Taking travel journalism seriously: Suggestions for scientific inquiry into a neglected genre

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Abstract

The practice of travel journalism is still largely neglected as a field of inquiry for communication and journalism scholars, despite the fact that news media are increasingly focussing on softer news. Lifestyle sections of newspapers, for example, have been growing in size over the past few decades, and given corresponding cutbacks in international news reporting, particularly travel journalism is now playing a growing role in the representation of 'the Other'. While this need for research into the field has been identified before, very little actual investigation of travel journalism has been forthcoming. This paper reviews the current state of research by reviewing what studies have been conducted into the production, content and reception of travel journalism. It argues that while there does now exist a very small number of studies, these have often been conducted in isolation and with significant limitations, and much remains to be done to sufficiently explore this sub-field of journalism. By analysing what we do know about travel journalism, the paper suggests a number of possibilities in each area on how we can advance this knowledge. Above all, it contends that dated prejudices against the field have to be put to the side, and the practice of travel journalism needs to be taken seriously in order to do its growing importance justice.

Keywords

Travel Journalism, Lifestyle Journalism, Journalism Practice, Othering

Introduction

Since its inception, academic research into journalism has focussed predominantly on the field of news journalism, with scholars examining aspects of the production, content and reception of this dominant aspect of the media. Other fields, such as sports journalism, fashion journalism and travel journalism have only recently begun to attract attention as a

serious field for research. Part of the reason for this interest is the fact that journalism has undergone somewhat of a transformation, giving rise to 'soft news' in media around the world. As far as 10 years ago, Wendy Bacon (1999:89) pointed out that there were gaps in media theory particularly "in the huge area of journalism beyond the news". This has become a particular issue in international communication research, because news media have cut back on international news reporting due to the costs involved as well as waning audience interest. However, as Fürsich and Kavoori (2001: 154) point out, "media representations of 'others' remain decisive factors in this era of globalisation". They recommend that international communication research therefore refocus and include other media genres, such as travel journalism. US travel editor Thomas Swick (2001: 65) also notes this shift when he says that "in this day of disappearing foreign bureaus, the travel section is many papers' only in-house window on the world at large". And Santos (2004: 394) even goes so far as saying that "travel writers have become socio-cultural decoders". Travel journalism in particular, with its tales from foreign lands, certainly has the potential to influence audiences' views of other cultures. It is therefore surprising perhaps, that despite its arguably increasing relevance and presence in the mass media, travel journalism is still heavily under-researched, despite a call by Fürsich and Kavoori's (2001) for more investigation some time ago. This paper will briefly review the few studies that have examined aspects of travel journalism, before making recommendations on how to extend Fürsich and Kavoori's (2001) suggestions for future research and address this gap in knowledge.

Literature review

Travel journalism has historically been seen as journalism's not-so-serious little brother, a view that has been held by both practitioners and scholars. Many news journalists do not take it very seriously themselves, often belittling its relevance or seriousness. The view is that "anyone can go on holidays, and anyone can write about them" (Lischke, 2007, my translation). The fact that many newspaper journalists who write travel pieces have generally not received any training in the field and have gone on all-expenses-paid assignments based on their performance as general staff may not have helped the esteem in which the field is held. The view that travel itself is supposed to be all about fun and therefore writing about is perhaps more a leisure activity than serious work doesn't help either. As travel journalist Thomas Swick (1997: 424) has pointed out, "of the special-section editors at a newspaper – travel, fashion, food, home and garden – only [travel] occupied a position that is viewed as requiring no particular expertise". Swick (1997:424) argued the field was seen as one in which anyone could work: "Not only do most people travel, most people write postcards when they do: ergo, most anyone can be a travel editor".

