



# Travel journalism 2.0

## Tourists' motivations, expectations, and practices online

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With the increase in online offerings, travel organization and planning have shifted to the internet as online travel agencies (OTAs) provide ever-steepening competition to brick and mortar agencies. Over half of all travel bookings including airfare and hotels are now happening online, with Europe and the US accounting for over 60% of these bookings (IBD World Travel Trends Report, 2012/2013). As such, the process of deciding where to book is now largely informed by online sources, both journalistic and otherwise. Traditional media are publishing content on the web, but online content, including comments on OTAs like Hotels.com or Orbitz.com, and independent blogs, are also supplying consumers with information used to plan trips. Members of the public more than ever play the role of insiders, offering travelers tips for a destination. We can begin to observe how travel journalism and the discourse surrounding a location, once managed by institutional media, travel professionals, and tourism offices, are potentially dictated more by audiences than by professionals within this niche consumer market. TripAdvisor, with over 160 new comments every minute and 2600 new forum topics each day, is one of the most popular, but not the only example of websites that allow consumers to voice their opinions after a voyage. A wide array of blogs, review sites, and comments left on OTAs have also changed the way we experience travel.

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These many sites, however, have far from replaced traditional journalism. Despite the possibility of self-publication and participatory journalism, the practice of allowing the public to produce content for public consumption, some studies show an adherence to traditional gatekeeping controlled by editors and professionals (Singer et al., 2011). Furthermore, studies on the long tail of subject diversity demonstrate how very few topics garner the most attention online just as in traditional print media, suggesting that information is not as varied as we'd like to think (Rebillard, 2006). Even among social media, with more democratic possibilities for publication, researchers suggest that there are still just a few dominate players, especially in a travel context (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Media companies still dominate the news discourse, at least when it comes to hard news stories relating to current events and politics. In terms of news dissemination, however institutionalized media is losing its hold, as one study on Canadian social media shows how social sharing is becoming a commonplace means of news consumption. *“Editorially, the traditional gatekeeping function of the media is weakened as a significant proportion of news consumers turn to family, friends and acquaintances to alert them to items of interest”* (Hermida et al., 2012: 821). As we will discuss, the changing role of the gatekeeper has led some to opt instead for the term *“gatewatching,”* exploring how journalists are needed more to curate information in an increasingly vast ocean of sources (Singer, 2008; Bruns, 2011). While these studies focus largely on general news, little attention has been paid to the emergence of online journalism specific to niche media like travel, where Web 2.0 practices have boomed in the last decade, allowing consumers of information to become the producers of travel-related content (Urry and Larson, 2011).

We argue that the travel industry deserves special focus when it comes to agenda setting and information distribution. The World Travel and Tourism Council reported that for the first time, one billion global travelers had trekked across the globe in 2012. The spending power alone of these travelers justifies a closer examination into how the information flows from vendors to clients, and who influences our decisions when booking any sort of trip.

While ethics and practices are important in a professional context (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001), travel journalism is complicated by an overlap between journaling and journalism, between the author looking into a mirror and out a window (Greenman, 2012). Self-publication online is further blurring the difference between the two. Travel journalists historically provided information to help travelers make informed decisions, treating them *“unashamedly as*

*consumers”* (Hanusch and Fursich, 2014: 10). The internet, however, introduces the widespread possibility for information to flow in multiple directions. Corporately-owned websites like TripAdvisor and self-published blogs, for example, both allow tourists to become the sole creators of content, to mimic the role of the journalist by informing potential travelers with their own information. More than supplemental sources, this user-generated content (UGC) often becomes primary sources of information for travelers. The problem is that the reliability and transparency in such sources lack the professional filter of journalistic endeavors.

While sifting through information for traveling in a destination, like Paris, how do tourists perceive UGC? Through a study focusing on travelers and the publications they read, we can begin to observe how travelers are using various sources of information, both journalistic and nonprofessional, and what value they attach to certain categories, notably expatriate blogs. How do these tourists, *“post-tourists”* as described by Urry and Larsen (2011), go about preparing their travels? There are several studies on the consumption of travel information (Gretzel, 2007; Chhabra, 2010; Yagi and Pearce, 2007), but few in the specific field of travel journalism or travel blogging focus on the traveler's motivations. Our questionnaire and more importantly, our interviews, look to enrich existing literature into journalism specifically in a travel context.

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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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To understand how UGC is challenging established journalistic norms, we must look at the traditional top-down approach of institutional media. Historically, brand name, corporate media have controlled much of the information that has trickled down to consumers, be it via newsprint, radio, TV, or web. Over the last two centuries, editors and journalists – the professionals – have presented content to the public, acting as the gatekeepers of information (Lewin, 1940). They were the professionals in charge of deciding which content fit into the limited pages of newspapers and precious minutes of TV airtime. Over the past few decades, however, this traditional role of the professional journalist has been challenged by the increasing popularity of the web, where both journalists and non-journalists can publish alongside each other, reaching large-scale publics. How they reach these audiences remains one of many differences between the two groups.

