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Ana María Munar ([amm.int@cbs.dk](mailto:amm.int@cbs.dk))  
Copenhagen Business School

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Center for International Business and Emerging Markets  
Department of International Economics and Management  
Copenhagen Business School  
Porcelænshaven 24B  
DK-2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark

# Technological mediation and user created content in tourism

Ana María Munar<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** A development in Information and Communication Technologies promising to have a large impact on tourism is the phenomenon known as the Web 2.0. A key to this development is the encouraging of interactivity due to User Generated Content (UGC). This paper focuses on a specific type of UGC: Tourist Created Content (TCC). Based on an exploratory examination of the Web and an extensive analysis of the content, the study systematizes the knowledge about TCC, presents a classification system and provides an overview of its characteristics. The paper shows the processes that allow the tourist to digitalize content and reveals how TCC relates to the cultures of the Internet and shapes the tourism experience.

**Keywords:** User generated content, word-of-mouth, Internet, cultural change.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of International Economics and Management, Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark,  
[amm.int@cbs.dk](mailto:amm.int@cbs.dk).

## **1. Introduction**

Both the demand and the supply of tourism products have been affected in one way or another by the expansion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (Buhalis, 1998; O'Connor, 1999; Poon, 1993). A large number of researchers have focussed on how tourism is transformed by this technological revolution, this effort has resulted into a large production of articles, books, conferences and even the creation of specific journals (Buhalis & Law, 2008). One of the latest developments in ICT which is promising to have a large impact on tourism is the phenomenon known as the Web 2.0. A popular term used to describe the further development of the World Wide Web (or the Web). In many ways, the term can be said to represent a new jargon for the full development of the potentials that already existed on the Internet and the Web. However, this concept emphasizes the shift towards a more participatory and inclusive Web. The Web 2.0 describes a Web which is “increasingly influenced by intelligent Web services that enable users to contribute to developing, rating, collaborating and distributing Internet content and customizing Internet applications” (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007, p.9). It reflects a mix of ICT, including wikis, Rich Site Summary, podcasts, messaging application, blogs and other tools (Stillman & McGrath, 2008). The key characteristic of the Web 2.0 is that enhances the collaboration and sharing of information online and it is built around social software which makes it possible for people to communicate and form communities using their computers (Cooke & Buckley, 2008).

Web 2.0 ICT are widely used by tourists to get information about tourism products and to share their tourism experiences. The access to the Web 2.0 has been facilitated by factors such as more powerful and affordable hardware and software, a faster network edge, the enhancement of easy-to-use tools for creating and sharing content, a higher e-literacy among the population of the world, and the increase in portable and wireless platforms (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007). All these factors have led to a change in the locus of control in the creation process of the online tourism content, from a Web content controlled by organizations and corporations to content, which to a large extent is the expression of the interaction and participation of end-users. The upload and

download phenomenon has brought the use of Internet facilities into a new stage of development. Expressions such as ‘user generated content’ (UGC), ‘users add value’ and ‘peers produce knowledge’ all relate to the Web 2.0 (Lee, Miller, & Newnham, 2009). The enabling and encouraging of UGC is one of the main characteristics of the Web 2.0 turn. UGC refers to all the information that is digitalized, uploaded by the users and made available through the Web. This paper focuses on a specific type of UGC: the Tourist Created Content.

The Internet and the Web as factors of social change have been studied from many different perspectives: In relation to globalization processes (Hand, 2008) focusing on the digital divide, diversity and power relations (Kirkpatrick, 2008; Kleinman, 2005) with regard to the construction of personal identities (Poster, 2006) examining changes in space-time constraints and cultural perceptions of body (Schwanen & Kwan, 2008; (Basu, Mok, & Wellman, 2007; Shaw, 2008) and from a historical and sociological standpoint (Castells, 2001; Castells, 1997; 1996). Furthermore, recent books have examined the impact of social media and web communities such as Facebook, Youtube or Twitter on both society and on the market place (Qualman, 2009; Weinberg, 2009; Li & Bernoff, 2008; L. Weber, 2009). In tourism, several studies have focused on the importance of the Internet for e-commerce (K. Weber, 1999; O'Connor, 2003), destination image formation (Frías, Rodríguez, & Castañeda, 2008) for strategy, intermediation and e-tourism (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Mills & Law, 2004) and for tourist behavior (Mattila & Mount, 2003; Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2004). The phenomenon of social network sites, UGC and tourism is not new and has been explored in several studies (World Tourism Organization, 2008), for example, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) have focused on online shared videos as mediators of the tourist experience. However, there is not a specific study which presents a conceptual understanding of the phenomenon applying to tourism. Most of the knowledge and sources available on the topic of UGC in tourism are organizational reports or newspaper and magazine articles, many of them with information provided by Web sources and consultancy firms, which may question the level of reliability and validity. There is a myriad of social network sites that present creative content generated by the tourists, but the study of the expansion of UGC and the topic of virtual travel communities in tourism, however important and relevant, is still to be developed and it

is said to be in its infancy stage (Preece, 2000). Therefore, the task of this paper is to systematize the knowledge regarding UGC in tourism, analyse Tourist Created Content in relation to the tourism experience and present a classification system, by analyzing how tourists use UGC and by examining the impacts of such developments on the tourism system.

## **2. Tourist Created Content**

### **2.1 Study methods**

This paper relies on qualitative research methods including documentary studies and an exploratory study of TCC on the Web. The Web is analyzed in this study as a context that facilitates the examination of the creation and evolution of social structures such as relationships and communities. This method is described as the social constructive approach by Markham (2004) and is used for several qualitative studies of Web content. The theoretical background of the study is based on the literature of ICT in tourism, in cultural studies focusing on technology and in the more general literature of business management and other related social sciences on the evolution and impact of the Web. Other literature consulted during the study includes documents and reports provided by organizations which study the usage and development of ICT.

