

Three Modes of Internet Connectivity during Travel: Remote, Transit and Residential

Michelangelo Magasic
School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts
Curtin University, Australia
m.magasic@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

Ulrike Gretzel
University of Southern California, USA
Gretzel@usc.edu

Abstract

In recent years the use of ICTs during travel has become a ubiquitous practice. Connected travellers access the Internet for a variety of reasons including information search, entertainment, communication and to record and share their journeys. While some research has looked at the implications of different modes of connectivity during travel, most literature treats Internet connectivity in a binary manner as either present or absent. Based on empirical autoethnographic data, this paper proposes a system of three different modes of Internet connectivity: Remote, Transit and Residential. Looking through the lens of online travel narration, each mode of connectivity and its particular characteristics and effects on travellers are outlined in detail.

Keywords: connectivity, connected tourists, travel blog, autoethnography

1 Introduction

It may be stated that the current tourism research era is largely concerned with the adoption of the Internet and social media within tourism practices and business. Within this paradigm it is possible to witness the integration of the Internet into all stages of tourism including information search (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), service provisioning, marketing (Minazzi, 2014), customer feedback and experience creation. Perhaps one of the driving forces here, and the main focus of this paper, is the usage of the Internet by tourists during travel. Connected travellers use the Internet for a variety of reasons including information search, entertainment, communication and to record and share their journeys (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2013). This paper will focus on the activity of recording travel online as a lens through which to investigate the different modes of Internet connectivity the traveller may encounter during a journey and the effects these have on travel practice.

1.1 Internet Connectivity during Travel

The use of ICTs during travel has become a ubiquitous practice (Munar Gyimothy & Cai, 2013). Thanks to the Internet travellers are increasingly able to continue routines of home and work sociality whilst on the road (Germann Molz, 2012; Germann Molz & Paris, 2015). However, studies on connected travellers have tended to compose

connectivity in binary terms, either as present or absent, rather than something that occurs across a broader spectrum. A limited number of studies have explored different grades of connection and their effects on travellers. Recently, Tanti and Buhalis (2016) have looked at the factors which increase or decrease the use of the Internet during travel, noting that there is significant grey area between connected and disconnected states. Pearce and Gretzel (2012) have explored connectivity “dead zones”, introducing the concept of “technology induced tension” in order to describe negative sensations associated with the loss of connectivity. Magasic’s (2014) study considering the mixed standards of connectivity encountered while travel blogging notes that just because an Internet connection is present doesn’t mean it will satisfy traveller’s needs for connectivity, stating, “Slow or unreliable connections can be worse than no connection at all in the potential lost time they may amount to in failed posts; especially when photo or video upload are involved.” Drawing on these examples, this paper seeks to outline a tiered system for understanding different modes of travel connectivity.

2 Methodology

In response to a largely positivist marketing based research agenda on connected tourists (Banyai & Havitz, 2013), this research responds to a call for greater attention towards empirical research exploring the personal processes through which ICTs are utilised (Munar, Gyimothy & Cai, 2013). The method proposed is autoethnography (Spry, 2011; Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). This research method involved the author undertaking a three month period of independent multicountry travel whilst critically reflecting on his experiences using ICTs in order to build up an understanding of this practice, and its practitioners, connected tourists. During this time, the data collection process occurred through three avenues, 1) ethnographic fieldwork and the observation of connectivity standards and how these are utilised by travellers, 2) the creation of a critical ‘meta-blog’ which reflects on the interplay between the author’s narrativisation of events for the online audience and his experience of travel, and, 3) a daily log of ICT usage which records time spent narrativising travel online, the practices through which this occurs (such as preparation, capturing, publishing and editing) as well as the primary type of Internet connection encountered. The data was analysed using literature on connected tourists and online self-presentation in order to expose the linkage between the traveller’s online narrative and travel behaviours.

3 Results

This study proposes a table of three different modes of connection which travellers may experience during their journey. Each mode represents a different standard of connectivity as configured through network availability and the traveller’s chosen method for connecting. The three proposed modes of connectivity: Remote, Transit and Residential are outlined along with their salient characteristics within Table 1.

3.1 Remote Connectivity

In the Remote mode the traveller experiences little or no connectivity from their own service provider or those of third parties. In this mode obtaining a connection is challenging and Internet use is characterised by prolonged loading times, drop outs

and a reduced spectrum of available websites and Internet functionalities. In Remote connectivity only the most basic tasks such as email and simple text based websites may be achieved meaning that the traveller's ability to use the Internet is limited to text only features. Moreover, Remote connectivity is somewhat temperamental and liable to drop-outs owing to factors like the number of users sharing a connection, the weather, or the fulfilment of data quotas. In the author's experience, Remote connections were usually characterised by their distance from population centres such as wilderness areas. In some locations, however, Remote connectivity may also be found in rural areas. As Remote connectivity is found on the boundaries of commercial tourist experience it is likely to be experienced by travellers seeking frontier or speciality experiences such as trekkers, adventure tourists or various forms of niche tourist such as divers or surfers.

