



# Reframing tourism distribution - Activity Theory and Actor-Network Theory



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- It is revealed that managerial approaches represent only one specific enactment of tourism distribution.
- Three arguments that highlight the limitations of the distribution channel approach are presented.
- Activity Theory and Actor-Network Theory are integrated into an approach and framework for tourism distribution analysis.
- Tourism distribution is seen as a process of mediation, happening in networks of relations between activity systems.

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## ABSTRACT

Tourism distribution has commonly been understood within a managerial framework, appearing as a static, linear and isolated process, happening in distribution channels. Through ontological, epistemological and methodological argumentation, this paper reveals that such an approach represents one specific enactment of tourism distribution that, on its own, does not sufficiently reflect the complex processes involved. A conceptual basis and framework for a new approach to analysis of tourism distribution is presented. This approach applies existing knowledge on tourism distribution to a framework founded in understandings from Activity Theory and Actor-Network Theory. In this framework, tourism distribution is considered as a process of mediation, happening in networks of relations, between complex activity systems. The approach sets up a specific frame for analysis of tourism distribution, but also encourages researchers to take an open approach where mess and multiplicity is embraced.

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## 1. Introduction

Distribution is understood as the process of making a product or service available for use or consumption by a consumer or business user, using direct means or indirect means with intermediaries (Kotler & Keller, 2015; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2013). Although it is widely recognised that distribution happens in “complex behavioural systems in which people and companies interact to accomplish goals” (Kotler et al., 2013, p. 345), the primary focus in the literature, as well as in practice, is on distribution as happening in distribution channels.

This supplier oriented and economically focused understanding of distribution has also been prevailing in tourism research (e.g. Buhalis, 2000; Kotler et al., 2013; Lin, Lee, & Chen, 2009; Pearce &

Schott, 2005). Perhaps it is because of this, that no clear definition of tourism distribution appears in the literature. Tourism distribution channels have been defined as: “... the link between the producers of tourism services and their customers” (Gartner & Bachri, 1994, p. 164). In the tourism context, the ‘channel approach’ has proven useful in many cases where an economically focused supply perspective was needed. It has for example acted as a useful way to simplify, illustrate and/or make an overview of the distribution process (e.g. King & Choi, 1999; Pan & Laws, 2003; Sharda & Pearce, 2006). It has also appeared as a good way to describe distribution processes to practitioners, as it is “speaking their language”, since many larger companies use the concept of distribution channels to plan their delivery of products. Despite its dominance and advantages, this paper argues that the ‘channel approach’ to tourism distribution is limited in its scope, as it represents only one specific enactment of tourism distribution.

The paper begins with three arguments that highlight the

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limitations of the 'channel approach' and provides suggestions for alternatives - an ontological argument, an epistemological argument and a methodological argument. Relevant aspects of Activity Theory and Actor-Network Theory are then explained, before the new approach and framework for analysis of tourism distribution is finally presented.

The approach and framework was developed through an ongoing iterative process of conceptual development and empirical testing over a period of two years. The empirical testing was based on 52 in-depth interviews with tourists (14), suppliers (16) and intermediaries (22) involved in tourism distribution from China to Scandinavia.

