

Is TripAdvisor trustworthy? *Via the web*

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Travel industry insiders have expressed their concern that TripAdvisor and similar sites that rely on anonymous reviews, are beginning to yield too much power.

The concern has existed before, but TripAdvisor's Dirtiest Hotels list made it an even hotter topic in the past week, according to the Independent in the UK.

The success of TripAdvisor means some hotels are trying to manipulate their results. **If websites like TripAdvisor are riddled with fake reviews, where will the traveller go for authentic advice, asks Charles Starmer-Smith.**

I used to wax lyrical about [TripAdvisor](#). It represented citizen journalism at its best. Instead of glossy brochures and toned-down guidebook reviews, travellers suddenly had access to real warts'n'all accounts, from real people, paying real money. It certainly shook up the hotel industry. Hoteliers no longer had only to impress the undercover columnist, AA inspector or health and safety officer that would come knocking once or twice a year, but everyday visitors, every day. It worked – it really did.

Some alarming photos had warned me off a dodgy hotel in Brighton that seemed desirable on first appearance. It had helped drastically narrow my selection of hotels for a holiday in Nice and I had even consulted it to ensure that my choice of honeymoon resort had been given the public seal of approval.

But TripAdvisor is in real danger of becoming a victim of its own success. With some 25 million-plus users a month, it wields enormous power and the hotel industry knows it. Many within the industry are now doing all they can to manipulate its anonymous reviews. And who can blame them? A series of bad TripAdvisor reviews can ruin a hotel's business. No wonder then that European hoteliers are seeking to persuade the EU Commission to overhaul the rules governing website reviews to ensure that they have been posted by genuine guests. **A report by the travel website, Travolution, this month, confirmed my suspicions that hoteliers are being approached by companies promising to post positive reviews on websites in return for monthly fees.** The report claims that such companies can avoid the protection measures that websites have put in place, by posting the reviews from different locations around the world. The report even claimed that one hotel had received a number of reviews before it had even opened.

TripAdvisor says all reviews go through a screening process prior to posting, adding that it has installed technology aimed at detecting those who try to circumvent this process, as well as receiving regular reports from the TripAdvisor community alerting them to any suspicious activity.

We can all spot the obvious “fakes”: from the gushing “to die for, paradise revisited, greatest, most romantic” hyperbole to the liberal use of the exclamation mark and the minute details about every in-room furnishing. But do we ever report them? Who has the time?

To be fair to TripAdvisor it has already begun imposing disclaimers – in bold red type above the name of the property concerned – when reviews have come under suspicion of being fake. It admits that it is aware of several companies offering paid-for positive reviews and claims that they have been penalised appropriately.

But I fear that if it was possible to unearth all the fake reviews. Like drug users in sport, the people committing the offences are nearly always one step ahead of those trying to catch them.

Ed Hasbrouck, the US journalist, reported that at the PhoCusWright marketing conference in 2006, one leading advertising agency was already boasting that it had an entire division “devoted to seeding online forums and bulletin boards with targeted content”, adding that its employees would spend months creating profiles and posting “neutral” messages to establish a credible background from which to post their "paid-for" messages. That was four years ago, you expect that the game will have moved on and up a level since then.

If that is the case, who can you really trust? Are some hotels being wrongly maligned or even going out of business at the hands of a few miscreant posters?

Independent Travel Agents that is who, as they have no vested interest or are not paid by entities that force the hand of a Hotel, chain or other travel company.

Travel Agents get “real-time” advice, hints, reports, own experiences to draw from. If they misguide a client they can be sued or lose that client and their reputation to boot !

The key to TripAdvisor's success is that it appeals to the average Joe who does not necessarily trust what he reads in brochures or guide books. But if people lose faith in the authenticity of TripAdvisor reviews then surely that would take away its raison-d'etre.

Arthur Frommer, the guide book publisher, may have had a rather big axe to grind when he claimed that TripAdvisor “contains within itself the germs of its own undoing”, but he might just have a point.

The list, which was compiled on the cleanliness rankings submitted by disgruntled travellers, created attracted a whopping 276 online comments.

Bob Cotton, CEO of the British Hospitality Association, told the Independent that hotels across Europe are lobbying the EU Commission to rewrite the rules governing website reviews. The goal? Make sure they're legitimate - and not written by rivals.

"Websites have a responsibility that the person has actually stayed at the hotel or dined at the restaurant," Cotton told the Independent.

"I have been having discussions in Brussels on behalf of the industry so that some sort of common sense should prevail, as it does on sites such as eBay." "You can't ban these on-line comments - that is like de-inventing the atomic bomb - and I am in favour of all these methods of modern communication. But we need a fair crack of the whip," said Cotton.

He said he's aware of some cases in which a hotel owner had been double-crossed by a competitor who wrote a series of disparaging comments about the rival hotel.

The owner of the two-star, seaside Grosvenor Hotel - named by TripAdvisor as Britain's No. 1 "dirtiest hotel" - criticized TripAdvisor's methodology.

Hotel owner Chirag Khajuria told the Independent that out of the 3,000 guests he'd had in the six months since he'd taken over the hotel, the hotel had 35 poor reviews "and some of our guests have said they would be back again to stay," according to the article.

When the Daily Mail wrote up the hotel's ranking on the list, it said that the rooms there were "no worse - and, in some cases, better - than many other hotels in Britain," according to the Independent's article.

In a statement, TripAdvisor said that it uses "automated tools" and a team of moderators to detect fraud.

The Telegraph, London