

# COMMUNICATIVE EFFICIENCY OF WEBSITES IN THE CASE OF THE TOURISM MANAGEMENT OF THE WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN SPAIN

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From the point of view of the tourism sector, the fact that a World Heritage Site is included on the list drawn up under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention is of great interest to the governments of the countries applying for inclusion in general and, more specifically, to the local inhabitants, since it fosters universal acknowledgement of the importance of a particular heritage site as well as generating a set of expectations regarding the capture of funding for the site. This declaration increases the international visibility of an attraction that is appealing to visitors who wish to know more about this universal heritage and, thus, also represents a source of associated wealth. Yet, whether the destination has a tradition and tourist vocation or not causes variations in the impact that such recognition may have (Tourtellot, 2006).

In 2001, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, aware of the opportunities and also the negative consequences tourist development can have for the receiving population and for the heritage itself, implemented the World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme, which was later extended in 2010. The aim of this programme is to examine the key aspects involved in coordinating the relationship between tourism and heritage conservation, especially aimed at managers of World Heritage Sites and in the tourist sector (Cleere, 2012).

The tourism activity that is carried out at the World Heritage site will have certain impacts depending on the fragility and vulnerability of the resources, the type of heritage (tangible or intangible), the aptitude and suitability of the territory, the preparation of the human resources and the model of tourism management, among others. The situation changes if the denomination is granted to a well-established tourist destination or if the destination is a newcomer to tourism-heritage relationships. In any case, experience shows that the visitor arrivals is not always planned and this often leads to undesirable consequences for the destinations that produce the opposite effect in the population and on the heritage, as pointed out by Doxey (1975) just a few years after the convention was implemented.

Strategic communication by using the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) appears as an excellent way to help achieve the goals set by UNESCO and other international institutions concerning the conservation of heritage. This opportunity is based on the fact that these technologies make it possible to establish an efficient dialogue among all the sectors involved in heritage management, the development of tourism and the users or visitors. Moreover, in addition to the traditional basic tools used to raise the value of heritage sites, tourism planning and management (inventory and valuation of tourism resources, determination of the recreational load capacity, congestion management, impact monitoring, visitor management, etc.), all of which have been widely reported in the literature, there are also others related to communication. These strategic communication tools attempt to foster the public participation of the local stakeholders, as was already stated years ago by authors and institutions such as Ceballos-Lascurain (1996) and UNESCO (2002) or, more recently, Borges *et al.* (2011), Jimura (2011), Tao *et al.* (2011) or Badia (2011). By so doing, the aim is to make the heritage easier for visitors to interpret, in the sense put forward by Ham in 1992. Likewise, in addition to the actual communication itself through on-line and off-line communicative supports, these communication tools seek to establish information quality systems, as suggested by Galiano *et al.* (2007).

Several decades ago, the ICT were quickly identified as being a valuable aid for tourism and were incorporated into many fields of tourism communication. One important application was their use on websites used to support and develop information and the promotion of tourist destinations (UNWTO, 2001; Buhalis *et al.*, 2008), as well as those of the companies involved in this sector. The development of websites has come as an undeniable means of offering information that is facilitated by the intangible nature of the tourism product and the inherent information needed to carry out the tourist experience. In a second phase, they became more communicative and were used to commercialise tourism products and services (Shin-Lim *et al.*, 2012). Now, there are also other technological tools, such as social networks in the form of blogs and other social media, which help increase the efficiency of these communication tools and, thus, the development of tourism. It can therefore be seen that the use of technological tools has many advantages, such as offering a wide range of up-to-date public information, which is available to anyone and at any time, as well as serving as a source of information and inspiration prior to undertaking a trip, as pointed out by Lyons (2002). It is important to bear in mind that the website of a World Heritage site is an initial introduction to and reflection of its identity. As such, it is conveying the prestige and label of quality of UNESCO, which also contributes to the process of motivating and generating expectations in visitors (Viñals *et al.*, 2014).

Nevertheless, although there is evidence of a growing use of the ICT in general and, more particularly, of the websites of World Heritage sites, it can be said that not all their foreseeable capabilities are being applied. In a previous study (Teruel *et al.*, 2012) lines were set out for a Strategic Communication Plan for heritage sites, in which the focus was on studying the capacities for the development of tourism in these places. Based on the initial situation outlined earlier, and in an attempt to delve further into this topic, the main aim of this research work is to identify the capabilities of the websites of heritage sites as strategic communication tools and to design an assessment instrument (which has been called the “Communicative Efficiency Questionnaire”) referring to indicators that can be

used to determine the application of the UNESCO Sustainable Tourism Programme to heritage sites. These grouped indicators will make up the General Communicative Efficiency Index (GCEI) of 39 websites of the 44 Spanish World Heritage sites which have been studied in order to test the results of this methodological proposal. An analysis of their communicative strengths and weaknesses revealed the aspects where the new technologies can offer greater performance than those currently being used for strategic communication in terms of management of the conservation of heritage and the sustainable tourism development of the sites. This is especially so with respect to the existence, or lack, of interpretation programmes, since they are considered a fundamental instrument for the education, training and increased awareness of those involved in tourism and for visitors. Moreover, it is very important to be able to get the local communities more involved in the process of conservation and promotion of heritage.

