Mediating Empowerment: The Role of Technology in Sustainable Tourism Governance

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Tourism has a dualistic nature characterised on the one hand by a high resilience and constant growth and on the other hand by a short-term greed of "consuming" its own life support systems: nature, culture and communities (Snepenger, Snepenger, Dalbey, & Wessol, 2007). Both aspects are constantly spurred by the rapid changes in demand and the diversity of supply, and the intrinsic importance that tourism has gained in individual lifestyles and in national economies. In addition, the strong influence of globalization on the institutional, organizational and policy formulation (Hall, 2005), determines three major aspects of tourism: the expansion of demand, the concentration of supply and increased similarities in demand. (Cornelissen, 2005) Consequently, the fragile balance required by a sustainable tourism development (European Commission, 2003a), (UNEP / UNWTO / WMO, 2008) is often at risk from conflicting goals of conservation versus development plans for tourism. Mixed approaches that combine top-down governance models with bottom-up collaborative strategies and policy networks are considered able to provide resilient decision making systems able to cope with unexpected challenges or conflict situations. These are characterized by shared rule-making and agreements between interdependent actors with divergent opinions and goals (Elzen, Geels, & Ken, 2004). Ultimately, a significant progress towards sustainability can be achieved by fostering changes of meaning and concepts, infrastructures and user-learning processes (Ehrenfeld, 2001).

The development of new technologies and particularly the incredible progress social media have been cited several times as the new path for innovation (Novelli, Schmitz, & Spencer, 2006), (European Commission, 2003b), (Ryan, 2004), (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003).

Historically, media has been an intrinsic vehicle for tourism images. In its outmost powerful form, the mass media was the single most effective mechanisms that enabled the fast adoption of the dominant tourism paradigm of mass tourism. In addition, the Internet has changed the concept of human interaction forever. Seemingly a hybrid output of these two, the social media is bound to have a powerful effect on tourism and implicitly on sustainable tourism developments. However, this chapter takes its starting point in a conceptual doubt that social media – as a generic term – has the inherent ability to contribute to sustainable tourism and calls for a more careful discrimination of its use. The following sections explore the significance of social media for governance structures that aim for sustainable tourism, with the hope of initiating a constructive discussion on the topic.

GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

The transformation of travelling, from an 'exclusive' to an 'accessible' activity, available to and affordable by a large number of people is a major achievement for the modern society. Subsequently, tourism has developed to become one of the most remarkable phenomena that define contemporary times. Growing in a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding political, institutional, social and cultural landscapes, tourism is influencing the evolution of biodiversity, natural resources, human population and economic infrastructures. Intertwined, these systems may stimulate or block each other's evolution. (Rotmans & Martens, 2002) The undeniable, but ambivalent relation of tourism with the global culture and economy, projected on its future growth, call for a careful and responsible development of tourism, within the context of sustainable development. Institutionalised as a guiding principle for economic developments that do not come at the expense of human and natural ones, *sustainable development* is in fact a journey towards a balanced future where humans have a decent way of living on Earth. (Giddens, 2001) In practice, a sustainable development of tourism should meet the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and

enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems. (UNEP & UNWTO, 2008) Leaving space for subjective interpretations, the definition of sustainable tourism continues to be the subject for numerous reviews (Hunter, 1997)