Similarly, travel journalism as a field of scientific inquiry has suffered in that there exist very few studies taking it seriously. Travel journalism is still widely regarded as a "frivolous topic" of research (Fürsich and Kavoori, 2001), despite the increasing importance that tourism plays in today's world. In fact tourism is an immensely important component of the world economy, with tourism growing at an average 4.8 per cent of GDP worldwide between 1975 and 2000, representing a 6 per cent share of worldwide exports of goods and services in 2003 (World Tourism Organisation, 2004). In Australia the industry represents around 3.9 per cent of GDP (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) and in the financial year 2006-07, tourism consumption through the Australian economy amounted to a total of $84.975 billion (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). This centrality of tourism was also addressed by Fürsich and Kavoori's (2001) call for an examination of the relationship between tourism and the media. They noted five reasons why travel journalism needs to be studied more deeply: a) the boom of the tourism industry, b) tourism and its impact remains under-studied, c) leisure is a significant social practice, d) travel journalism is an important site for international communication research and e) travel journalism has special contingencies as it is a highly-charged discourse strongly affected by public relations.

In addition, international communication scholar Hamid Mowlana (1997) criticised tourism research for concentrating too much on financial and economic concerns, while neglecting social issues related to the industry. While there has been considerable increase in sociological and anthropological approaches to the field as noted by Fürsich and Kavoori (2001), I will argue that despite their call for communication scholars to examine contemporary practices of travel journalism, there has still been relatively little in the way of approaches from communication studies, let alone journalism studies.

Importantly, the studies that do exist, were conducted in relative isolation, almost haphazardly. This paper will review these existing studies by way of their approaches within a journalism studies context, ie. whether they examined producers of travel journalism, travel journalistic output, or whether they were concerned with its reception by the audience.

Producers of travel journalism

To the best of my knowledge there exists no systematic, representative study or analysis of travel journalists. This is a curious occurrence, as we do possess considerable knowledge of journalist profiles at large, with a number of studies even making international comparisons (see, for example, Weaver et al., 2007; Weischenberg et al., 2006; Weaver, 1998; Deuze,

2002; Donsbach and Patterson, 2004). Some of the studies, such as Weischenberg et al.'s (2006) representative survey of German journalists, did include travel journalists in their survey, however, the survey was designed to take account of wider journalistic characteristics and did not examine the special contingencies of travel journalism separately.

There has been one qualitative study in the form of a Masters' degree thesis which concerns itself with German travel journalists, and which can help provide somewhat of a starting point for future investigations. In interviews with a small number of purposively selected travel journalists, Lischke (2007) arrived at four classifications, or types, of travel journalists. She argued journalists could be seen as "story-tellers", who are typical quality newspaper journalists writing on a high level and trying to be critical; "discoverers", who write mostly for general interest magazines to special travel magazines, who want to have fun on their travels and pass that on to readers; "do-gooders" who are independent and want to inform about other cultures and countries; and "service-providers" who see themselves as neutral providers of information and who mostly work for regional newspapers and don't actually travel much themselves. Importantly, Lischke noted that the lines between these categories were blurred at times, and journalists could possess more than one characteristic. While useful as a starting point for future examinations of travel journalists, Lischke's exploratory study was somewhat limited in that she interviewed only a small number of journalists (12), which did not allow for more standardised comparisons.

In addition to this relatively small study, our only knowledge about travel journalists' views stems from travel practitioners who have written about their experience and the industry they work in (Austin, 1999; Eliot, 1994; Swick, 1997, 2001; Thompson, 2007). Dominant in most of these accounts has been the everlasting dispute over whether travel journalists or their publications should accept free travel, and if they did whether they should disclose this information. Most travel journalists realise that free travel or accommodation is necessary for them to do their job, but they believe they are not necessarily influenced by this as much as some might think. American travel journalist Elizabeth Austin (1999: 10) says that while it may be true "the writers of most junket-based pieces generally sing the praises of their hosts' accommodations, let's face it: Travel publications celebrate travel". She argues that stories which were paid for by the publisher themselves may even be more biased as, after all, the publisher wants an outcome for their expense. Austin further notes that many so-called "paid-for" trips have actually been purchased at large discounts. Alexander Eliot (1994: 56) also argues that travel sponsors never overtly ask for positive coverage: "Never was I asked to soften or sweeten anything I wrote, nor did any sponsor ask me for special treatment". While this agrees with Lischke's (2007) findings in her study of travel journalists, we need to

differentiate here between overt pressure and covert pressure, or perhaps a feeling of obligation, because receiving a free trip and luxury accommodation may arguably lead a journalist to be purely positive, if only so that they may be asked back on another trip or the sponsor doesn't pull their advertising. Finding that articles which carried a disclosure contained more in-text advertising than those which didn't, Hill-James (2006: 163) even asked whether sponsor disclosure was really "openness with the audience or an ethical 'out' for journalists to provide publicity to sponsors and continue to receive 'freebies'".

