

# The Political Economy of Social Media: What Does it Mean for Tourism? The Case of YouTube

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The research presented here builds on theories of the political economy of (new) media. The objective of this paper is to overcome two 'blind spots' in the current literature on social media and tourism. The first is the role of social media intermediaries, such as YouTube (YouTube LLC) in the mediation of communication amongst tourists, hosts and the tourism industry. The second is the role of social media in tourism as a social force, by enabling communication amongst tourists and hosts. We borrow analytical tools from the political economy paradigm and thus focus upon the ownership structures, political regulations and modes of transforming communication into marketable products (commodification) by YouTube LLC. These are analyzed as factors that influence tourism both as an industry and as a social force.

*Keywords:* tourism; social media; YouTube; political economy

## **Introduction: Social Media and Tourism**

Public discourse as well as scientific research on new media often seem to follow techno-deterministic fears and myths of new media that predict extreme social changes after which nothing will ever be as it was (Schoenbach, 2001). One such prediction is the empowerment of tourists in their relation to the tourism industry via social media.

Social media, both general (such as YouTube and Facebook) and travel specific (such as TripAdvisor), are often hailed (and feared) as democratising the travel experience because travellers are said to have gained new, hitherto unprecedented powers in relating positive and negative information on tourism destinations to their fellow travellers (Mendes-Filho & Tan, 2009; Amersdorffer, Bauhuber, & Oellrich, 2012; Lim,

Chung, & Weaver, 2012). Word-of-mouth communication on tourism destinations has always been extremely influential for the tourism industry. This has only been amplified by social media, since one person not only reaches his or her acquaintances but can also communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other people about a tourism destination.

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) have analysed the extent to which social media appear in search engine results in the context of travel-related searches. Their analysis shows that social media constitute a substantial part of tourism search results, indicating that search engines likely direct travellers to social media sites, thus confirming the growing importance of social media in the online tourism domain.

With social media, Amersdorffer et al. (2012, p. 178) argue that the quality of a service is more transparent; the promises of quality of tourism brands are open to more public questioning, and traditional branding and brand communication are called into question. The website becomes less salient and constitutes only one core area of the online presence. Social media become social filters through which information is extracted and customised according to interests of the network members (Amersdorffer et al., 2012).

According to Lim et al. (2012), a substantial number of consumer-generated videos exist about destinations and have the ability to influence consumers' brand perception of a destination. Furthermore, their research shows that the consumer-generated tourism content on YouTube attracts more people than marketer-generated content. Similarly, social media are perceived as a more trustworthy source of information regarding tourism products and services than corporate-sponsored communication (Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012).

However, the trustworthiness of tourist-generated content depends on the trustworthiness of the social intermediary that provides the possibilities for publishing such content (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2009), e.g. TripAdvisor LLC or YouTube LLC as the organisations that serve as social filters or gatekeepers of information. While the role of intermediaries in tourism is well explored in other subfields of tourism, e.g. operations of travel agencies, social me-

dia as intermediaries are not only under-researched in tourism literature but are most commonly not even recognised as such, since the focus is only on those who publish (tourists) and not those who dictate the rules of publishing (social media intermediaries).

Another 'blind spot' in discussions on social media in tourism literature is the relation between social media and tourism as a social force, not merely tourism as an industry. As Higgins-Desbiolles (2006) shows, tourism has historically been considered to be much more than only the tourism industry since, in addition to economic values, tourism offers social, cultural, and environmental benefits and can be a powerful force promoting peace and understanding between peoples. Social media potentially have enormous power to aid in these other functions of tourism since they enable not only word-of-mouth communication amongst tourists but also communication amongst tourists and their (potential) hosts.

### **The 'New Communications Paradigm'**

Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that social media transform power relations since the content, timing and frequency of the social media-based conversations occurring between consumers are outside managers' direct control. Integrated marketing communications have traditionally been considered to be largely one-way in nature. Corporations asserted control over their brands and destination marketing through advertising, personal selling, public relations and publicity, direct marketing and sales promotion.