Despite its wide acceptance and recognition, sustainability in tourism has major hurdles to overcome, especially in terms of the operationalisation of the concept. Problematic issues stemming from the ambiguity of definitions, such as ill management and monitoring, lead to insufficient policy measures and rather loose management systems. (Butler, 1999) The competition for limited resources such as land, water, cultural access, social welfare, as well as unequal distribution of benefits and responsibilities bring high animosity among stakeholder groups. Due to the frequently ad hoc character of tourism developments (McDonald, 2009), local governance structures that aim to build a sustainable development of tourism are often missing, leading to a divorce of tourism from sustainable development and its development in isolation from other systems. Subsequently, harmonious collaborative in tourism networks are rare. Reaching common goals is not done by controlling the underlying values of different stakeholders, but through the employment of a suitable array of collaboration and intervention strategies by governing agencies able to secure progress towards a sustainable development of tourism. (McDonald, 2009) Lastly, functional information systems are essential for providing meaningful status diagnostics and secure continuous monitoring that enable satisfying intra- and inter- generational needs within the limits set by nature and the society. (Hardy, Beeton, & Pearson, 2002) A harmonious functioning of the three elements, ensure flexibility within the tourism system, makes
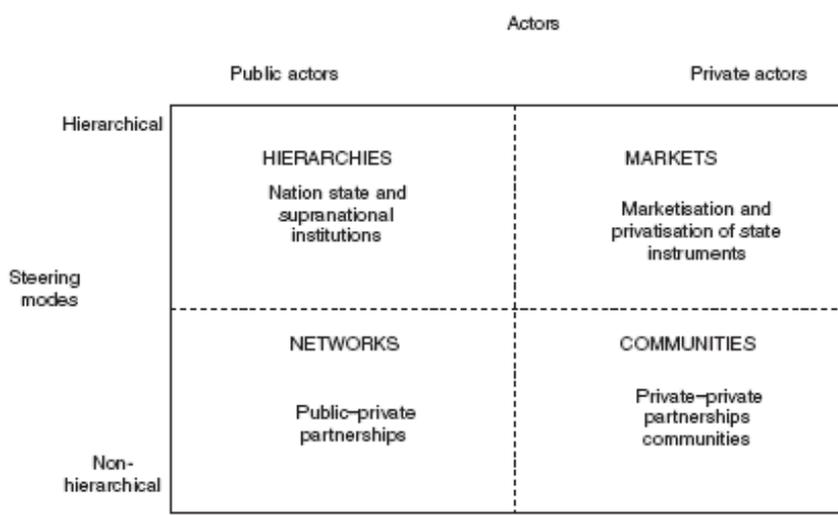
possible a balanced consumption of resources and reduced risk which leads to long term survival.

The global resilience of tourism in the face of political, natural and health-related crisis cannot be denied. Its unmitigated growth, forecasted by several agencies (UNWTO, 2010) for the next decades will continue to put under strenuous pressure the availability of natural and man-made resources. Under globalization, the spectrum of influences able to destabilise a destination and jeopardise its future has enlarged. Consequently, tourism faces a number of challenges under the colliding goals of globalization (emphasizing the immediacy of short-term gains) and sustainability (that promotes long-term thinking for the global benefit). (Cornelissen, 2005) (Hall, 2005; Holden, 2006) A key lesson learnt from the recent financial, natural and health-related crisis, is that flexible and fast reactions are paramount in dealing with unexpected events. In order to create and maintain a consistent focus on sustainable development in tourism, democratic and transparent governance structures are essential.

The last decades have witnesses an increased recognition and appreciation for aspects such as transparency and democratic decision making in tourism developments, particularly in response to overpowering structures that characterise the industrialisation era and the overbearing economic priorities of tourism at the expense of local communities and even at national governments. Subsequently, the term of governance became synonymous with coherent participation and mediated action for sustainable tourism. The term represents the activities of an 'open and transparent government' that establishes and maintains new relationships with economic interests (Dredge, 2006) and local community (Zeppel, 2010) The processes named collectively as *governance*, extend beyond the formal structures of governments and is the result of a transitions from top-down processes that characterise

bureaucratic structures, to 'bottom-up' inputs to decision making. (Zeppel, 2010) Ideally, governance provides a balanced approach to local decision making processes and hence has a core relevance for the success of sustainability in tourism (United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 2003) However, the definition of "good governance" remains a subjective exercise, able to be evaluated accurately only by the actual participants in governance structures. (Beaumont, 2009)

There is little agreement regarding the definition of governance and its use in sustainable tourism. A great deal of attention is given to the issues that are rightfully covered by governance processes, and the identification of conditions for collaboration. Less attention is given to the levels of involvement and responsibility allocation for each actor involved in governance. (Zeppel, 2010) Targeting to cover this gap, Hall (2011) identifies four models of governance

(figure) that describe the diverse relationships between governments and tourism stakeholders: hierarchies, markets, networks, communities. (Hall, 2011)