As we can see then, there exists very little in the way of systematic, scientific inquiry into travel journalists' values, attitudes, standards and perceptions as well as how these journalists see their role in an environment that is, perhaps more so than any other form of journalism, trapped between traditional journalistic ideals of objectivity and independence on the one hand, and the publicity expectations of tourism providers – who often finance their travels – on the other. This lack of inquiry has left us with numerous unanswered questions about the production of travel journalism content. As the next sections will show, it is generally acknowledged that media representations can have a relatively strong effect on destination images in tourists, yet very few studies have actually examined how these images are produced.

Travel Journalism Content

While there does exist a reasonably large body of work under the umbrella "media representations and tourism", many such studies are concerned not with news media but media such as movies, government websites and other promotional material or even tourists' use of media such as mobile phones and postcards (see for example Ateljevic and Doorne, 2002; Buchmann, 2006; Crouch et al, 2005; Dann, 2001; Fürsich and Robins, 2004; Mellinger, 1994; Selwyn, 1996). Nevertheless, the amount of research that does examine specifically travel writing or travel journalism content exceeds that of the other two areas discussed in this paper.

Travel editor Thomas Swick (2001) lists seven things he thinks are wrong with travel journalism and which resonate with many of the studies cited below: 1) he believes that almost nothing is negative in travel stories, there are only positive descriptions; 2) the present is missing, stories always focus on historical aspects of the destination; 3) stories are unimaginative and too descriptive; 4) there is very little real insight; 5) stories contain very little humour; 6) they lack dialogue; and 7) people other than the writers themselves are missing in these stories.

A number of Swick's concerns have been addressed in the studies that do exist, but most studies of the representation of tourism in travel journalism have been concerned with discourse analyses in order to examine how "the Other" is constructed in these tales. Very few studies have aimed to quantitatively analyse the content of travel media such as newspaper supplements. Hill-James (2006) analysed the content of three Australian newspapers' travel supplements and found, in line with anecdotal evidence as well as statements by travel journalists, that a significant amount of articles contained advertising within the text. Hill-James, arguing that travel journalists needed to engage with the world and interpret it, called for travel journalists to provide readers with more interpretive accounts of destinations, rather than the uncritical trailblazing for tourist authorities that was so common in much of travel journalism.

Hill-James further found that stories largely ignored locals at the destination, a finding which resonates with Hanefors and Mossberg's (2002) finding of a marginalisation of "the other" in their examination of Swedish TV travel shows. They found that travel shows were first and foremost about the presenter, not the locals at the destination. "When anyone from the destination's population actually appears, he or she is involved in the tourism industry and, if not, seems to act as a sort of silent marker, as if to lend authenticity" (Hanefors and Mossberg, 2002: 243). Incidentally, the authors also acknowledged – in line with the argument presented above – that there was an urgent need for more examination into the production side of travel journalism in order to find out why certain decisions were taken.

Santos (2006), in her textual analysis of American travel writing, has also been concerned with representations of "the Other". She argued that what was regarded the best travel writing was predominantly about authors' experiences, with frequent comparisons between host and American societies, as well as patriarchal discourses: "Editorial choices for the 'best' American travel writing suggest that the most relevant and paramount stories for these particular American readers are those which provide them with reassurance regarding their own ways of living by helping them make sense of the world and their place in it" (Santos, 2006: 639).

In a similar vein, Mahmood (2005) found that programs broadcast on the Travel Channel focussed primarily on the United States and Europe in their destinations, neglecting other parts of the world. In addition, Mahmood (2005: np) argues that the vast majority of programs placed "extensive focus on consumerism while almost entirely ignoring issues of culture".