Nonprofessional contributions online come in many forms, be it self-published blogs, comments on a professional news article, or an amateur contribu-

tion to a local news site. This citizen or participatory journalism has managed to reach into niches too nuanced for institutional media to penetrate, according to Dan Gillmor (2006). With major newspapers reducing staff, the potential value of participatory journalism is increasingly clear (Gant, 2007). However, many institutional news sites have not yet embraced contributions made by the public, as demonstrated by Singer et al. who identified a lack of participation in the creation of online content in major publications across several national newspapers (2011). The public, instead, is more often implicated in what the researchers label the “*interpretation phase*” by leaving comments and sharing content with others.

Besides news media, other sites have opened up access to their contributions, largely in the framework of consumer journalism. Websites like Yelp and TripAdvisor have become leaders in the travel and dining industry, in the tradition of the Zagat printed guides begun in 1979, based solely on user reviews. Other sites like Blogger and WordPress have offered, since the late 1990s and early 2000s, free platforms for self-publication, leading to the now-pervasive practice of blogging (Gant, 2007). The gate-keeping role of journalists, according to some researchers, has changed, as readers need more help navigating a sea of publications produced with varying levels of professionalization and, moreover, reliability. Hermida et al. suggest that social networks play the role of news editors, “*deciding whether a story, video or other piece of content is important, interesting, or entertaining enough to recommend*” (2012: 821). Jane Singer points to the role of the journalist as an authenticator, helping readers know what information is trustworthy, a role largely taken over by news consumers in a networked age (Singer, 2008).

Modifying the terminology, Axel Bruns suggests rethinking the gatekeeper role as a “*gatewatcher*” role, curating and parsing through the flux of information that can no longer be controlled. Before the widespread use of the internet, there were relatively few outlets and lots of information that needed to be selected for distribution on the limited pages of newsprint and timeslots on the evening news. Now, Bruns says, there are endless possibilities for publishing content, and users have access to much of the same information that journalists do. Journalists, he says, “*are engaged in a form of internal gatewatching which tracks the outcomes of this crowdsourced process of investigation to identify any particularly relevant, interesting, or outrageous findings to be explored further through more conventional journalistic activities*” (Bruns, 2011: 122). In a sense, the process of gatewatching has opened up traditional journalism to contributions by the public, allowing nonprofessionals a

greater say in what headlines end up in institutional media. Furthermore, Singer details the concept of “*user-generated visibility*,” another sort of filter whereby news consumers will vote or share links on social media, acting as a second level of gate-keeping for news items (Singer, 2014). By using sharing and social media tools, as well as websites like Reddit, “*users make editorial judgments about what may be of interest to an audience made up of other users*” (Singer 2014: 4).

Various *pureplayer* sites – media websites found exclusively online – and blogging platforms are giving more of a voice to writers and journalists who aren’t always connected to the big media brands. While audience-powered sites are rewriting the rules, speaking alongside and often over the voices of professional journalists, institutional media still remains some of the most viewed websites, according to Alexa ratings in December 2014, a trusted source for page rankings worldwide. In the US, for example, professional sites like CNN ranks at 24 and *The New York Times* at number 32, but pureplayers and UGC sites are not far behind. General news sites like the Huffington Post rank at number 77 while top travel related sites like TripAdvisor clock in at 103 with Yelp far ahead at 36.

Travel journalism, however, does not necessarily fit the same developmental patterns as most hard news. Dating back centuries to correspondence from travelers abroad and evolving over time with ship logs, scientific journeys in exotic places, and private journals made public, travel writing has its own peculiarities (Blanton, 1997; Marcil, 2007). Many of the earlier formers of writing – think Christopher Columbus’s notes or Flaubert’s exploits in Egypt – were not necessarily destined for publication but were written as more intimate accounts. Over the years, the writing styles and objectives of such authors evolved, shifting focus more on information and less on reflection as technology opened up tourism to larger audiences. As Catherine Bertho-Lavenir writes, the 19<sup>th</sup> century bolstered the more objective/professional travel guide with the advent of the steamboat and railway, changes that would only further with commercial airlines in the mid-1900s. She writes, “*Travel narratives and then tourist guides teach their readers systematically that which they should admire and how to conduct themselves*” (1999: 41). Guides like *Fodor’s* and the *Michelin Guides* offered more standardized information from a trusted, professional source, and the travel guide industry developed through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, continuing to evolve today with the web.

Today, defining travel journalism remains a difficult task thanks to the plethora of travel writing

found on the web, in books, as well as television programs, Youtube videos, and smartphone applications. Information is coming from every device we possess, but there are practices in common among such travel publications and productions. Hanush and Fürsich provide a functional definition for travel journalism that pivots on delivering factual accounts to a consumer of tourist experiences. They suggest that a travel journalist should provide information, entertainment, but also critical perspectives. They specify that travel journalism, despite its more consumer-based nature, “operates within the broader ethical framework of professional journalism, but with specific constraints brought on by the economic environment of its production” (2014: 11). Such a definition leaves room for interpretation, specifically with regards to how nonprofessionals may fit into such boundaries if they provide factual information while adhering to the same ethics as professional journalists.

