

# Digital Hospitality: Trail Running and Technology in the Moroccan High Atlas

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**Abstract:** In the mountainous region of the Central High Atlas in Morocco, tourism has emerged as a promising economic prospect among a number of profound changes recently. However, the implications of digital media technology *in situ* and as part of this wider transformation have rather been neglected by scholarship. Hence, in this paper I propose the notion of *digital hospitality* to map out and articulate the interplay of digital media, tourism and ‘Mediterranean themes’ like hospitality, topography and connectivity, and to make it tangible how processes of sociotechnical restructuring are challenging the interactions and possible relationships between guests and hosts in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Drawing on extended ethnographic fieldwork in the High Atlas, I analyse the ultramarathon sports event ‘Zaouiat Ahansal Ultra Trail’ as a mediated, circulated and digitised phenomenon. It is the re-adjusted focus on (digital) media technology, which foregrounds social practices and cooperation, that allows this trail-running event to be understood as an achievement of the organizers’ scaling work, which in turn feeds into and interacts with the scalar characteristics of hospitality itself.

*[Morocco; High Atlas; hospitality; digital media; tourism; ultramarathon]*

## Introduction

The Moroccan region of the Central High Atlas is currently undergoing profound change, which has been intensifying over the past decade. Paved roads, potable water, electricity, television and mobile phones, new schools and gradual integration into an expanding global economy (see especially Crawford 2008; Hoffman 2008; more recently Mulet 2018) have not only altered the infrastructural constellations and arrangements of a whole region, but the very social fabric of everyday life itself.<sup>1</sup> It is within these processes of sociotechnical restructuring that digital media are increasingly taking centre stage. The analysis of these processes of transformation must therefore be recalibrated in light of the dissemination of ‘new’ or digital media (Coleman 2010; Hirschkind et al. 2017).

Research along the southern Mediterranean shore has recently discussed media in two major respects: first, mass-mediated communication with regard to political

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, such changes take place against significant regional and historical backgrounds; see Berque (1978), Gellner (1969) and Montagne (1931). For a comprehensive overview of anthropological studies and themes concerning Morocco, see Rachik (2016).

and religious reforms (Hirschkind 2006; Spadola 2014); and second, the influence of social media in relation to struggles for greater political participation (Gerbaudo 2012; Jurkiewicz 2018; Salvatore 2011) and intimate social relationships (Costa 2016; Costa and Menin 2016). More generally, contemporary anthropology of media emphasises ethnographic investigations into digital media's specific formation on the ground and in particular contexts (Bender and Zillinger 2015; Horst and Miller 2012; Pink et al. 2016; see also Mazzarella 2004).

Along these lines, in this paper I view digital media technology from the perspective of its consequences and implications *in situ* in order to investigate and articulate the wider processes of transformation of which they are a part. However, I will argue that digital media technology is not a prefabricated entity that changes all conditions when implemented. Rather, digital media are made and remade by people on the ground. The argument of this paper comprises three areas: tourism, digital media and hospitality, which I will bring together in the concept of *digital hospitality*.

A significant aspect of the ongoing transformations in the High Atlas is the new economic opportunities that have emerged in the region, above all, tourism.<sup>2</sup> Digital media technology is not only contributing to this transformation in general, it is influencing local tourism practices in particular. In the following I will focus on a trail-running event in the High Atlas in order to carve out particular media and data practices through which the event can be realised in the first place and through which the organisers can scale different issues and concerns for varying scope and different contexts. This might seem like an odd example of digital media. After all, running is a quite physical experience. The focus, however, will not be on the event's touristic experience or its sports aspect, but rather on the trail-running event as a mediated, circulated and digitised phenomenon with its own sociocultural and historically specific preconditions and ramifications.

One implication of digital media technology for touristic encounters in the High Atlas is that it revives a familiar preoccupation of Mediterranean anthropology, namely hospitality. Hospitality constitutes a *fait social* in the Durkheimian sense, and as such it conflates questions of giving, reciprocity, power relations, politics, sovereignty, materiality, space and morality (Selwyn 2000). From this point of view, the concept overlaps with other shared but implicit assumptions and elusive organisational principles, such as kinship, honour and solidarity within relations of family, patronage and friendship, all of which have characterised classic studies of Mediterranean anthropology (Ben-Yehoyada 2016; Boissevain 1979; Gilmore 1982). As one of the central founders of a Mediterranean anthropology, Julian Pitt-Rivers has written the most influential text on hospitality (Pitt-Rivers 2012[1977]) through which he not only became hospitality's central theorist, but also raised questions and triggered a debate that are still relevant today. In this article I shall show how topical the debate is and suggest that it even

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the relationship between tourism and anthropology, see the seminal works by Graburn (1983), Nash (1981) and Stronza (2001).

plays a central role in Moroccan mountain tourism. Beyond a 'mere Mediterranean' perspective on hospitality, Candea and Da Col's (2012) recent introduction to their re-vitalisation of an anthropology of hospitality in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* represents the most comprehensive and skilful genealogy of the subject. The authors have evinced a growing academic and interdisciplinary interest in the topic in recent years, driven mainly by Derrida's philosophical reflections (Derrida 2000; see also Shryock 2008; Still 2010).

In the field of tourism, however, the "problem of how to deal with strangers" (Pitt-Rivers 2012[1977]:501) is not only a problem of dealing with them, but also of appealing to them. Usually more delicate for the tourism entrepreneurs involved, strangers represent potential clients who need to be attracted, accommodated and satisfied in order to compete in the volatile and often precarious mountain tourism industry. Articulating the question that guides the research in this article, I ask to what extent do processes of sociotechnical restructuring challenge the interactions and possible relationships between guests and hosts?

In the field of tourism research, the anthropological and philosophical horizons of hospitality tend to be curtailed and hospitality reduced to providing accommodation primarily as a form of business. However, there are some interesting approaches that have made observations about increased mobility and the wider dissemination of information and communication technology (ICT) (Molz and Gibson 2007) or asked how "technologies of hospitality" (Bialski 2012) might challenge and/or change relations of hospitality. This "mobile" (Molz 2007) or "network hospitality" (Molz 2012, 2014), which can be found across social networks, sharing services and online platforms such as *CouchSurfing* or *Airbnb* (Ikkala and Lampinen 2015), presumably present peer-to-peer versions of hosting and guesting and may even come up with new ways for strangers to interact.