The 'new communications paradigm' that they introduce, in contrast, means going beyond one-way traffic to communications that also include multiple avenues of social media: highly magnified forms of word-of-mouth communication in which marketing managers cannot control the content and frequency of such information (Mangold & Faulds 2009) (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, Mangold and Faulds (2009) provide a variety of methods for the industry to relate to their customers via social media, such as providing consumers with networking platforms, using blogs, social media tools, and promotional tools to engage customers. Their 'new communications paradigm' is thus

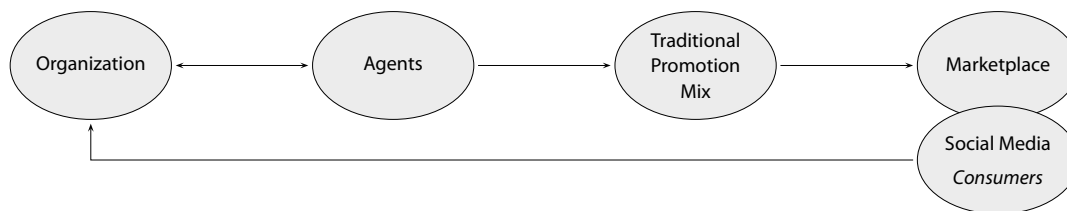


Figure 1 The New Communications Paradigm (adapted from Mangold & Faulds 2009, p. 360)

set upon the relation between the industry and the consumers or tourists; it does not account, however, for the ‘blind spot’ in most literature on social media: the power of social media platform providers as new intermediaries and their role in shaping the online tourism domain. In other words, they do not include any thoughts on the political economy of social media and how that might affect the ‘new communications paradigm.’

### Political Economy of Social Media:

#### Material versus Social Mediation

The political economy of media (old and new) is briefly described by McChesney (2000, p. 110) as entailing two dimensions. First, it addresses the nature of the relationship between media and communication systems on one hand and the broader social structure on the other; it does so with a particular interest in how economic factors influence politics and social relations. Second, it specifically examines how ownership, support mechanisms (e.g. advertising) and government policies influence media behaviour and content (McChesney, 2000, p. 110).

The political economy of (social) media is addressed here because of its explicit recognition of media as social actors who perform and actively engage in the mediatization of communication. The discourse on tourists’ empowerment via social media usually glosses over or fails to recognise social media as actors in and by themselves but implicitly considers them as only tools for mediation – more similar to a sheet of paper than to a publishing company.

Mediated communication means mediation by a material artefact (e.g. a letter written on a sheet of paper) and/or mediation by a social actor (e.g. a newspaper published by a media house). In the case of writing a letter, for example, the extent of control over commu-

nication is much higher by the communicative partners (Person A writing a letter to Person B), and the medium in question (letter) by itself does not perform any active social role.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of a newspaper, this relationship is much more complicated. Communication between a journalist and her reader is mediated not only by a printed sheet of paper but much more effectively by the media house in question, which includes work of one or more editors, professional codes of conduct, relations amongst journalists, relations between the media house and its advertisers, state regulation, etc.

What we see in most predictions about social media empowering tourists in relation to the tourism industry is an implicit and incorrect understanding of social media as merely tools with no active social role in the popularisation of their use, the selection and creation of published content or influencing the popularity of tourist-generated content. In this, such works merely accept the intentional discourse of social media platforms that strategically self-characterise themselves in a way that allows them to gain protections that benefit them and obligations that do not (Gillespie 2010). This means that most of this literature falls into the discourse criticised by Scholz as employing a market ideology that ‘worships the creative amateur’ (Keen 2007) and is actually a framing device of professional elites who are trying to mobilise novelty as a marketing ploy (Scholz, 2008).

Technology, especially technology that enables tourist-generated content, is a result of the intentional

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note, however, that even in a simple case of writing a letter we are usually not talking only about materially mediated communication, since for posting a letter we need postal services which thus include not only material but already social mediation.

