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A VIRTUAL ISLAND?

Tourism and the Internet in a Shetland Island Community

Abstract

The use of the Internet for tourism is a widely recognised phenomenon, calling forth the attention of the academic community. The Internet has made it easier for tourists to find information about travel and locations, as well as for the tourist sector to take control of promoting services directly to consumers. The paper presents and analyses empirical data of verbal descriptions and the imagery used on tourist websites on a Shetland Island. The paper explores in particular the representations of the island community in tourist websites. Even though the websites use the familiar descriptions and iconography of rurality for tourists, such as beautiful scenery, it is remarkable that the websites lack certain aspects of the usual way of representing Shetland, such as community life. These representations will be analysed in relation to the practices of tourism and the everyday life in the community.

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular uses of the Internet is searching for information related to travel (National Statistics 2006). The Internet offers tourism business providers new ways to market their services for potential tourists, and indeed also small scale tourism business providers are encouraged to get online (UNWTO 2001:127-128). This paper provides an empirical case study that analyses websites promoting tourist services within a Shetland Islands community. The main focus is the way the community is represented on the websites. The visual and textual representations for tourists need to be tempting, in order to entice tourists to that location. While dealing with the Shetland case, the paper utilises two articles discussing tourism representations and relations between locals and tourists. Ken Teague (1997) analysed the representations of Nepal in tourist brochures, anthropological literature and museums. He noticed that representations of any culture are necessarily selective, involving the appropriation, analysis and representation of that culture. He also pointed that this runs the risk of creating cultural stereotypes (ibid. 1997:173). The advertised

tourist attractions in Shetland are scenery and wildlife; history, traditional way of life and sense of a vibrant community. Roel Puijk (1996) conducted research in a Norwegian fishing village in the Lofoten Islands. He compared how the non-local fishermen, and the tourists, fit in the local population. Similarly as in Shetland, the main attractions for tourists in this village included traditional village life and the scenery.

This paper analyses the representations of a Shetland Islands community in tourist websites of the island that have been created by islanders to promote their tourist services. The ways the community is presented on these websites is compared to the encounters with tourists once they actually arrive to the island. Analysing these different parts of tourist experience shows that certain aspects of the generally advertised Shetland attractions, like traditions and community life, are left aside on the websites. After dealing with practical reasons for this, the paper also claims that this is partly due to the freedom the Internet can provide to rural tourism business providers. With the aid of the Internet they can decide themselves how their community is marketed, rather than depend on external sources which might portray stereotypical representations of the location. The empirical data which this paper draws on was gathered during 2 weeks of fieldwork in summer 2004 and 3 months in spring 2005. The research techniques utilised included participant observation, semi-structured interviews and a household survey among the households on the island.

2 SHETLAND LIFE AND TOURISM

The Shetland Islands are the most northern part of Scotland. Located between the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea, Shetland consists of over a hundred islands of which 15 are populated. The population is roughly 22,000, the majority of which live in the capital Lerwick (Shetland Islands Council 2004). Shetland was a part of Norway until 1469 and there still lingers cultural and linguistic traces of Norwegian in the Shetland daily life (Cohen 1987:5). Tourism is the fourth most important sector of economy in Shetland, after fishing, oil industry and agriculture. There are over 1,600 tourism bed spaces in Shetland; and the tourism industry employs 372 people (Shetland Islands Council 2004). The characteristics of people travelling to Shetland are diverse, including independent travellers, package holiday travellers, people on cruise ships and yachts. The majority of the visitors in 2000 were from Scotland (44%) and from elsewhere in Britain (36%) (Shetland Islands Council 2004). The motivations to travel to Shetland are various, including meeting friends and family; enjoying the scenery and wildlife, especially birds; exploring the history and seeing the traditional crafts.