While the studies mentioned above have focused on particular media technologies or specific platforms in order to investigate the changing practices, motivations and expectations of hospitality, I will proceed in the reverse direction. I will focus instead on a touristic event in the High Atlas and on the media technology, publicness, infrastructure and cooperation that were produced during the event and that went into its realisation. As I will argue, however, hospitality will help make sense of these different aspects in the context of the ongoing transformations in the area more generally. Hence, this article is less concerned with attempting to define 'what hospitality is or is not', but rather employs hospitality in order to analyse what is happening on the ground. It is by means of a readjusted focus on media technology that foregrounds social practices and cooperation that the scaling work of actors will become analytically tangible. This scaling work, in turn, feeds into the scalar characteristics of hospitality itself and interacts with them.

Drawing on fourteen months of fieldwork between 2016 and 2018 in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, I analyse the *Zaouiat Ahansal Ultra Trail* (ZAUT) in particular, and mountain tourism more generally, as simultaneously an expression and

a driver of sociotechnical restructuring on the ground.<sup>3</sup> I will start by describing the ZAUT as the latest individual innovation strategy in Moroccan mountain tourism not to have been driven by the state. Next, I will address the digital media, with their implications for scaling work and publicness, and the data involved, through which topography is translated into a digital format. This necessary detour via mediation and digitisation in their own right will then merge into the bigger picture about digital hospitality. In this context, I will suggest that digital media and data practices are becoming an increasingly crucial part of how the relationship between host and guest is played out in the tourism of the High Atlas Mountains. Hence, in the following pages I will argue that revisiting hospitality will allow several themes in Mediterranean anthropology to be drawn together conceptually and linked, namely mediation, connectivity and topography, thus helping to identify and understand the manifold processes of sociotechnical transformation in the High Atlas.

## **The Zaouiat Ahansal Ultra Trail within Mountain Tourism in Morocco**

The mountainous region of the High Atlas began to play a role as a tourist destination as far back as the French protectorate. However, international tourism did not emerge until after independence, when it became interwoven with formations of national modernisation aiming at increasing living standards. From the perspective of national policy, mountain tourism is a means for the development of economically weak regions. For the Moroccan government tourism is a key industry to be managed and promoted on a large scale (Ait Hamza and Popp 1999; Boumaza 1996; George et al. 2011; Lessmeister 2008). More recently, the Moroccan government has set out new goals for the development of tourism in the region by 2020: about two million tourist arrivals, doubling the number of beds to almost 30,000 and creating nearly 40,000 jobs. Yet, these economic targets will obviously be severely affected by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the future and the planned grow of the tourism sector, especially under current circumstances, tourism has proved to be both a foundation and an expression of the ongoing processes of transformation in the High Atlas. Today, local tourism practices function as an aspiration that had not existed in

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<sup>3</sup> The trail-running event was developed on site and by the interlocutors, or rather the research partners and friends, I got to know during my stay. I accompanied the planning and organisation of the first version of the event and participated in running the second version a year later.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Ministry of Tourism as stated on their website, <http://www.tourisme.gov.ma/en/tourism-territories/atlas-vallees> [25 July 2018].



Figure 1 & 2 Ultra Trail participants before third-day stage (left), camp site and finish of a stage (right). Photos: Simon Holdermann

prior decades. Tourism presents itself as a space of possibilities for the way people are creating and shaping the conditions to make a living in mountain areas. The Zaouiat Ahansal Ultra Trail (ZAUT), too, must be situated within this historical context and socio-economic framework. This trail-running event is classified as an ‘ultramarathon’, an umbrella term for any race beyond the traditional marathon distance of 42.195 kilometres. The Zaouiat Ahansal Ultra Trail is a four-day stage race (*étapes*) across the central High Atlas covering 116 kilometres at a cumulative altitude of 6,400 metres. The total distance is divided between the four individual stages of 17, 36, 37 and 26 kilometres respectively.

Early one morning in September 2018, I was standing among neon-coloured trail-runners in front of the ZAUT start line. The atmosphere was energised, the excitement palpable. Many of the runners were equipped with high-tech hiking sticks and were activating their muscles with some last-minute stretching exercises or by jumping up and down on the spot. Some others took one group photo after another in an atmosphere of joyful anticipation. In total 38 participants started the run, of whom 33 finished, including myself.

Each stage had a clearly marked route, mostly on mule tracks up and down rocky mountain slopes and across barren high plateaus, with several refreshment points along the way where the runners could refill their water supplies. At the end of each stage a camp was set up, including an inflatable start/finish gate, a speaker system and a kitchen tent. The organisers provided communal tents and the necessary camping infrastructure, but it was also possible to bring one’s own tent to sleep in. The accompanying staff transported the runners’ luggage and all the materials and provisions in off-road vehicles and pick-up trucks to the locations of the daily camp and the stage finish. Early in the morning, while the participants were getting themselves ready, packing up sleeping bags and personal belongings, the staff prepared breakfast, including different types of bread, tea, coffee, jam and honey collected the luggage again and loaded it on to the trucks. After the participants had started on the run, the camp was dismantled and groups of staff headed either to the refreshment points or to the next location and

stage finish. Participants would arrive throughout the afternoon. Upon arrival they would take a shower, relax, chat, walk around, eat something, or get medical care from the two accompanying nurses from France if needed.

## Increasing Scope: Publicness and ‘Circulatability’

Hamou,<sup>5</sup> a local mountain guide and guesthouse owner, and Ibrahim, a former professional athlete, were the main organisers of the run. Ibrahim was the event’s somewhat famous patron.<sup>6</sup> As a many-times champion of the *Marathon des Sables*, he himself had organised a number of similar and larger trail-running events in Morocco. Together with a local association for mountaineering and alpine tourism, Hamou developed the idea of creating a trail-running event specifically for this particular region of the High Atlas and got Ibrahim on board. In addition, drivers, assistants for the supply points along the route, helping hands to set up the camp, cooks and kitchen assistants were indispensable in bringing off the event.

Hamou was only in his thirties and thus did not belong to the very first generation of local guides himself, but his father had already worked as guide, even before the first official national schemes were launched to support mountain tourism. He had also started the family’s guesthouse. For this reason, Hamou too had an intricate historical knowledge of the workings of regional tourism. This knowledge from own biographical experience allowed him to assess how ways of reaching and communicating with tourists had changed over the years.