The research design was composed of several steps. The first step consisted of purposive sampling of tourism social network sites based on a literature review and several rankings of most popular travel and tourism websites (Comscore, 2009; Hitwise, 2008a; Hitwise, 2008b). The first classification based on content analysis of the sites incorporated knowledge and discussions provided by the developing group of the project 'Travel 2.0 promotion in Asia and Pacific' financed by the Nordic Innovation Center and coordinated by the Scandinavian Tourism Board. The second step consisted of developing a preliminary taxonomy and classification of the UGC of sites. This preliminary classification was established based on the first sample of sites. During the third step a larger sample of sites was created based on a larger literature review on the findings of the analysis of the first sample and newer rankings (The Times, 2009). This second sample of sites was classified and analysed using the preliminary classification. Finally, the definitive classification presented in this study was established. In the sampling larger attention was given to sites which had as their

primary purpose the use and development of UGC, but not including sites of organizations using Web 2.0 tools to a minor degree.

Table 1: Sample of Websites with TCC analyzed

Website	Tourism specific	Generic	Transport
Blogabond.com	x		
Couchsurfing.org	x		
dopplr.com	x		
Gowander.com	x		
Hostelz.com	x		
IgoUgo.com	x		
iTourist.com	x		
Lonelyplanet.com (Thorn Tree)	x		
Travelblog.org	x		
Travelersfortravelers.com	x		
Travelistic.com	x		
Travelpod.com	x		
Tripadvisor.com	x		
Tripfilms.com	x		
Trustedplaces.com	x		
Virtualtourist.com	x		
Wayn.com	x		
Worldreviewer.com	x		
Digg.com		x	
Facebook.com		x	
Flickr.com		x	
Myspace.com		x	
Twitter.com		x	
Youtube.com		x	
IsAnyoneGoingTo.com			x
Liftshare.com			x

Particular attention was given to the examination of those sites with a tourism focus and also to those with a large number of users. Therefore the sample, included in table 1, was divided into three categories of sites: tourism specific, generic (non tourism specific) and transport (those sites for commuters and users wanting to share transportation services). The great majority of the analyzed sites can be classified as social network sites. In the process many tourism and travel sites were explored but eliminated from the sample because of their main commercial focus or because their

prime content was based on blogs provided by experts and not on contributions of all tourists in general (e.g. Gridskipper.com, Coolhunter.com or Spottedbylocals.com).

The sites and documentation that lay the foundation for this analysis are developing and changing at a high speed. The rapid change in the patterns of use, the fragmentation and massive amount of data related to the object of analysis represents a challenge to the study of the Web; however it does not make it less relevant. The aim is therefore not to map all the possibilities of TCC, but to widen the knowledge on TCC, to provide a critical perspective on UGC in tourism and to contribute to a wider understanding of how the latest technological developments impact on the way in which TCC is developed in tourism.

## **2.2 User Generated Content and Tourist Created Content**

User Generated Content is a massive trend, with millions of users throughout the globe. The importance of the UGC can be seen in the fact that a number of companies, which vigorously use Web 2.0 tools, are already among the top ten most visited sites by US Internet users (Nielsen, 2008). Social media based on UGC has also become the most popular activity on the web (Qualman, 2009). UGC can be defined as the aggregation and leveraging of the users' contributions on the web. It is related to the digital transformation of cultural objects- text, sounds and images (Poster, 2005). The increase in UGC is part of the transformation from 'new media' to 'We media' (Gillmor, 2006). Despite the popularity of UGC, critical perspectives show that "Not everybody is a writer or enthusiastic information sharer, and not everyone is happy about being filmed or taped for a podcast either." (Stillman & McGrath, 2008). In a provocative essay about the quality and value of the millions of amateur contributions, Keen (2007) mentions that instead of creating masterpieces the UGC is an "endless digital forest of mediocrity" (p.3). Besides the debate on the merit of the content available, there are other problematic issues related to the security of content as exemplified in the cases of identity theft by media (Poster, 2006) or ownership of the content displayed (Aspan, 2008).

There are several definitions and classifications of this content (Cook, 2008; Cooke & Buckley, 2008; Deshpande & Jadad, 2006; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Stillman & McGrath, 2008; Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007; Wellman, 2007; World Tourism

Organization, 2008). From all the different classifications, the ones provided by Cook (2008) and Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent (2007) are most relevant for this study. Cook's classification defines UGC as part of the broader user contribution systems. User contribution systems "aggregate and leverage various types of user input in ways that are valuable to others" (Cook, 2008, p.3). These systems consist of various types of contributions: *active contribution* (aggregates content or stuff for sale) and a *passive contribution* (aggregates behavioral data or aggregates resources). Besides, Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent's analysis of the participative Web provides a difference between UGC and user created content (UCC) and focuses on the creative element of the content generation.

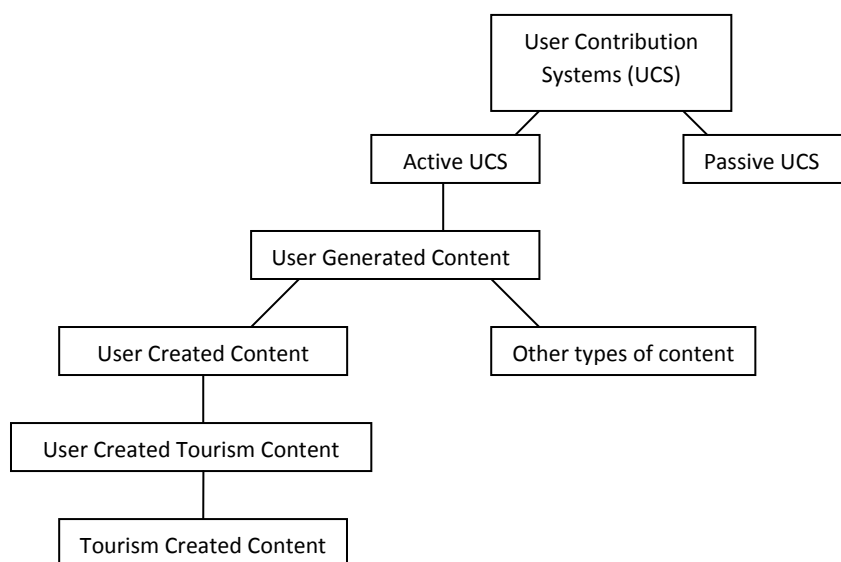


Fig.1. Types of contributions of users to the Web and Tourist Created Content.