With this definition in mind, we look to the tourists themselves. Several studies point to the increased importance of social media in travel research, especially in part to popular search engines like Google (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). But few studies analyze tourists’ motivations and interactions with such publications. Shifts in travel have changed as travelers are looking for something more than the prepackaged tours that were made popular during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Or at least within the framework of such tours, travelers are looking for something off the beaten path (Urry and Larsen, 2011). One such term, “experiential travel,” is the latest trend to infiltrate mainstream travel. According to one report by destination management company PEAK and travel industry watchdog Skift, “The online sharing portal pairs travelers with its network of local citizens around the world offering opportunities to experience their destination as much as possible like a local” (Oates, 2014: 8). With sites like AirBnB and Vayable connecting to locals with tourists for various travel needs, we can see how the internet facilitates such a trend.

But such a movement is rooted in previous trends. Nearly 40 years after writing *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell’s theories on the leisure class and their quest for “authentic experiences” still resonate with travelers. Basing his ideas in part on Goffman’s stage theory, MacCannell describes how travelers want to go behind the scenes, examining for example the “work displays” and other images of everyday life instead of just monuments and museums (1976: 36). A visit to the chic but industrial chocolate shop by famed French chef Alain Ducasse in Paris, for example, puts visitors into such a work display, surrounded by machines and kitchen equip-

ment that formerly were hidden behind the scenes. Such experiences attempt to create an authentic experience, but MacCannell downplays the reality of the situation, calling it instead “staged authenticity,” evoking the impossibility of truly living like a local while a tourist. He writes: “It is always possible that what is taken to be entry into a back region is really entry into a front region that has been totally set up in advance for touristic visitation” (1976: 101).

This distinction between touristy and authentic experiences, however, sometimes embodied in the lexicological distinction between *tourist* and *traveler*, has become less problematic in postmodern society. For Jean-Didier Urbain, travelers walk alongside the natives, while tourists merely walk ahead of them, foreign and lost, but such a conception seems oversimplified, as today’s travelers do both, and willingly (1991: 103). For Urry and Larsen, the “post-tourist” is replacing the dueling factions of authentic and touristy. We can imagine such a traveler who chooses to rent an apartment from a local Parisian, but who will also make time for sightseeing at the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre. This post-tourist is a person who accepts the touristy with the authentic, a more pragmatic and realistic traveler. According to their updated work, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, the authors propose that today’s travelers and tourists are essentially the same person. They write:

*“The post-tourist thus knows that he or she will have to queue time and time again, that the glossy brochure is a piece of pop culture, that the apparently authentic local experience is as socially contrived as the ethnic bar, and that the supposedly quaint and traditional village could not survive without some income from tourists”* (2011: 114)

As the post-tourist prepares a trip, we then look to the information sources used in the research process. If travelers are as much seeking some form of authenticity as well as the standard tourist sites, embracing them both, we propose that certain types of publications are better situated for certain types of information regarding activities or practical details. The post-tourist will look far and wide online for information, consulting many of the thousands of webpages dedicated to Paris before making travel decisions. Travel journalism becomes effectively a composite of traditional, institutionalized journalism and UGC, with consumers looking across the spectrum for specific bits from specific sources.

With this image of the post-tourist guiding our research, we examine an example of travel journalism, English-speaking publications about Paris, to explore how the post-tourist operates. Through

a questionnaire and interviews with travelers and expatriates in Paris, we can begin to understand how certain types of information, especially blogs, can fulfill a certain need during the online travel planning in the stages before a trip. We hypothesized that readers would favor online content, and in particular blogs for their access to these more “*authentic*” experiences. We propose finally that professional journalists take a back seat in the flow of travel information, while tourists play the role of authenticator and verifier through online sources, effectively curating their own image of a destination through information sources that they deem pertinent.

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### FIELD OF STUDY AND METHOD

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In this study, we are examining how those who seek information on Paris inform themselves while researching a certain experience – be it a hotel, a restaurant, a tour, a café, or other event. We are interested in knowing what sources of information travelers in a digital era use when planning their trips and if they seek out certain websites – like blogs or TripAdvisor – for specific information like a more off-the-beaten track experiences.

To explore such themes, in the first phase of our study we decided to look to the tourists themselves to understand how they use various online sources of information. We thus employed an online questionnaire followed by in-person interviews to understand better how these presumably post-tourists research their experiences.

Our sample consisted of English-speakers around the world, specifically those who consume information about Paris. We used the online questionnaire platform Survey Monkey to reach a larger audience of web users than a paper version would in a short amount of time. We proposed four parts in the questionnaire with the possibility of open-ended responses or graded responses depending on the question. The questionnaire was launched online and shared by several bloggers and Twitter users in Paris with English-speaking followings during early 2012. The goal was to reach a maximum of online users who read about Paris, whether they were planning a trip or not, to understand what role online content plays for them. By sharing the survey as much as possible, we obtained 264 useable responses. Respondents’ ages ranged from 19 to 79 years with responses from the US, Canada, France, England, the Philippines, Australia, and other European nations. All spoke English and read travel information about Paris with varying frequencies, and the vast majority read blogs even when not planning a trip to Paris.

The questionnaire began with general questions about preferences and trust in various categories of travel information. We then asked some more pointed questions about blogs to understand users’ practices. We then introduced the question of authenticity in travel information to see if this was a notion that the post-tourist pays particular attention to while planning. Finally, we asked for optional biographical and contact information in order to find subjects for the eventual interviews.