## 2. The ontological argument – accepting multiplicity

Investigation of the existing literature on tourism distribution reveals that the ontological approach to tourism distribution has primarily been (post-)positivistic (Pearce, 2009). Reality is perceived as singular, and tourism distribution is overwhelmingly understood as an isolated process in which products are created by suppliers and sold to consumers via distribution channels. This ontological stance is challenged by the idea of Multiplicity (Mol, 1999) (also known as Multiplicity-oriented ANT (Vikkelsø, 2007), Relational Materialism (Law & Singleton, 2005), or Radical Ontology (Ren, 2011)). The main idea of this approach is that the world and ontologies are multiple, therefore “different realities overlap and interfere with one another.” (Law, 2004, p. 61) and “reality is done and enacted rather than observed.” (Mol, 1999, p. 77). Because of this, reality is never untouched, it is enacted and manipulated through practice(s) in which researchers also participate (Law & Singleton, 2005). In attempting to understand different practices, researchers must study these enactments and the ways in which they collide with other enactments of the same phenomena. Important ways that multiplicity differs from other ontologies are highlighted by Mol (1999). She explains that multiplicity is not singularity e.g. Perspectivalism. Perspectivalism removes responsibility from the actors and the researcher, as it implies the existence of one static reality that different actors are perceiving from different angles. It is not pluralism e.g. Social Constructivism either. Such approaches suggest that anything goes, because actors have an unlimited potential number of social constructions, which again, removes responsibility from the actors and researchers who partake in the enactments. According to Law (2004) such approaches suggest that: “Either there is one, one reality, one ethics, one politics, or there are many. There is nothing in between.” (p. 63). Multiplicity suggests that reality is more than one, but less than many. “We are in a world where bodies, organisations, or machines are more than one and less than many. In a *world* that is more than one and less than many” (Ibid p. 62). In the context of tourism, an example of this could be ‘the Chinese tourist’. A young Chinese person embarking on her first trip to Europe may enact ‘the Chinese tourist’ as an individual explorer, a Parisian may enact ‘the Chinese tourist’ as a mass tourist, while a politician in a receiving destination may enact ‘the Chinese tourist’ as a number signifying potential income. All these enactments are real, they simultaneously exist as different things through different enactments, but the number of enactments is not infinite. The number of enactments will depend on the subject under scrutiny. Some enactments may change, while others may appear or disappear as different actors engage with them. The fact that reality is multiple and enacted means that all actors, including researchers, have the ability to affect and change it. Actor-Network theorists have dubbed the ways in which actors and scholars engage with or enact reality, and the consequences of this *ontological politics* (Mol, 1999).

In the context of tourism distribution, multiplicity means that

researchers must be aware of the multiple ways in which tourism distribution has been and is enacted by different actors. Since researchers themselves are part of the enactment, it also means that their methods are not innocent (Law, 2004). Enacting tourism distribution as taking place in channels creates a very specific way of understanding tourism distribution. One that may be easy to comprehend, but which ignores the consequences of multiplicity and leaves out the mess. In this paper, the researcher suggests that (at least) two different enactments of tourism distribution exist. One that considers tourism distribution as a tool for planning, simplifying and communicating complex distribution processes, and one that considers tourism distribution as a messy practise, a phenomenon. Most existing literature has focussed on the first. The approach and framework presented in this paper focusses on the latter. The epistemological argument will unfold this assertion further.

## 3. The epistemological argument - embracing mess

As referenced in the introduction, the epistemological approaches to tourism distribution have overwhelmingly been managerial and reductionist. The purpose of many studies of tourism distribution has been to construct models that simplify the distribution process into something that is easy to communicate to practitioners. This paper recognises the usefulness of such approaches for certain purposes, but the managerial epistemology carries important implications and limitations. It implies that reality is what managers say it is. That distribution will happen the way the manager planned it or, at least, that reality happens in a way that can be described solely through a managerial understanding of distribution - as a linear process happening in channels. A risk of the managerial approach is that it does not allow things that may be regarded as mess: “managerialism becomes a way of making objects fit to be known by social scientists.” (Law & Singleton, 2005, p. 333). In this case, mess may be actors whose opinions do not fit the mainstream, concepts or ideas that do not fit into a distribution model or actors who are regarded as too small or in other ways too insignificant to be included as respondents. Law and Singleton (2005) argue that the result of this is that: “That which is not clear and distinct, well ordered, is othered. It is constituted as mess, like the plants that are turned into weeds by virtue of the invention of gardening.” (p. 34). The argument here is that researchers have a choice. They can attempt to change and/or pick realities to fit their methods, or they can change their methods to embrace complex realities.

In the context of tourism distribution, this means that things, which do not fit into pre-set categories, should not be dismissed; researchers should look for answers in the multiple and sometimes conflicting enactments and realities of different actors; all actors, big and small, (including objects) may hold important information; and finally, that the methods researchers choose, shape the results that they get.

## 4. The methodological argument – finding a framework

Network theorists have shown how actors do not act in isolation, but in networks of relations, which affect their behaviour (e.g. Granovetter, 1985; Provan, Fish, & Sydow, 2007; Rowley, 1997; Wasserman & Galaskiewicz, 1994; Webster & Morrison, 2004). This perspective is often ignored in current approaches to tourism distribution. Perhaps because the complexities that come with these wider networks do not necessarily fit the channel framework, but constitutes mess, as explained in the previous section. In his extensive review of tourism distribution literature, Pearce (2009) argues:

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