While the *hierarchies* represent the mechanisms where state authorities take a leading role in setting up the agendas for tourism developments, the *markets* include groups of independent tourism operators brought together by shared economic interests. A sustainable tourism development strives for a balanced use of available resources by different groups. In reality

such agreements are rare, or even impossible (Johnston & Tyrrell, 2005) More often, stakeholder's' interests are competing on limited local resources and create tensions between state and businesses actions. The scarcity of resources also leads to power imbalances with negative consequences for both locals and guests. Incentives and regulatory instruments are used to restore the power imbalances, while information instruments are used to facilitate consensus and for inspiring higher responsibilities in using local assets. For academic purposes the two are treated separately but in reality they may co-exist in time and space. Governance *networks*, particularly public-private partnerships, are preferred channels for implementing sustainable tourism policies (European Commission, 2003a) as they are based on synergetic goals, function through collaborative processes and enable a broad ownership of actions, together with operational advantages. (T. B. Jamal & Getz, 1995) When successful, networks are indeed able to achieve agreed goals and common actions that contribute to regional sustainable development. However, networks are also fragile to power struggles and may easily become power platforms for interests aside of sustainable goals. Lack of transparency and the exclusion of local actors create opportunities for failure in sustainable tourism networks. (Zinaida, 2005) Lastly, *communities* are forms of engaging local groups in the development of plans or visions for regional transformations. Known primarily as 'bottom-up' forms of organization, communities are characterised by low power struggles and tolerant rules of engagement that are frequent encountered in small scale or alternative type of tourism. (Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008) Ideally, communities have a higher chance of representing locals' standpoint regarding the quality and intensity of the resource consumption induced by tourism. At the same time, due to their scale and scope, *communities* could enable non-commercial actors to get involved in relevant policy debates, such as the sustainable development of tourism and beyond. However, the rhetoric about the opportunities for involving local communities in sustainable tourism may only cover a low

involvement of local residents in tourism decision making or benefit sharing. (Marion, 1996; Sharpley, 2004)

Despite worthy efforts, forces inherent to tourism structures may hinder the attendance of set outcomes. For one, the historical reliance on consultant inputs is detrimental for resolving governance issues and encouraging a lack of interest in measuring the effectiveness of initiatives. At the same time, reliance on internal resources, information or skills may limit the extent of accountability and transparency one can afford. (Zeppel, 2010) One key barrier however, intrinsic to the tourism system, is that powerful actors steer the dynamics of governance structures in spite of the leading role of the state. Even when governmental organizations drive climate change initiatives, the implementation depends on voluntary involvement from the tourism operators. (Zeppel, 2010) Although the presence of large multinational corporations is an integral part of the globalized landscape, their unbound power is able to circumvent local initiatives in order to achieve their commercial interests and undermine the outcomes of governance structures that work for sustainable development of tourism. (Budeanu, 2009)

The growing influence of multinational corporations that is stimulated by de-regulation, by the extension of vertical and horizontal linkages, and by globalization, starts to challenge the state authority. (Holden, 2006) Growing at the expense of the influence of the state, the permanence of multinationals is seen as *sine qua non* element in a hyper-globalized (Peck & Theodore, 2001) and the role of 'localities' is reduced to providing competitive assets for the global supply. Reduced to a mere management of international capital and the creation of a correct business climate (Sharpley, 2004), a weak presence of local governments is correlated with escalating impacts and (possibly) with the decay of destination (Weaver, 2006) The rare

occasions of rejuvenation are found possible only when governmental authorities take a preeminent role in leading governance structures. (Hovinen, 2002) However, often policy structures are unprepared for building up solid governance structures able to carry out and implement a sustainable development of tourism. (Hall, 2011) The global tourism landscape reflects this dichotomy of control over tourism developments, between local authorities and international corporations, and remains the greatest challenge for a sustainable development of tourism. (Sharpley, 2004) Recent evolutions of communication technologies may change the situation in favour of destinations and customers (Ioannides & Debbage, 1997; Kärcher, 1997)

INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The social web is an online place where people with mutual interests can share thoughts, opinions and comments (Weber 2009) without time or locations constraints. (Boz & Unal 2011) Better represented as an ecology of new kinds of media (Kietzmann & Hermkens, 2011), social platforms are structured by the type of relations between users, such as personal interests (e.g. Digg, Photobucket, Flickr, Picasa, YouTube), friendship (e.g. MySpace, SixDegrees, Friendster or Facebook) or professional affiliation (e.g. LinkedIn). While the key drivers for getting on social media platforms are the desire to share thoughts and to make better-informed choices (Evans 2008), the most distinctive feature of social media is the opportunity to create content and broadcast it widely. The access to global audiences has empowered individuals to take part in global dialogues and exercise their roles as citizens. The fast and highly personalised communication facilitated by social media enable the creation of ties and new forms of human connectivity, much in line with Facebook's alleged purpose of connecting all humanity.