The instrument used for the analysis of the communicative supports was the “Communicative Efficiency Questionnaire” (hereafter, CEQ), which is one of the most significant scientific contributions of this research. The purpose of this questionnaire is to identify the tourism management and strategic communication capacities of the institution responsible for the World Heritage site by reviewing the formal aspects and, above all, the content of the websites. To do so, it includes a series of previously defined questions that are based on the UNESCO’s Sustainable Tourism Programme (2001) and further developed in the Action Plan (UNESCO, 2013), which is applicable to all heritage sites.

The CEQ has been structured following a grouped scheme grounded in three basic principles taken from the lines of activity of UNESCO’s Sustainable Tourism Programme:

- P1. To increase the capacity of the heritage site to develop a closer relationship with the tourism sector,
- P2. To train the local communities in activities related with tourism, and
- P3. To increase esteem for the destination through tourism activities and policies aimed at both tourists and entrepreneurs.

The second phase consists in applying analysis criteria to those principles. These criteria assess the evidence on the website of the existence of the use of tourism management tools at the heritage site. Accordingly, the first analysis criterion (AC1) developed by the CEQ for this principle is to know whether the website offers information about the existence of relationships between the local tourism system and the heritage site. The second analysis criterion (AC2) proposed here focuses on verifying whether the website describes actions favouring the “training of the local stakeholders in activities related with tourism”, and more specifically in competences that can improve aspects related to the development and management of tourism products. This last tourism activity is a fundamental element for interpreting the heritage and the promotion and transmission of the values that led to these heritage sites being declared as such, in addition to contributing to the local economy through the creation of employment and wealth. The third analysis criterion (AC3) consists in evaluating whether the website includes interpretive messages that contribute to the esteem held by the public and the local residents as regards the heritage. This criterion is developed through six indicators and is very important for the CEQ, as it focuses on the

analysis of the importance of the information and its transmission via the websites, as well as on determining the level of technological development through the elements that they present.

In the third phase, the indicators associated to each analysis criterion are described (Fig. 1), thus allowing a certain level of detailed knowledge to be gained about the actions that exist in that place.

Figure 1  
LIST OF THE INDICATORS ASSOCIATED TO THE ANALYSIS CRITERIA

INDICATORS	
Criterion 1	Ind.1.1. Presence of links to providers of tourism services at the heritage site
	Ind.1.2. Forms of collaboration between local stakeholders and the Public Administration
Criterion 2	Ind.2.1. Training of customer assistance staff and site interpreters
	Ind.2.2. It provides information about professional teaching institutions associated with the thematic interests of the heritage site
	Ind.2.3. It provides information about the existence of an official recognition or qualification for tourist guides
Criterion 3	Ind.3.1. There are interpretive messages about the heritage
	Ind.3.2. It promotes the development of awareness-raising campaigns for the local population
	Ind.3.3. It presents updated information about events and other activities related with the heritage site
	Ind.3.4. There are logotypes, signatures or brand images of the institutions responsible for the site
	Ind.3.5. It provides links to social networks
	Ind.3.6. It offers acceptable levels of interactivity (languages, search engines, apps, CRS's, etc.)

The results were validated by applying the content analysis research technique (Krippendorff, 1990; López, 2002; Gutierrez *et al.*, 2007) using a quantitative and qualitative exploration. The results obtained were then evaluated.

Each of the 36 variables were analysed according to the 11 indicators. The answers obtained range from those aimed at just proving the existence, or not, of the variable (0-1) to other more complex ones that were to be given according to a scale with five responses which vary depending on the variables analysed. The mean and the standard deviation were then calculated and each series of data was normalised so that each dataset has a mean of 0 and a deviation of 1 in order to make it easier to process them and to perform comparisons. Furthermore, the data resulting from the normalisation were weighted by granting a value to each indicator that makes up the AC. The arithmetic mean of each dataset leads us to establish a partial index for each AC (ACPI) and a general index called Communicative Efficiency (GCEI), which provides information about the previous indices. Both indices allow comparisons to be established between the non-weighted (Test 1) and the weighted data (Test 2), as we shall see below.

