Doing 'Voluntourism' well: technology and community-centred volunteer-tourism in the global south

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Introduction

Volunteer Tourism (or voluntourism) is the combination of leisure travel and voluntary work [28]. Sometimes, it is portrayed as a win-win situation: the person gets to travel and gain new experiences while also 'saving the world'. This 'saving the world' component includes projects in conservation, scientific research, medical assistance, economic and social development (including agriculture, construction and education), and cultural restoration [36].

Most voluntourism projects tend to be short-term, with a majority of them lasting less than four weeks [34]. Wearing et al. note that despite the growing popularity of this endeavour, '*systematic academic research in this area is still limited*' and '*much of it targets the demand side... it is only recently that the host communities are starting to be the primary subject of research on any scale*' [1,17,29,32,34,37].

Those who take part in voluntouring are seen as exhibiting prosocial behaviour, using their leisure and travel time to help others, who are less privileged. However, others have highlighted the naiveté of this portrayal, especially in the popular media. It has been seen as tokenistic social action combined with exotic experiences or to put it another way, "see a tiger, build a loo". This perspective sees undertones of neo-

colonialism and exploitative and harmful practices in the multi-billion dollar voluntourism industry.

In this research, I will be investigating the role of digital technologies in designing for ethical, sustainable and community-driven voluntourism. In the literature around voluntourism, very little work has been done around the role of technology. Secondly, there has been a lot of talk about how voluntourism fits in with community-based tourism and sustainable tourism, however little research has been done on the design and development of infrastructures for voluntourism in these contexts. So I will be looking at the design and development of technologies to support this.

Thirdly, I will be investigating how voluntourism aligns with its purpose of international development, through the lens of tourism for development. By looking at these three aspects, I will be able to bring a Digital Civics approach (design-led research for bottom-up models of infrastructure in a civic domain) to make the voluntourism process more community-centred and sustainable.

Initial research questions

1. How can host communities have a greater say in the voluntourist experience, and what are the barriers that currently limit their voice?
2. How can digital technologies reconfigure voluntourism to reflect community-centred values and practices?

Motivation

A waste of time and money?
In 2014, Pippa Biddle, a former voluntourist, wrote a very critical blog post on the voluntourism industry, arguing that we need to look beyond cross-cultural volunteer work to do effective development work [3]. Her piece went viral, sparking controversy and debate in the voluntourism field. A particularly stinging point was her argument that volunteer labour is essentially harmful to the local economy: "*It would have been more cost effective, stimulative of the local economy, and efficient for the orphanage to take our money and hire locals to do the work, but there we were trying to build straight walls without a level*". Similarly, the journalist Mohamud [24] describes voluntourism as, "*a bit too self-congratulatory and disingenuous*" and an attempt to, "*inflate one's own ego and spruce up one's resume*".

Another voluntourist has similarly reflected on whether their endeavour was, "*perpetuating the white man coming to save us dependency*" [9]. This viewpoint has been supported in the academic literature as well [4,21,29,30,37]. There have also been critiques of the neoliberal roots of volunteer tourism, which agree that this tourism activity represents the commercialisation of the human need to travel, exploiting natural and cultural resources as a means to profit accumulation [34]. In a similar vein, voluntourism has elsewhere been shunned as an example of commodification and an example of the '*rebellious acquiescence to the status quo of neoliberal global capitalism*' [6,11,20,21,31,35,38].
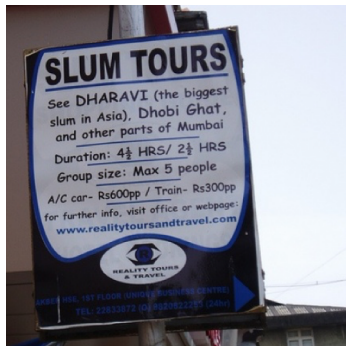
Figure 1 An example of entrepreneurship or negative sightseeing?

Figure 2 There is a strong need to address the conversation around tourism and development.

Source:
http://archived.thisisafrica.me/downloads/detail/19607/slum-tourism-step-right-up-for-africa-s-worst-destination

Lupton [19] has argued that often we assess the value of development work "*by the rewards we receive through service rather than the benefits received by the served*". Another journalist has written that, "*As admirably altruistic as it sounds, the problem with voluntourism is its singular focus on the volunteer's quest for experience, as opposed to the recipient community's actual needs*" [39].