Social media has opened up new possibilities for private and public organizations to connect with stakeholders and adjust better the functions such as marketing, communication, product development and governance. The raise of social media has catapulted the interaction individual-organization from the one-way passive model of Web 1.0 to an interactive model where traditional and web-based media are jointly used, and where consumers are initiators and receivers of information. (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011) It is also smart of companies to be present on social media platforms in order to avoid misrepresentation by competitors. Mass media was among the first sector to fully take advantage of the opportunities offered by social media, and major radio or TV channels such as CNN, BBC or Euronews have opened permanent communication channels on major social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook inviting people to share and comment on their news. Social media is also present in the political sphere, with preeminent political figures such as President Obama (Obama, 2011) and Angela Merkel (Merkel, 2011) keep close contact with citizens via social media. Public services renowned for their slow reaction to public inquiries are now creating eGovernance functions to get closer to citizens and local communities. Social media proved to be an invaluable source of news in crisis situations, where other communication media failed, such as the Egyptian elections earlier in 2011 or the Icelandic volcano eruption in 2010.

Social media brings great support for sustainability work, by opening up possibilities for organizations to prove their responsible presence in the community, to adopt transparent policies in relation to their activities, engage local communities and encourage an informed and aware customer demand. Companies are now collaborating with customers to find optimal and efficient way of providing products and services with less impact on the environment. A good example is Nike who goes beyond and above the duty and boundaries

of their business into the local community. International organizations that are working on sustainable development goals, such as UNEP, can now connect directly to people across the world and work on sensitive issues, by avoiding inefficiencies of formal channels. Case of human rights abuses, prostitution and human trafficking, slavery and economic exploitation, environmental abuse and ecological irresponsibility are easier to bring in front of qualified institutions. Public services, such as the US Army, encourage their staff to use social media (ArmyStrongStories.com) to connect securely with communities outside their organizations. (Stine, 2011) Champions at adapting social media are the NGOs, who were notoriously lacking campaigning resources. Using social media tools, campaigners such as Greenpeace have gained a great support and a great boost for all their campaigns.

Despite the opportunity to generate their own discussions and create a dialogue with the customer instead of staying on the sidelines, commercial organizations and authorities are rarely present on social media. (Hanna et al., 2011) Partly due to lack of understanding of social media tools, and partly with the hope of maintaining the control over the image they portray through traditional marketing organizations remain reluctant or unable to develop strategies and allocate resources to engage effectively with social media. Many organizations ignore or mismanage the opportunities and threats posed by the creative consumers (PR Berthon & L. Pitt, 2007). The inability of organizations to understand the challenges and adapt to the requirements of the newly enlarged mass of listeners, gives enormous power to those who 'ride the wave of social media'. With consumers playing a bigger role in creating content, companies and governments need to take a step forward instead of looking back on what worked in the past. (Furness, 2008; Miguéns et al., 2008)

Social media is hailed as the technological development that will transform human interaction. Despite opening up numerous possibilities, it is worth noting that the existence of social

media does not immediately lead to its use and even less to a successful outcome. Many more factors are necessary to fulfil the possibilities that social media offers. As it is very recent, it lacks rules and procedures to ensure the best outcome possible. The lack of control can easily lead to frenetic creativity where "anyone armed with a hundred dollar digital camera and a connection to the Internet is a potential Spielberg or Riefenstahl." (Gaines-Ross, 2010) The culture of use for social media platforms are only in incipient stages, the development is done by trial and error and flaws are to be expected. Besides benefits and challenges, social media increases organizational risk and magnifies the power of public scrutiny. However, possibly the most profound aspect of social media remains the democratization of communication. For the first time in history of communication, individual voices can have a global audience much the same as mass media does. By enabling individuals to become part of the global community, social media is re-defining the concepts of 'communication', 'sharing' and 'belonging'. In essence, social media is an evolution back to the roots of the Internet, as it re-transformed the World Wide Web into what it was meant from the beginning: a platform to facilitate information exchanged between people. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) By allowing the access un-conditioned by the affiliation to bureaucratic organizations (public or private), social media gives a voice to those who previously were less heard in the public space. While the strong impact of social media communication on institutional forms of social organization is undeniable, it is paramount to remember that technology is merely an enabler and it is the desire of people to step into their global role that will change the world.

