



Sectoral perspective on bridging the digital divide – the case of tourism

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Over the past fifty years, the travel and tourism industries have been at the forefront of technological change. The transport sector has seen constant innovation in the quest to carry more passengers more quickly, more safely and at lower cost, whether by land or by air; and to enable people to travel longer distances to other parts of the world at a price that is affordable to substantial segments of the world's population.

The travel sector was also one of the first to use computers to enhance business processes on a macro scale, notably through the Global Distribution Systems established by airlines during the 1960s to enable travel agents to access their inventory easily and to book multiple leg journeys on a properly scheduled basis. These and booking systems developed for the major hotel and car rental groups were upgraded constantly during the early years of widespread computing, to better meet the needs of travel agents and their customers.

During the 1980s, the scope of information and reservation systems extended, to cover other forms of travel and accommodation and to enable customers to start to make bookings directly. Many systems were developed, some successfully, some not, but there was increasing recognition of the opportunities that information and communication technologies offered to enhance customer services.

In the mid-1990s, the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web as tools for widespread public and business use brought about a sea change in computer based information and booking systems. Applications were developed rapidly and major new players emerged on the tourism scene – Expedia (established by Microsoft), Travelocity (established by the Sabre GDS) and many more, large and small. It was a time of huge innovation in the sector, opening up the potential for major changes in businesses processes, particularly marketing and sales.

'Marketing Tourism Destinations Online', was published in 2000 by UNWTO. It was the first publication of this type to focus on the ways in which the first wave of online technologies, applications and distribution opportunities should be used by the travel and tourism industries and was followed by a series of highly successful conferences and seminars in different parts of the world, over a period of about three years.

Since 2004-5 the digital world has transformed dramatically, with the emergence of smart mobile applications and social media, which have combined to bring about fundamental changes in the ways that consumers behave and services are delivered. Control of the activity moved strongly towards the consumer. GPS and mapping services (notably Google Maps and Google Earth) became widely available for use on and its



application became widely-used service in portable devices and car navigation systems, enabling a major new set of geo-spatial applications, such as route planning and navigation and spatial search.

Now a third phase of change is emerging – again, a combination of disruptive new technologies and applications that will change the way people behave. In the words of Fjord, an Accenture Design and Innovation consultancy: "Over the next five years, sensors, the cloud, connected smart devices and real-time analytics will combine to deliver a new layer of connected intelligence that will revolutionise the ability of organisations to offer interesting and increasingly indispensable digital services to travellers".

The new technologies will further change the ways in which people work and play, including their interaction with friends and family, with businesses and with tourism destinations. These will include wearable technology, Big Data, 'Mobility as a Service' applications for travellers, driverless cars, robotic devices, 3D Printing, new mobile payment applications, wireless optical networking technology (Li-Fi), the 'Internet of Me', gesture technology, voice recognition and instant and efficient mobile translation,.

These technology based applications pose major challenges through disruption of traditional ways of doing – and also exciting opportunities for those who are willing and able to innovate. One example of innovation, which is bringing about a fundamental shift in consumer behaviour, is the 'Sharing Economy'. This concept is already well established, and will potentially have a much broader impact on the way in which society will work, in terms of goods and services available on a shared basis.

All the while that the digital technology revolution has been taking place, there have continued to be major advances in engineering technology and material science that have enhanced ground and air transport systems and brought about further advances in speed, economy and comfort of travel and access to a vastly increased range of destinations.

These twin aspects of technological change have reinforced each other, enabling the dramatic growth in tourism that we have seen over the past thirty years. Innovation that has taken place and the innovations that may be expected in the years ahead will have implications for travel and tourism nationally and internationally.

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