Although UGC and UCC appear as synonymous in some literature (Ryu, Kim, & Lee, 2009), the difference between 'generated' and 'created' reflects the amount of creative effort invested by the user in the content as well as the need for the content to be published (excluding for example two-ways instant messaging and the like). While the first term would include an activity such as copy-pasting part of a text making it available through a chat on the web, the second will demand a larger use of creative skills by the user as for example when writing the review of a restaurant or making a



photographical reportage of a destination. This research mainly analyses the forms of UCC and *active contributions* in tourism (Fig. 1). Therefore, it does not include a throughout examination of *passive contribution systems* such as the aggregation of resources. UCC in tourism can be found in many different sites in the web and a further clarification is needed. The first important conceptual difference to be noticed is between UCC developed by tourists and UCC on tourism developed by all other kind of users. An example of the first one is the tourist that shares a video of his/her trip through a social network site such as Facebook, an example of the second one is an economy professor discussing the performance of tourism businesses in his/her blog. In the second case the content is at the center of the analysis, so any creative content which deals with tourism as topic can be classified as user created tourism content. In the first case, the user is at the center of the analysis and any creative content that is uploaded by tourists and deals with tourism is to be considered as TCC.

The second important conceptual distinction is the difference between users and end-users. Although this distinction is missing in most of the literature on the topic of UGC it is important when considering the difference between user created tourism content and TCC. Many of the tools related to UGC such as blogs, podcasts, wikis etc, can be used by tourism corporations and organizations to increase the interaction with their employees/members or for business-to-business communication. However, the analysis of this perspective lies beyond the aims of this study. The focus of this study and classification is therefore the participative end-user, the tourist.

### **3. Internet cultures and TCC**

Technological systems are not produced in vacuums but in specific cultural settings. TCC is embedded in the different types of cultures which have been shaping the Internet. Tourists compete, shape their identities and interact with each other on these digital platforms. Internet is grounded in the *techno-meritocratic* culture, the *virtual community* culture, the *hacker* culture, and the *entrepreneur* culture ( Castells, 2001) (Fig. 2). The social sites that display digital content created by tourists share many similarities with *techno-meritocratic* culture and the open source movement for example Wikitravel, a site based on the encyclopedic genre, further explained later in the article. They are based on the establishment of collaborative on-line systems that

reward expertise and merit. Several of the sites establish hierarchical structures based on merit and peer evaluation, for example: Worldreviewer.com differentiates in their community between expert members, most active members and editorial teams, Travelistic.com ranks contributions of the tourists by popularity. Travelersfortravelers.com announces its 'Top TFT Ranking Members' and Virtualtourists.com encourages users to rate contributions according to helpfulness and presents rankings of most popular content. Tourists that upload content to these sites contribute to a virtual form of informal tourism social interaction and become part of competitive systems in which tourism expertise is rewarded by the voting and opinions of other users.

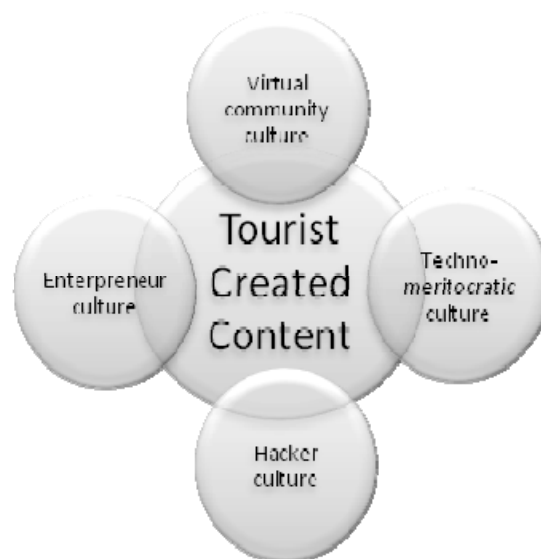


Fig. 2. Tourist Created Content and the cultures of internet.

The influence of the 'open-source movement' in TCC is evident in the openness of the virtual texts. Traditionally published narrative, visual or audio texts had a clear authorship and functioned as closed works after their publication, e.g. a published review of a restaurant in a newspaper. The texts published on the web are open. The work is not completed, and invites to the contribution of other users. Tourists are invited to alter the original work in many different ways. They can rate it, comment on it, include tags in photos and videos, link it to other contents or send it to other users or

sites. Although to different degrees co-creation of tourist content and interactivity of authorship can be seen in all the sites explored. The character of most of the TCC is dynamic and fluid, always open to alteration. The lack of full control over ones own production is part of the essence of this virtual sharing of information and the assumption of this lack of control of the final product is part of the system architecture of the social network sites in tourism. As a consequence the total contribution provided by a tourist on a destination/product becomes a collage of user's inputs (comments, tags, rankings, etc.).

The impact of the *virtual community* culture on TCC can be seen in two trends: the trend of free revealing of knowledge and information in tourism and the trend of establishing ties of friendship, sociability and identity through tourist generated content. Free revealing produces value by enhancing the use/reuse of what has been revealed (Von Hippel, 2005). Tourists do not keep their knowledge and experience as secrets or trade them as valuable assets in commercial terms. The more accessibility, usability and reusability of content the larger its value. By sharing their knowledge, tourists appear as free revealing innovators expressing some of the values of virtual community cultures. Many of the contributions in social network sites correspond to the type of participation made by the 'Pro-Ams', amateurs who work to professional standards (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004). The proliferation of sites with TCC shows that there are many 'Pro-Ams', enthusiastic about tourism experiences, who are willing to share them in the form of travel guides, reviews, etc. Furthermore, the product is offered free of charge. Many of the sites explored use a language that encourage the idea of community identity; the users are not only 'users' or 'tourists' they are 'friends'(Facebook), 'Producers' (Travelistic) 'CouchSurfers'(Couchsurfing) or 'experts and members' (Worldreviewer). Communities can be defined as networks of interpersonal ties. These ties can provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity. These findings support other studies that stress the importance of sociability as an element of the tourism experience (Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2007).