EXPLORING THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN RELATION TO SUSTAINABLE

The evolution of social media and tourism are intimately intertwined by sharing their subject of attention, the tourist experience. Therefore it comes with no surprise that the adoption of social media tools in tourism is fast, extensive and has implications that may go deeper than

for other activity. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are intensely used for sharing tourism information, while TripAdvisor is the single biggest social media platform used in tourism planning. (Conrad Advertising, 2011) Although the primary use of social media is related to individuals, as social and cultural entities (in their roles as citizens, travelers, etc) its democratic character allows companies and public authorities to use it too. As a result, relationships between tourism actors and the dynamics of the entire tourism system intensify. While the adoption and use of social media is intensely studied, its implications for sustainability in tourism are insufficiently explored by research.

Among the experiences shared by tourists on social media platforms, such as TripAdviser, posts related to sustainable tourism are still rare. The majority of such posts are traveler articles, reviews or forum comments, presenting or discussing specific elements of the tourism product. Frequent subjects are hotels and restaurants labeled as 'sustainable', while 'sustainable' transport, tour operators and attractions are less popular topics. By volume, advertisements made by tourism providers and destination management organizations are larger than the comments made by individual travelers. There is a clear difference between the long, detailed, professionally written descriptions from tourism organizations and the skimmed laconic posts of individuals. Interestingly, only a few (under a dozen) are replies to requests and most contributions are voluntary, signaling a beyond-average feeling of satisfaction or displease. When replies are offered, they validate or contradict industry's claims to sustainability via eco-labels, environmental awards or sustainable policies. However, customers tend to focus on quality aspects with only accidental mentions of the sustainability aspects of the establishment or the service consumed.

> *"This is an interesting little place in the old downtown area. It's a "socially*
>
> *conscious" establishment that serves sustainable seafood. That also means*

pricey. The lunch menu was simple. The she-crab soup was very good. ...

My wife's oysters were very small. ... But we'll try this place again."

Notably, most often the skimmed remarks about tourism providers are positive towards the voluntary claims to sustainability and only a few contest them. However, on occasion, TripAdvisor forums are spiced by abundant discussions about corporate activities. In contrast with the traditional image of tourists as being uninterested and unaware, they seem to be quite educated and able to understand the meaning of complex concepts such as sustainable tourism and the role of corporations for it.

"*You are not a sustainable tourism company if you do one and not the other. Supporting local economies has an impact on the environment, if local people see their share in tourism they will protect their environs, otherwise they will search ways of sustaining themselves.*"

Tourists primarily react to industry claims and do not venture into making personal investigations other issues that the ones prompted via marketing campaigns. While this fact suggests a lack of interest in scrutinizing the performance of tourist providers, it is also a confirmation of the strong influence of the industry in triggering consumer activism. Historically, tourism organizations underused their influence on the demand for sustainable tourism, under the argument of tourists' alleged wish to be undisturbed by duties or complex issues (e.g. sustainability) during their holidays. The approach is also reflected by the paternalistic tone of policy instruments and corporate programs such as guiding documents and codes of conduct that teach people how to behave as 'responsible tourists'. Rather unfocused, comments found on social media platforms about sustainable tourism sum up to a cloud of fractioned opinions, much in line with other studies on tourist behaviour. (Budeanu & Emtairah, forthcoming)The fact comes with little surprise considering that except for ecotourism, tourists are not yet accustomed to associate the concept of sustainable with their

own holiday routines. While the low demand for sustainable tourism is unfortunately still true, it is clearly so under as a direct consequence of the scarce promotion of this concept by tourism organizations.

The fluidity of tourist demand and the long time necessary for impacts to become visible in destination (Butler, 1999) made possible the detachment of tourists from the less pleasant consequences of tourism. The 'out-of-sight, out of mind' attitude of tourists was encouraged by a constantly renewed product offer and associated marketing campaigns. (Ooi, 2003) The newly mediated virtual connection between tourists and locals by-passes the control of tourism organizations and makes possible individual feedback and increases the public scrutiny, across borders and over time:

> "*We heard a lot of discontent about the operations of [...] when we spoke with the local people. They said that crew members got caught up in illegal shark fishing and the boats operations were going to be suspended but since they have so much money power they paid out the authorities to continue operating.*"

Although it is a positive development by reducing the imperialistic construction of the tourist gaze, its refreshment is not necessarily a better one. In the absence of a collective responsibility, public opinion can be easily misguided or misused, out of simple ignorance (to say the least) with possible damages to the benefits to the detriment of the destination and its sustainability. At the same time such feedback is often triggering the shift from a passive presence to a strong active stand towards protecting the environment and local communities. The brief experience with social media shows that fast turns of public attitudes can happen in a matter of hours and can have damaging consequences for organizational reputation. (Stine, 2011) Even if tourists' virtual conversations about sustainable tourism are in incipient stages,

it gives an impetus to increasing accountability of organizations working or managing tourism.