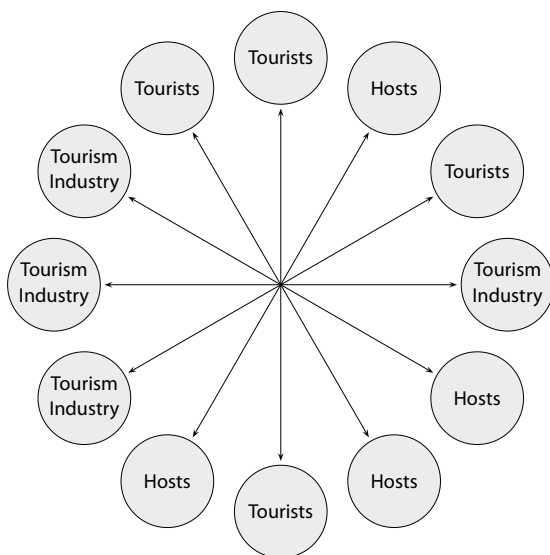


Figure 2 Social Media and Tourism Communication

process, 'that is to say, as being looked for and developed with certain purposes and practices already in mind' (Williams 1974). The practices that the ICT companies had in mind when creating social media were less of the empowerment of users than 'crowd-sourcing' (Brabham 2008; Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2009) and 'harnessing collective intelligence' (O'Reilly, 2005). The popularisation of social media has not been merely a bottom-up process but is, to a large extent, driven by media companies that are learning how to expand their revenue opportunities (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008, p. 6).

Any thought on social media and their relation to tourism as a social force and as an industry should thus include the fact that it is the new intermediaries (i.e. the platform providers, such as YouTube Limited Liability Company (YouTube LLC) or TripAdvisor LLT) that dictate the rules of engagement on social media.

Social media are not only tourist-to-tourist communication as in the marketplace, but encompass a much wider variety of communicative relations (see Figure 2):

- *Tourist-to-tourist communication* – this encompasses traditional forms of word-of-mouth transformed into social media forms and is extended by various possibilities for online reviews com-

bined with user-generated pictures and videos. Here, we include not only communication with the goal of making recommendations to other travellers but also other more 'mundane' yet extremely powerful functions of tourism as a social form: to share memories with friends or to relive the vacation experience (Wilson, Murphy, & Cambra Fierro, 2012).

- *Tourist-to-host communication* – social media are full of examples of communication on tourism destinations in which local people provide information for tourists (Miguéns, Baggio, & Costa, 2009) or tourists praise specific destinations and flatter local people on the beauty of their home; much more research is needed, however, on the positive effects of such communication in relation to tourism as a social force for promoting international understanding.
- *Host-to-host communication* – this includes communication on tourism amongst those that are not travelling but communicate on tourism issues that affect their daily lives in a tourism destination.
- *Tourism industry-to-tourist communication* – this conversation takes place either in the traditional form of paid advertisements or in more creative ways of direct involvement in social media, such as providing blogs, profiles and channels with communication that resembles the communication of users much more than it does traditional advertising forms (Hvass & Munar 2012).
- *Tourist-to-tourism industry communication* – one of the arguments supporting the thesis on tourists' empowerment via social media is the fact that these media provide more possibilities for users to publish comments and questions to the tourism industry. However, empowerment happens only if the industry is willing to listen. Here, a specific characteristic of social media is helpful for tourists: their public character. In comparison to other more traditional forms of providing feedback to the tourism industry, such as writing a letter to the manager, social media enable the tourists to perform a potentially much more

public feedback. The mere fact that others are potentially listening to the 'conversation' means more incentives for the industry to truly listen and respond (previously, this was reserved only for rare cases when tourists managed to publicise their complaints and, to a smaller extent, also their praise in mass media).

- Communication of all the above actors to other social actors such as mass media, political system, etc.

All this communication is embedded into a virtual sphere commanded by social media intermediaries (e.g. YouTube LLC as a company). We need to analyse a specific case to illustrate more specifically what exactly such social mediation means for the tourism industry and tourism as a social force. In the next section, we do so based on one of the most powerful social media intermediaries: YouTube LLC.

