Tourism and Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

Data, data, data. Since the advent of mass utilization of personal computers and then the Internet, digitizing of social research has provided us with what previously would have been considered an unreachable quantity of data (Dellarocas, 2003; Lagus et al., 2004). However, the fact that this data is a valuable resource has only recently been recognized. Governments, businesses, and other organizations are just beginning to learn how to turn this data into actionable information and knowledge. Traditionally, manipulation of *numeric* data was the main purview of analysis, most often derived from sample surveys. Now, with digitization more esoteric analysis has become available in the form of data mining of free-text for comments, attitudes, or sentiment towards objects or concepts of interest to researchers. Free or unstructured text examined through the tools of data mining has been harnessed to produce valuable knowledge that businesses, governments, and researchers can benefit from (Hepburn, 2007; Carson, 2008). For example, analyzing the free text portions of medical records shows that this information can provide new insights into patient and medical staff opinions and reactions that can assist in decision-making in the field of medical tomography (Lee, Koh & Ong, 1989). In this article we will explore this application of data mining to the study of social media and show that valuable and powerful insights generated from these media are also available in the field of tourism and hospitality (Choi et al., 2007; Ellion, 2007; Gretzel et al., 2007).

The analysis of social media can provide the tourism industry with business analytic results in the short term (real-time), medium and longer term horizons (Laboy & Torchio, 2007; Jansen et al., 2009). In this, it is essentially the modern form of 'word of mouth', a long established and important method of finding out and influencing decisions in the tourism and hospitality industry (Dellarocas, 2003; Cooper & Eades, 2012). We investigate and describe the real-time potential, industry potential, and brand potential of the methodologies described (Mack et al., 2008; Claster et al., 2010). We also examine whether the tourism and hospitality industry can benefit from real-time monitoring of events through following social media and we investigate how the industry can make use of this knowledge advantage to allow individual businesses to outperform competitors (eMarketer, 2007; Pan et al., 2007; Pang & Lee, 2008; Akehurst, 2009). The utilization of this knowledge resource may lead to lower costs, better differentiation, more effective operational methods, and more powerful innovation in the industry (Werther & Ricci, 2004; Carson, 2005). In addition both comparative and differential advantages may be realized through the use of these methodologies. Current research indicates that social media analytics is a vital tool that must be used to innovate decision support in order to revolutionize the process landscape (Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Tajeddini et al., 2011). It is essential that real-time monitoring be incorporated in overall information strategies; businesses that fail to take advantage of this resource will fall behind and lose market share. In the same way, in addition to real-time

monitoring, governments and businesses must learn to take advantage of this resource for its industry development potential and its brand potential. Although our research focuses on the tourism and hospitality industry, we argue that the advantages are fungible and can be applied to many industries and organizations.

BACKGROUND

In this section we examine how the hospitality industry can monitor events in real-time and thereby marshal resources to respond in time to offset possible losses. As an example we use the dramatic political upheaval in Thailand in 2010, but less momentous events can also be monitored (Claster et al., 2010). In 2010 a prolonged series of political protests occurred in Bangkok, Thailand (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2010). Many people were killed in this relatively peaceful city when the *National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship* (UDD) called for the prime minister to dissolve parliament and stand down (Figure 1). The city shut down for more than 30 days as redshirt protestors,

police and the military engaged in intense fighting. Over 80 civilians and 6 soldiers were killed, and over 2,100 people were injured before the military crackdown in May of 2010 (Adrees & Damir, 2010). However, from the analysis of social media commentaries, as described below, it emerged that the tourism industry may not have been too negatively impacted by these events. This was confirmed afterwards by the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

Had the tourism and hospitality industry been able to monitor social media in real-time, they could have discovered immediately whether the havoc and mayhem in Bangkok would actually carry over to the nationally vital tourist destinations of Phuket and beyond, and from this would have been able to adjust resources, pricing, and management responses during the crisis rather than later. Using a social media dashboard (Green, 2013), management can monitor events worldwide for their business implications (Figure 2). A social media dashboard is a program or website that allows users to manage many of their profiles in one place. For instance, it is not necessary to login to Facebook, Twittter, Linkedin, Feedly, or similar sites

Figure 1. Image of violence in Bangkok in 2010. Photo courtesy of Authors.

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