

The Importance of the Social Web – Implications for the Tourism Industry and for Society

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Abstract

The social web is more than a technological innovation: it is a social innovation – it changes the way people and companies interact and communicate. New business models, new structures and new hierarchies in tourism enterprises and tourism organisations are the consequences of this transformation. The environment of tourism will be changed permanently by the influence of the social web on media landscapes, on media consumption and on construction of tourism imaginations. The central starting points of the debate are seized on in this article trying to visualise the challenges in tourism associated with the developments of the social web out of a scientific and practical point of the view.

Keywords: Social Web, Tourism, Principles, Internet, Society, Business Management

1 Introduction

The tourism industry always had high expectations of the internet. Tourism as an intangible service product can be perfectly adapted for electronic data transfer. Online travel communities and online ticket sales were said to have a bright future due to the fact that the presentation of necessary information for purchasing products in the internet is easy and the costs for daily updates are comparatively small. Moreover, the emotionalisation of travel products can be attained more simply compared to other kinds of the media, e.g. through the integration of pictures and videos (Buhalis, 2003). In the late 1990s such advantages were seen as ‘revolution’ of the internet. Taking the chances and possibilities of the internet into account it may be assumed that the changes and influences of the Internet will have an unprecedented impact on businesses and society because the internet is with its 10 to 15 years still a young media.

The term ‘social web’ is the best explanation for the current influence of the Internet on the society. “The social web is represented by a class of web sites and applications

in which user participation is the primary driver of value” (Gruber, 2008: 4). Referring to this statement, the changes on society and economy caused by the internet will be described in this article. The tourism industry will be the example used to demonstrate the influences and changes. In the end, the importance of the social web for the tourism industry shall be explained out of an academic as well as a business point of view.

2 Literature Review

The social web could emerge because the technological conditions have changed enormously compared to the early days of the internet (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The term Web 2.0, introduced by Tim O’Reilly in 2005, is said to be the reason for the paradigm changes in the internet. It outlines the technological changes (RSS-Feeds, AJAX, Mashups, Blogs, etc.).

The term social web is a better description for the developments in the internet better than Web 2.0 and is significantly older being used for the first time by Peter Hoschka in 1998 in the context of the „social web research programme. [...] Providing content via the World Wide Web has been the killer application of the internet in the last few years. Linking people will be the next killer application” (Hoschka, 1998). Back then, he already forecasted the transformation of the internet from a sheer source of information to a social network in which people interact socially. Thus, this research programme addressed some central topics of current research more than ten years ago. His work demonstrates that those considerations are nothing completely new. The social web means the development of the Web 2.0 by people and was forecasted many years ago by visionaries and scientists. The developments in the tourism industry are certainly not.

It is a fact that the communication monopoly is changing into a competition. One reason for this is the success of rating and review sites like Holidaycheck and Tripadvisor. Thoughts going beyond that are not comprehensively considered in scientific research yet (Bauhuber, 2009; Hopfinger & Günther, 2009). The adoption of tourism spaces with the aid of social media and the consequent practices are so far uninvestigated. Another consideration which is insufficiently observed in research is the use of new travel media as a critical success factor for tourism companies in an increasing severe competition. Scientific work in this context mostly deals with particular tools, platforms and technologies and their impact on tourism. The changes associated with the social web have an effect beyond economic perspectives and affect the way people act and interact for a long time.

The technological innovations of the Web 2.0 induce social innovation by the social web. Hence, social media is more than a technological innovation: it is a social innovation – it changes the way people and companies interact and communicate: markets are conversations now (Levine et al., 2000). These innovations are disruptive and they shake especially the tourism industry. Innovation is a destructive process which releases existing products and procedures and leads to a reconsideration of previous behaviours and aspiration levels.

3 Methodology

In this study, the internet and the social web with all their developments have been observed. In this participant observation, information was gathered from our daily experiences in our consultancy, from blogs, from Facebook, from Twitter and other platforms of the social web.