From the contact information provided, we were able to find ten subjects in Paris to discuss their travel practices. All were American, most in their mid-twenties with two over 50 years old, and all female except one male. Seven of the ten were currently living in Paris for an extended stay, meaning we had fewer short-term tourists in Paris. Though as expats in Paris, these subjects still traveled routinely and their responses varied little from the short-term tourists. This point will be re-assessed in future studies, but Jean-Didier Urbain suggests, “*An expat is just a traveler in an interrupted voyage : a person living abroad, a traveler outside of his travels*” (1991: 273). Even though an expats’ needs or expectations may differ from a first-time tourist, as many interviewees pointed out, all still use online media for their experiences. Further studies into first-time tourists, repeat tourists, and expats could reveal differing trends among what each group values. For the moment, this lack of diverse statuses is a limit of this study and an opportunity for continued research. The online questionnaire also prevents conversations with those who travel consulting only paper media and brick and mortar agencies, but for the moment we are only interested in web users.

We carried out the interviews in cafés in Paris, with about one hour of conversation per subject. We asked about general travel practices, how they inform themselves, the sources they depend on, and other practices. We then shifted the conversation towards blogs to find out why they read them if they do, and why they don’t in the few cases where subjects don’t seek out blogs. We then ask about impressions on local experiences, introducing the notion of authenticity, and asking about the role it plays in their travel planning, if any at all.

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### RESULTS

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#### **Bloggers Fill A Need**

How do users’ comments help define travel experiences and do online, nonprofessional contributors hold more clout than traditional journal-

ists? According to our study, comments and other UGC are vitally important to travelers who plan online, but they are far from the only source. In the open-ended response sections of our survey, when asked about sources of information that they trust, there was a large variety of websites, media outlets, and social networks (both physical and virtual) that users said they used. This plurality of sources helps demonstrate Urry and Larsen's definition of post-tourists. They describe how the tourist gaze is mediated through a constant stream of text, image, and video, making it "virtually impossible to visit a place which people have not travelled 'imaginatively' at some time" (2011: 116). The internet has accelerated such mediations, adding to travel publications, guides, novels, and TV shows already offered. Travelers are thus bombarded with various websites and other media, allowing a seemingly endless scope of information on a destination – at least one as mediated as Paris. As Singer suggests, the public is then left to authenticate and verify on their own, "for instance by flagging items that are inaccurate, offensive, or otherwise problematic" (Singer, 2008: 66).

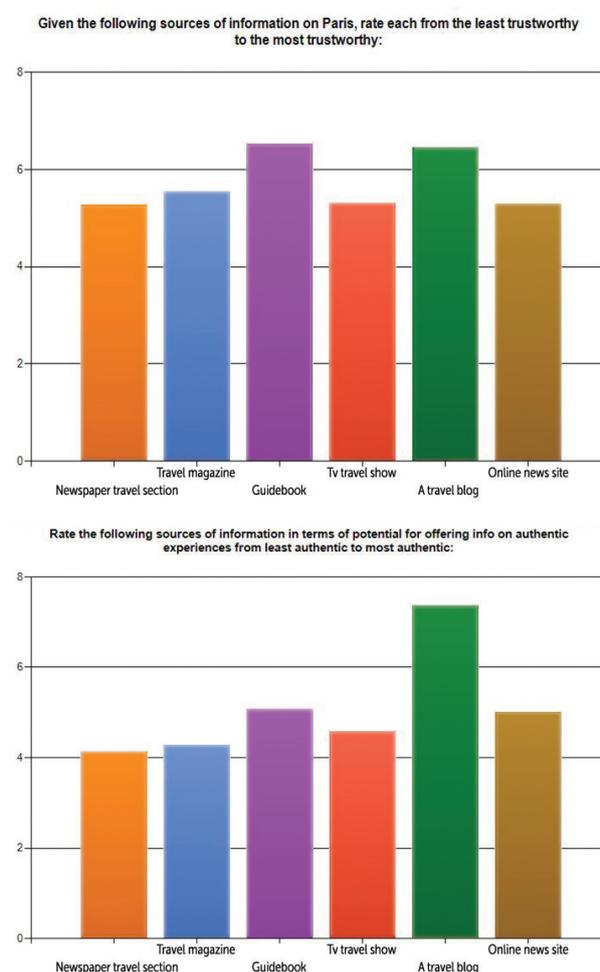
With travel information available in diverse forms, respondents were asked to rank some of the major categories, newspapers travel sections, magazines, guidebooks, travel TV shows, travel blogs, and online news sites, according to how much they trusted them. Each was ranked on a nine-point scale, with 0 being the least trustworthy and 8 being the most trustworthy. Overall, respondents deemed that each was more or less equally trustworthy on average for their research purposes before a trip. Interestingly, they make little distinction in the dependability of professional and nonprofessional sources for basic elements of their trips. Both travel blogs and travel guides were ranked the same, for example (see figure 1).

Some travelers said newer online sites, especially forums and wikis, were the go-to. One female, 59, said in an interview, "I go to WikiTravel. I recognize that there are huge abilities for that information to be incorrect but sometimes in WikiTravel they have just a sentence in there about something that you never would have expected to see."