### **Tourism and New Intermediaries:**

#### **The Case of YouTube**

YouTube is the most relevant example of social media given in scholarly literature (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008). It has an almost a global monopoly within online video-sharing and is, according to the Alexa Web Information Company (<http://www.alexa.com/topsites>), the third most visited website, immediately following Google and Facebook in most countries throughout the world.

Although YouTube is not tourism-specific social medium (compared to TripAdvisor, for example), tourism is one of its extremely common subjects (Wall 2009; Lim et al., 2012). Nevertheless, YouTube has not featured prominently in tourism research, and much work needs to be done in this area in the future.

We borrowed research and analytical methods from the political economy and focused on three characteristics of YouTube LLC and their relation to tourism as an industry and a social force: political regulation, ownership and business model. To a large extent, this analysis builds on a literature review of previous research regarding the political economy of YouTube.

It combines this with two research methods of analysing YouTube, closely following the works of

Van Dijck (2009) and Pauwels and Hellriegel (2009).

One method was a discourse analysis (Van Dijck 2009) of YouTube LLC's official voice found in its public statements and terms of use.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this analysis was to obtain information on how YouTube LLC discursively constructs itself and its users. Another method was an analysis of the steering mechanisms embodied in the YouTube infrastructure or 'hybrid media analysis' including structure, design, hyperlinks, imagery, topics and issues (Pauwels & Hellriegel 2009).

#### **Political Regulation**

One supremely significant critical issue in the political economy of old broadcasting media has been Western imperialism and exporting Western cultural values with a global expansion of mostly Hollywood products. Nowadays, these concerns are focused on the dominance of US corporate power in ICT industries (Boyd-Barrett, 2006).

One such fear is the fact that US dominance in ICT industries is reflected in a dominance of Western voices in such communicative venues, which in turn has serious consequences for tourism as a social force. Wall (2009) analysed YouTube videos on Africa and concluded that the age-old inequities in communication still exist and still allow Westerners to dominate (Wall, 2009, p. 405):

More broadly, the findings here suggest that YouTube enables the average westerner in particular to become a chronicler of other peoples in faraway lands just as travellers and missionaries 'discovered' Africa in previous centuries. Most of these westerners, although not the official voices of the past, do not offer a remedy to the Othering of Africa. Indeed, many of their contributions to YouTube reinforce and naturalize stereotypes.

<sup>2</sup> Here we analysed information that was provided in two depths of hyperlinking from YouTube homepage in the spring of 2013 from the following sections: 'About,' 'Press,' 'Copyright,' 'Creators,' 'Advertise,' 'Developers,' 'Help,' 'Terms,' 'Policy and Safety,' 'Privacy,' 'Try something new!'

The second fear is the fact that communication, both national and international, via social media is regulated by Western rules and Western cultural norms. YouTube is registered in US and thus complies to the US regulation, even though it operates worldwide and is amongst the most visited websites worldwide.

In its terms of service, YouTube LLC states (<http://www.youtube.com/t/terms>):

You agree that: (i) the Service shall be deemed solely based in California; and (ii) the Service shall be deemed a passive website that does not give rise to personal jurisdiction over YouTube, either specific or general, in jurisdictions other than California.

The tourism industry, tourists and hosts that want to communicate via YouTube thus also need to comply to the US regulation.

Specifically, YouTube LLC is registered as a limited liability company. The US Digital Millennium Copyright Act provides limited liability to online service providers. According to McDonald (2009, p. 398), these limitations create a 'safe harbour' for online service providers. They are not held liable for infringing material available over their services if (a) the provider has no knowledge the material was available, (b) does not gain any direct financial benefit from the infringing activity, (c) acts expeditiously to remove or disable access to such material once notification is presented (McDonald, 2009, p. 398).

YouTube has been a target of 'the copyright wars' in which mainstream media accuse YouTube LLC of being a distribution platform for illegally reproduced proprietary content; Burgess and Green (2009, p. 35) argue that the 'copyright wars illustrate the difficult dual identity' of YouTube LLC both as a business and as a cultural resource co-created by its users. Similarly, Gillespie (2010, p. 17) argues that 'it is YouTube LLC's complex economic allegiances that compel it to both play host to amateur video culture and provide content owners with the tools to criminalize it.'