*Simon: Was the tourism business different in the past?*

Hamou: Earlier it was a little harder to reach people (“*flwl ishqa shwiya*”). (...)

In the past, people wrote letters and made inquiries or reservations. You answered them, then they came. In general, there hadn’t been so many tourists at that time. Today there are indeed many interested tourists, more than before, but they also send many requests or messages to all possible guesthouses in parallel [via e-mail or via social media]. Then they compare the prices and the answers they get. It has become more complicated.

Local guides like Hamou were well aware of the impact, potential and promise that digital media technology held out for mountain tourism in general and for the ZAUT in particular. There was tremendous pressure to make the first version of the Ultra Trail a success, which Hamou considered absolutely crucial to establish a reputation. From

<sup>5</sup> All the names of persons appearing in the text have been changed.

<sup>6</sup> Hamou had known Ibrahim from other trail-running events before asking him to help organise the Zaouiat Ahansal Ultra Trail. But even before that, Hamou’s father had known him and worked with him in arranging desert tours for tourists.



the beginning, an important part of the planning was to create an appealing visual representation of the event and by doing so not only to display a degree of professionalism, but also to address and attract possible clients. Only if it could attract a definite and preferably growing number of participants in each of the following years would the ZAUT become profitable in the long run. In other words, the organisers needed to achieve a degree of public awareness as an investment for the successful holding of the event in the future. In order to do this, Hamou has pragmatically combined different types of media and forms of publication to achieve public visibility and outreach, including a Facebook page to announce the Ultra Trail and make progress with the planning transparent. He and his team even added some participatory elements: for instance, their Facebook followers could vote on the colour of the 'Finisher T-Shirt'. "It's the only marathon where people can decide what the T-shirt would look like", Hamou told me. In this way, the organisers attempted to establish a unique selling point among other trail-running events. "But not only for this: Facebook is important (*mohim*)", Hamou continued, "most of the interested people and participants asked about the marathon via Facebook. Only a few called by phone."

Later in the process they used the social media platform to spread information about the stages and regularly posted calls for registration. Hamou and Ibrahim had been in contact with many of the trail's professional or semi-professional runners, who made up about half of all participants, calling them in advance, issuing them with invitations and informing them about the run. Trail-running events such as the ZAUT are promising opportunities for aspiring athletes. Even smaller running events might boost one's prospects of a successful sports career. Others, such as a French group of ambitious hobby athletes, had registered for the event after it had been posted and shared on Facebook. Participants who did not have any personal ties did learn about the event via announcements and coverage in papers, magazines and online.

Hamou also received support from some journalists and trail-running bloggers, with whom he already had contacts from his previous work experience with other trail-running events in Morocco. The journalists wrote announcements and reports about the Ultra Trail in regional and national newspapers.<sup>7</sup> The bloggers drew on their own networks of trail-running enthusiasts and wrote articles for their respective community or online magazines in Morocco, France and Germany. In addition, and complementary to this, the organisers were able to include another classic mass medium in their public relations work, namely television reports on the event.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, Hamou and

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<sup>7</sup> Hamou scanned some of these articles and recycled or rather re-circulated them via Facebook. Interestingly, by doing this Hamou was simultaneously digitising and archiving the articles, as well as making them available to a supposedly wider and different readership. From another perspective this seems to be quite a basic operation in the marketing world, sometimes called cross-media or cross-platform communication.

<sup>8</sup> Both the Moroccan television station Tamazight (Channel 8) and the pay TV station BeIn Sports were present at the first Ultra Trail and reported about it. The Ultra Trail was the first sports event in the Azilal region ever to be covered by BeIn Sports.

Ibrahim were able to build on existing social relations they had forged over the years in order to expand the outreach for their Ultra Trail venture. As well as the contacts they had already made, Ibrahim's personal popularity was another important factor in both facilitating and promoting the ZAUT. Not only did he have athletic expertise, ties with a transnational trail-runner community and a reputation of his own, but also organisational knowledge from similar events he had arranged in the past. Moreover, he had good relations with the local administration and media institutions.

The role of the media is decisive in this context. In view of the situated ethnography, it seems appropriate to understand media technology not as something that is merely used or utilised, but as something that is produced by the organisers themselves. The ability to circulate is both an achievement and an investment. It is not just a matter of using the right media channels, but also of establishing the conditions for cooperation through social practices. In fact, this speaks to a different notion of publicness. As Hamou and his fellow organisers successively planned and held the Ultra Trail, it simultaneously grew as a common concern. Only as an *issue* did the ZAUT become connectable, circulatable, and contestable. The various practices involved created the issue, mediated it and "sparked" (Marres 2005) a form of publicness around it.

Beyond the questions of addressability and circulatability and the extent to which the Ultra Trail has been *made* a public matter, a number of central points can be noted. What Hamou needed to do in order to hold the trail-running event was to draw on and successively expand his network of cooperative relations. He was able to fall back on the resources his father had already built up and developed. As a guide and guesthouse owner, he was able to draw on material, infrastructure and co-workers, such as two Spanish friends for audio-visual support, cooks, drivers, people working with pack animals and muleteers, with many of whom he already had working relations from his day-to-day business. It was hardly surprising, then, that the participants were also staying at his guesthouse the night before the start of the Ultra Trail. The local association for mountaineering and alpine tourism was crucial as well,<sup>9</sup> consisting of several guides and tourist entrepreneurs of the area who had organised themselves as a collective. The organisation in and as an association has also contributed substantially to finding further cooperation partners, such as representatives of local administrations, who provided a regional ambulance for the event's duration, or a brand of mineral water as the main sponsor.

All this suggests that the feasibility of the Ultra Trail has been fundamentally dependent on assessing the resources at one's disposal, primarily cooperative ties and potential relationships that might be drawn on in holding the event. To cooperate and

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<sup>9</sup> In a sense, it is also comparable to a 'lobbying special interest group', where tourist entrepreneurs come together in order to jointly and collaboratively achieve objectives that would be difficult to achieve alone. Hamou first discussed his idea at a meeting of the association. Together they assessed the feasibility of the event. In both the first and second editions of the Ultra Trail, members of the association volunteered their own resources and manpower to help.



to display touristic activities in a digitally mediated form to generate public visibility helps claim a special niche in the tourism business. A niche that represents an advantage over one's competitors when it comes to reaching and attracting tourists, which in turn stabilises one's position as a touristic entrepreneur. However, from Hamou's perspective, which I have mainly adopted for this article, this aim or goal need in no way be shared with others who are involved in order to make cooperation possible. In fact, as an event the ZAUT is both "plastic enough (...), yet robust enough" (Star and Griesemer 1989:393) to be compatible with and connectable for different participants or communities of practice.

