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Ways of Seeing for Ourselves. The Role of Webcams in Tourism Research & Practice.

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TTRA 2021 Extended Abstract:

Title: Ways of Seeing for Ourselves. The Role of Webcams in Tourism Research & Practice.

Short Abstract:

Until recently, webcams and their implications for tourism research and practitioners have been overlooked in tourism. However, recent publications (Jarratt, 2020a, 2020b) started to theorize webcams as windows into distant worlds whose unedited gaze requires no further interpretation. Referring to the concept of transparency (Flyverbom, 2019; Flyverbom, Christensen, & Hansen, 2015; van Woerkum & Aarts, 2009) and canons of use (Ledin & Machin, 2019), this research offers an alternative concept of webcams as a prism with historical, material, and social roots in surveillance and transparency narratives. Acknowledging webcams as artifacts formed by historical, social, and material context offers opportunities and uncovers hurdles for researchers and practitioners. First, researchers must consider the circumstances of production when critically assessing webcams and their content. Second, practitioners can leverage (and maintain) the narratives of truthfulness and facticity for building trust and authenticity if they are aware of the fragile, constructed nature of the webcam images.

Introduction

In two recent articles, Jarratt (2020a, 2020b) discussed the (un)popularity and importance of webcams in tourism research. Indeed, webcams and webcam travel have long been a neglected field and data source in tourism research, with a few notable exceptions. Timothy and Groves (2001) recognized webcam images as a potentially rich data source for tourism researchers, and Koskela (2006) emphasized the importance of appealing *imagescapes* in city tourism. In a digitized society with a heavy emphasis on the visual in every part of our (travel) life, it is astonishing that the webcam has not found its place in the academic debate about tourism.

The recent works by Jarratt (2020a, 2020b) are a needed first step in this direction. He conceptualizes the webcam as simple technology (compared to VR applications) that supplies real-time and easy access to distant places (Jarratt, 2020b). As he illustrates with his concept of webcam travel (Jarratt, 2020a), these windows into other tourism realities uphold the connection between destinations and travelers, despite physical distance and travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. By looking at the webcam, the (potential) guests experience feelings of wonder, delight, freedom, and nostalgia. Jarratt (2020a) concludes that through their "unfiltered and unedited live view," the webcams create this sense of connection and "offer a window onto part of the 'real' world" (p.11). Drawing on his empirical research in webcam travel, he positions the webcam as a "reflection of the material world" with no requirement for further interpretation to understand (2020a).

Although his research provides valuable insights about webcams (especially from a traveler's point of view), the window metaphor's underlying narratives, reality and truthfulness, neglect the webcam's historical and social context: surveillance and transparency. Challenging the assumption of webcams as windows that enable an unedited view of the real world, this conceptual work introduces the notion of a prism (Flyverbom, 2019) and critical research about transparency to the

recent debate about the role of webcams and the visual in tourism research. With this discussion, the researcher contributes to the crucial understanding of webcams as powerful tools for the (re-)production and purposeful construction of transparency and discusses the implications for tourism practitioners and employees see their destinations and organization with and through webcams.

Problem Statement

Tourism as a mediated experience has been discussed widely in recent years. With concepts like the tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011), mediascapes and representation (Jansson, 2002), or virtual reality (Guttentag, 2010), the prevalence of the visual is central to a contemporary understanding of travel experiences. All these approaches see virtual travel as an instrument to foster the desire for 'real-life' travel. Especially research with a focus on marketing and branding (for an overview, see Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril, and Gázquez-Abad (2020)) has also discussed the underlying mechanisms in the (de-)construction of destination image with certain narratives through carefully crafted strategies. However, webcams and their produced imagery have long escaped such discussions. Following the notable exceptions provided in the introduction, the webcam is a vital part of various destinations' tourism marketing. Webcams show beaches, ski areas, attractions, city centers, architecture, cruise ships, and much more. Through their seemingly simple functionality and straightforward imagery (compared to advanced VR applications or elaborate visual marketing campaigns), webcams become windows into tourism worlds - for travelers and academics (Jarratt, 2020b; Timothy & Groves, 2001). However, this unedited and true reflection only holds at first glance. By considering their historical and social context (in this paper conceptualized as their canons of use as suggested by Ledin & Machin, 2019;) and their entanglement in narratives of truth and transparency, this research argues to step back from the metaphor of unedited "windows" and conceptualize webcams as a prism (Flyverbom, 2019) into tourism worlds.

Conceptualizing the Webcam as Prism – an Attempt

Critically questioning the unedited nature of webcams, we step into the field of transparency (Flyverbom, 2019) and semiotics (Ledin & Machin, 2019). The visual mode of communication itself is often mentioned as particularly suitable to produce authentic, trustworthy, and easy-to-grasp content. As Van Woerkum and Aarst (2009) elaborate, its sensual immediacy requires no other sign system and little effort to decode. However, when McLuhan (1967) proposed that it is not the content itself that is important but the medium that transmits it, he acknowledged the importance and significance of the mode of transmission to understand reality. What does this imply for researchers (and practitioners) and their practices of seeing through a webcam?

Starting with detailed elaboration on glass metaphors for various tools and practices of seeing and watching, Flyverbom (2019, p. 17) challenges "the metaphorical understanding of transparency as windows being opened on reality." A normative concept of transparency suggests that the more we see and the more we can look at things, the more information we get, which leads to the optimization of decisions on an individual, organizational, or societal level. In this sense, transparency "takes the form of information" (Flyverbom et al., 2015, p. 390) and "makes reality shine through" (Hansen & Weiskopf, 2021, p. 111).