The *hacker* culture combines the enjoyment of creativity and the reputation among colleagues. The relevance of reputation systems is a usual characteristic of internet cultures as seen in the previous analysis of meritocracy ( Castells, 2001). A fundamental value of the hacker culture is freedom which can also be seen in the lack of formality in

relation to ownership of production and on the avoidance of commercial interests. Like hackers, tourists do not show interest in displaying a recognizable authorship online and opinions and reviews produced by companies are discouraged. This lack of recognizable authorship differs greatly from other mediators in tourism such as travel guides, brochures, corporate sites or even traditional word-of-mouth. In TCC the signatures are very diverse, in most cases they include nicknames, what may look like the real name of the author or is anonymous like in Wikitravel. In other cases there is a verification system like in the case of Couchsurfing. The use of nicknames is a common element of most sites of the sample for example those of some popular contributors in Virtualtourists: 'angiebabe', 'imbi', 'jo104', etc. In this way tourists incorporate in their relation to the Web an element of the hacker culture.

Furthermore, the system architecture of the sites defines to which extend the personal data of the tourist has to be revealed to the system administrator. Much of the control related to tourists' personal data is to provide a 'free of commercial interests' image and to avoid the misuse of the system by business owners eager to get positive reviews. This creates a tension between the need to generate as much user traffic as possible, so that the value of accessing to the information will increase, and the need to provide reliable information from the end-users without bias from the industry.

Sites explored in this study, such as TripAdvisor, IgoUgo and others show recommendations and even threats to business owners that may try to cheat the system. However, in general, the contribution structures are very open and false information can be generated from different computers and servers by creating false identities. Trip advisor administrator includes a message entitled "we have zero tolerance for fake reviews" in which the site explains that "In the rare case that we find a fake review, we remove it immediately and take steps to ensure that the property in question is penalized in our rankings and on our site" (TripAdvisor, 2008). Other such as Virtualtourist include a tool to report abuse in the content uploaded. Some sites have a larger control because they are closed to members only, like it is the case of Facebook or Dopplr while others have a "reproving" function allowing users to denounce inappropriate or harmful content. The tension between openness and control has generated an increased number of books to help tourism firms to participate in social networks in the right way (Weinberg, 2009).

Finally, the *entrepreneur* culture can be seen in the constant appearing of new sites and forms of sharing TCC. There is a large dynamism in the type and number of sites that allow tourists to upload and access UGC. Some of them as couchsurfing.org also show a high level of innovativeness by creating a web of users that want to provide accommodation services for free.

### **3.1. Is Tourist Created Content globalizing word-of-mouth?**

The increasing importance of TCC brings two main issues for discussion: the impact of this phenomenon in globalization tendencies and its relationship to traditional word-of-mouth. Word-of-mouth is an important component of the tourism experience and a relevant tourism marketing tool. TCC can be seen as the virtualization and digitalization of the word-of-mouth. The interaction of Internet users through Online feedback mechanisms, also known as reputation systems, allow to create large-scale word-of-mouth networks in which individuals share information on many different topics (Dellarocas, 2003), including tourism and tourism suppliers. These systems expand the impact and break the geographical limitation that the word-of-mouth had previously in tourism, presenting new challenges to tourism businesses and organizations alike, establishing a phenomenon entitled by Qualman 'World of Mouth' (2009, p.1 ). According to Dellarocas (Dellarocas, 2003) the difference between the word-of-mouth in the Web and that of the past is first, the unprecedented scale of the phenomenon; second, how the programmers can mediate by creating mechanisms of automatic feedback mediation and third; the specific properties of the online interaction, with a volatile nature of the communication and identities. The analysis points towards the importance of those controlling the system architecture of the sites. Programmers are those that design and implement the mechanisms for feedback mediation and also those that make the framework in which the interaction takes place. For example by allowing the social network to be open or closed, the impact of the word-of-mouth can be expected to be different. In a closed network such as Facebook the word-of-mouth accessed is in many cases that of those users classified as 'friends' of the reader.

In most social networks on the Web the traditional production function is changed by some form of social function; the primary dimension being social rather than commercial. According to Parameswaran and Whinston (2007) , online communities do

not follow the structure of markets or hierarchies. They represent a different type of organized human enterprise creating economic value. This is also the case in tourism. Tourism is not only about individual gazing of places but about relevant social relationships, “much tourism involves a particular combination of places and significant people” (Larsen et al., 2007, p.250). The use of social network sites reproduces and enhances this social dimension of tourism.

Internet users share their tourism experiences and create value based on different and innovative structures which are virtually available, that is to say everywhere and also nowhere as long as they do not appeal or are understandable for the receiver. Poster (2006) observes that the territoriality of the subject is minimized in digital culture, but is not eradicated. Thanks to the Web, the supply of TCC is global but it is consumed and produced locally. TCC includes an enormous amount of information. Social network sites as the ones examined in this study act as a tool to make sense and structure the excess of information (Qualman, 2009). However, the production of meaning and the reception of meaning remains personal and takes place in a specific setting. TCC uses global mechanisms but provides local impacts and can be seen as a glocal phenomenon, using Robertson (1995) categorization. The personal experience of the tourist that creates and consumes online content is historically and culturally rooted.

During the last decades globalization has been an important process of change for tourism world wide, bringing the world closer together (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999) and enabling access for tourists to the most remote regions of the world. Still, many languages remain local and rooted in the local communities. There are a number of world languages with millions of users such as English, Chinese or Spanish. However, a very large number of languages locally rooted are largely used by Internet users from Japanese or Danish to Greek. The use of these languages in TCC is a barrier to the sharing of information through the Web. Although automatic software programs for translation are available through websites and the use of English as second or third language has been expanding throughout the world, language proficiency is still a barrier. Besides, issues such as the e-literacy of the population and large differences in the access to cheap and fast Internet services mean that large differences of participation can be expected around the world.