To become aware of and think through the various constellations of situated practices that contributed to the organisation of the event, I suggest drawing on an analytical framework that uses a media praxeological perspective. This means perceiving media more broadly than usual, that is, as "cooperatively developed conditions of cooperation" (Schüttpelz 2017:14), as well as equally involving social, cultural and technological aspects and thus being embedded in their specific historicity and within the particular situatedness of their surrounding practices. In this context, the "[s]cale and scope of media are achievements that are practically accomplished by the actors through coordinating, delegating and registering/identifying" (Gießmann 2018:98, own translation). On the one hand, this takes into account the mutual entanglement of media practices and data practices, while on the other hand fruitfully expanding the focus on media to include crucial questions concerning infrastructural conditions, as well as their ramifications for publicness.

While participants were scaling mountains, Hamou had to *scale up* the event itself in a different sense, by actively increasing its scope. However, this involves going beyond creating publicity, as it is caught up in a delicate interplay that both brings forth and expands the reach of the Ultra Trail's media, infrastructure and publicness. Increasing the scope hence also means increasing connectivity. Hamou and others cooperatively developed the conditions for the "mutual making of common goals, means and processes" (cf. Schüttpelz and Gießmann 2015), that is, the cooperation that led to the ZAUT and its situated media practices. They had to make use of an array of different resources including social ties, particular sets of values and material artefacts. This involved and presupposed careful scaling work by the actors themselves in order to transfer, expand or limit different issues and concerns to different contexts. As will be shown below, this quality also permeates the relationship between guest and host in the touristic landscape of the High Atlas Mountains.

## Tracking Mediterranean Mountains

For tourism, and the Ultra Trail in particular, the topographical and ecological features of the High Atlas are an important resource. This includes the climate, geology and

biodiversity from which the mountains draw their aura of originality, uniqueness and attraction. Besides the ‘authentic display of culture’ and cultural heritage (Bruner 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2010; Schnepel et al. 2014), promotional representations of touristic marketing and tourism imaginaries in general are based on these ecological features of natural landscapes (Salazar and Graburn 2014). Hence, what is perceived to be special about the Ultra Trail – and what the organisers are promoting – is not only the sporting challenge of the race, but precisely the fact that the participants run across the High Atlas. It holds out the promise of an exceptional physical experience in an extraordinary setting.

Even in the classic treatise on the Mediterranean, Braudel does not start off his seminal work with the sea, but the mountains. He sets out to identify their defining features in comparison to the adjacent plateaus and plains, as well as their contribution to Mediterranean history at large. “[The] Mediterranean means more than landscapes of vines and olive trees and urbanized villages; these are merely the fringe. Close by, looming above them, are the dense highlands, the mountain world with its fastnesses, its isolated houses and hamlets, its ‘vertical norths’” (Braudel 1972:26–27). The Mediterranean area, as he points out on a different page, “has no unity but that created by the movements of men, the relationships they imply, and the routes they follow” (ibid.:276). And indeed “roads may be steep, winding, and full of potholes, but they are passable on foot” (ibid.:41), an observation that also applies to the High Atlas.

By its very definition, ‘trail-running’ means to run, or sporadically to hike, on unpaved roads. Especially in mountainous terrain involving significant ascents and descents, racing on asphalt tracks is rare. Even where wide roads are available, runners prefer small, undisturbed hiking and farming trails. Unusual though it may be in urbanised and cemented contexts, there is no doubt that the most direct route across the High Atlas runs along such prototypical trails, which are inscribed in the landscape as expressions of connectivity and mobility, as well as sedimentations of time and memory. They are stabilised by local people who have used them to obtain firewood or to graze their animals, and used seasonally by nomads or semi-nomads who, in the course of exploiting transhumant pastures, have led their flocks, some of them of considerable size, from the dry and hot plains in the south to the grazing grounds in the mountains in summer.

Horden and Purcell (2000) have written a comprehensive history of the Mediterranean, which emphasises the fragmented, ever-changing and interconnected aspects of its micro-regions. With regard to mountain areas, they write: “Mountains can seem hostile and marginal areas; yet they are actually closely integrated into the patterns of production and communication that abut them” (ibid.:81). Horden and Purcell’s Mediterranean, like the mountain ranges on its southern shores, has always been connected. In the middle of the ZAUT’s second stage at an altitude of almost three thousand metres, it dawned on me that I was bodily experiencing the phrase ‘the High Atlas has always been connected’.

The 36-kilometre route of the second stage took the participants through the High Atlas along mule tracks. There was no such direct route for vehicles. In order to reach

the location of the second-stage finish by driving and not on foot or running, the organisers and staff had to make a detour of over 120 kilometres.<sup>10</sup> If one were dependent on motorised vehicles and paved roads, as was largely the case in the colonial imagination and during the French protectorate (Burke 2014; El Qadery 2010; Miller 2013), the mountains would appear as an obstacle and act as a ‘natural barrier’. However, the High Atlas has always been a source of livelihood and it has always been possible to cross it.<sup>11</sup> In fact, stories and kinship ties from the plateaus and valleys to places on the southern slope are the clearest indication that the mountains, both in local perceptions and in their tangible consequences, may not have been as ‘naturally divisive’ as other perspectives suggest. Distance, after all, is relational and depends a great deal on certain cultural techniques and the particular technological structuration of everyday life. It is exactly those contextual practices of mobility that also shape perceptions of what counts as distant or connected.

In order to make the distances, routes and characteristics of the Ultra Trail comprehensible, the organisers increasingly resort to the datafication of the High Atlas topography and environment. This involves the visual-virtual representation of the trail as data and its conversion into various types of translation in the form of navigational data in both a digitally processable GPX format and painted marks on rocks along the trail.

