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# **'Fake news' meets tourism: a proposed research agenda**

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## **Introduction**

This brief essay in the form of a research note focuses on the phenomenon of 'fake news' in the context of travel and tourism.

With the most prominent public figure, current U.S. president Donald Trump being credited with elevating the term to the public discourse, 'fake news' has increasingly gained wider attention in recent years due to diffusion of ICTs, digital media and the popularity of numerous social platforms reaching out and connecting people worldwide. 'Fake news' has proved to have a vast impact and implications on public matters [1], being recognised as a widespread phenomenon of the digital information age.

The tourism sector cannot be disregarded amidst the social phenomenon of 'fake news' spanning globally. Information in tourism plays a pivotal role as the industry is highly reliant on information which is continuously generated, shared and consumed by millions of people worldwide. In the wake of recent evidence from various contexts, 'fake news' has the potential, for instance, to impact opinions, expectations and behaviour of tourism consumers. Furthermore, the manipulation of information could shape differently to the benefit or detriment of tourism destinations and operators.

This paper concisely reviews some of the most recent literature on the topic through the exploration of studies from various disciplines. Due to the novelty of the subject and its original application to the tourism domain, the use of non-academic sources (e.g. newspaper articles) was deemed valuable and incorporated to properly address the discourse. This research note represents the first attempt at outlining the most recent phenomenon of 'fake news' in the travel and tourism context. The main purpose is exploratory as it aims to raise consideration and discussion about several conceivable implications related to users (visitors and tourists), tourism organisations and marketers, on both theoretical and practical aspects around the diffusion of the phenomenon at the centre of this text. To conclude, the topic offered

adheres to existing research streams in tourism, for instance earlier studies on 'truth value' and authenticity, by adding contemporary and fascinating facets to these themes.

### **Defining 'Fake news'**

Describes as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting", 'fake news' has been named word of the year in 2017 by the Collins dictionary (in [8]). 'Fake news' has always existed in history with scholars citing evidence dating back to the eighth century [4]. Tandoc *et al.* (2018) in their study reviewed 34 academic articles published between 2003 and 2017 where the term 'fake news' was used. They found different forms of 'fake news' which manifest based on the dimensions of facticity and deception, namely: news satire and parody, manipulation, fabrication, advertising, and propaganda [13]. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) [1] introduce the "cousins of fake news" (p. 214), including as such: intentional reporting mistakes; rumours that do not originate from news articles; conspiracy theories; satire that is unlikely to be misinterpreted as genuine; false statements by politicians; and reports that are biased or misleading although not absolutely false.

Undoubtedly, underlying the origin of the phenomenon, a crucial role is played by the democratic and uncensored features of the Internet, with a special emphasis on social media platforms, which have the power to disseminate information exponentially with virtually unlimited restrictions. Although the term 'fake news' has become newsworthy only recently, studies on this subject have been broadly covered in academia in the areas of communication, economics, psychology, political and computer science [1].

### **'Fake news' in tourism: evidence from the industry**

If considered in broader terms, 'fake news' in tourism can manifest in different forms. In 2017, the Lithuanian national tourism agency was responsible for using images unrelated to the country to promote the Baltic state as part of an on-line marketing campaign [3]. The Bali Development Planning Agency in Indonesia claimed that various countries were circulating false statements about the danger of the volcanic eruption of Mount Agung in Bali, in order to detract visitors from the island [15]. In 2017, the controversial case of a Polish

tourist murdered in Egypt became a case of public domain. The discussion of the tragic events rapidly spread on social media, aided by the creation of Facebook groups and an on-line poll launched by a tabloid news website [5]. Undoubtedly, while the sad facts remain central to the story, the on-line debate spurred by diverging versions of the truth and politicised propaganda divulged by on-line sources caused a collective negative effect for Egypt's image, resulting in numerous travel cancellations to the country by Polish travellers following the tragic events.

Google searches with use of Boolean operators containing 'fake news' and the terms 'tourism' and 'travel' were performed, while the same approach applied to a variety of academic databases (mainly Google Scholar, ScienceDirect and Emerald) did not produce any significant result. Although the examples proposed here considerably differ from one another, they specifically serve the purpose of grasping the diverse degree of the phenomenon of 'fake news', how this can originate from different sources and the heterogeneity of characteristics and effects of the diffusion of such information. While several studies have looked at the phenomenon of 'fake news' mainly in the context of politics and elections [1,6,2] and others addressed ways for detecting 'fake news' [10,14,12], the lack of research with reference to the tourism sector offers the opportunity for a challenging and fresh field of research.

### **Preliminary findings: Challenges for the tourism industry**

Several themes which come into discussion when considering the implications 'fake news' have in the tourism domain have been identified. Therefore, the author suggests several areas of research, falling under different disciplines, to study the phenomenon. The discourse should encompass the following issues:

#### ***Research Area 1: Ethical aspects***

Several studies have considered ethics in media and journalism domains. For instance, it is acknowledged that journalists adopt codes of ethics and reprimand those failing to follow them. As 'fake news' enters the boundaries of journalism, those codes are becoming increasingly difficult to detect [4]. Comparably, an attorney fabricating alternative facts would face legal consequences [9]. The example offered on Bali earlier shows how the notions

of truth and falsity are questioned between accredited sources of information. This happens particularly on websites, blogs and social media where any individual or group can create and disclose any sort of information, regardless of accuracy. Another aspect in this area is the use of humour and satire in tourism, a topic widely researched in academia which could offer common arguments.