Others, like one female, 25, let the search engines guide her. "I'll type it into Google and whatever it is I'll click on it," she said. Though she continued to say that she actively seeks multiple opinions before settling on a choice. "I don't like to base my judgment off one source. I can pick up a guide book, then I'll look at some website for forums, if there's a blog I'll click on that, too," she said. Throughout the interviews, such practices

dominated the discourse of the travelers who each have distinct processes but that follow the same general principal – look everywhere. Since most were social media users, having found the initial questionnaire via Twitter and Facebook, and attest to using online social networks for various stages of planning, the sample of interviewees demonstrates Hermida's findings that heavy social media users are more likely to access international news sites, news commentary sites, and independent blogs (2011: 820).

**Figure 1: Trustworthiness and Authenticity Rankings in Various Travel Information**



After introducing the question of authenticity using the same nine-point scale, however, respondents ranked travel blogs well above other traditional forms of media on average for their ability to offer information concerning more "authentic" experiences. Unfortunately, there is little consensus on what "authentic" means, and each traveler expressed his or her own definition. We asked the respondents to define what they mean by authentic, which yielded results ranging from "local" and "non-touristy" to "off the beaten path" and "unexpected."

Despite the lack of agreement, respondents were very aware of the possibility, and sometimes the expectation, to get “*off the beaten path*.” Some expressed reluctance to spend too much time researching such experiences. As one woman, 21, said, “*You have to just admit sometimes that you are a tourist.*”

The problem for many travelers is how to qualify an experience as “*authentic*”. As one woman, 26, said, “*I think also what makes it authentic – it depends on your perspective. If you’re new to Paris and you’ve never been here before, what’s authentic for them is bakeries, things that they smell, that they can see, being able to see landmarks that they’ve heard about their whole life but have never been able to see in person.*”

And a male, 25, described how he looks for both the touristy and the lesser-known experiences. “*I go to see the touristy things but at the same time I like to find something a little strange, something unknown, a park in the middle of nowhere, a rooftop terrace, covered passageways, parks, little cafés,*” he said. Such attitudes, present among most of the respondents, embody Urry and Larsen’s characteristics of the post-tourist.

This range of responses further emphasizes the lack of a unique definition of an authentic experience. Still, respondents in the questionnaire, and afterwards in the interviews, attest to the notion that blogs, as opposed to other institutional media, are more useful for finding that authentic experience when traveling to Paris. When asked where they generally look for such experiences, nearly 80% said they take word-of-mouth advice or suggestions from locals. With the personal nature of blogs and the interaction with their authors, these bloggers become online acquaintances of sorts, acting as an “*electronic word of mouth*” (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan, 2006). Several interviewees even speak about bloggers using their first names, as if they were old friends. As Singer proposes, online information leads to a system “*where authenticity or credibility becomes more a matter of the relationship that an individual establishes with his or her readers than with the institutional role of the media organization*” (Singer, 2008: 67). By interacting through social media and online comments, these on-the-ground reporters can easily become more attractive than more stagnant corporate media and travel guides.

Respondents cite several reasons for turning to bloggers. For instance, many like the narrative quality, allowing readers to follow along as part of the story. Others point to the humor and entertaining nature of the posts. Both are marketing

considerations that have historically been used to sell travel stories, relying on “*author’s celebrity or on the eccentricity of the trip*” (Youngs, 2013: 88). Bloggers have simply cut out the middle man of publishers or editors. More concretely, interviewees appreciate the fact that blogs have a faster publishing time than travel guides or magazine articles that can often be dated by the time they are printed (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). “*It is attractive because then you get the most up to date information. That’s why you want bloggers who live locally,*” said one woman, 31.

Urry and Larsen explain that on a basic level, photos help show “*that someone really was there,*” which may explain why so many interviewees mentioned the importance of quality photography on the blogs (Urry and Larsen, 2011: 179). On a deeper level, however, many respondents emphasized that the fact that a blogger lives in Paris plays a large role in helping them trust and follow the blogger. Simply being in Paris is not enough. They want to know that their information provider is a local and not just a vagrant traveler with superficial experiences. One such interviewee, a male, 25, said, “*The most important thing for me is to feel like I’m seeing the city and that I’ve done the city. Locals, expats, people who have lived there their whole lives who know the cities well,*” he said. A woman, 24, agrees, adding that she appreciates that bloggers show both the good and the bad, unlike mass media that often sells only the dream. “*By reading blogs of people who have done that and who live here, and who not only let you see the dream of it but also the reality of it,*” she said.

### Using online information

Are travelers looking for an online consensus while planning or instead for one trustworthy voice to follow? As discussed above, such a notion may be oversimplified, especially given the nature of information sought by the traveler. While the questionnaire clearly demonstrated a plurality of sources, the interviews shed light on how users rely on these sources. Some use guide books as starting points, while others go directly to blogs. Others said that they simply start with a Google search and let their results guide them. A similar study on TripAdvisor demonstrates differences in how travelers actually use comments on the site. For example, a majority of those who use TripAdvisor report using it at the beginning of their planning to get inspiration as well as in the middle to narrow down choices (Gretzel, 2007). Few said they use the site during or after their trip. This detail helps demonstrate how the site influences buying choices, playing a larger role before a pur-

chase than after. Blogs, though less focused solely on reviews and critiques, can play a similar role when bloggers do suggest an event or venue either in a post or on a social network. Their relationship with their readers helps create a loyalty and trust in the bloggers' recommendations. Such relationships could lead to positive or negative effects on local economies, as poor reviews could ruin a hotel's reputation if, for example, a well-read blog turned off his readers to the hotel because of a poor experience (Urry and Larsen, 2011: 60).