Easterly, another key thinker in this field, has previously decried the pervasive paternalistic and unethical attitudes in International Development [8]. His work argues instead for a sustainable home-grown model of development, where the so-called developing countries are seen as the experts about what is best for their communities.

In summary, voluntourism has been heavily criticised, and often rightly so. However, these critiques of voluntourism are not a reason to abandon this popular and ever-growing endeavour, but instead to reconfigure it to do good.

Voluntourism as a force for good
Palacios [26] suggests that volunteer tourism organisations can be considered to have the potential to act either as catalysts for positive socio-cultural change or facilitators of neo-colonialism and dependency. For example, Meschkank [22] writes about the corrective role that tourism organisations can undertake in the emerging slum-tourism debate. She argues that tourism in developmental contexts can be reimagined from the popular themes of passivity, stagnation and desperation to one of activity, development and hope.

By reimagining the conversation beyond tourism management, and looking at the role of Digital Civics and ICT, we can reconfigure the voluntourism space and allow for innovative approaches to how voluntourism is conducted.

Technology and Voluntourism
Inversini et al. [15] wrote a key piece arguing for the recognition of an emerging field of research called eTourism For Development (eT4D). This field is seen as existing at the convergence of three distinct disciplines: development studies, tourism studies and information and communication technologies. However, this work sees ICT as analogous with web-presence and social media presence, and thus does not consider the role of design and development of new technologies as part of its paradigm.

On the other hand, the ICTD field, which is an established field looking at the role of technologies in development contexts [5,12] has been silent on the issue of voluntourism and its increasing presence in the global south.

Although HCI has been prolific in bringing post-colonial and feminist methodologies to the fore in doing development research [2,7,16,27,33], this has not been studied much in the contexts of technology and voluntourism.
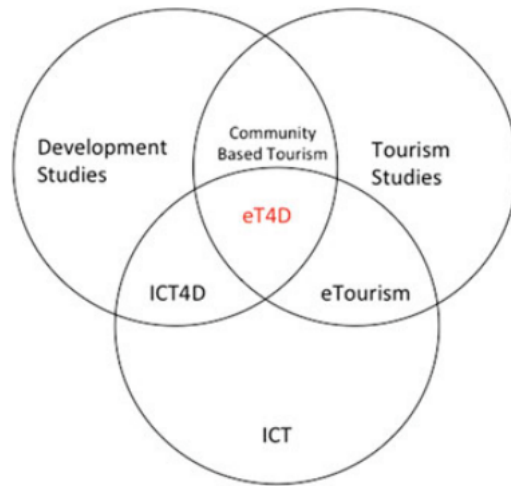
Figure 3 Inversini et al.'s conceptualisation of the interplay between tourism studies, development studies, and technologies [15]

Approach and Methods

One of the first steps will involve setting an agenda for engaging with technology and voluntourism through a iterative design-led research approach. As I have only recently switched to this field, the preliminary step will be to identify practical next steps to take, which will include further engagement with literature to show gaps in current understanding, choosing appropriate methods, finding and brokering relationships with key stakeholders, and selecting case studies to take exploratory steps toward working with the stakeholders.

Choosing Appropriate Methods
I will use approaches that are currently used heavily in the International Development field i.e. mixed-methods approaches to research in global development and vulnerability.

This will involve working with semi to low-literate participants in under-served communities in the global south. This will require looking at non-traditional engagement methods that use visual and audio-based approaches (for example: mapping, diagrams, seasonal calendars, interviews etc. [13]).

Another challenge will be working with stakeholders with whom I don't share a common language or culture with (whether cultures within a country or trans-nationally). If this is the case, I will need to be aware of asking culture-aware and context-aware questions.

Ethnographic Methods
I will be using auto-ethnographic methods to observe and take part in Voluntourism, to capture the lived experiences of actors within the voluntourism discourse. This will allow me to engage with the organisation, fellow volunteers and with the host populations.

Participatory Action Research
Participatory Action Research (doing action oriented research) involves directly working with stakeholders to examine a problem and changing it to the better. It involves collaborative research, education and action oriented towards social change [18]. Stakeholders will be co-researchers with me in the research process. This is crucial element of meaningful work in an action-

oriented activity like voluntourism. This project will be peer research, with members of the host population as co-researchers.

Often there is a tendency to treat participation as a panacea in development research, but this research's aim is to use it critically, acknowledging that while it is easy to write about 'giving voice to the marginalised', in reality it is a messy and complicated process (cf. critical modernist approaches to participation [14]). The research will try to involve all stakeholders in the project conceptualisation, allowing different motivations to emerge and be discussed from the start. [23].