By being transparent, organizations strive to be more trustworthy, accountable, and less corrupt by opening their gates to verify what is really going on behind closed doors (Albu & Flyverbom, 2019;

Heimstädt & Dobusch, 2020; Ringel, 2018). However, by disclosing some things, others stay in the dark. Transparency becomes performative of the organization, creating and shaping the same thing they aimed to merely represent (Albu & Flyverbom, 2019; Hansen & Flyverbom, 2015).

Windows of any kind (webcams, statistics, glimpses "behind the scenes" of organizations) create such seemingly transparent observations and are believed to be neutral channels of linear transmission which deliver information from a pre-existing reality to a receiver (Albu & Flyverbom, 2016; Flyverbom, 2019). However, as outlined in the continuing paragraphs, the webcam (as all mediated images) is not a neutral channel of transmission but a medium capable of creating and influencing reality (Van Woerkam & Aarst, 2009).

To fully understand the meaning of the webcam and its content, we must consider its historical tradition and social context, its canon of use. As Ledin and Machin (2019) point out, this canon of use "accounts for a different level of instances of communication than the actual semiotic resources" (p.501). In line with McLuhan's (1967) claim, they underline the importance of the outer form and the material context when interpreting a message. The webcam is not an isolated material artifact but has emerged from a long history in military and surveillance (Arunima, 2020; Grayson & Mawdsley, 2019; Koskela, 2004). This historical context (in close connection to the visual as the primary mode of communication) shapes how we see things through webcams: accurate, authentic, and objective (Arunima, 2020; LeBaron, Jarzabkowski, Pratt, & Fetzer, 2018). However, we must keep in mind that this truth and facticity are produced through many choices: camera position, camera angle, interface design, time, and duration of the operation. As Flyverbom (2019, p. 69) emphasizes that "what we see in a recording is not reality or truth, but a selective slice taken from one vantage point."

Webcams can look the other way if things' get ugly'. For example, the re-opening of ski areas in Austria during the third Covid-19 lockdown in Winter 20/21 lead to massive outrage about crowds and queuing on slopes. So, some ski areas decided to reposition the camera and turn a "blind eye" to reality (see Werdenigg, 2020 for an example). Such incidences are extreme examples of interventions. When crafting webcam images, many other choices are more subtle: changing the camera angle, turning cameras off in the low-season, or not installing cameras in "less attractive" areas of destinations altogether. When we look at things through cameras of any kind, Koskela (2004, p. 210) concludes that "there will always be dead angles – both in space and time." In this sense, every webcam in a tourism destination represents an assemblage of strategic decisions, historical context, and visual (and other modes of) content. Thus, the metaphor of the unedited and unmediated window (Jarratt, 2020b) cannot uphold for webcams. Instead, webcams resemble "prisms that create extensive and manifold reconfigurations" (p.17), which "produce surprising and selective visibilities" (p.145), as Flyverbom (2019) suggests.

Conclusion and Discussion

Where do we go from here as tourism scholars and practitioners? As scholars, we have to be sensitive when using webcam data for our empirical analysis. That does not mean we should abandon the idea at all. Webcam data does open new possibilities to (re-)discover destinations and places for researchers and tourists alike. However, we must keep in mind the context and historical implications of the content. Webcams are not just windows that need no further interpretation or reflexivity but come into being through a bundle of strategic decisions, modes of communication, and cultural implications. Thus, their content (and its impact) can only be understood by

considering these canons of use. By taking communication, mediation, and the socio-material aspects of webcams as a starting point (Flyverbom, 2016), we can start to take a fresh look at windows and understand how they come to matter as formative parts in creating realities and organizations, how they become prisms. Empirical studies considering the multimodality of messages from a critical standpoint can offer a valuable starting point to tackle this endeavor from a methodological perspective (see, e.g., Höllerer, Jancsary, and Grafström (2018) or Lefsrud, Graves, and Phillips (2019) for frameworks on how to approach critical multimodal discourse analysis). Taking the critical discussion of transparency itself as a starting point, Hansen and Weiskopf (2021) analyze the Chinese Social Credit System along four transparency matrices to reveal the practices, tools, and objectives linked to different modes of transparency and looking at our world. To see how the tools (in our case, the webcam) and intertwined notions and histories unfold, Heimstädt and Dobusch (2020) suggest that we have to follow these entanglements to where they become performative, preferably to sites of ethical contestation, where people struggle to grasp what reality and transparency really are. Thinking of webcams, this can be a situation where employees or tourists deal with failed transmission (e.g., webcam videos freeze or are grainy), purposefully altered situations (e.g., webcams are turned off or look away). These slight changes can help us see the prism-like character of webcams and look beyond the seemingly unedited windows.

For tourism practitioners, this opens a new avenue (but also a couple of things to keep in mind) when working with webcams. The illusion of truthfulness or unmediated reality can only take a certain amount of repositioning and intervention. However, if used correctly, webcams have the power to create a desire to travel across space (and with archival functions even across time) even in times of crisis and restricted travel possibilities and increase the trust towards tourism organizations and destinations. This more "realistic" form of destination marketing can create more realistic travel expectations and, ultimately, increase tourists' motivation to travel despite sometimes featuring undesirable content (Scholl-Grisseemann, Peters, & Teichmann, 2020). If we conceptualize webcams as prisms (and not as windows), it can help us understand and be aware of these tools from a holistic perspective and open our gaze to a new way of seeing.

Resonating with the overall theme "Uncharted Territory: Reimagining Tourism in a New Era", this conceptual paper establishes a new look at tourism places and at tourism communication in a digital era. This work wants to extend critical perspectives on contemporary tourism phenomena (like webcam travel). We can explore "uncharted territories" from our homes' comfort: distant places, wildlife, architecture, and remote landscapes. Thus, these tools help us to connect tourists and destinations. However, the tools can also be "uncharted territory" and confront researchers and practitioners with new challenges and new ways of looking at and understanding tourism realities.

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