One result of the 'copyright wars' has been, as Wasko and Erikson (2009, p. 381) point out, the content-identification technology provided by YouTube

LLC that allows companies to claim their content and ask for its removal or run advertising with it and thereby gain revenue. Another result identified by McDonald (2009, p. 392) was advertising only with 'partner' videos, for which the content is checked for its compliance with the copyright laws. A third result has been advertising deals with mainstream media. McDonald (2009) argues that YouTube LLC has 'been particularly keen to recruit content partners from big media brands' (McDonald 2009, p. 392).

All three of these steps mean that political regulation in terms of copyright compels YouTube LLC to play by the rules of big business, thereby 'levelling' the playing field not in a way that would empower users or small tourism companies but large companies.

### Ownership

YouTube was purchased in 2006 by Google, the largest global player in online search engines. Although Google and YouTube operate as two separate corporations, their enmeshment is ever more visible. An example would be their design synchronisation that happens at times Google wishes to promote a specific event or information, sometimes favour of sports events and with them the tourism industry.

Google gains its revenue from advertising; the share of its advertising revenue in 2005 was 98.8 per cent of its total turnover (Machill, Beiler & Zenker, 2009, p. 595). It must thus continuously acquire new users and generate high access rates. Since Google already had its own Google Videos service at the time of purchasing YouTube, it is unlikely, as van Dijck (2009, 42) points out, that the acquisition of YouTube was about technology: it was about the large number of publishers and audiences that YouTube attracted and the creation of 'the Google layer.'

The 'Google layer' is the 'synergistic membrane created by media companies with prescribed circuits that constrain user freedoms and constrain users' range of motion within a narrow, privatized slice of the World Wide Web' (Milberry & Anderson, 2009, p. 393).

Specifically, this means that those forms of communication on tourism that are not part of Google layer are strategically pushed away so that those who

use Google or YouTube (thus most of internet users) are not likely to find such expressions. Thus, it is now more convenient for a tourism provider to use YouTube as a venue for their videos – even if they would want to publish them only at their own websites this would mean that they would not necessarily be part of ‘the Google layer’ and would thus reach fewer viewers.

Google dominates the online market in a number of countries worldwide to an extent that would not be permissible for other media and, in Europe, according to Machill et al. (2008, p. 593), would be curbed by rules that limit their reach. It thus has the power to dictate the way the tourism industry is represented. Xiang, Wöber, and Fesenmaier (2008) have discovered that only an exceedingly small fraction of indexed tourism Web pages are shown as Google search results that are accessible to a user, resulting in an over-all visibility ratio of 0.032%. Considering that most search engines users view only the first three search result pages, the actual visibility ratio is thus much lower.

Their findings furthermore indicate that Google substantially over-represents a relatively small number of websites in the online tourism domain, especially portal websites and information aggregators. The competition for attention has already been shown with substantial investment by destination marketing organisations in online marketing and advertising through search engines (Xiang et al., 2008, 146).

No research has been conducted on how YouTube LLC represents tourism and its actors, yet given the fact that it follows the operations of its owner Google we can hypothesise here that over-representation of large tourism companies would be the norm. This is thus a case and a call for future research. Furthermore, the fact that Google has a global monopoly both in online search and in video sharing via YouTube has major consequences for the tourism industry since such a monopolistic position means that the advertising model and the price are set by the monopolists, as we will see in the next chapter.

### **Business Model**

An indispensable analytical concept in political economy is commodification, i.e. the transformation of

communication into a commodity that can be sold on the market. Mosco (1996) identifies five interconnected types of communication commodification: commodification of content, audience commodification, intrinsic commodification, extensive commodification, commodification of labour. YouTube LLC does not sell its content since the watching and publishing YouTube videos are free for all. It does, however, engage in other forms of commodification of communication.