Data Collection
Along with interviews, I will be running focus groups with stakeholders from the host community. Focus groups are appropriate in many of the collectivist cultures that I will be carrying out research in.

Another aspect of data collection is through observations done during field visits. Also, I will be using the well-established method of analysing journal entries of individuals taking part in the voluntourism activity.

Using a variety of the methods described above, I will be utilising the concept of triangulation to ensure the validity of the findings (example: combining data gathered from observation, interviews, surveys, journal entries etc.)

Digital Civics
As alluded to earlier, little work has been done looking at the design, development and deployment of digital technologies in the community-based tourism or the volunteer tourism sector. Digital Civics posits that one should encourage inclusivity in the design and ideation of services to best serve the community they serve [10]. This means putting the community first, seeing them as co-creators and actors to be interacted with, in a relational rather than transactional manner [25]. Digital Civics opens itself up, quite comfortably with the ethos of community-based tourism (CBT) [29]. CBT shares Digital Civics' passion for bottom-up approaches to infrastructure design, and supports the notion of involving the community in the creation and execution of tourism products.

This can be directed, for example, as how we can enable arguably the most important actor in the volunteer tourism process, the host communities in the global south, to have more of a say in the configuration of the voluntourist experience. Since the local community knows best about the targets for development work in the local area, their current role in the voluntourism sector, as passive beneficiaries, needs to change. This begins with the understanding that while the host population in the global south may be economically resource-poor, they are not knowledge-poor and should not be treated as such.

The lack of agreement about the role of voluntourism between global actors in the field of development studies underlines the need for identifying areas of discord and building trust between stakeholders. A starting step for this is identifying key development indicators that can be used as a measuring stick with which to measure effectiveness of the research.

Building on the stated research goals of investigating the design of social infrastructures for voluntourism,

the research will need to look at scaffolding the process of volunteering: what are the key actions and micro-activities that constitute voluntouring? Can we design a generalizable infrastructure for efficient, sustainable community-centred voluntouring?

A major challenge for Digital Civics will be the fact that voluntourism currently is dominated not by charities and NGOs but rather, by private sector tourism organisations (particularly those based in the global north). We will need to investigate how current international development NGOs and tourism for development initiatives can play a bigger role in the voluntourism debate.

Supervision Team
My primary supervisor will be Professor Patrick Olivier who will bring his extensive expertise in Digital Civics based projects to the table. He has previously worked with Gary Pritchard, who looked at social entrepreneurship and international volunteering in the South African context.

My second supervisor will be Professor Matt Baillie-Smith from Northumbria University, who is also the director of the Centre for International Development (also based at Northumbria University). He has done a lot of work in the area of international development, volunteering and global citizenship. A number of my conversations with him have helped guide this PhD proposal.

My third supervisor will be Professor Pauline Dixon, who is Professor of International Development and Education and has extensive experience in Asia and Africa. She will be giving guidance on how to do

effective research in the challenging global south contexts, in which I do not have previous experience.

I am also in discussion with other academics who could provide additional supervision, particularly in the area of social innovation and social entrepreneurship. This will supplement my interest in looking at the design of social infrastructures for voluntouring (creating a space for meaningful exchange between the voluntourist and the host community).

I will be based in the School of Computing Science (CS).

Collaborators
As the research focus on voluntourism has been a recent switch, currently relationships have not been brokered with any organisations. However, as the external supervisor, Professor Baillie-Smith has offered to introduce the research team to key players in the international volunteering sector (including FRIC, http://www.ifrc.org/). This will be confirmed in the next few months.

I am also in contact with Professor Sugata Mitra, the innovator behind the 'School in the Cloud' and 'Self Organised Learning Environment (SOLE)' concepts (https://www.theschoolinthecloud.org/). I will be helping to run the infrastructure across SOLE labs in India, which are located in underserved and under-resourced communities. We are investigating the role of voluntourism (particularly voluntourism activity **within** the global south) in this context.

Furthermore, I am also acquainted with Fiona Poulson, an independent volunteer in Calais, providing support & practical assistance to refugees in the 'Calais jungle'

(home to refugees who have migrated from many countries in the global south). She has provided opportunities for many people (including myself) to come and help serve the resident refugee population. She can be contacted at: fipoulson@gmail.com

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