Table. 1. Three modes of connectivity

	Remote	Transit	Residential
Service provider	Third party/ First party	Third party	First party
Connection quality	Low	Variable	Variable
Access location	A limited number of locations within a given locale	Hotel, café, restaurant, public space, airport, Internet café	Ever present
Usage pattern	As the connection is weak and unreliable, progress is slow	Limited connection range means Internet tasks may be completed in block sessions	Ongoing bursts of usage
Restrictions	'Text only', no uploading	Large data transfers may present a problem	Data or roaming fees
'Feel'	Off the grid	Away	Home
Travel type	Adventure traveller, trekking	Vacation, backpacker	Business, staycation, domestic trip

3.2 Transit Connectivity

Transit connectivity is encountered from third party connections, either free or for a fee, from locations such as cafes, restaurants, libraries, hotels or airports. As the Transit mode encompasses a large range of connections, quality may vary significantly. As Transit connectivity is from a third party, it means that the physical range of the connection is limited and as such the traveller is effectively forced to remain in a certain physical space. The consequence of this in the author's experience is that the traveller tends to access the Internet in block sessions in which a number of tasks are completed together. Moreover, when the traveller leaves a space of connection they are unable to follow and update communications unlike those who are using a first-party connection. It is argued that this usage mode is different from that of the home routine of Western tourists who are accustomed to having a smartphone and available cellular data.

3.3 Residential Connectivity

The Residential connectivity mode is experienced by travellers who have available cellular data. Residential connection could also be available through rental wifi or a satellite connection. A salient factor within Residential connectivity is that the traveller has the connection with them as they move and so are able to use the Internet at their leisure. This means that communications can be easily maintained and information obtained when needed. It is argued that this method of usage is very similar to that which the traveller would use at home. One possible limitation that may exist here is the high charges accorded to roaming fees by different telecommunications companies (Tanti & Buhalis, 2016).

4 Discussion

This paper has sought to outline three modes of connectivity which are formed at the nexus of network availability and the traveller's chosen communications technologies. While each mode outlined here is characterised by a particular set of conditions through which connectivity is experienced, the borders between different modes are fluid. These modes are not mutually exclusive and may coexist within the one physical place with the chosen connection type depending on the traveller's personal factors such as budget, access to ICTs and connectivity needs. For example, an airport which is experienced in Transit mode by vacationers could easily be experienced as Residential connectivity by a business traveller who has a cellphone connection with a service provider in that country. In the same way, a wilderness area could potentially be experienced by somebody with a satellite connection in the Residential mode. As such, the traveller may transition between different modes of connectivity at different periods of the journey depending on network strength or the technology at hand.

The typology of connectivity produced here could be integrated into future studies. By noting the way in which different connectivity modes are available to travellers, future research is able to understand how connected travellers use the Internet in a more nuanced way. For example, travellers with Transit connectivity may be more likely to group together online searching, purchasing, and reviewing behaviours as their usage is more likely to comprise of block sessions. Travellers with Residential connectivity on the other hand may perform these activities further apart as they are able to access the Internet at their leisure. By seeing that different connectivity types are likely to produce different narrative reflections on travel, researchers and DMOs may better analyse the content present in traveller's digital records.

As an exploratory study it should be noted that there is significant room for experimentation and analysis of the results produced. Transit connectivity provides the most scope for theoretical expansion given that it is arguably the most common mode of connectivity experienced by travellers at this point in time. Future research could include developing a universal connectivity standard by which to notify visitors of the quality of a third party connection. Moreover, the reliability of this typology as a whole could be improved by using ethnographic research to test its relevance amongst a wider range of travellers from different demographics.

5 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to introduce a table of three modes of Internet connectivity which may be experienced by connected travellers during a journey and to outline the salient characteristics particular to each mode. This is in order to highlight the distinctly heterogeneous nature of Internet connectivity and to emphasise to researchers and marketers that different types of connection will produce different ways of experiencing and recording travel. The typology produced allows for the tailored analysis of travel content. In knowing which mode of connectivity a traveller utilises at a given time, researchers are better able to understand the set of characteristics which preform that traveller's online interactions. Further research over an increased sample area amongst different demographics of tourists is recommended.

References

- Banyai, M. & Havitz, M. E. (2013). Analyzing travel blogs using a realist evaluation approach. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 22(2), 229-241.
- Germann Molz, J. (2012). *Travel connections: Tourism, technology and togetherness in a mobile world*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Germann Molz, J & Paris, C. (2015.) The social affordances of flashpacking: Exploring the mobility nexus of travel and communication. *Mobilities*, 10 (2), 173-192.
- Magasic, M. (2014). Travel blogging: An auto-ethnographic study of how online interactions influence a journey. *First Monday*, (19) 7. Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4887/4098>
- Minazzi, R. (2014). *Social Media Marketing in Tourism and Hospitality*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Munar, A. M., Gyimóthy, S., & Cai, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Tourism Social Media: Transformations in Identity, Community and Culture*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Pearce, P.L. & Gretzel, U. (2012) Tourism in technology dead zones: Documenting experiential dimensions. *International Journal of Tourism Sciences*, 12(2), 1-20.
- Spry, T. (2011). *Body, paper, stage: Writing and performing autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Tanti, A. & Buhalis, D. (2016). Connectivity and the consequences of being (dis)connected. In A. Inversini, & R. Schegg. (Eds.) *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2016*, 31-44. New York, NY: Springer.
- Wang, D. & Fesenmaier, D.R. (2013). Transforming the travel experience: The use of smartphones for travel. In L. Cantoni, & Z. Xiang (Eds.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2013*, 58-69. New York, NY: Springer.
- Wilson, E. & Hollinshead, K. (2015). Qualitative tourism research: Opportunities in the emergent soft sciences. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 54, 30-47.
- Xiang, Z. & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, 31, 179-188.