## 4. A typology of Tourist Created Content

### 4.1 The revival of the written word

TCC can be divided in narrative, visual and audio content. The examination of the sample of the study showed a strong dominance of the written word, complemented with other media such as photos or videos. The written text and therefore the narrative creative expression is the main asset of many of the tourist sites studied. This section focuses on the typology of the narrative content. Based on the analysis of the content of the sites several narrative genres were identified. In previous ICT studies, the concept of genre has proven to be useful as a tool to examine web enabled communication (Eriksen & Ihlström, 2000). The different narrative genres can be placed on a continuum from the more descriptive and objectivistic narrative (*the encyclopedic genre*) to a more subjective and personal (*the diary*).

The *encyclopedic genre* is based on knowledge sharing with a form of peer-review or critical evaluation of the content, the most known example of this genre being Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia with over 1.5 million articles produced by users. In tourism the same concept is developed with Wikitravel (b, 2009) “a project to create a free, complete, up to date and reliable worldwide travel guide”. Wikitravel allows people to share their knowledge on tourism destinations and is available in many languages. At the time of the study, Wikitravel announced that it provided more than 22 000 destination guides and other articles from around the globe. Based on open-source, Wikitravel provides an extensive manual of style for authors that encourage a form of academic standard and a specific structure of the contributions. This type of content avoids the expression of an intimate and personal tourism experience. There is a lack of first-person narrative. This content is rich in the use of passive while other times it addresses the needs of the future tourist: “*There's a lot to see on the Mall. You can walk the whole Mall on an afternoon to admire the sights and monuments, but note that it is bigger than it looks—over two miles end-to-end (3.2 km)—an illusion that is reinforced by the sheer size of the Capitol Building, Washington Monument, and Lincoln Memorial*” (Wikitravel a, 2009). The role assumed by the contributors of this type of content is that of a local expert and less that of the touristic gaze. In this content, there

are features of landscape and townscape and destination image creation. The contributions are mostly space and attraction-centered.

The *review genre* is based on the critical evaluation of a tourism product or experience, a very popular site which mainly relies on this genre is TripAdvisor. Some other sites of the sample that also provide this genre are IgoUgo, Trustedplaces and Hostelz. There are different types of rating typologies associated to this genre. This can be seen in the example of figure 3 (TripAdvisor, 2009). The review genre differs from the encyclopaedic by having a focus on the personal experience of consumption of a very specific part of the tourism product and not in the tourism experience as a whole. It provides insights into the feelings and emotions of the tourists as consumers from a micro-perspective. This genre is activity related and self-centered. There is a large use of the first person and the inclusion of names of friends and families: *“Mom and I went for their Sunday Roast special, L15 for two courses. They were very tasty.”* or *“I absolutely loved afternoon tea at the Dorchester Hotel. First, we started with tea, I chose Earl Grey, scones, clotted cream, and jam”*.

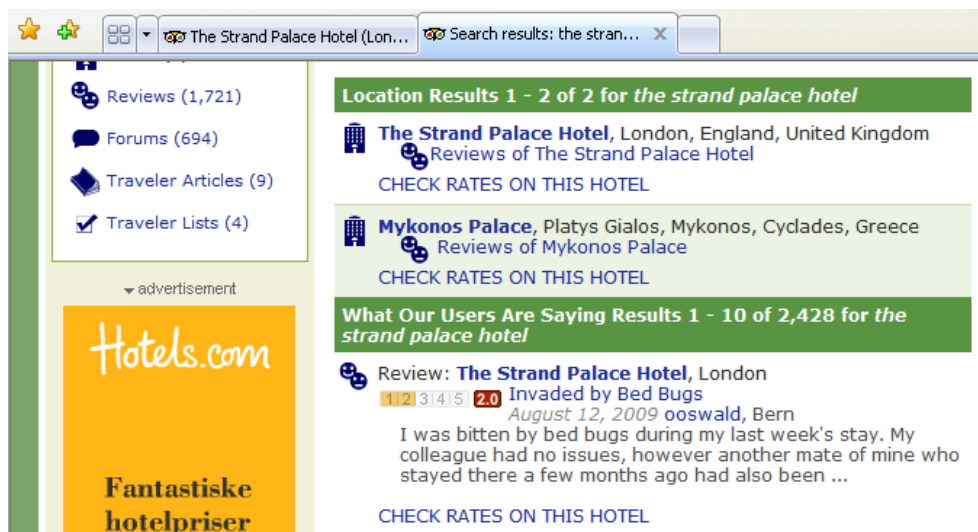


Fig. 3. Tourist Created Content: Review genre.

The *diary genre* (also called travel journals) relates to the narrative explanation of the personal experience through time. It is a classical genre which has been related to tourism historically. Many world known authors have written diaries of their tourism experiences from H.C. Andersen in Scandinavia to E. Hemingway in the US. This genre is also very popular on the Web and its expression is mostly to be found



in the form of blogs at the different sites. The content has extensive use of the first-person. It shows the development of the travel through a larger period of time and provides a wholistic understanding of the tourism experience.

The general *blog* relates to individual opinions about specific issues (Ryu et al., 2009). The *blog* is mix-genre which contains many elements related to the diary, but also can contain encyclopedic knowledge and review passages. They are not related to rankings in the same way than reviews do, but allow usually for comments of other users. Travel Blogs can have a permanent nature or be used for a specific travel experience. Some of the sites reviewed that have travel blogs as main content are Gowander, Travelistic, Blogabond and iTourist. These sites present in their design and presentation a strong focus on ‘the experiential’ part of tourism as well as in the ‘community building’ capacity of tourism. Gowander presents its network as follows: “*We are a community of independent-minded, adventurous and passionate travellers. Share your experiences*”. Independence of thought and of authorship is again a theme that is common to blogging sites.

