

How TripAdvisor changed travel

The world's biggest travel site has turned the industry upside down – but now it is struggling to deal with the same kinds of problems that are vexing other tech giants like Facebook, Google and Twitter.

Should one be so unlucky as to find oneself, as I did, lying awake in bed in the early hours of the morning in a hostel in La Paz, Bolivia, listening anxiously to the sound of someone trying to force their way into one's room, one could do worse than to throw a chair under the doorknob as a first line of defence. But this is not what I did. Instead, I held my breath and waited until the intruder, ever so mercifully, abandoned his project and sauntered down the hall. The next morning, when I raised the incident with the hostel employee at the front desk, he said the attempted intrusion had just been an innocent mistake, a misdirected early-morning wake-up call gone wrong, and what was the big deal, anyway? Fuming, I turned to the highest authority in the world of international travel, the only entity to which every hotel, restaurant, museum and attraction in the world is beholden: I left the hostel a bad review on TripAdvisor.

TripAdvisor is where we go to praise, criticise and purchase our way through the inhabited world. It is, at its core, a guestbook, a place where people record the highs and lows of their holiday experiences for the benefit of hotel proprietors and future guests. But this guestbook lives on the internet, where its contributors continue swapping advice, memories and complaints about their journeys long after their vacations have come to an end.

Every month, 456 million people – about one in every 16 people on earth – visit some tentacle of TripAdvisor.com to plan or assess a trip. For virtually every place, there exists a corresponding page. The Rajneeshee Osho International Meditation Resort in Pune, India, has 140 reviews and a 4 out of 5 rating, Cobham Service Station on the M25 has 451 reviews and a rating of 3.5, while Wes Anderson's fictional Grand Budapest Hotel currently has 358 reviews and a rating of 4.5. (At the top of the page, there is a message from TripAdvisor: "This is a fictional place, as seen in the movie The Grand Budapest Hotel. Please do not try to book a visit here.")

Over its two decades in business, TripAdvisor has turned an initial investment of \$3m into a \$7bn business by figuring out how to provide a service that no other tech company has quite mastered: constantly updated information about every imaginable element of travel, courtesy of an ever-growing army of contributors who provide their services for free. Browsing through TripAdvisor's 660m reviews is a study in extremes. As a kind of mirror of the world and all its wonders, the site can transport you to the most spectacular landmarks, the finest restaurants, the most "adrenaline-pumping" water parks, the greatest "Hop-On Hop-Off Experiences" that mankind has ever devised. Yet TripAdvisor reviews are also a ruthless audit of the earth's many flaws. For every effusive review of the Eiffel Tower ("Worth the hype at night," "Perfect Backdrop!"), there is another

that suggests it is a blight on the face of the earth (“sad, ugly, don’t bother”; “similar to the lobby of a big Vegas casino, but outside”.)

TripAdvisor is to travel as Google is to search, as Amazon is to books, as Uber is to cabs – so dominant that it is almost a monopoly. Bad reviews can be devastating for business, so proprietors tend to think of them in rather violent terms. “It is the marketing/PR equivalent of a drive-by shooting,” Edward Terry, the owner of a Lebanese restaurant in Weybridge, UK, wrote in 2015. Marketers call a cascade of online one-star ratings a “review bomb”. Likewise, positive reviews can transform an establishment’s fortunes. Researchers studying Yelp, one of TripAdvisor’s main competitors, found that a one-star increase meant a 5-9% increase in revenue. Before TripAdvisor, the customer was only nominally king. After, he became a veritable tyrant, with the power to make or break lives. In response, the hospitality industry has lawyered up, and it is not uncommon for businesses to threaten to sue customers who post negative reviews.

As the so-called “reputation economy” has grown, so too has a shadow industry of fake reviews, which can be bought, sold and traded online. For TripAdvisor, this trend amounts to an existential threat. Its business depends on having real consumers post real reviews. Without that, says Dina Mayzlin, a professor of marketing at the University of Southern California, “the whole thing falls apart”. And there have been moments, over the past several years, when it looked like things were falling apart. One of the most dangerous things about the rise of fake reviews is that they have also endangered genuine ones – as companies like TripAdvisor raced to eliminate fraudulent posts from their sites, they ended up taking down some truthful ones, too. And given that user reviews can go beyond complaints about bad service and peeling wallpaper, to much more serious claims about fraud, theft and sexual assault, their removal becomes a grave problem.