### **Audience Commodification: Advertising**

YouTube LLC’s business model is focused primarily on audience commodification: it sells audiences to advertisers. Advertising on YouTube can be targeted according to the geographic location of the user: specific by country, region or even city. Audiences could be targeted according to age, gender and interest. ‘Interest-Based Advertising,’ for example, identifies common interest groups among users that have affinities for particular types of content.

In its documents, YouTube LLC recognises the tourism industry as an important player, since it is one of the most addressed industries in its promotional examples. To illustrate, in its ‘Grow Your Business with YouTube’ guide, YouTube LLC provides guidelines for advertisements based on a tourism case: to ‘Generate interest in Northlake Bed and Breakfast as a premier vacation destination in central Vermont’ (YouTube, 2012).

Another illustration comes from the main address aimed at advertisers (<http://www.youtube.com/yt/advertise/why-youtube.html>):

Say you run a hotel in Dallas. You can shoot a video tour of your rooms and promote it as a TV-style ad before other YouTube travel videos. Or put it next to video search results for ‘Dallas hotels,’ or on Texas travel websites where vacationers will see it as they browse on their tablets, PCs, web TVs and smartphones.

You don’t need fancy equipment or a big budget to make great video. And with AdWords for video, you pay nothing unless a viewer *chooses* to watch your video.

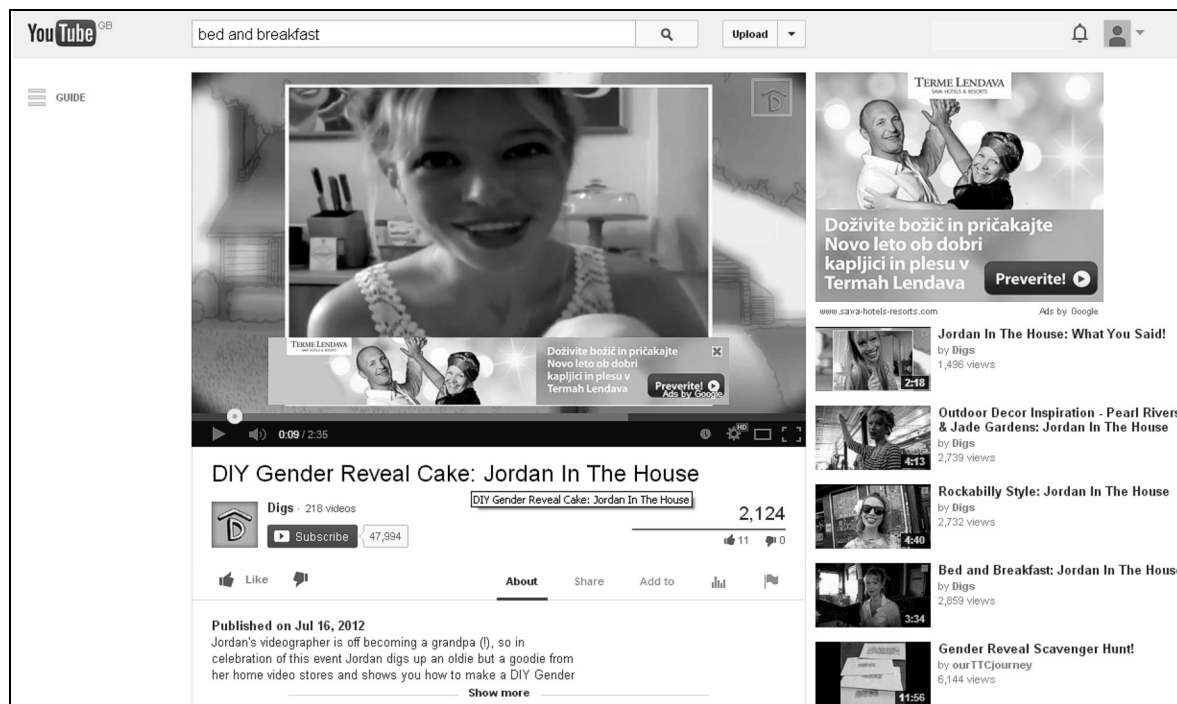


Figure 3 Example of Tourism Advertisement on YouTube When Searching for 'Bed and Breakfast' Videos