Increasingly, review sites like TripAdvisor are attracting audiences. Gretzel also reports that 95% of respondents attest to always reading user comments when travel planning. Nearly 78% of respondents in the study said that online reviews are extremely or very important in deciding where to stay. The impact on other choices like where to visit or what to see is less important, according to the author, but our interviews suggest that travelers are also interested in hearing the public's opinions on other decisions including choosing a restaurant and visiting standard sites in alternative ways (visiting the Eiffel Tower at night, for example). Our interviews revealed that UGC, especially blogs, are useful for researching all types of experiences, and not just hotels. Restaurants, at least in Paris, are just as important to the travelers interviewed.

Further study can help to shed light on when travel planners actually click on blogs, but our questionnaire revealed that 66% of respondents read 1-3 blogs about Paris, and 87% use them for planning purposes always or sometimes. Moreover, 93% report additionally reading blogs outside of travel planning, for pleasure (about 80%), curiosity (about 50%), and fantasy (about 25%). We can therefore deduce preliminarily that travelers don't consult blogs only before their trips, but again, further research would be needed to address such questions.

#### *Journalistic sources fall short, but persist*

Sometimes reviews or articles, both journalistic and nonprofessional, may have an adverse effect on consumers. One interviewee stated that a favorite Parisian restaurant became too popular once big-name blogs and the media wrote about it, while another referred to the negative effects of a prominent institutional travel writer on one of her favorite places in Paris. The interviewees overall expressed a disdain towards commercial travel guides and brand name media for their effect on certain experiences that they once deemed authentic. *"In the sense of an 'authentic' café, I'm not expecting to find it in a newspaper, but if I do, it's not going to stay authentic*

*for very long. It's going to get stamped,*" said one woman, 59.

Additionally, in terms of style and content, interviews revealed an aversion to "professional" travel information, preferring the personal feel of bloggers in tailoring their personal itineraries. Many aspects of the blog came up during the interviews, specifically the personal writing style, the possibility of dialoguing in comments and on social networks, and the often amateur-feel of the blogs which aren't as saturated with corporate advertising and sleek design like *The New York Times* or *Travel + Leisure* magazine. Again, this population of online travel planners reported depending largely on word of mouth recommendations, and the intimacy made possible by blogging helps attract readers to such content. Journalists, in maintaining an ideal of objectivity, do not always inject their voice into stories, though travel writing seems dependent on a certain amount of the author in the writing (Blanton, 1997).

Journalists, however, still occupy place in informing travelers. As one female, 51, said, *"The Louvre is still the Louvre,"* continuing to explain that certain experiences in Paris are not going to change much, but need continual updating. She argues that guides are still important for this perennial information, to keep cornerstones of the tourism circuit fresh and pertinent each year. In a way, institutional media works well to curate and maintain institutional tourism through guidebooks and updates on the iconic experiences and monuments that one will inevitably visit in Paris. But these topics and information are less present in blogs where authors opt for less touristy topics (Pirolli, 2012).

Further study, however, is needed to assess how journalistic content weighs on the decisions and planning practices of travelers. The question of curated information, for example, was not specifically addressed in this study. As Hermida shows, journalists who curate UGC on social media sites are trusted by about a third of social media users in his study, with divided results on opinions towards news organizations who use social media (Hermida et al., 2012: 821). Similar research on travel information could help clarify to what extent travelers value journalistically-produced material.

#### *Convergence*

Throughout the interviews, subjects evoked the fact that many of their favorite bloggers and publications have fused with professional and nonprofessional media. For example, despite their nonprofessional status, bloggers manage to adapt their styles and publish articles in journalistic outlets. This

prompted us to look at examples of both professional and nonprofessional sites discussed by our interviewees and at how they are increasingly working with each other. Here we can look at examples of convergence in the travel industry and at how non-professional voices are finding themselves alongside professional ones.

In one sense, professional media understand that, at least in the travel industry, they need to work with UGC somehow in order to remain relevant. The digitalization of the *Guide du Routard* in France and others like it opens up these brands to contributions from nonprofessionals by way of forums and reviews. For example, a popular travel guide in the US, *Fodor's*, printed since 1936, formed a partnership with TripAdvisor in 2011. The websites will reference each other, mixing the professional quality recommendations from *Fodor's* with TripAdvisor's largely anonymous user reviews. What's more, the printed guides even featured various online comments, bringing the online world into the print world. *Lonely Planet* and other travel guides also have their online forums, allowing users to provide their own information under the header of a trusted source.

Another example of convergence was the recent purchase and redesign of *Zagat* bought by Google. The *Zagat* guides, known for ranking and describing restaurants from user comments collected by editors, were a pre-web version of TripAdvisor, though an editor did comb through and decide how to present the information. Google purchased the brand in 2011, employing local writers and journalists to edit and package information pertaining to shops, restaurants, and other experiences. The reviews were still written from comments and feedback from customers, sourcing opinion material from the public. The information was also linked to Google Maps, giving travelers a new way to approach information that previously existed to those who paid for an online subscription or who bought the paper guide.