4 Findings and Discussion

Open Innovation

Social software meaning the software systems of the social web and including blogs, wikis, and social networks become a part of the external (marketing, branding, public relations) and of the internal (research and measurement, employee engagement) business communications. Within the business, the processes are self-activated and controlled but the external communication is often indiscriminate. In many cases, employees of a tourism company appear as individuals in the internet and are at the borderline between professional and private communication. "Centrally controlled communication via public relations offices is a thing of the past" (editor's note: translation from German) (Ebersbach et al., 2008, S. 211). Hence, the tasks and fields of work of employees, the professional fields and occupational titles (e.g. Community Manager), and the processes and structures within the business are changing. Thus, a discrepancy arises between the open, little hierarchy architecture of the social web and the still strict organisational structures of the business world. A consistent change management is necessary to react to these new challenges. Bienert (2008) distinguishes between three levels of change management: business culture, the motivation of employees, and strategies of implementation. As a result, the difference between a successful and a less successful company is based on the time an enterprise needs to deal with the new business rules and on the ability to adapt to the changing situation (Ullmann, 2000). It becomes more and more evident that the greatest potential for innovation exists in the structures of networks and in the integration of external competences rather than in the companies (Zerfass & Sandhu, 2008). The consequent open innovation characterised by Chesbrough (2003) is not a technological but a social innovation affecting the way on how people are organised within a business (Beinhocker, 2007). Due to the social web, consultants and customers become a part of the interactive value added of the new innovative tourism businesses.

Social Web in the Culturalistic Paradigm

The social web can be classified as a social development which can be assigned to a sociological model of changing societies. The model of thrill-seeking society by Schulze (2000) is an ideal-typical example which is already applicable in tourism research. Schulze refers to the dissolution of traditional social boundaries in the shift from the industrial to the service society. An individual in a society gets the chance to not only open herself/himself to the experiences but also to choose experiences

corresponding to their effect on the own well-being (Schulze, 2000). The social web can be located in this context because it enables a completely new communication experience with an internal impact on the communicating individual. Communication through media in the age of the social web is no longer defined by the influence but by the choice of the communication tool and contents. Activities like “self broadcasting“, “ego boosting“, or “social involvement“ (Wiedmann et. al., 2007) can be understood as experiences with an internal impact of the individual.

In tourism, the result is the alienation of travellers from package tours to differentiated products. While this process is not a new development of the social web, it has been intensified by the behaviour of the customers and the way they gather information. Editorial teams and gatekeepers become less important and are replaced by diversified producers of information and by processes of selection within the social web. The attitude of tourists shifts from a pull concept whereby the providers define the travel and information experiences towards a pull concept by which the tourist consumes information and tourism products self-determined by reference to the own wishes and effects of the chosen.

Social Filters

Another important tool of the social web is social filters (Amersdorffer et al., 2010). The role of social filters is changed considerably in the social search and social booking process. “Social commerce is the logical consequence. Customers are no longer passive but they perform for the companies as well as for other clients” (editor’s note: translation from German) (Richter et al., 2007). This process can be supported with technical filters. New technologies of the Semantic Web (e.g. ontologies, neuronal and linguistic concepts) give the possibility to recognise and structure contents. Moreover, contents can automatically be enriched with additional information. Thus, they can be customised. On this basis, computers can offer additional, thematically relevant information corresponding to search behaviour and other user profile data. The browser knows the search behaviour of a particular user best because it can be seen as the permanent companion in the Web. Thus, it is reasonable to complement this key element with additional technologies so that the browser becomes an “intelligent keyhole” through which the user can take a look at the data.

5 Conclusion

The findings and discussion has shown how important the role of the social web already is within the tourism industry. However, recent technological and social developments will give the social web much more power than it already has.

In other words: the new online presence concepts and technologies have to and will lift and dissolve the existing web pages. Adapting the famous quote of Castells (2001) for the tourism industry it has to be called: if they do not care about the social web, the social web will care for them.

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