The sea is never far away on the islands; the steep cliffs, strong winds and foggy weather are constant reminders of this. Shetlandic scenery is unique as there are practically no trees on the islands leaving the hills and the croft houses open to view even from a distance. Part of the scenery is wildlife; the islands are a haven for migrating birds and seals and even whales can be seen by the shores. The scenery is filled with small townships with stone build croft houses, stone walls surrounding the fields were sheep graze and other signs of agriculture. In contemporary Shetland the crofting tradition continues. Parman (1990:1) describes a *croft* as a "small unit of agricultural land", which includes a small garden patch and a share of the common grazing land. The main livestock is sheep; there are over 360,000 sheep in Shetland (Shetland Islands Council 2004). Crofting forms the basis of livelihood, but it has never been intended to be the only source of income. Traditionally crofting has been supplemented by fishing (Nicolson 1983:17). In contemporary Shetland fishing is still important but so are other means including tourism and IT. Crofting is often described as a traditional way of life rather than just a particular mode of agriculture. This includes a tight community life. Cohen (1987:34) in his research on another Shetland island notes that this kind of close social life requires commitment to peaceful co-existence among community members. This has also been noted by various visitors to Shetland throughout times, for example a visitor to Fair Isle in 1769 describes the population to be "very hospitable to strangers and live in the utmost peace and harmony with each other" (cit. Thom 1989:91). The view of crofting communities as traditional and peaceful has also been criticised as too simplistic (Macdonald 1997:102). Nonetheless, it is one of the central attraction for tourists wanting to see traditional crafts and active community life. Part of the attraction might be the opposition to the tourist's everyday life. Getting away from one's everyday surroundings is understood to be one of the main motivations for tourism (Urry 2002:3; Boissevain 1996:3).

This paper will focus on one of smallest and most remote of the Shetland Islands, Fair Isle. The population of Fair Isle is about 70. In the island there are basic amenities, such as a shop, a primary school and a Post Office. The island is located about 40 kilometres from other islands and is accessible from mainland Shetland by ferry and plane on certain days a week. The plane is run from mainland Shetland, while the ferry, the *Good Shepherd IV*, is run by Shetland Island's Council with a crew from the island. Both modes of transportation are intensely weather-dependent, especially to high winds and fog. Travelling to the island can be an experience – portrayed in one of the tourist souvenirs, a t-shirt stating: "I survived the Good Shepherd!" The majority of the tourists come by the small plane rather than the, at times, rocky boat. For the tourists who get to Fair Isle there are

three houses offering bed-and-breakfast accommodation, a self-catering cottage, and a Bird Observatory which doubles as a hostel for the summer season. For the majority of these people tourism forms only one part of their overall livelihood, fitting in to the aforementioned Shetland tradition of gaining income from multiple sources. One reason for this is the change of seasons, which affects the daily life, and tourist practices. The summer time is the busy season, both with tourists as well as with croft work, the winter time calmer – and practically with no tourist presence.[1]

3 REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ISLAND ONLINE

In addition to being presented to tourists in the Shetland Islands tourist brochures, Fair Isle has an own Island Website, which is created by a computer enthusiastic islander. The website introduces different aspects of the island life and depicts photographs taken by the creator of the website. The website provides a thorough picture of the community, introducing the agriculture, local windmill scheme, communal events and so on. The website also has a section on travel, which gives practical information on how to get to this remote location as well as contact details to the people offering tourist services. In addition to the Island Website, three of the accommodation services on the island have their own websites. These websites introduce the tourist accommodation service provided telling about the rooms and other services available, give contact information and so on. In addition to this, each of the service providers has other interests which also have presence on these websites. These include ornithology, art, and hand dyed spinning fibres, respectively. This section will analyse these three tourist accommodation service websites, focusing especially on the photographs and the verbal descriptions of the location.

The breakdown of the images (see Table 1) shows that the majority of the photographs portray the scenery, which is one of the main attractions of Shetland. There are only a few scenery photographs that do not include the sea. The second most popular topic for the photographs is, quite understandably, images of the services provided. These include pictures of the building where the accommodation service is organised and images of the indoor facilities such as bedrooms and communal spaces. Also common are photographs of people, namely staff or their family members. In addition to this in a large number of these images people were only a feature with the scenery or the accommodation services. Wildlife, another Shetland attraction, is shown in 5 images. These

[1] Puijk (1996) presents a very similar situation in the Norwegian fishing village. He mentions also of plans to bring in tourists in wintertime too – development of which not all locals are inspired.

include pictures of birds, seals and of flowers. There is only one picture in relation to agriculture, showing sheep – by the sea.