The *microblog* is a specific genre inside the category of blog that has become popular thanks to Twitter and also some tools included in social networks such as Facebook. The *microblog* allows the user to write a text with a highly limited number of words (e.g. 140 characters in Twitter.com). This limitation makes this tool relevant when the tourist wants to make a short comment on his/her trip or provide an update of the experience. Tourists use this genre to provide a ‘life’ scheme of the tourism experience. The experience is reported as it occurs. This type of TCC has a high sociability component as it allows the tourist to keep family, friends and other ‘followers’ updated about the travel. This content has many similarities to the ‘news genre’ described by Erikson and Ihlström (2000) in their study of news on the Web. The microblogs are valuable as long as they are constantly updated. Novelty and speed, opposed to deep reflection or analysis, are what makes them relevant. Microblogging provides a unique image of the tourism experience as it occurs and contributes to the mediation of tourism in a highly innovative way that cannot be found in other traditional tourism media.

The sample reviewed in this study reveals that the different genres appear combined in many ways. The combination of genres and of media is a characteristic of TCC. However, usually there is a main focus of the text published which allows for the classification. For example in TripAdvisor the reviews may also include some text which reminds of a diary or some objective information about how to arrive to a destination. Nevertheless, the main aim is still to review the product; an objective that is encouraged by the design and indications of the site (write your review here, select your ranking, etc). Besides, all the different narrative genres use hypertext at different levels, with links to other sites or documents available in the cyberworld. The genres also combine forms of narrative content with other media such as photos, video and audio. Finally, depending of the system architecture of the site the tourist narrative contributions remain open to the incorporation of other content supplied by other users, for example some of the sites allow for users to give a grading evaluating how useful the information provided in the review was. In the case of the wikis and the encyclopedic genre, the feature of openness is imbedded in the system. This genre is very close to the profile of the ‘open source movement’ based on the users’ contributions to generate, modify and improve free accessible software on the web.

#### **4.2 Podcasts: visual and audio creation**

The visual content can mainly divided into photos and video content. It is an extremely popular form of content of tourism sites. Tourism is deeply related to image-making media (Beeton, 2004). Similar to the case of the narrative expression, also the visual expression can also be classified according to different genres and it is often combined with hypertext and other forms of expression by the use of titles, descriptions attached to the images, tags on the photos, etc. Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) in their case study of Youtube videos on the destination of New York City identified also a difference between more objectivistic types of videos focusing on activities or spaces and those expressing the self image and impressions of the producer. Furthermore sites encourage different types of interactivity, for example ‘Virtualtourists’ users are only allowed to watch the visual content while other sites such as ‘Tripfilm’ or ‘Travelistic’ promote the ranking of the images showed or the comments of other users. In addition, the visual content may be combined with audio being this the sounds of the scene, speakers or music. Some of the most popular general sites for video and photo sharing

are Flickr and Youtube. Many of the images on these sites have a “real life” approach, without any or only a minimum degree of manipulation. The large diversity of video films available through TCC presents a kaleidoscopic image of destinations that stands in deep contrast to traditional dominant tourist images of destinations as presented by the tourism industry or the cultural industry and that have usually played a relevant role in the development of tourism destinations (Beeton, 2004).

The audio content is to be found in the form of podcasts and it has received a large bust of popularity thanks to the iPods and other mobile technologies that allow for the downloading and uploading of this type of user created content. The audio content related to tourism can also be classified according to the narrative typology explained earlier. As well as the visual content this content can be found with different combinations of multiple media. Rating may also be allowed and encouraged depending on the site. This type of content was seldom present in the sample of websites studied.

### **4.3 Introducing other contents**

A type of content that had a lower level of creative process by the user refers to the uploading of information of products and services for sale. This content can be found in the advertising of a tourism guide book at eBay, in the sharing of accommodation services in Coachsurfing.com or in the sharing of transportation to minimize expenses and carbon emission in Liftshare.com. Other content can be seen in the use of applications such as ‘Cities I’ve visited’ of TripAdvisor or ‘Where I’ve been’ of Facebook that allow travelers to place pins on a digital map. Other types of content with a lower creative value that may have a large market value are the sites advocating the sharing of social information, with users uploading personal information regarding their educational and marital status, their position and workplace, their date of birth etc. This content may not be directly related to the tourism experience. However, it is valuable information often used to conduct market research for the tourism industry. This information also allows linking the different forms of created content such as blogs or videos to be linked to the personal profile of the tourist/creator. Relevant examples of these sites are Facebook or MySpace which are generic sites and Dopplr which focuses on tourism.

## 5. Tourist Created Content and the Tourism Experience

TCC includes the various types of creative media content that are produced by tourists and published through the Web. This new social media has expanded the way by which tourists see and interpret the world. Traditionally, tourism conceptualization results from a basic binary division between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary (Jafari, 1987; Urry, 2002). The tourist experience includes both a spatial travel outside the place of residence and the crossing of the “home’s sociocultural thresholds” (Jafari, 1987). However, the assumption of the separation between home and away has been challenged by modern sociological analysis (Franklin & Crang, 2001; Larsen et al., 2007). According to Jansson (2002):

*In a historical perspective, the tourist gaze has become more and more intertwined with the consumption of media images. Modern tourism has never involved any pure first-hand gaze, and is today governed by and measured against mediated representations created by the tourism industry of by the culture industry at large (p.431)*

The innovative aspect of TCC is that it is a new form of mediation in the creation of the tourism experience, which neither represents the industry nor the cultural industry but which airs people’s personal reflexive considerations of the tourism experience. TCC functions as virtual mediator. The reading, viewing and making of TCC helps to ease access to the experience of touristhood so that this not only takes place as a contrast to day to day activities but also in many different contexts (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009).