Bermejo (2009) compares business models of broadcasting media with Google's business model. He describes Google as an innovator in terms of online advertising, since it introduced a cost-per-click pricing model coupled with a system of keyword auctions (Bermejo, 2009, p. 148). In exposure-pricing models, known from broadcasting, audience attention was sold in terms of exposure. In performance-pricing models, it is not exposure but audience responses (e.g. clicking, providing or asking for information, purchasing, etc.) that determine revenue, or in other words are sold to the advertisers. Since the response of audiences is not under direct media control, but depends mostly on the quality and pricing of the product advertised and the advertisements (Bermejo, 2009, p. 148), Google added a specific possibility: the order in which advertisements are shown depends on the previous performance of advertisements. 'That is, the more successful a particular advert linked to a particular keyword is in generating clicks (and revenue for Google), the more prominent it will be in successive appearance

on the search results page' (Bermejo, 2009, p. 148).

This has significant consequences for the tourism industry. In the old exposure-pricing models, e.g. on television or in newspapers, companies were guaranteed a space in the best viewed pages or during most watched broadcasts as long as they paid for the service. In this new model, tourism companies need to compete with other advertisers not only in terms of readiness to pay a specific price but much more in terms of quality of their previous offer and marketing appeal of their advertisements in order to gain prominent exposure and thus large viewership and extensive response from YouTube users.

This advertising model thus gives more possibilities to small tourism providers who may never have had sufficient funds to buy expensive commercials in the old pricing model but may prove to have more creative approaches to reaching audiences via YouTube. However, given the fact that larger companies can afford to hire professionals to create appealing advertisements and can afford to pay more and thus gain



Table 1 How Ads Appear on YouTube

Ad Format	Viewer Experience	Pricing Model
<i>TrueView In-search</i> Ads appear on the YouTube search page.	Viewers see your ad above or next to YouTube's search results when they search for content related to your video.	Pay only when someone clicks your ad to watch your video.
<i>TrueView In-display</i> Ads appear next to videos on the YouTube watch page.	Viewers can click the display ad to watch the video in the ad or on a YouTube watch or channel page.	Pay only when someone clicks your ad to watch your video.
<i>TrueView In-stream</i> Ads play as a pre-, mid-, or post-roll on YouTube partner videos of all lengths.	Ad plays and viewers can skip after 5 seconds.	Pay only when someone watches 30 seconds of your ad or to completion if the ad is under 30 seconds.
<i>TrueView In-slate</i> Ads play before long-form YouTube partner videos over 10 minutes.	Before a video plays, viewers choose to watch one of three ads, or to see regular commercial breaks during the video.	Pay only when someone clicks your ad to watch your video.

Notes Adapted from YouTube (2012, p. 74).

larger audiences (since costs are per click) and that small tourism providers usually do not pay close attention to online marketing (Brumen, Rosi, Turnšek Hančič, & Kurež 2013), it is unlikely that this model empowers the small tourism industries but, just as the old model, helps 'the rich get richer.'

#### Intrinsic Commodification: Information on Users

According to Amersdorffer et al. (2012, p. 183), the future in tourism belongs to those innovators that will know how to exploit the enormous amount of data provided by search engines about their users and will know how to go beyond the older webpage concept to the social web practices. YouTube LLC's business model rests upon this intrinsic commodification of information on its users – metadata used to profile people and their interests and therefore deliver successful targeted marketing. As van Dijck and Nieborg emphasise, 'Google is less interested in co-creation or content than it is in people making connections – connections that yield valuable information about who they are and what they are interested in' (Van Dijck & Nieborg 2009, p. 865).

This is also why YouTube users are becoming 'citizens of Google' through attempts to synchronise users' Google and YouTube identities. Specifically, it is possible to sign into YouTube either via a special YouTube account or via a Google account. Within the 'Google layer,' attempts are thus made to create a world in

which everyone is identifiable through the same online account. This makes online preferences even more traceable through a broad variety of online activities and the data, due to its target-marketing value, even more profitable. We can thus expect that in the future the tourism industry will need to pay ever greater attention to specialised, niche and segmented marketing, since the online audiences will be ever more specifically defined.