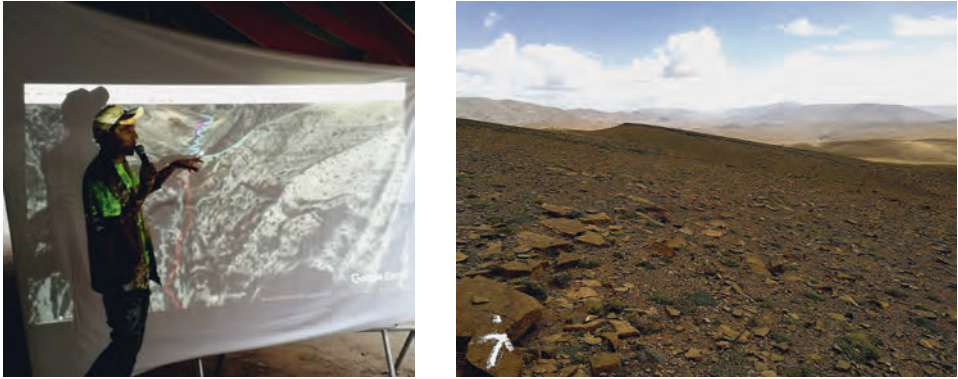
For the general preparatory meeting before the Ultra Trail, as well as before the individual stages, Hamou and his team set up a video projector and screen to display the particular routes. To provide the most detailed account of the routes, they used GPS data, provided an elevation profile and employed Google Earth visualisations. Before the start of the second version of the Ultra Trail, for instance, Hamou highlighted some minor changes to the previous year’s event and showed some of the altered route in detail. The GPS data for the track had been loaded into Google Earth, so that we, the crowd of participants and staff, were flying virtually over the landscape and the next day’s stage. Hamou drew our attention to several dots on the digital route, which was visualised on the cloth canvas. These dots designated the supply points where staff would hand out water to the runners, set up about every eight to ten kilometres. The virtual route on the screen indicated the distance we were to cover the next day, which, however, was also unfolding at the present moment, thus making yesterday’s historic mule tracks digitally tangible.

But in order to run the ZAUT and follow its route, the runners did not necessarily have to use navigation technology such as maps or GPS devices, as the course of the

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10 In fact, the detours posed an immense logistical challenge. Because the end points of the second and third stages were so difficult to reach by off-road vehicles, staff were split up. While some travelled directly from the first stage to the end point of the third, others only took on the work for the second and fourth stages.

11 This counts especially for nomadic pastoralists and caravans from the south on their way to the trade centres in the Moroccan plains and by the Atlantic or Mediterranean. Continuing in this perspective, the absence of paved roads does not pose a problem if you are on foot with pack animals or/and your herds.



Figures 3 & 4 Hamou showing the GPS track for the first stage (left), way marking on a plateau (right).  
Photos: Simon Holdermann

trail had been meticulously marked. Way marks painted on rocks and regular supply points where staff waited provided sufficient navigational orientation. After the joint start, the field of participants increasingly thinned out and, depending on their pace, the runners made their way alone or in small groups through the vast terrain. Under the scorching mountain sun, I followed the white arrows and splashes of paint in the landscape, which were sometimes supplemented by a white 'X' to prevent a wrong turn, and often I met nobody else for several kilometres or even hours. When occasionally I passed a small settlement, men working in the fields or children herding goats, it seemed almost absurd. After all, they were not surreal extras in a manufactured authentic tourist experience – they *lived* here. The virtuality of the route and the backdrop of the sporting event overlapped and collided with the long-standing realities of life in the mountains.

Although the trails and paths through the High Atlas exist, and have existed for centuries, they are not the same for everyone and at all times. The practices surrounding them and their ramifications vary. Following Ingold (2000), for those who know the High Atlas and their way around the mountains, “the answers to such basic questions as ‘Where am I?’ and ‘Which way should I go?’ are found in narratives of past movement” (ibid.:237). Hamou had explored the trails and paths of the High Atlas through his earlier work as a mountain guide. He was able to use his regular tourism commitments to acquire experience about possible alternative routes and to explore the general feasibility of the idea of an Ultra Trail. During the initial planning process for the ZAUT he continually organised multi-day hiking trips through the High Atlas for clients in such a way that it allowed him to reassess parts of designated routes for the Ultra Trail. The course was only really finalised once the organisers had walked the final route again both to capture GPS data for the route and to paint the way marks. In other words, establishing the route, Hamou had to translate it physically and digitally in order to stabilise and fix it. Wayfinding, in this case, closely coincides with mapping

it. Thus, both the way marks as physical representations and the recorded GPS track as a digital representation are based on past movements through space, being condensed forms of working out the route as the organisers went along, – and as I myself, in a parallel, methodological turn, worked it out ethnographically by ‘going along’ (Kusenbach 2003), or rather *running along*.

While for both the GPS track and the way marks it does indeed seem to be the case that “to follow a path is also to retrace one’s steps, or the steps of one’s predecessors” (Ingold 2000:237), the implications of doing so differ depending on who is following on behind. For the participants, on the one hand, running along the Ultra Trail is fundamentally a navigational operation that involves stop-and-go orientation and the particular indexicality of the way marks.<sup>12</sup> It appears to be a practice of map-using-without-map, either following the GPS track on the device or following the white arrows as if on a paper chase. Neither a map nor former knowledge of the landscape are required for successful navigation. The topographical features of the High Atlas do not need a visual representation, as they are bodily experienced by running through them. Conversely, the GPS route attempts to translate and represent this physical experience of the topography of the High Atlas into data, thus providing information that subjects the route to anticipation.<sup>13</sup> For the organisers and guides, on the other hand, following a path or trail through the High Atlas may well constitute a movement through familiar landscape, drawing on former experience and knowledge. This is not to suggest that to them physical marks, maps and GPS tracks are obsolete, only that they can draw on a further historical and experiential level, so to speak. Here, then, and on both sides, practices of wayfinding are, fundamentally, practices of making connections.

By referring to representation and navigation by means of GPS data, it already becomes apparent that Mediterranean connectivity and topography today have a digital side. For the organisers of the Ultra Trail, the use of GPS data and altitude profiles is a way of demonstrating their own professionalism and thorough, data-driven preparation, while making completely transparent what participants can expect from the Ultra Trail. Furthermore, this is a new service for (potential) clients, pointing towards a changing relationship between ‘host’ and ‘guest’. For mountain tourism in the High Atlas too, digitality is a condition of possibility, which in turn catalyses a new set of digital tourism practices.