Photographs on the tourist websites	
Scenery	18
Images of the services provided	13
People	13
Wildlife	5
Livestock	1

Table 1. Breakdown of the images on the tourist websites [2]

The verbal descriptions on the websites include the history of the house where the accommodation is provided, describing it to have "three feet thick stone walls" which "have stood for centuries". Also the weather conditions are described, both in some of the pictures of the scenery, as well as verbally, talking of "the worst weather the North Sea, Atlantic and Artic have to offer". This description also illustrates the remote location of the island, in between the seas. Part of the remote location is the calm pace of life, described as the "tranquillity of Fair Isle". Also the activities provided are described, for example the option on "spending hours on end spinning". These descriptions not only characterise the services provided but also build a picture of their authenticity with references to history, the special weather conditions and traditional crafts. But even though the websites use these "authenticity claims" (Puijk 1996:214), it is notable that certain aspects are left out. There are no pictures presenting community life, and traditional crafts and agriculture are also rarely depicted, even though these are seen as part of the attraction of Shetland. And, as the following section shows, the tourists coming to the island encounter these parts of Shetland life. This intriguing distinction between the touristic representations and the tourist experience will be dealt with in more detail in section 5.

4 ENCOUNTERS WITH TOURISTS

During the summer season several cruise ships stop on Fair Isle for a day. There is a programme organised for the tourists by several islanders. This programme typically includes visits to the museum and the chapel, guided bird tours and visits to the village hall. In the hall there are several

[2] In addition to these images the websites had sections of their specialist area, including numerous pictures of their respective interest; bird sightings, fibre for sale and art.

stalls where people sell their produce; for example the local knitwear, books and magazines, tea and local bakes, jewellery, post cards and CDs. For some cruise ship visits there is also evening programme in the form of a Scottish dance. Local musicians play in these events, which are participated by locals as well as the tourists. The evening programme allows less formal mingling between the locals and the tourists, but the relations seldom continue further than these encounters. Likewise Puijk (1996:217) describes relations between the Norwegian villagers and the fishermen in dances. These events allow the fishermen and locals to get to know each other, but the relations rarely exceed beyond these public spheres.

All these events are part of the everyday life of the islanders, but only one part of it. The islanders are as 'modern' as the tourists coming to visit them, they have Internet access,[3] digital television and they go on holidays as well – resembling again the way Puijk (1997:205) describes the situation in the Norwegian fishing village. But this is not part of the picture the tourists are interested in. The purpose of tourism is to get distance from everyday life, to see something exotic, something out of the ordinary. This leads easily into some parts of the everyday life to be disowned by tourism, namely the realities of everyday life that remind tourists of their working life; or of aspects that do not fit into the simplistic image of tourist location.

An example of the matters left out of the tourist representations in Shetland is the reuse of old materials. This has developed out of the practicality of living on a remote island community where all resources have to be transported to the island. This is part of the island's history. The island is surrounded by rocks and dangerous waters and there have been numerous shipwrecks on the island shores. While the islanders did their best to rescue the people on these ships, they also utilised the goods and timber salvaged of the wrecks (see Thom 1989: 21). The practice of re-using materials is a part of contemporary life in Shetland as well as other remote communities (see Macdonald 1997:116 for an example on the Western Isles of Scotland). Also on Fair Isle there are houses that have stashes of material waiting to be re-used, by themselves or their neighbours needing those materials. But these parts of the everyday life are out of sight for the tourists, belonging to the private sphere of life of the islanders. While these might not fit the image the tourists have of the remote island community, it also is in the locals' interests to keep some areas of their life guarded from the tourists' gaze, an issue that has been mentioned as a problem in many tourist destinations (e.g. Macdonald 1997:101; Puijk 1996:218).

[3] Actually on this island 77% of the households have Internet access – where as the national average in United Kingdom was at the same time 57% (National Statistics 2006).

These examples describe how in the encounters between the tourists and the islanders the different aspects of the image of Shetland are present. The tourists admire the scenery and observe birds and other wildlife; they see the history and traditions in the museum as well having a chance to participate and to observe crafts. The community life and friendliness of locals is experienced through different encounters, in the hall as well as evening programme. But, as the example on reusing materials show, there are also aspects of everyday life that are not seen or taken a notice by the tourists.

5 DISCUSSION

The two previous sections dealt separately with the ways the island community is presented online for tourists and the encounters between the islanders and tourists. When analysing these together, an interesting difference is portrayed. As indicated in the section 3 which analysed the websites, these do not portray community life or crofting and barely mention traditional crafts. All of these are part of the image of Shetland as a tourist destination, and all of these aspects of Shetland life are seen and met by the tourists when they come to the island. There are practical reasons for this; the websites are aimed to sell the service and the images and textual descriptions on the websites focus on these. Nonetheless, part of the tourist product is not only the service within the house providing the accommodation service; the location has to be interesting for the tourists to come and buy the service. Another possible explanation lies with the existence of the Island Website described section 3. This is a website that provides the main source of information of Fair Isle online and also includes many images and representations of the community life, traditions, and agriculture. The existence of such a website means the websites promoting tourist services do not need to portray the community life again. However, this section will explore another aspect on why the tourist websites do not portray community life.