#### Labour Commodification

YouTube LLC also commodifies free online labour. On YouTube, Andrejevic (2009, p. 419) argues, 'users are offered a medium of control over the product of their creative activity in exchange for the work they do in building up an online community and sociality upon a privately controlled networked structure.' Attempts at commodification of free online labour are part of the discourse of 'crowdsourcing,' whereby the focus is upon direct enthusiasm over its 'potential to exploit a crowd of innovators' (Brabham, 2008, p. 75).

However, not all users' labour is free. YouTube shares advertising revenues with its 'YouTube partners.' In the past, users needed to apply for partnership and if they showed themselves commercially profitable, either by having already become popular with YouTube users or by being an influential player in terms of 'popular or commercially successful' content

provision outside of YouTube, they were accepted as YouTube partners.

Now there is no application procedure, yet users need to comply with following criteria:

Your YouTube channel may be eligible for the YouTube Partner Program if it meets the following criteria (<http://support.google.com/youtube/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=82839>):<sup>3</sup>

- The program has launched in your country. (If the program is not available in your country, you will see a notification in your monetization settings.)
- Your account is in good standing and hasn't previously been disabled for monetization.
- You upload original, quality content that is advertiser-friendly.
- Your video content complies with our Terms of Service and Community Guidelines.
- You have reviewed our copyright education materials.

The mechanism of YouTube partnerships follows the mechanism of Google advertising described by Bermejo (2009, p. 148), whereby Google promotes those advertisements according to their previous performance. In other words, on YouTube 'the rich get richer.' Those who are already extremely popular are afforded additional techniques, such as the possibility of analysing user demographics, thus leading to the creation of targeted content.

YouTube partners are offered a variety of benefits, most importantly (a) 'monetisation' of their content by profiting from advertisements on their videos and channels and (b) additional promotion and inclusion in special advertising programs that run on YouTube, across the internet and offline. In relation to travel and tourism, this option is used mostly to 'semi-professional travellers,' i.e. people who travel all over the world and publish commentaries and guides on tourism destinations.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Slovenia is not a country in which the program has been launched, which is most likely due to the fact that it is a too small and thus not an interesting enough market.

### External Commodification

YouTube LLC also performs external commodification, since it is transforming communication medium that was not originally conceptualised in economic terms into a commodity that can be sold. In relation to tourism, this specifically means communication amongst tourists and amongst tourists and hosts.

YouTube LLC thus transforms the sphere of word-of-mouth, such as expressing one's opinion on a tourism destination or sharing pictures and memories with family and friends, into a sphere that it controls and can be sold to tourism advertisers (this is even more true for tourism-specific social media such as TripAdvisor).

### Conclusions

The 'tourist empowerment' thesis has become the main frame in which the discourse on social media and tourism is discussed. This research has argued that those who were most empowered with the introduction and popularisation of social media were their owners: YouTube LLC and Google in the specific case of communication on YouTube.

This does not mean that we are not witnessing a shift in power relations amongst tourists and the tourism industry. It does mean, however, that by using social media tourists are not communicating in a social vacuum but in virtual environments that are popularised, controlled, regulated and formed by increasingly powerful social media intermediaries, such as YouTube LLC or TripAdvisor LLC.

It also means that tourism as an industry and a social force should be wary of the power that a global monopoly affords to these intermediaries (most specifically Google): from special promotions of larger industry players to setting the price for advertising; such power is in the hands of these intermediaries, not in the hands of tourists or tourism industry.

Finally, tourism as a social force, potentially promoting peace and understanding amongst peoples of the world, should be more recognised when discussing social media. Such positive examples are social videos and commentaries on the beauties of a specific destination and hospitality of their peoples. The negative side of the same coin is examples of nationalistic,

racist and hostile discussions. We thus need more research on communication amongst tourists and hosts, tourists and tourists, and hosts and hosts, while simultaneously not losing focus on the role of the social intermediaries of such communication.

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