In the other direction, nonprofessionals are increasingly professionalizing. Bloggers have also segued into professional journalistic roles. One Parisian blogger, with an advertising background, hosted a popular blog that eventually landed her a travel piece in *The New York Times* and, eventually, a book deal. Another blogger, who works in social media, has had freelance articles appear in *Travel + Leisure* magazine as well in *The New York Times* online magazine. These nonprofessional journalists may or may not have notions of standard journalistic practices, but they still demonstrate a shift in travel publications that doesn't hesitate to source information from the public.

If bloggers are acting like journalists, are they adhering to principles of transparency and other ethics that Hanusch and Fursich point to in their definition? Are they disclosing everything? Greenman suggests that disclosure is essential especially for journalists who take subsidized travel experiences or press trips. "*Credibility with the readers is the most important reason*," he says, to make disclosure a common practice (2012: 143). On some sites, we know this is not the case, as shown by reports of abusive comments by competition on TripAdvisor or the removal of positive comments on Yelp for a company who cancelled an advertisement subscription with the site. And a whole business of fake review writing has sprung up, while real people who leave negative comments have been fined by establishments in both the US and UK in 2014. Arguably, UGC is plagued by the question of transparency faced by journalists, if only in different forms.

In a qualitative study of Paris-based blogs, few instances of disclosure were found across a sample of 95 blog posts, but how can readers be sure that a travel experience wasn't sponsored or paid for by a company (Pirolli, 2012)? At the same time, blogs are, as of recently, being held to a standard previously reserved for journalists. A French blogger in 2014 was found guilty of damaging a restaurant's reputation after a negative review written on her blog. The potentially chilling effect of the ruling could lead to a discussion about journalistic ethics in blogging and questions of defamation and libel as non-professionals gain more and more clout.

These are just some of the example of how institutional media and contributions from the public are converging, effectively catering directly to the post-tourist who is casting a wide net before a trip. A blog on the *Lonely Planet* website will add more time-sensitive, offbeat information, while the traditional guide continues to provide perennial information. Such changes on traditional media sites resonate with Hermida's findings on news consumers through social media. "*Social networking sites represent an evolution of the public sphere, where the dynamics of publication and distribution of news are being reshaped by networked publics*" (2012: 816). How and if such changes to travel journalism are effective remains to be seen, and further research will be needed to illustrate the motivations of those nonprofessionals contributing to the flux of travel information both online and offline.

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## CONCLUSION

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While institutional media still has a grasp on travel information, even attracting large amounts of followers on social media networks, these brands

are not the sole purveyors of information useful to tourists. Nor do readers want them to be. Our research shows that travelers seek consumer feedback in addition to professional recommendations, using both in different ways depending upon the traveler. While observing UGC like blog posts and review comments, our research suggests that such information is more pertinent to the off-the-beaten-track experiences that travelers are looking for, and not just the standard routine sites that many destinations offer.

But postcard experiences (the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Statue of Liberty in New York, and the Taj Mahal in Agra) are still fixtures in professional publications like guidebooks and other journalistic sources – even if the information is largely service-related. Travelers continue to consult traditional journalistic sources for evergreen information or touristy recommendations, like “must-sees” and major landmarks. Journalists are still able to provide honest information, adhering to principles of transparency and disclosure that nonprofessionals might not. Furthermore, beyond looking for authentic experiences once arrived at a destination, travelers need other standard information related to transportation, local customs, and other news-related stories that journalists are trained and ready to supply.

Still, travelers are relying on these comments and blog posts to help them decide where to book a room and where to eat, two necessary parts of a voyage, in addition to searching for other experiences. As our study demonstrated, travelers are increasingly looking to the multitude of user comments before making spending decisions, looking to both professional and nonprofessional publications with varying degrees of frequency.

Further study is needed to investigate the continued impact of UGC on travelers. How are mainstream travel publications integrating UGC practices on their websites or on other platforms like smartphone applications? How have social networks, like FourSquare and Twitter, responded to needs of travelers, especially with regard to experiential travel? Gretzel reported that very few travelers use consumer comments while actually traveling, but what can be said of social networks and even geosocial networking applications that allow more personal interaction between travelers and locals? This sort of hyper-local connection is creating an ever widening gap between the professional information provider and the destination in question. Increased focus on experiential travel by the tourism industry may further shift the role of “travel professional” from the hands of agents and journalists to nonprofessionals, offering travelers even more sources of information to sift through, verify, and evaluate for themselves.