That meant that programs advocated "conscious over-indulgence, including the purchasing of ultra-expensive items" (Mahmood, 2005: np).

In a more novel approach, Pan and Ryan (2007) analysed the framing of New Zealand in travelogues published in that country's major tourist source countries, and argued that there existed differences in the way in which male and female journalists followed certain frames differently in their reporting. Applying gender research, which has found an increasingly strong foothold in journalism and communication research, to the practice of travel journalism can certainly provide an interesting approach and component for future studies.

Audience reception of travel journalism

Many of the above studies of travel journalism content which were conducted within critical and cultural studies paradigms have been also concerned with the effect travel stories might have on audiences, however, few have empirically examined how audiences do react to such stories or how they might be negotiated from a communication studies perspective. In fact, most of the literature examining how tourists perceive travel literature stems from the area of tourism studies and is concerned largely with how destination images are formed among tourists (for example, Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Gallarza, Saura and Garcia, 2002; Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1988; Jenkins, 1999; Tasci and Gartner, 2007)

Gunn (1988) talks about the first phase of the development of a destination image being the organic image, which is based on sources from outside the tourism industry, such as general news media reports but also movies and books, education and peer groups. This phase is then followed by the so-called induced image, which includes more commercial sources such as travel brochures, travel agents and guidebooks. Echtner and Ritchie (2003: 38-39) note that while the general media does not appear to have much influence on tourists' images of certain products, "destination images however seem to be derived from a much wider spectrum of information sources". Travel journalism, which is neither as independent or neutral as news reports can be, nor can it be classed as purely commercial, would probably be situated across these two types of image formation. In fact, Gartner (1993) differentiates further between the various information sources which might impact on image formation, coming up with eight classifications. News reports are classed as autonomous image formation agents, and are often seen as more powerful agents due to their higher level of credibility. Travel journalism, on the other hand, would fall into the category of covert-induced, which means information that is influenced by marketers but to the audience appears independent.

This would mean that travel journalism might play an important role in the image formation stage, influencing at least those audience members who may not have heard about the destination before, or know very little about it. As tourists progress through the decision-making stage, they would arguably receive more information from a wider variety of sources, thus relegating the importance of one particular travel story. Nevertheless, first impressions often have lasting effects, and it would at least appear very important to research the impact that travel stories might have.

Beerli and Martin (2004), in their empirical study of tourists' destination image of Lanzarote, found that indeed organic and autonomous sources significantly influenced some aspects of destination image, and called for closer collaboration from destination management organisations with the media. Further, Loda and Carrick Coleman (2005: 368) noted that the most effective way to market tourism was to generate publicity messages before advertising, as they were generally given more credibility by consumers: "publicity followed by advertising yields more potent levels of message acceptance and message response". However, they noted that there had been very little actual research in this field so far, highlighting the need for further research here. Dore and Crouch (2003) also identified this need arguing that marketing management practices had focused mainly on destination image studies, marketing strategy, conversion studies and advertising research, while neglecting the use of publicity. This was despite some destination management organisations "receiving greater annual values (as measured in terms of equivalent commercial advertising expenditure) from their publicity programmes than from their entire annual budgets" (Dore and Crouch, 2003: 137). One case in point here is Tourism Queensland's recent marketing campaign around "The best Job in the World", which, has returned an estimated $100 million in publicity and promotion, for the advertisement cost of a mere $1.7 million (Koch, 2009).

One example of how media can impact on tourists' perception of a destination can be found in Mercille's (2005) study of the destination image of Tibet. He found a relatively strong influence of mass media images on what tourists expected when they visited the country for the first time. Mercille (2005: 1051) noted that "most tourists' gaze did not include signs of modernisation and Sinification, since it had been constructed by representations which did not include those signs". However, Mercille examined only the influence of movies, books and magazines rather than specifically news media let alone travel journalism content.