Among the questions that are raised:

- What is the responsibility of recognised media actors divulging 'fake news'? Should boundaries be applied to the notions of truth and falsity in relation to the information divulged by media?
- To what extent can freedom of speech be deemed as acceptable in the current scenarios where the truth cannot be easily recognised anymore?
- Should 'fake news' be considered a harmless form of entertainment, e.g. when associated with satire and mockery? In this context, what criteria should be taken into consideration to define forms of innocuous 'fake news'?

### ***Research area 2: Marketing of tourism organisations: micro and macro levels***

The author has offered the example of the Lithuanian national tourism organisation, employing false images to promote the attractions of the country. When prompted by the organisation itself, 'fake news' can be seen in the same light as mendacious advertising; this can result in negative repercussions on the credibility of an organisation making use of such techniques, further to facing possible legal implications such as defamation lawsuits. While the example made might lead to temporary positive results in terms of marketing, both individual tourism organisations and the wider local tourism industry could find themselves paying the consequences of the practise of 'fake news'. Furthermore, false reviews of tourism businesses and services, *guerrilla marketing* strategies [7] and *click-baiting* techniques based on 'fake news' provide further examples of this issue on different levels.

The questions that are raised are:

- Should 'fake news' be permitted as accepted practice in tourism marketing?

- To what extent are tourism organisations responsible for the use of ‘fake news’ in their marketing activities?
- What is the difference between scam and ‘fake news’ in tourism marketing?
- What effects and impacts can originate from this marketing practice and how can these be measured (e.g. economic or social costs involved; effects in the short, medium or long term)?
- How can tourism organisations recover from the negative effects that ‘fake news’ might have at the individual or wider destination levels?

### ***Research area 3: Impact on tourists’ perception and behaviour***

Impacts on perceptions, attitude and behaviour of ‘fake news’ have been extensively considered in other disciplines outside tourism. As the availability of transparent information is fundamental for tourists in terms of knowledge construction about places, products and activities, ‘fake news’ can bias the dynamics of information gathering and processing. This issue relates to and can also be explained through the processes of knowledge creation and dissemination in tourism, which are based on the shared construction of reality and narratives among tourists, as in the case of backpackers in Noy (2005) [11]. As *hyper-reality* sees ‘fake news’ becoming more real than reality itself [4], ‘fake news’ could highly prejudice the notion of tourism places and products for users and have impacts which could ultimately influence decision making and the formation of values and beliefs of tourists.

Hence, the following questions are raised:

- To what extent is the range of tourism information users aware of the existence and consequences of ‘fake news’?
- Are visitors/tourists’ perceptions, attitudes, decisions and behaviour affected by the influence of ‘fake news’? If so, are the effects on consumers ephemeral, limited in time and space or have wider impact on both dimensions?
- Is the use of ‘fake news’ among tourism players perceived as a form of creativity or a source of deception by users?

### ***Research area 4: Security and regulations***

An important aspect is represented by the measures that tourism organisations should employ to protect themselves from the effects of ‘fake news’. Internet giants Facebook and Google have been gradually taking actions to tackle the phenomenon of ‘fake news’ on their platforms and news content feeds [16]. Nevertheless, this might not be enough to control the type of information that affects public debate and impacts on the correct interpretation of reality. To a certain extent, tourism organisations and destinations could face similar situations to the recovery process from natural disasters or other major events. Therefore, the tourism literature on crisis and disaster management might be beneficial in this area.

Questions in this area might include:

- What are the threats in term of security for tourism organisations?
- How can tourism organisations protect themselves from ‘fake news’ negative effects?
- Is cyber-security central to the issue?
- Is the tourism sector in need of protecting itself specially or similarly to other sectors?
- What systems should be put in place for public safety matters by tourism destinations?

## **Conclusions**

Conclusively, ‘fake news’ infiltrates the new state of information structure as it is distributed and consumed in the post-modern era. As ‘fake news’ meets travel and tourism, an industry deeply reliant on information, the opacity and indistinct reliability brought to its foundations can primarily affect users, their expectations and overall experience. Key themes already well researched in tourism academia such as: authenticity, consumer behaviour (e.g. risk perception), marketing and crisis management in tourism certainly represent important connections to extant knowledge to help understand the issue. Undoubtedly, this phenomenon represents a peculiar area of study as it combines wide-ranging disciplines linked by a common underlying issue. In the light of the most recent developments of technological and societal nature, the ‘fake news’ phenomenon merits attention by tourism academics since it has not been directly considered. In this regard, this short essay attempts to

offer several arguments for discussion and spur in-depth studies on the phenomenon of 'fake news' in the tourism domain.

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