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12 On this point, compare also the analysis of photo-audio guides as early automated versions of route-calculation (Thielmann 2016). Given recent debates about autonomous vehicles, questions of digital navigation practices (Hind 2019) have become more pressing.

13 Successful navigation via GPS track, however, does not necessitate the visual representation of the topography either. On the sports watch I used in the High Atlas the route’s visual representation amounted to a blue precipitous line in a blank void, a trail in a mountain terrain without surface or mountains.

## Datafication as Professionalisation

All media practices are also data practices. Digital media technology goes hand in hand with new ways of creating issues and rendering them public. For guides like Hamou, digital media practices increasingly include the datafication of one's own environment and everyday life in order to talk about and present touristic activities:

Hamou: Today, there are no pens anymore, everything is digital (“*stilo makhddamsh, deba kulshi l-informatik*”). For example, if you don't have a website today, if someone asks you about it, it's very bad. If they're interested, potential clients can't look it up – it's bad, and they may not even come. I don't use TripAdvisor or other similar booking portals. Only Facebook. And there are links on some blogs and an entry on Google Maps. Because many people use Google Maps, it's very good if you also find the guesthouse there.

It is also important to know, for example, how to use GPS and how to record routes, how to create a height profile. Because even the tourists are not as they used to be. They want to know exactly when it comes to planning a hike, for example: How many kilometres is that per day? How many altitude metres in total? How much gradient? In the past, it was simply said that the route takes about five hours. That's not enough anymore. Tourists expect more details nowadays.

That tourist expectations of the provision of information have changed is pivotal. Not only does datafication signify a degree of professionalism, which the ambitious touristic entrepreneur is eager to display, it also produces a different standard for communicating about touristic offers, activities and details. Hamou was explicit that he perceives how one communicates with potential clients as a central aspect of the tourist's decision-making process:

It's not just the price that counts – whether a *Gite* costs 300Dh or 100Dh per night, for example. It also depends on how you write to potential clients and how you talk to them. For example, sending a friendly answer with lots of information. And with pictures of the rooms, the food, the guesthouse. So, it depends above all on the strategy.

What is more, to overlook or simply disregard these new expectations concerning standards of information exchange and to fail in the prudent handling of inquiries is the equivalent of sabotaging one's own business – hence the need for a tourism strategy that has to reflect the changes wrought by digital media. To a certain extent digital media technology puts tourism entrepreneurs under pressure. If a tourist entrepreneur does not participate appropriately, it most likely turns into a competitive disadvantage. This means adapting both standards for information policy and practices of com-



munication.<sup>14</sup> The field of mountain tourism has gradually become digitised, which has changed how tourists are reached and also information for (potential) clients is provided and presented.

In other words, guests expect ‘more’ or different data, and hosts must see to it that they meet their expectations. Pitt-Rivers (2012[1977]) writes that the “roles of host and guest have territorial limitations. A host is host only on the territory over which on a particular occasion he claims authority. Outside it he cannot maintain the role” (ibid.:514). Although, or maybe exactly because, it is “founded upon ambivalence” (ibid.:513), hospitality constitutes a reciprocal but not equal relationship of respectful mutual recognition between host and guest, which allows strangers and locals to engage in interactions with each other for a limited period of time. Commonly, this interaction takes place in a specific spatial setting (e.g. in the guest room or ‘the parlour’) and primarily involves concern for the physical well-being of the guest. To what extent can these aspects be transferred to the touristic spaces of the Ultra Trail or the virtual spaces of the digital world?

## Towards Digital Hospitality

Without over-emphasising Mediterranean anthropology’s analytical tool, in the High Atlas Mountains hospitality indeed constitutes an important everyday value and practice. This is particularly cultivated in touristic situations, such as the ZAUT. From registration to transportation and accommodation, the organisers aim to offer a full-service package. Accommodation in the camp was simple and the meals rather un-spectacular, although there was a greater variety of food than the average breakfast in the High Atlas, which mainly consists of bread and oil. The food for the joint dinner was mostly taken from Moroccan cuisine and was prepared either by the staff in the kitchen tent or sometimes by partners from the villages where camp was set up. And of course, there was green tea with mint and sugar – tea, the epitome of Moroccan hospitality. But all in all, the Ultra Trail as a sporting event does not aim to score points with luxurious equipment and comfort, but with adventure, which is what ultimately determines the participants’ expectations. Hence, the Ultra Trail aspires to offer a professional organisation and authentic impression of the High Atlas to deliver this adventurous experience. This is the basis and motivation for hospitable action.

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<sup>14</sup> It goes without saying that a prerequisite for this and for successfully attracting tourists is appropriate language skills and a degree of digital literacy. Possibly this can lead to a race between competitors about who is first or fastest in appropriating technology and adopting standards. Hamou, for example, is in favour of more ICT-focused and intensive education and training (like most, he has acquired his technological knowledge autodidactically), and he believes that the more satisfactorily one can use digital tools, the greater the competitive advantage in tourism.



Figure 5 *Abidus* group at the closing ceremony.  
Photo: Simon Holdermann

Besides the actual accommodation and catering, folkloristic elements displaying collective identity and public culture are another crucial part. The end of the last stage included a closing event with music, dancing and an award ceremony. At the ceremony the main organisers, Hamou and Ibrahim, invited the runners with the best overall times on to a makeshift stage and awarded them with gifts in front of the assembled crowd of participants, staff and guests. The gifts, which included woven garments and carpets, reflected the cultural identity of the High Atlas. Moreover, from the start a rider had accompanied the group of runners, dressed in the ‘traditional’ robes of the noblemen (*igurramen*) and carrying a wooden treasure chest on a mule, which symbolically contained the gifts for the winners. The organisers had also engaged a local music group consisting of men and women all dressed in ‘traditional’ Amazigh clothing.