Teague (1997) analysed the images of tourist brochures of Nepal. The majority of the images were of religious scenes and environments. The images included also religious activities and portraits of people. Similarly Shetland tourist brochures typically include some aspects of community life; such as a portrait of a child, image of a woman knitting or of a night with local musicians playing. This can be seen as a part of the commoditisation of local cultures for purposes of tourism. For the purposes of tourism the images of a location and a community the images need to be tempting so the tourists want to visit the location. This can lead to the use of stereotypical images of what

tourists are expected to want to see. This can result in the commoditisation of local cultures by national and regional tourist authorities, who may or may not consult the inhabitants of the way they and their community are represented (see Greenwood 1989:180). For example Puijk describes how in the fishing village an old fishing boat has been placed on the rocks outside the village to welcome tourists. One day members of a large Norwegian company were doing a trip to the village and the company flag was erected on the boat – an action that insulted many of the villagers (ibid. 204). The tourist business providers saw the boat as a symbol of tourism and the village as the location for tourism, whereas for the locals the village is a home, and the boat was seen as a symbol of it.

The case dealt with in this paper shows how the situation can differ when the marketing is conducted online, through websites created by people living in the tourist destination. Using the Internet gives the tourist business providers a greater independence on deciding how their community is represented. Especially for small businesses, with small marketing budgets the Internet is a useful tool enabling them to provide information about their services to a wide audience (see also Mukerji & Simon 1998). And for such a remote community the Internet is an excellent tool also as a communication medium enabling communication between the business providers and customers. Previously in this community the enquiries of potential tourists came mainly by post, which in the winter time was at times delayed even for some weeks due to bad weather.

As the online representations only portray part of the island reality, similarly in the tourist encounters also only a part of this is experienced. Section 4 described tourist encounters on the island showing that not all parts of everyday life go under the tourist gaze. This ambivalent relation between the representations of the community for tourists and the reality of life as it is experienced by locals was also noticed by an islander who regularly meets the cruise ship passengers in the hall. She describes how the tourists see them:

> ".... the visitors that come to the hall, probably think that we spend all day in the hall everyday [laughs], selling postcards ...and drinking tea, and smiling [laughs loudly]. Oh dear." (female, 40+)

Similarly Macdonald (1997) gives examples on jokes the locals tell of the simple tourists who do not seem to understand that "it is possible to be a crofter *and* educated" (ibid. 111). These kinds of

examples show how locals, the hosts of tourism, know and are able to play with the stereotypical images of them posed sometimes by tourism.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

This paper analysed the images and verbal descriptions on websites promoting tourist services on a Shetland Island. As is common on Shetland tourism promotion, the scenery was a central feature on the images. But contrary to stereotypical views of Shetland for tourists, the websites did not portray images of community life and very few on the traditional way of life and agriculture. The paper presented that using the Internet for tourism promotion can give tourism business providers in rural communities greater freedom not to present their community in conventional ways; instead working against the commoditisation of their local culture for purposes of tourism.

The paper also described encounters between the islanders and tourists, showing that the aspects missing from the online representations were present on the island, and accessible to the tourists there. Moreover, the paper showed that also in these encounters the islanders managed to keep their distance from the tourists, to protect certain parts of their everyday life. Interestingly, this also partly leads into stereotypical relations between the islanders and the tourists – the cruise ship tourists described in the paper see a picture of a traditional, tight community. But this situation is created on the islanders' own terms, and for them this kind of relation can be seen to provide a safety mechanism, ensuring certain areas of their everyday life are kept private. The islanders are able to keep their distance from the touristic image of themselves, as an interviewee described laughing ironically to the image the tourists must have of them.

These preliminary findings will form the basis for the continuation of the research that will include further data gathering in a select number of locations across rural Britain, and analysis of this data by the aid of the theory of social construction. The research will also include an analysis of a larger number of websites, to gain better understanding on how locations are represented on Internet sites. The research will include interviews of the tourist service promoters to gain understanding on their reasons on why they have chosen to present their community the way they do. Are the presentations well thought of, or have the websites been created without much consideration? The research will also incorporate the tourist's point of view, namely on how their expectations of the location through the websites was met in the experiences they gained once in the location.

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