opportunity to convey our knowledge to a public that seems to be fundamentally interested in animal behaviour, this is a good means of bridging the gap between knowledge among an academic few and the general public.

Highlights

► Video-related technology can be a preliminary tool for studying animal behaviour. ► We discuss three case studies related to animal play behaviour. ► YouTube can provide large sample sizes. ► It also increases chances of observation of rare behaviour. ► This means of engaging with the public has considerable potential for researchers.