Thus, in promising a faithful portrait of the world, TripAdvisor has, like other tech giants, found itself in the unhappy position of becoming an arbiter of truth, of having to determine which reviews are real and which are fake, which are accurate and which are not, and how free speech on their platform should be. It is hard to imagine that when CEO Stephen Kaufer and his co-founders were sitting in a pizza restaurant in a suburb of Boston 18 years ago dreaming up tripadvisor.com, they foresaw their business growing so powerful and so large that they would find themselves tangled up in the kinds of problems that vex the minds of the world’s most brilliant philosophers and legal theorists. From the vantage point of 2018, one of the company’s early mottos now seems comically naive: “Get the truth and go.”

Many of the difficult questions the company faces are also questions about the nature of travel itself, about what it means to enter unknown territory, to interact with strangers, and to put one’s trust in them. These are all things that one also does online – it is no coincidence that the some of the earliest analogies that we once used to talk about the digital world (“information superhighway”, “electronic frontier”) tended to belong to the vocabulary of travel. In this sense, the story of TripAdvisor, one of the least-examined and most relied-upon tech companies in the world, is something like a parable of the internet writ large.

Ex. 1 Find the words or expressions in the text which mean the following:

1. to make (something) very untidy-
2. to bring trouble, distress, or agitation to-
3. a knob that releases a door latch-
4. a person who comes into a place where they are not wanted or welcome-
5. in a good or lucky way-
6. to utter while in a state of excited irritation or anger-
7. being under obligation for a favor or gift
8. one of the long, flexible arms of an animal (such as an octopus) that are used for grabbing things and moving
9. marked by the expression of great or excessive emotion or enthusiasm
10. being in fact the thing named and not false, unreal, or imaginary

Ex. 2 Match the expressions from the two columns into logical collocations:

1.	lying awake	my breath
2.	held	an end
3.	an innocent	wrong
4.	call gone	in bed
5.	come to	mistake
6.	provide their	falls apart
7.	the whole thing	upon tech companies
8.	devastating	problem
9.	most relied-	services for free
10.	a grave	for business

Ex. 3 Provide English equivalents for these expressions.

- a) prawdziwy, rzeczywisty-
- b) nakaz sądowy-
- c) przypadek-
- d) przypowieść, parabola-
- e) naiwny(a)-
- f) zaraza-

Ex. 4 Transformations:

- a) Let's go to the cinema tonight. She.....that night.
- b) No I didn't do it. She.....
- c) You don't go to the cinema because you don't have free time. If you
.....

Glossary

turn upside down	przewrócić do góry nogami
lying awake in bed	leżeć w łóżku nie śpiąc
held my breath	wstrzymać oddech
an innocent mistake	prawdziwa pomyłka
call gone wrong	telefon który się nie udał
come to an end	skończyć się
provide their services for free	dostarczać usługi za darmo

the whole thing falls apart	wszystko się rozpadło
devastating for business	rujnujące dla biznesu
most relied-upon tech companies	godne zaufania firmy
a grave problem	dramatyczny problem
turn upside down	przewrócić do góry nogami
to vex	męczyć, dręczyć
doorknob	kłamka
intruder	intruz
mercifully	łaskawie
to fume	ciskać się
beholden	wdzięczny, zobowiązany
tentacle	macka
effusive	przesądny
veritable	prawdziwy, rzeczywisty
writ	nakaz sądowy
coincidence	przypadek
parable	przypowieść, parabola
naïve	naiwny(a)

blight	zaraza

KEY:

ex.		ex.	
1		2	
1	turn upside down	1	lying awake in bed
2	to vex	2	held my breath
3	doorknob	3	an innocent mistake
4	intruder	4	call gone wrong
5	mercifully	5	come to an end
6	to fume	6	provide their services for free
7	beholden	7	the whole thing falls apart
8	tentacle	8	devastating for business
9	effusive	9	most relied-upon tech companies
10	veritable	10	a grave problem
ex.		ex.	
3		4	
1	writ	1	suggested going to the

			cinema
2	coincidence	2	denied doing it
3	parable	3	you had free time, you'd go
4	naïve	4	
5	blight	5	
6		6	
7		7	
8		8	
9		9	
10		10	