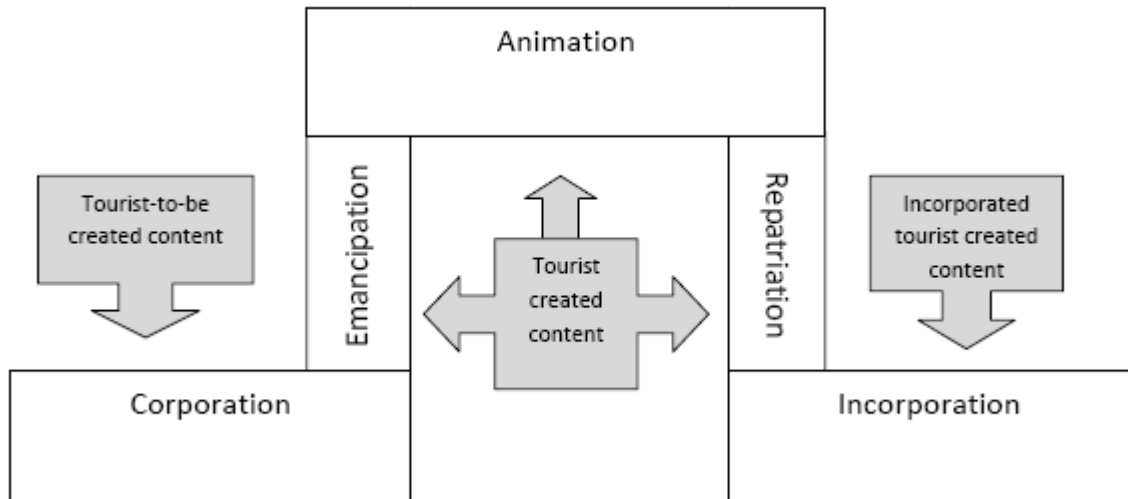


Figure 4. TCC and Jafari's Tourism Model

TCC can be developed, uploaded and shared during the entire tourism experience and its mediation will vary depending of the type of tourist (e.g. lifestyle, age), his/her eLiteracy, the level of connectivity of the destination and the technological resources of the tourist. Jafari's tourism model identifies several components representing the different stages of the tourism experience: *corporation*, *emancipation*, *animation*, *repatriation* and *incorporation*. The TCC in each of these stages corresponds to the different wishes and needs of the person experiencing tourism

In the *corporation* component the user is in search position, the type of content at this stage is related to those aspects that can motivate the travel experience, the search for information and also the pre-purchase and purchase phases. Examples of the contribution of TCC are the comments that tourists-to-be write about other tourist reviews, blogs or visual podcasts and also the questions and requests that users upload onto social network sites. TCC consumed at this stage emphasizes the role of fantasy and imagination as part of a fluid tourism experience that begins already with a virtual, emotional and imaginative mode of travel before the actual physical journey. Jasson's (2002) study on the mediation of the tourism experience demonstrates how this virtual mediation far from bringing the 'end of tourism' actually encourages the search for the 'on-location' tourism experience. Much of the planning of the journey takes place in

this stage and share communities such as Wayn or Dopplr focus specially on this type of content facilitating the planning of the journey among their users thus encouraging the sociability element in tourism. This stage incorporates all types of requests that demand information about destinations and tourism experiences uploaded by the tourists-to-be. It includes also blogs and other types of content (audio or visual podcasts) which refer not only to the desires and motivation for traveling but also to the possibilities or impossibilities of doing so. At this stage the tourist can also aggregate resources, for example by offering the service of a car trip to a destination in return for the sharing of the fuel expenses as in the case of a site such as Liftshare or accommodation services like Couchsurfing.

The study of the information uploaded by the tourists-to-be can identify issues of suppressed demand, in addition to the needs and wants which are not met by the current market or even ideas for new service development. Furthermore, at this stage there is an important element of passive or non-creative generated content, for example the information provided by the buying behavior of many tourists-to-be at an ecommerce site. The examination of the sample shows that use of TCC can be found during the corporation component but it is not very intensive. The tourist-to-be experience of virtual mobility at this stage is more that of a 'watcher' and a 'reader' than a 'doer'. However, when considering other uses of Internet such as e-commerce this is an extremely important stage that corresponds to the pre-purchase and purchase phases of many of the tourism products. Finally, reviews, diaries, blogs, videos etc, created and published by tourists can be expected to have the largest impact on this stage by affecting other users motivation for travel and purchase choices. TCC at this stage is relevant because touristic culture is not only the physical act of traveling but also the preparation of people to experience tourism (Franklin & Crang, 2001).

The second component, emancipation refers to the physical traveling to the tourist destination as well as the mental traveling which in Jafari's terms corresponds to the entering into touristhood. TCC at this phase corresponds to the one produced and uploaded during the physical journey to the destination and is the images, sounds and narrative texts produced by the tourists at transportation sites (airports, train stations, harbors, etc) and other content which relates to the physical travel experience in an airplane, train, coach, car, etc, while going away from the place of residence and while

arriving at the destination. These contents refer to the expectations towards the destination and the perceptions of the transport service. The importance of this component can be said to be distinct depending of the type of travel. If it is a cruise trip then the emancipation and the animation component are deeply interlinked. Transportation to the destination and destination in this type of travel are often one and the same thing, the cruise boat being for many the destination itself (Wood, 2000). For other types of modes of travel there may be a larger difference between the transport service and what may be perceived as the destination experience.

The *repatriation* is, due to its focus on transport and the movement in space, very similar to the emancipation component, however it is very different in its psychological perspective. During repatriation the tourist can provide content about the transportation but also about the feelings and perceptions on their way back home. Information provided by the tourists at this stage relates to the perception of the tourism experience and not only to the expectation of it. Tourists create and share on the Web content that indicates their satisfaction or disappointment with the trip and depict details of their tourist experience at their destination. However, because the physical traveling takes place during this component, and in some types of travel such as road travel or flight travel it may be difficult for tourists to have easy access to the Internet or their personal computers, much of the content portraying the full tourism experience can be expected to be generated at the final component, the incorporation. A special case is the type of transportation in which destination and mode of transport are intertwined, for example cruising. Greater use of mobile devices with Internet access may change this situation, as greater amounts of tourists can choose to be on-line at all times during their trip. Besides, the trend of microblogging with its short messages may enhance a larger interactivity from mobile devices. However, nowadays there are still infrastructural and financial boundaries to a situation of total connectivity.