Tourism companies also use social media platforms such as TripAdvisor or Facebook, for posting informative snapshots that function like 'appetizers' redirecting customers to the source webpage for more details. Airlines are present on different social media platforms, in a passive yet dominating tone which can be interpreted as patronizing. (Hvass & Munar, 2011) The tone of hotels and restaurants has an enticing and alluring character while tourist attractions adopt an exciting up-beat voice. Altogether, the posts of tourism companies have similar functions with traditional communication channels such as advertising, selling and promotion, customer contact (e.g. personalised holiday wishes) and public relations (distributing information about company's sponsorships, events and performances). The conversational potential of platforms such as Facebook is not yet used for connecting with customers or finding inspiration for innovation, as suggested by literature. Tourism providers seem to prefer a passive presence on social media, at least for the moment, and are interested only in having a fast access to the end-user, in addition to traditional communication channels. Sustainability issues are frequently addressed with a cautious and reactive attitude by tourism companies and in the case of social media it may be accompanied by a technological uneasiness.

While keeping a low profile themselves, tourism companies are keen on mapping out the social behavior of tourists and the relevance for businesses. Metrics such as website traffic, referral counts, potential reach (e.g. retweets, impressions), sentiments (positive, negative) and share of conversations, are monitored constantly to evaluate the success of campaigns. The industry's interest in understanding, predicting and capturing the business potential from customers' presence on social media, led to the creation of new skills in tourism, such as

Sustainable Travel International (Sustainable Travel International) who offers expertise in eco-certification and on social media. In line with people's tendency to react to environmental labels, benchmarking services are made available for tourists to vote on the quality and sustainability performance of tourism providers. Recommendations provided by industry specialists specialized in monitoring the virtual space, have an encouraging yet finale tone, such as "*say goodbye to domination*" and "*follow the theory of acceptance*" suggesting the dramatic changes that are expected in terms of customer interaction. Whether they would translate into a transformation of marketing or create a new business function able to exploit the opportunities offered by the virtual world, including the possibility to enhance industry's input to sustainable development of tourism, remains to be seen. At the moment, tourism providers keep most virtual activities on their own websites to which social media platforms are merely additional entrance points.

Tourism authorities and destination management organizations extend their advertising campaigns onto Facebook, TripAdvisor, and YouTube in order to capture the attention of visitors. Traveler reviews on TripAdvisor refer to socio-cultural aspects encountered during holidays while references to governmental programs or legislative frameworks that target sustainable tourism, get the attention of locals. In contrast with private companies, destination management organizations are keen on exploring the collaborative opportunities offered by social media. Taking advantage of the high importance that people give to feedback from peers (third most trusted source after family and friends) destinations stimulate the sharing of such testimonials. (Conrad Advertising, 2011) One example is the "*Get lost*" campaign of Montana Tourist Office, where tourists became co-producers of the promotional material "*The first 100 users to submit stories received a free t-shirt. Retail partnerships to distribute 50,000 stickers increased awareness, piqued curiosity, and helped create cult-like followings.*

A reorder was necessary less than halfway into the campaign. Some stickers even crossed state lines...including the one on this baggage cart in the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport's C Concourse!" (Montana State Government) By creatively using social media, the local tourist organization created a 'win-win-win' situation, where the past visitor, the future one and the destination were rewarded. Using primarily web 1.0 strategies, governmental agencies also create awareness about their own efforts to mitigate global impacts such as climate change by reducing emissions from accommodation and offering the possibility to offset their air travel. (Zeppel, 2010) While the presence and creative potential of social media are well used by tourism authorities, a democratic engagement of individuals in decisions that relate to sustainable development is still absent. Mirroring this situation, tourists' interests remain focused on events and general info about the area.