As pointed out before, the vast majority of the above research has been undertaken from a tourism studies perspective, and mostly with the background of enabling destination

management organisations to better target their marketing efforts. More research from an angle of how audiences negotiate these images they receive is desperately needed. In what may constitute the only study in this regard, Santos (2004) examined university students' perceptions and interpretations of leisure travel articles. She found that above all, tourists negotiated meanings of travel stories for themselves and constructed their own meaning from them and argued that rather than seeing audiences as passive receivers of structured messages, they needed to be seen as active participants. More work in this field is clearly required in order to make better sense of how audiences receive certain messages and how they negotiate them.

Conclusion

Eight years ago Fürsich and Kavoori (2001) called for a comprehensive analysis of travel journalism as they saw it as an increasingly important field of communication and journalism studies. Yet, as we can see from the above review, very little has happened since then. The few studies that do examine travel journalism from a communication or journalism studies perspective have often been conducted in isolation, only addressing parts of the equation.

Urgent action is needed if we want to take travel journalism as a field of scientific inquiry seriously. This begins with the simple definition of what a travel journalist is. Fürsich and Kavoori (2001) base their definition on Hartley's (1996) notion that journalism purports to be true, which enables them to differentiate travel journalists from travel writers, as the latter often blur fiction and non-fiction in their accounts. This definition, which also is able to include any medium, be it TV travel shows, newspaper travel sections, travel magazines or travel websites, provides us with a very good starting point, but perhaps future studies will be able to differentiate even further, or even categorise here. After all travel journalists come from various backgrounds with various working arrangements – from permanent full-time employees, to part-timers, to freelancers, even to the celebrity (or housewife for that matter) who writes a one-off feature. To do so, empirical studies to ascertain who these producers of travel content in the mass media actually are is sorely needed. Lischke (2007) has provided some starting points, but future research needs to test and expand some of her findings. Santos (2004) has argued travel writers play an important role as cultural intermediators, and as such we need to know more about their role perceptions, values, ethics, attitudes and standards. This can even be of benefit to the tourism industry, as it may allow destination management organisations to more effectively target their publicity programs.

Similarly, more in-depth analyses of the actual content which travel journalists produce is needed. This needs to occur from a variety of approaches, and should include quantitative as well as qualitative research. Fürsich and Kavoori (2001) have suggested a number of ways to examine textual representations, with combinations of approaches coming from areas such as postmodernism, nationalism, cultural imperialism and ideology and identity formation. Again, these are all important suggestions which need to be actioned in order to find out more about the role travel journalism can play. Other approaches could include quantitative analyses of which countries are most-represented in travel content or how journalists' views on certain issues are actually reflected – or not reflected – in the content they produce, or whether stories really are predominantly information- or entertainment-driven. Similarly, Mahmood (2005) found strong emphases on consumerism and high-priced items, it would be interesting to examine empirically what the average cost of featured trips is and to compare it with average incomes or average tourist expenditures.

In the area of reception analysis, efforts should be undertaken to isolate travel journalism content and examine its effect on audiences. Santos' (2004) study should provide very helpful guidance here as well. Scholars need to conduct more research to validate her findings, as well as expand on theoretical frameworks. We need to find out just how strong the influence of travel journalism content can be on audiences, as well as, for example, whether it makes a difference if stories are sponsored or not. Rieder (2000) cited internal research from a US newspaper which found that readers gave no credibility to sponsored travel stories – leading that newspaper to ban all such stories. More empirical evidence should be gathered in this regard.

The vast majority of existing studies have been conducted from a critical and cultural studies perspective, and this approach can be highly useful. However, I would argue that, particularly because we have very little empirical information so far to base some of these arguments on, it is equally important to conduct serious quantitative studies as well. Perhaps even more importantly, scholars will need to conduct comparative and inter-disciplinary studies, necessitated by the very nature of travel journalism spanning the disciplines of communication/journalism, advertising/marketing and business/tourism. Inter-disciplinary studies which are able to take advantage of, for example, tourism studies' knowledge of destination image will benefit immensely here. Similarly, much of travel writing is about crossing borders, and as such includes international perspectives which need to be taken account of.

With journalism increasingly focussing away from hard-news to soft-news, it is high time we, as communication and journalism scholars, take these emerging forms of journalism seriously, and do not just see them, in the words of Fürsich and Kavoori (2001: 154), as "trivial cultural celebration".

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