They performed the *abidus*, an important regional genre that combines playing the drums, chanting poetic verses mostly in a repetitive call-and-response pattern and dancing shoulder to shoulder. Typically, this is danced collectively at weddings or occasional celebrations, but for some time now it has also been an integral part of folklore shows on national television channels, as well as in tourist programmes.<sup>15</sup> For some, folklore groups are a way of attempting to participate in the tourist business, that is, in what Herzfeld calls a “global hierarchy of values” (Herzfeld 2004) without being able to become a touristic entrepreneur or a certified guide individually due to a lack of training, education or resources. Monkachi (1994) has pointed out that families in the

<sup>15</sup> In the village where I lived during my stay, there was also an *abidus* group, which was supported by a local community-based organisation and usually played in touristic, festive settings (of ‘intercultural exchange’). When I asked a member of the group whether it made a difference to dance *abidus* during a wedding ceremony or in front of tourists, he replied: “No, of course not, there is only *one abidus*. It is the same in this or that situation!” While this alludes to the moral claim about and general status of *abidus*, something else – not voiced here – is different in these situations, although it is not the *abidus* itself. In the touristic context, the clothing is more geared towards a comprehensive folkloristic display of cultural identity. And above all, the group is paid for its performance in the touristic context. In both contexts, to hint at the associated quality of hospitality, the host is responsible for the group and is especially expected to provide the group (like other guests) with tea and a sumptuous meal.

High Atlas who engage successfully in tourism are often those who were better off to begin with. Poorer segments of society do not necessarily benefit from tourism, sometimes not at all.

The scope of the tourist services offered, here characterised by both the materials of the infrastructure provided for the Ultra Trail, the means of bodily sustenance and the authentic impressions and experiences of the cultural identity on display convey the degree of successful hospitality. In their felicitous efforts to revitalise the concept of hospitality, Candea and Da Col (2012) draw attention to Ortner's work, in which she points out that "hospitality, mediated through substances, does not merely *elicit* co-operative responses but *coerces* them" (ibid.:S9). Furthermore, as Shryock (2004) points out, hospitality constitutes a "field of ritualized exchange in which performance animates and responds to social critique" (ibid.:36). He argues that among Balga Bedouins in Jordan "hosts must 'fear' their guests", because "[r]eputations are at stake" (ibid.:36). Hosting someone always entails moral ambivalence, which might even turn negative. The guests can accuse the hosts of not living up to their responsibilities as hosts, while the guests can be accused of overstaying or abusing their hosts' hospitality (Pitt-Rivers 2012[1977]; Shryock 2012). Dealing with the perceived radical alterity of the stranger potentially evokes suspicion, potential threats and mistrust.

In the tourism sector, this risk presents not only a moral and social conundrum, but one that can affect economic viability. Tourists are the responsibility of their hosts, who must not only try to meet the expectations of their guests, but also assume their responsibility towards them. It is therefore not surprising that the organisers of the Ultra Trail try to hedge against possible risks. In concrete terms, the participants must, for instance, sign a waiver as a prerequisite for starting the run in which they confirm that they are participating in the race at their own risk, that they are in the necessary physical condition to do so and that they are aware of the health risks involved. In addition, only those who have suitable footwear, adequate sun protection and a drinking system with a capacity of at least 1.5 litres may be allowed to compete. This can be explained as drastically as it is simple: in this hospitable relationship, everything is at stake for the host. Should a serious accident occur in which tourists are involved, this not only affects the reputation of the tourist entrepreneur, it may entail meticulous to repressive investigations by the state's authorities. Hence, to be able to present all official permits and legally sound documents is more than a mere economic necessity, it is an existential one.

Instances of mediation (communication about and audio-visual coverage of the event) and datafication (GPS data, elevation profiles) permeated the actual ZAUT run, through which the organisers intended to enhance the quality of their hospitality. But at the same time the touristic accommodation and service is increasingly subject to a *datafied valuation* itself that complicates the moral dilemma of hospitable relations even further. Nowhere are the benefits and risks of hosting someone for one's own social and economic reputation more closely linked than with the mechanisms of valuation brought about by the recent review processes on social media platforms, apps, blogs or

websites. In the very context of mountain tourism, they are not only public statements about the quality of particular touristic work and efforts, but also about the potential for further cooperation:

Hamou: If you do good work, you are going to earn money. If you are only sleeping, money will not just start to fall from the sky like rain (“*lfus maghadish ykun bhal ansar*”). If you are busy, travel a lot, put an effort into brochures, it pays off. And if you are sincere (“*nishan*”).

If, on the other hand, you lie to people or mislead them, it will fall on your feet. There was, for example, one guesthouse in the area that was running well in former times. But now it doesn't work anymore (“*makhddmsb*”). The owner had lied to people (“*kdub*”). Then it spread through word-of-mouth communication, blogs and the internet that this one guesthouse should be avoided.

This is also a new development due to the internet and the increased exchange of information. You must always be careful and on full guard (“*attention*”). You have to always treat them well, because otherwise [through the available social media] your reputation and thus your business could suffer very quickly. It is even better to let a customer who is unhappy depart the next morning without having to pay anything for the overnight stay. It is better not to insist on the money so that he is not angry and he then writes something bad on the Internet – which then a lot of people and the whole Internet could read and which could influence future business negatively.

Especially with regard to online portals and social media platforms, datafication is widely perceived as an opportunity to reach more people through targeted information in an (semi-)automatised way. However, this automation always has the potential to backfire, as the very un-transparent algorithmic routines at the back of digital platforms might jeopardise the very touristic business efforts they were supposed to support so smoothly.

To illustrate this, consider the business of tourist transportation in Marrakech. “I was last year's best rated driver in Marrakech on booking.com”, Abdelwahed bragged, shortly after I had met him for the first time. He was a full-time driver in his late twenties. His claim, which I could not easily verify, seemed at least a little unlikely, though not completely impossible. Indeed, he worked for a local chauffeur company and was driving a tidy minivan of a European brand. “Positive reviews and comments are crucial in our business. That's why you always have to be respectful and polite as a driver”, he continued to explain. His company worked exclusively as a sub-contractor for booking.com. Whenever tourists would book transportation together with their accommodation package, booking.com would delegate the transportation request to one of its local sub-contractors. “Disrespectful behaviour leads to bad reviews, and bad reviews are very bad. It can cost you your job.”

