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Editorial : Information and Communication Technologies in Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage

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Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and, particularly, social media are contributing to deeply re-shape the tourism experience, and play a major role in all its stages:

- In the dreaming and planning stage, when the wish or the need for travel arises, ICTs are by now the leading source of information search and of advice seeking (especially through so-called electronic eWord-of-mouth), up to the actual booking of hotels, tickets and so on;
- On the road, GPS systems guide to the final destination and provide *en-route* information; the smart phone grants access to airport gates via QR codes and in both cases, technology provides updates about traffic;
- At the destination, wi-fi systems and smart phones make it easier to use services like buying tickets or getting updates about events, to access information about the place, local customs and traditions, to keep memories of the experience through camera devices, to ‘augment’ the experienced reality, and to be ‘always on’ keeping in touch with family and friends;
- Once back home, digital technologies allow for an easy archiving of the memories collected throughout the journey, and to give feed-back both to tourism service suppliers and to fellow tourists.

The new communication and social dynamics supported and promoted by ICTs in the field of tourism are receiving wide attention both from the academy as well as from the related industries. Their role in religious tourism and pilgrimage, though, is still under-investigated. Here, indeed, ICTs may have a strong influence on how the religious site and the customs and traditions bound to it are perceived,

understood, experienced, elaborated and then reported to others by visitors. Religious tourists and pilgrims, then, have a reliable travel companion in smart phones, which not only can drive them along the road, but can enrich their journey in different ways. ICTs give, eventually, valuable opportunities to travel agencies and organizations managing religious sites - they facilitate listening to tourists’ voices and collecting their genuine opinions. This can then result in an adjustment or even differentiation of the cultural promotion of the site and its communication.

This special issue aims at drawing attention to these topics and setting the stage for an interdisciplinary discussion. The collected papers were elaborated on the base of presentations given during a panel dedicated to ICTs for religious and pilgrimage destinations, organized within the 2015 ENTER conference, entitled ‘*eTourism: transforming mobility*’. This was a major international event organized by IFITT – International Federation for IT and Travel & Tourism in Lugano (Switzerland), from 3rd to 6th February 2015.

In the paper by Stefania Cerutti & Elisa Piva, and the paper by Rayviscic Mutinda Ndivo & Lorenzo Cantoni, the focus is on the role of online media as a channel that gives voice to users and allows, in this way, the sharing of tourism experiences. On the other hand, any user can access those visitors’ experiences with very different interests / goals. Fellow visitors might find travel advice and guidance, while site / destination managers might realise that certain managerial aspects need to be improved. Visitors’ voices can be collected through Online Travel Reviews (OTR) published in online platforms for travel and tourism.

Cerutti & Piva consider OTR about the Sacred Mounts of Oropa and Orta, where groups of chapels and other sacred works of art are inscribed, together with seven

further sacred mounts in the Northern of Italy, in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The analysis of OTRs points out that, even if no specific reference to religious and devotional motivations was made, the Sacred Mounts act both as devotional centres and as religious tourism attractions, because of their combinations of historical, artistic and scenic characteristics. Even if they are a gem of Italian cultural heritage, they are almost unknown by the wide international public; in fact, visitors come mostly from nearby areas and are mainly excursionists or one-day visitors.

Moving from southern Europe to northern Africa, Ndivo & Cantoni analyse OTRs about the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela in Ethiopia, which are also part of the UNESCO World Heritage list and are one of the most visited attractions in the country. The site consists of a range of material and non-material cultural components that constitute an important part of the local community and of its traditional way of life. With this growing popularity, needs exist to ensure quality heritage interpretation, both to provide adequate presentation of the site and to meet visitors' expectations. The paper seeks to investigate the level of visitors satisfaction with the heritage interpretation and explores the need for ICT intermediation in heritage presentation.

Narbona and Arasa focus on smartphones as tools of direct communication, investigating their role in the organization and management of large religious events. They take the case of the beatification of the Catholic bishop Álvaro del Portillo, a ceremony held in Madrid on 27th September 2014, which attracted more than 250,000 people from over 70 countries. Mass religious events are simultaneously a spiritual experience, an organized event and an occasion for tourism, but might generate several organizational problems for the hosting city. The study analyzed the features and uses of the 'Álvaro del Portillo' mobile application, created to support attendees and also to promote the city of Madrid beyond the event. In addition to the app, a phone number was set up, in order to exploit the application *Whatsapp*, to send instant messages during the event and promote the official website.

As a follow up to the *ENTER 2015* panel on ICTs for religious tourism and pilgrimage, an expert workshop titled *Pilgrims in the Digital Age. Towards a map of the overlapping areas between eTourism, eReligion and eLearning*, was organized at USI – Università della Svizzera Italiana (Lugano) on September 18-19, 2015, supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The *Manifesto* which emanated from this expert workshop is published in this special issue as an introduction to the topic, in order to provide a framework for understanding and interpreting the intersections between tourism, religion and education, mediated by ICT.

We hope that the Manifesto and the papers published in this special issue might be for the readers an opportunity to ponder on how ICTs are moulding every aspect of human life, comprised the most personal and private ones such as religious and tourism experiences.