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Fake News and Tourism – Whose Responsibility Is It?

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ABSTRACT: Fake news was Collins Dictionary's 2017 word of the year. The term was made extremely popular before and during the 2016 U.S elections where sensationalist news reporting, often unverified, were disseminated by political actors in their bid to secure support towards their campaigns. In brief, fake news refers to the reporting of articles that has been manipulated so that information is re-presented in a manner determined by a sender. For this reason, interest has been piqued to mitigate the effects of fake news given the ease of publicizing and disseminating user-generated contents digitally, especially so in the realm of social media. However, it has been conceded that fake news has hardly been addressed in tourism academic scholarship. This is somewhat surprising, given that online information search and dissemination is a core feature of a technologically mediated tourism industry, with recent instances of fake online reviews emerging. This project will explore the current scope of fake news in tourism, propose future areas of investigation, and discuss theoretical and practical implications for responsible tourism management.

KEYWORDS: responsible tourism; sensationalistic reporting; media framing; credibility; online information

Introduction

Fake news was Collins Dictionary's 2017 word of the year (Hunt, 2017). The term was made extremely popular before and during the 2016 U.S elections where sensationalist news reporting, often unverified, were disseminated by political actors in their bid to secure support towards their campaigns (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Ott, 2017). In brief, fake news refers to the reporting of articles that has been manipulated so that information is re-presented in a manner determined by a sender (Tandoc Jr, Lim & Ling, 2018). For this reason, interest has been piqued to mitigate the effects of fake news given the ease of publicizing and disseminating user-generated contents digitally, especially so in the realm of social media (Auberry, 2018).

However, Fedeli (2020) conceded that fake news has hardly been addressed in tourism academic scholarship. This is somewhat surprising, given that online information search and dissemination is a core feature of a technologically mediated tourism industry, with recent instances of fake online reviews as highlighted by Choi, Mattila, Van Hoof and Quadri-Felitti

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(2017). This project will explore the current scope of fake news in tourism, provide insights from a fake news tourism experiment, and discuss theoretical and practical implications for responsible tourism management.

Literature Review

Fake news has deleterious ramifications on tourism, with regional destinations losing anywhere from US$7,000-$140,000 in the space of a fortnight due to sensationalistic media reporting on a natural disaster (Holdsworth, 2017). Likewise, fake news in the form of fake reviews can also damage a hotel or restaurant's goodwill and brand to the unsuspecting guest (Sousa, Silva & Veloso, 2020). This is because at present there appears to be very little in place to prevent fake news from being publicized on social media. In addition, information can be disseminated anonymously and even in instances where the administrator kicks out a deviant user on the site, he or she can return under a new pseudonym.

Given the ubiquitous landscape of digital spaces in everyday lives, including tourism, fake news has therefore piqued academic and industry attention (Abdallah, 2021). Some studies have emerged to paint a more nuanced understanding of the fake news phenomenon, examining reasons for their creation and also from a consumption perspective (see for instance Larisa-Andreea, Andreea-Maria & Iasmina, 2020). From a production angle, fake news may be generated from jealous competitors seeking to gain an advantage over another business for a greater market share (Reyes-Menendez, Saura & Filipe, 2019). This may be done by the organization itself, or through incentivizing a third party to do so on their behalf. Some of these examples include Russia's troll army, or India's scam factory, though fake news can circulate from anywhere in the world (Shuster & Ifraimova, 2018; Yasir & Kumar, 2020). Likewise, content creators such as travel influencers may manipulate the beauty of a site and wax lyrical on their reviews due to the economic benefits they have gained from either a local destination, or other sponsors (Kucheran, 2019).

However, from a consumption perspective, there is a lack of consensus as to how end users of information process and authenticate information to discern real, from fake news (Groundwater, 2018; Marchant, 2021). While studies have suggested that digital users are aware of fake news in circulation, there remains a lack of policing around its dissemination, especially within tourism (Vidriales, 2020). In fact, fake news is also rampant during the course of the current COVID-19 pandemic, because health information and tourism policies occur in a fast-evolving landscape (Williams, Wassler & Ferdinand, 2022). As such, different scholars have postulated that end users with resort to a few heuristics to ascertain the 'truth' behind the information they received. For instance, source credibility in terms of whether the information is coming from an authoritative position, such as the World Tourism Organization, or perhaps the official destination management organization, may be one cue to verify the information (Berhanu & Raj, 2020). Then, fake news may be discerned when compared against one's past experience or loved ones where there is greater established trust. All the same, information load, and overload, on social media and other digital platforms, may often take a few days to check on a specific piece of information that has been circulated, though by that time, some damage may already be incurred, such as travel cancellations or postponements (Thiessen, 2020). Enhancements to technology, such as deepfake, make the detection of fake news even more elusive in tourism, and other contexts (Kwok & Koh, 2021).

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A Fake News Tourism Experiment

Guided by the extant literature (or lack thereof), a fake news tourism experiment was conducted as part of a conference session presentation. 20 participants to the presentation were each given a pen and paper to determine if ten media articles were real, or fake news. These then media articles were entirely selected in the English language, from tourism-related sources around the world. Each article was chosen to be as brief as possible so that assessment of whether the information is real, or fake could be determined within ten seconds of appearing on the projector screen. Five of these media articles were real, and the remaining five were fake. The real and fake media articles were placed in a random sequence, so participants would need to ascertain the cues of the information e.g. source, believability of the information etc. to determine if this was real, or fake news. Participant scores ranged from 1 to 6 out of 10 in terms of correctly picking out real news from fake news. Several participants commented that it was challenging and confusing to detect fake news from real information because each of these appeared somewhat authentic, except for those that they felt were likely exaggerating, or hardly possible. This fake news experiment validated the challenges of the tourism industry in seeking to mitigate fabricated information from circulating in the electronic world and raises key questions as to who should be responsible for such incidents.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research note seeks to paint a quick overview of fake news in tourism and highlights the challenges of managing such deviant behavior in a responsible tourism manner. While such instances of fake news are deceitful, and appear mostly innocuous, the humor or viral effect of such information cannot be ignored. From a responsible tourism perspective, each individual should be reflexive of his or her own behavior and determine if their information that is being disseminated is carrying authentic views of a destination, or a mechanism to generate more 'likes' on Facebook. Likewise, sites such as Facebook and Instagram are now expected to take up more responsibility to authenticate information and have the power to take down fake news if they contravene the ethos of free speech. From a supply-side perspective, destinations should also work closer with tourism operators to create algorithms to detect fake news and have the power to delete such comments if these are indeed falsified. Finally, tourism organizations also need to be educated and empowered to take action against fake news through available legal advice or support at a destination (Choi & Seo, 2021).

This research note is not without its limitations. As an exploratory investigation, the outcomes of the fake news tourism experiment may not be generalizable across different contexts, such as students or leisure travelers. Moreover, the experiment was conducted entirely in English, and using only static reports. Studies in other languages or employing video contents may reveal similar or different outcomes towards detection of fake news. These limitations notwithstanding, the research note has charted some avenues for future studies.

Future studies may wish to investigate fake news in other contexts, such as hospitality or events. Scholars can also employ intrusive technologies such as eye-tracking or neuroscience apparatus to evaluate users' cognitive or emotional responses to real or fake news, and how

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they draw a conclusion to the accuracy of the information. Overall, this research note calls for greater attention and focus to the way fake news is to be managed, and for different destination stakeholders to co-share the responsibility to ensure that news is verified and authentically distributed to their existing, and potential tourists.

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