He went on to tell the story of his colleague Mohamed, who had behaved unprofessionally and at times quite disrespectfully. Once he had slandered a customer on the

phone and in derogatory comments to himself while she was sitting in the car with him. Unknown to him, however, she spoke fluent Arabic. She confronted him and left a shattering review afterwards. This did not remain the only incident. The accumulation of negative reviews, for which he was responsible, ultimately led to his dismissal. After all, the reputation, in other words a good online rating, was crucial to his boss: as soon as there are too many negative reviews of the drivers or the company as a whole, booking.com will no longer award any contracts to the company. If booking.com terminates the collaboration and sacks the subcontractor, the entire basis of the company's business could be lost.

Similarly, owners of guesthouses and even receptionists ask customers or clients for comments and online reviews. This is common and has increased considerably in recent years. Often, staff openly urge clients to write a positive comment and ask them to explicitly mention their own name when doing so. While bad comments or reviews can have serious consequences for one's socio-economic position 'outside' the digital platforms, positive ones are perceived as verifying one's value and degree of responsibility. However, it is not only the diligence of and one's social relations with one's fellow workers or clients that indicate a successful work ethic, but also the hierarchisation calculated by algorithmic operations. Consequently, comments and positive online reviews have become a currency for touristic entrepreneurship. In short, online reviewing represents an evaluation of the performance of hospitality. Beyond that, it publicly signals the virtue of a host to 'strangers', who have not yet actively started to engage in the hospitable interaction at all, and based on the rating might not even consider doing so.

This is followed by two further considerations. The first is whether there is still hospitality in Pitt River's sense of 'dealing with strangers' when guest and host both face each other as part of an online community via a platform such as Airbnb or Couch-Surfing. This is because, in order to log on to such platforms, users have to disclose a lot of personal data about themselves or create a profile that is supposed to convey a degree of knowledge and familiarity and thus turn the unknown guest into a less strange and even more recognisable counterpart. In addition, there are certain desired manners and (n)etiquettes that can characterise such a community. Personal information or an appealing online profile – this is the second consideration – are also access requirements for the platform, which are processed further. They are processed both by the algorithms in the background of the platform and by the users, whose expectations of the (later) hospitable interaction face-to-face are also fuelled by the online information and communication. This might affect the morally ambiguous status of the hospitable relations as a whole.

If it is true that "each major 'event' of hospitality (...) encompasses a multiplicity of singular events and transactions where altruism and selfishness, trust and suspicion, benevolence and malice are present but never *co-present*", and that it is "this careful *avoidance of simultaneity* which makes hospitality the locus of moral dilemmas – and generates its peculiarly charged affective space" (Candea and Da Col 2012:S11), then digital media

technology might call precisely this into question. Digital media and data practices do indeed have the potential to create the co-presence and simultaneity mentioned above.

To exaggerate, and from a merely provisional perspective, this could suggest that hospitality might be mediated and measured in a radically different way. Not only elusive or transcending concepts such as honour, grace and religious duty,<sup>16</sup> but also the ‘hard facts of algorithmic truth’ would then form a possible basis for motivating, driving and sanctioning the host/guest relationship. This would, in turn, also indicate the digitisation of a moral dilemma, which has always been part of hospitality. Notwithstanding the full extent of the consequences, hospitality has been influenced by processes of mediation and digitisation, too. This is why I suggest the term *digital hospitality*.

Digital hospitality,<sup>17</sup> then, represents an extension of the relationship between host and guest, both temporal and spatial. In the field of Moroccan tourism, conventional aspects of hospitality have been updated in being digitally connected to a (moral) archive. While longstanding moral implications continue to be crucial, in a more encompassing way digital hospitality conveys the fact that digital media technology is increasingly part and parcel of how hospitable relations are played out. The modes, values and interactions of hospitality relations are not only mediated – to a degree appropriate to the context – but increasingly digitally spelled out and restructured: in ‘classical’ situations of hospitality, specific materialities or substances may play a decisive role, not having become obsolete, but merely being supplemented. Like, for example, the sharing of food and other commensality through the (sometimes formalised or even ritualised) drinking of tea, coffee and alcohol together, the sharing of data, such as the provision of GPS tracks, as well as engaging in supposedly immediate digital communication (while adhering to certain technical, informational and semantic standards associated with the type of media chosen for establishing contact), are among the ‘substances’ that enable and facilitate the exchange between host and guest, thus forming the basis for hospitable relations in the sense of digital hospitality.

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16 Here, Pitt-River’s analysis of the figure of the beggar and its relationship to the sacred and to hospitality deserves to be recalled (Pitt-Rivers 2012[1977]:506–513), as well as his position on the concept of grace (Pitt-Rivers 1992).

17 I do not mean the term here in the narrower sense of its possible understanding in the context of User Experience Design, that is, as an attempt to make the virtual experience of an interface, platform or software more intuitive or inviting to the user, thus improving the way users feel ‘accommodated’ when interacting with technology (see Gude 2010, who has suggested the term ‘digital hospitality’ in a computer science context that contrasts strongly with what I propose here).



## Conclusion

The practices of hospitality also contain and enhance scalar characteristics. Through its digitised form, “hospitality’s role as a practical way of shifting scales” (Candea 2012:S43; see also Herzfeld 1987) seems likely to gain even greater and more accentuated significance. A promising “emphasis on scalar analysis” (Herzfeld 2020:162) in order to map out cultural and social changes should include a perspective that focuses on digital media practices, as I argue in this paper. In practices of digital hospitality, certain types of standards, information policies and forms of data(-fication) are conflated, which together not only determine the reputation and level of professionalism of tourism entrepreneurs, but also increase both the scope for addressing potential customers and the likelihood of success in their individual scaling work. Simultaneously this constitutes a tentative advocacy for the ongoing relevance that some of Mediterranean anthropology’s *topoi* do possess as conceptual tools, if they are carefully grounded historically and based on particular ethnographic accounts.

The Zaouiat Ahansal Ultra Trail is an account of individual strategies and struggles in the face of globally circulating ideas that are taken up and being modified within a specific context. If scale is the achievement of the actors themselves – an implication derived from Latour (2005:183–185) – the place where things become scalable is in and through those situations and practices of cooperation, at the point where the pragmatic forging of new relations that might pay off in the future coincide with drawing on past relations and existing social ties at the same time. In this way, digital hospitality becomes another crucial element in touristic entrepreneurs’ efforts at scale-making and increasing the scope to cooperate in making connections within a volatile mountain tourism sector in the High Atlas.

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