The democratic inclusion of key stakeholders is paramount for involving all affected parties in taking decisions that affect their own and their children's lives. The locals' interest in conversing is shown by their large share (estimated around 40%) of the traffic on destination websites. However, traditionally, local communities are rarely seen as equal partners in sustainable tourism (Hardy et al., 2002) The successful collaboration of tourism agencies and local groups on community-relevant projects (T. Jamal, Hartl, & Lohmer, 2010; Zeppel, 2010) can be initiated or intensified through the virtual dialogue between locals and their elected governments. This potential is used extensively by a large number of reputable NGOs (e.g. Rainforest Alliance), activist groups and international organizations (e.g. IUCN, UNEP and UNWTO) are opening up new discussions about sustainable tourism on Facebook. The scope of such initiatives is often multiple providing information, encouraging the sharing of experience and opinions while also stimulating people to evaluate and distinguish what 'good' or 'bad' tourism may be. The rather notorious statement from Blackberry's VP, Brian

Wallace, "a Facebook fan has no value" has spurred a number of replies that demonstrate that "getting a Facebook fan to *do something* does (have a value)". In a long run, such complex engagements have the highest potential of creating a demand for sustainable tourism, which in turn would stimulate and encourage its production and institutionalization.

CONCLUSIONS

Extensive and diverse, tourism is bound to strive under constant uncertainty and in 2008, tourism was one of the 6 sectors in 'the danger zone' due to regulatory, physical and reputational risks related to climate change. (Cohen, 2010) Resilient governance structures are essential for enabling social justice in situations when conflicts over resource distribution occur. However, governance structures for sustainable tourism are challenged by the power imbalance between multinational companies and hierarchic tourism structures, which risk a subordination of sustainability goals to private interests. The contemporary landscape of tourism reflects the underlying power tensions, with mass tourism destinations being distinctively different from destinations adopting bottom-up approaches to sustainability. Emerging communication technologies offer multiple possibilities for restoration of power imbalances, and gives scope for the exploratory discussion of this chapter which examines their relevance for sustainable tourism.

Virtual conversations about sustainable tourism are rare and brief among travellers sharing experiences on social media platforms. Much alike their attitude in practice, the virtual self-interest of tourists in the sustainability of their holidays, holiday providers or destinations is still in infancy. Relating primarily to industry claims, tourists are not interested in investigating issues outside of industry cues. At the same time the industry is showing initiative by being present on social media and open for feedback. Although trust is scarce and interactions are cautious, the fragile virtual friendships between companies and their customers may (in the future) re-shape institutional relations in tourism. So in absolute terms,

the potential of social media for restoring power imbalances and striving towards sustainable development is not yet utilised due to a low level of individual activism. A hopeful perspective would gamble on the individual desire to share and gain control over others by sharing their impressions, and expect that new power centres would emerge. While the possibility is undeniable, the lack of unity, cohesion, level of awareness and interest in driving change make such expectations premature.

As industry-customers relations may not change just yet, tourism authorities, destination management organizations and interest groups such as NGOs, taking the lead and initiating the dialogue with locals and tourists. With an active and engaging social presence, public organizations and NGOs capture the support of individuals and grow stronger in their negotiation power towards industry actors. Synchronised interactions on social media are essential for creating the intimacy that leads to such a strong engagement. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) Therefore, indirectly, social media enhances the power of less hierarchical governance structures and facilitates the attendance of democratic participation in sustainable tourism.

Without a doubt, the greatest benefit of social media is the possibility of individuals to access to global audiences. Accountability is higher than ever and raises tremendous risks for tourism organizations involved in the production and management of tourism resources. Long criticised, abundant but semi-transparent voluntary initiatives for sustainable tourism are under increased scrutiny, by a less educated public eye. A typically non-hierarchic feature, the presence of consumers on the public arena seems to favour the 'weaker' tourism stakeholders (networks and local communities). However, sharing uncoordinated opinions among crowds with skewed view over global issues could potentially be more detrimental than helpful in achieving sustainability. While the presence of customers remains valuable from a democratic perspective, it is the challenge of tourism authorities to identify the best

use and design suitable incentives for capturing the benevolent support of the crowds for sustainable tourism goals. With the purpose of initiating a discussion on this new line of research, this chapter outlined some of the aspects that could be relevant for mapping out the impact of social media for sustainability in tourism.

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