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**En** With travel culture increasingly moving online, from bookings to sharing photos on social networks, information concerning tourist destinations is also shifting to the web and digital sources. Whereas travel guides, magazines, and newspaper travel sections were once the gatekeepers of the tourism industry, online forums, review sites, and blogs driven by audiences are quickly becoming equally important sources of information for tourists. Audiences are increasingly producing, selecting, and distributing travel advice and critiques that are viewed as trustworthy, but without the transparency demanded of journalists. But when it comes to finding information, where do today's tourists actually look and what do they trust? A sample of travelers interviewed in Paris helped explore how they search for information and what value they attribute to various categories, specifically blogs, in fulfilling their travel needs. Results reveal that travelers show a preference for audience-driven content like blogs and TripAdvisor when looking for "insider" or "authentic" information. They deem such sites more personal and akin to word of mouth advice sought by travelers. These same information sources, however, do not always adhere to journalistic standards of transparency or verification, putting into question their trustworthiness. While non-professional travel content gains more readers, professional media is not left behind. Travelers identified journalistic sources as valuable when it comes to more standard or perennial information that bloggers may not, or cannot, provide. Travelers also revealed they systematically search multiple sources – forums, articles, review sites, and blogs – before planning a trip. According to our interviews, this plurality of sources illustrates a lack of total confidence in any one particular source. What's more, bloggers and other non-professionals are integrating into professional publications, and such convergence further blurs the lines between the journalist and audience, especially as bloggers often lack the ethics and codes of professionals.

**Keywords:** online journalism, travel blogs, tourism, authenticity, convergence

**Fr** Avec la culture du voyage se diffusant de façon croissante en ligne, des réservations au partage de photos sur des réseaux sociaux, l'information concernant les destinations touristiques s'adapte aussi très largement à l'environnement numérique. Tandis que les guides de voyage et les rubriques voyages des magazines et journaux ont été longtemps les gatekeepers de l'industrie du tourisme, les forums en ligne, les sites de recommandation et les blogs amateurs deviennent actuellement des sources primordiales pour les touristes. Mais, quand il s'agit de rechercher de l'information, où cherchent les touristes contemporains et à quoi font-ils confiance? Dans cette étude, un échantillon de voyageurs interviewés à Paris nous aide à explorer les pratiques de recherche d'information en ligne et la valeur qu'ils attribuent aux diverses sources, principalement les blogs, pour répondre à leurs besoins d'information touristique. Les résultats montrent que les voyageurs préfèrent le contenu produit par le public comme les blogs et TripAdvisor pour obtenir des informations 'insolites' et 'authentiques'. Ils trouvent ces sites plus personnels proche du bouche à l'oreille. Ces mêmes sources d'information n'adhèrent pourtant pas toujours aux standards journalistiques de transparence et de vérification, mettant en question leur véracité. Alors que le contenu non-professionnel attire de plus en plus les lecteurs, les médias professionnels ne sont pas exclus non plus. Les voyageurs consultent des sources journalistiques quand ils ont besoin d'informations plus standard ou pérennes que les blogueurs ne peuvent offrir. Les voyageurs avouent aussi qu'ils cherchent systématiquement une pluralité de sources – forums, articles, sites de recommandation, et blogs – avant d'organiser leur voyage. Selon les entretiens menés, cette pluralité de sources illustre le manque de confiance dans l'une ou l'autre des sources consultées. De plus, les blogueurs et les autres acteurs non-professionnels s'intègrent au sein des publications professionnelles, et cette forme de convergence rend encore plus floues les frontières entre le journaliste et le public, d'autant que les blogueurs manquent souvent d'éthique et de codes professionnels.

**Mots clés :** journalisme en ligne, blogs de voyage, tourisme, authenticité, convergence

**Pt.** Com a cultura de viagem se difundindo de forma crescente na internet, das reservas à partilha de fotos nas redes sociais, a informações sobre os destinos turísticos também tem se adaptado amplamente ao ambiente digital. Da mesma forma que os guias de viagem e as editoriais de turismo das revistas e dos jornais foram, durante muito tempo, os *gatekeepers* da indústria do turismo, os fóruns online, os sites de viagem e os blogs amadores tornaram-se atualmente as fontes primordiais para os turistas. Mas, quando se trata de pesquisar uma informação, onde os turistas contemporâneos fazem a sua busca? E no que eles confiam? Neste estudo, uma amostra de viajantes foi entrevistada em Paris com o objetivo de nos ajudar a explorar as práticas de pesquisa da informação online e o valor atribuído por essas pessoas às diferentes fontes, sobretudo os blogs, na forma como elas respondem às suas necessidades por informação turística. Os resultados mostram que os viajantes preferem conteúdos produzidos pelo público, como os blogs e o site TripAdvisor, para obter informações “insólitas” e “autênticas”. Eles enxergam esses sites mais pessoais como algo mais próximo da informação boca a boca. Contudo, essas mesmas fontes de informação nem sempre aderem aos padrões jornalísticos de transparência e de verificação, o que acaba por questionar sua veracidade. Assim, mesmo que o conteúdo não profissional atraia cada vez mais leitores, a mídia profissional também não é excluída. Os viajantes consultam as fontes jornalísticas quando eles têm a necessidade de informações mais padronizadas ou perenes do que aqueles que os blogs podem oferecer. Os viajantes também revelaram que eles buscam sistematicamente por uma pluralidade de fontes – fóruns, artigos, sites de recomendação, e blogs – antes de organizar uma viagem. De acordo com as entrevistas, essa pluralidade de fontes ilustra a falta de confiança em ambas as fontes consultadas. Além disso, os blogueiros e outros autores não profissionais se integram ao ambiente das publicações profissionais e essa forma de convergência deixa ainda mais confusas as fronteiras entre o jornalista e o público, até porque frequentemente faltam aos blogueiros a ética e os códigos profissionais.

**Palavras-chave :** jornalismo online, blogs de viagem, turismo, autenticidade, convergência