The results of applying the CEQ to the websites of Spanish heritage sites offer significant data. In general terms, the websites that include information about the heritage site are linked to the tourist destination where they are located, which does not always coincide with the Public Administration that is responsible for it. National Parks or some heritage sites on private property, such as those belonging to the Catholic Church, have their own websites and are very often linked to the websites of the tourist destination.

The presentation of the results obtained from the normalised analysis is followed by the discussion based on comparing the results obtained from the GCEI for the weighted (Test 2) and the non-weighted analyses (Test 1). It was decided that more importance should be given to the partial index of analysis criterion 3 (ACPI3), as it was considered that it included the determining variables for identifying the capacities of the website as a vehicle for strategic communication.

Grouping them in clusters makes it possible to establish four groups arranged in hierarchical descending order, according to:

- whether the heritage site is the main attraction;
- the ownership of the heritage site, that is to say, whether it is a public or private asset;
- the purpose or nature of the website: educational, conservationist or touristic; and
- whether it is a site of historic interest.

In general, it can be said that only 16 of the 39 cases analysed pass the GCEI in the second weighted test (P2), in which more importance is given to the communication elements (AC3), whereas only 14 cases pass that of the P1 test. The analysis of the results of the tests (P1-P2) does not reveal any significant changes. This finding does enable us to state, however, that heritage sites are applying the principles of the UNESCO Sustainable Tourism Programme defined by means of the CEQ, although they are doing so on a spontaneous basis rather than following any binding guidelines given by UNESCO. Nevertheless, there are several differences and external factors to be taken into account in this discussion regarding both the destination and the heritage site and the external image that may affect the perception of the destination and the user's expectations concerning the heritage site.

Some final conclusions that can be drawn from this work include the following:

- The manager of the World Heritage site is not always responsible for issuing information about these heritage sites. Instead, this responsibility falls on other administrations that are directly involved in the management of the heritage site. It must be remembered that the Public Administrations are normally responsible for managing heritage and, thus, they must be aware of the tourist activities that are performed in those places and authorise them.
- Websites are an excellent way of highlighting the importance of managing heritage and establishing the public relations and communications activities that can make the heritage site more widely known. It must be remembered, however, that the information posted on the websites has an informative guiding content when it comes from institutional managers, but this becomes commercial and persuasive when it is produced by private enterprises or another kind of associations.

- It should also be noted that, despite the technological development that communicative tools have undergone, we have detected a lack of conceptualisation in the contents of these websites. In the best of cases, this leads us to think that they are underestimated as a means of communication and can even make us reflect on the harmful effects that “poor communication” can have for World Heritage sites. As the study shows, these range from the non-existence of an integrated communication strategy to a lack of knowledge and experiential goals and programmes concerning communication.
- One of the most important scientific contributions of this work is the Communicative Efficiency Questionnaire and the General Communicative Efficiency Index, both created to be able to assess and measure the strategic communication on the websites of World Heritage sites, although they are also useful for application to other cases.
- The drawbacks detected in applying this method are that the websites do not always provide sufficient information and it must be completed by means of in-depth interviews with the managers of the heritage so as to be able to draw definitive conclusions. Likewise, it has also been observed that the digital gap is present, since some World Heritage sites have access to better connections and technological development than others.
- The heritage sites with the best results from applying this method of measuring communicative efficiency are those of a cultural nature. Those that obtained the best results are: La Alhambra, Córdoba, Santiago de Compostela, Segovia and the Hospital de Sant Pau (Barcelona). Furthermore, with regard to the appraisal of the management aspects, the websites of Alcalá de Henares and the architectural complex of Tarragona stand out above the rest. At the other end of the scale we find the websites of natural assets such as the Teide, Doñana and Pirineos-Monte Perdido national parks, as well as the Mérida heritage site, which has a website with more informational contents.
- As a final conclusion it can be said that the website must faithfully reflect the management of the heritage site and the destination together, as a whole. It must not create excessive or insufficient expectations. If this is not done correctly, the destination may find itself implementing bad management that does more harm than good.

Thus, as final recommendations, the following points should be highlighted:

- The ease with which a website can be created and published may have negative consequences in terms of its quality. The heritage manager must seek the advice of professionals who can offer guidance on efficient communication. In this regard, the analysis shows that most of the Spanish World Heritage sites do not have their own website and they are promoted by being linked to the tourism website of the destination where they are located.
- There is a need to set up on-line collaborative management tools *to foster* public-private participation and thus offset to a certain extent the lack of coordination between the Administration and associations involved in managing the World Heritage site.
- It is essential to reinforce the awareness-raising capacities of the websites so that the local population and local stakeholders can participate in the value of their heritage, while also ensuring that the attitude and behaviour of the visitors are satisfactory.