The animation component corresponds to the “tourist doing tourism in his animated world” (Jafari, 1987, p.151) and in spatial terms relates to staying at the tourism destination. During animation the tourist can have different degrees of immersion in the experience. This component corresponds to the non-ordinary life, however the modern tourism experience is much more fluid and it does not always differentiate in absolute terms between the ordinary life of the tourists and the non-ordinary tourist experience.

During their stay at the destination the tourists may check their emails from time to time or read material related to their jobs and they may also send information to their friends and peers about their experience. The fluidity of the ordinary and non-ordinary is helped by the evolution of ICT, which makes it possible to stay in touch with the world back home 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Bauman, 1998).

Tourists during the animation stage can develop and share content related to the tourism experience at the destination. This content relates to the core of what the tourism industry is offering; for example reviews of attractions, accommodation or other type of services at the destination. If the content is created during this stage it will be an explanation of the experience while it is taking place, an on-going perception of the trip. Many of the sites of the analyzed sample provide a great deal of real-time reviews and descriptions of the experience and give an immediate perception of the experience. Many of the examples of TCC during this stage are to be found in blogs and travel diaries or in visual podcasts such as those uploaded in Youtube or the photos shared at Flickr while still at the destination. The microblog also encourages real-time communication. This type of ‘on-the-stage’ uploaded content usually makes a powerful impression by creating the illusion of showing the tourism experience as it ‘is’ and not as remembered.

The texts at the animation stage try to provide an impression of the “real” experience but in fact they are personally created, digitally manipulated and uploaded while adapting to the possibilities of the system architecture of the sites. Furthermore, the use of nicknames and anonymity of users gives a sensation of artificiality and simulation. Examples of content at this stage are the pictures of a honeymoon holiday in New Zealand with the clarifying title of “Liz-onthefly’s photostream” (Flickr, 2009). Visual texts of the destination only take place during this stage. A lot of the content analysed in the sample also has the aim of keeping friends and relatives updated about the travel experience. Twitter and the use of microblogs have facilitated the sharing of content based on mobile technologies. The narrative texts and the visual content are a combination of published travel diaries and virtual postcards. Tourism businesses and destination managers can try to influence the uploading of relevant TCC at this stage by encouraging tourists to create content regarding their products while still experiencing them at the destination.



Finally, a very relevant phase in TCC is the incorporation phase. At this stage the tourist returns to his/her place of residence and day to day activities. This phase corresponds in many cases to the post-purchase and post-experience phase, in which tourists upload texts giving their opinions and reminiscing about their trip. Many of the sites studied show a very high level of activity at this stage, making the initiatives and strategies related to the post-purchase extremely important for tourism businesses. When analyzing the content posted on the sites it is not possible to verify the actual location used by the tourist when uploading the content. However, the use of verbs in past tenses (we were, we travelled to, etc) and in temporal indications (last week, last month, etc) in the narrative contributions points towards the importance of the post-experience in TCC.

## **6. Conclusions**

The purpose of this study has been to broaden the knowledge regarding TCC, to provide a critical perspective on the topic and to contribute to a wider understanding of how the increased tourist contributions on the Web impact on tourism today. Based on the exploration of the Web and an extensive analysis of the content the paper proposes a classification of the User Generated Content. Furthermore, the different types of UGC have been specified and TCC was defined as the creative media content produced by the tourists and published through the Web. This content is to be understood as part of the broader picture of user contribution systems, Web 2.0 tools and User Generated Content.

TCC is a massive phenomenon, with millions of users throughout the globe. However, there is a debate regarding the merit of the content available, the profile of those participating and other issues such as the security of content and ownership rights. TCC is produced, exposed and disseminated thanks to the Web and Internet and reflects the cultures that shape these technologies: the techno-meritocratic culture, the hacker culture, the virtual community culture and the entrepreneur culture. The analysis of the cultural technological background has provided insights on the processes that allow the tourist to create content and interact with the Web. These processes reflect the logic of collaborative on-line systems that reward expertise and merit, reveal the relevance of the system architecture, work thanks to the establishment of hierarchical structures

based on meritocracy and ranking systems, imply the lack of formality in ownership, allow the establishment of networks of interpersonal ties, and reveal the paradox of openness versus control of content. Furthermore, the findings of this study show that TCC is the virtualization and digitalization of the word-of-mouth. These systems expand the impact and break the geographical limitation that the word-of-mouth previously had in tourism and thus present new challenges to tourism businesses and organizations alike. TCC reproduces and enhances the social dimension of tourism.

The analysis led to the proposition of a classification for the different types of TCC produced by the tourists on the Web and also to provided both an overview and an explanation of its characteristics. The main types of content identified are the narrative, the visual and the audio. The study showed that TCC is a new form of mediation in the creation of the tourism experience. It can be developed, uploaded and shared during the whole tourism experience. However, the stages of the tourist experience point towards differences in the processes of creation and use of TCC. The analysis suggests that at the corporation component, the impact of TCC is larger, while the production of TCC can be expected to be greater in the later stages of the experience, especially in the animation and incorporation components. The knowledge on how tourists use this content and how they produce it is a relevant issue for tourist organizations that want to have an impact on the tourism content available on the Web.

The incipient stage of research on the topic of UGC demands further research, particularly with a focus on several main issues: the motivations that lay the grounds for the creation and use of TCC and the examination of the impacts that this content has in the decision making, purchase behavior and travel planning of the tourists. From the supply side, further research is needed to understand how to benefit from the massive amount of data relating to tourism brands and products that is uploaded and shared by the tourists. More knowledge is necessary regarding the strategies that tourism planners and suppliers can use to participate actively in the enhancement of TCC. As mentioned in the introduction of this study, research on the topic of UGC and TCC is in its infancy stage. This first analysis of TCC sets a challenge for further research effort.

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