

ENTER and IFITT: A Critical Reflection

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I was both honoured and delighted but also perhaps a little apprehensive at being invited to offer some thoughts on the history and development of IFITT as along with the annual ENTER conference for which it is so well known, IFITT holds a special place for me. Being I guess something of a tribal elder and officially emeritus provides me with a platform from which I can, I hope, offer a somewhat informed and genuinely candid perspective on the organisation's past, present and potential future. Of course, this is necessarily a very personal, subjective view but nevertheless one which I trust will be a useful input to thinking about IFITT and in these exceptional times where any kind of travel is all but impossible, I hope you will indulge me in taking this trip which I will begin by offering a brief glimpse of a few of the early years as I saw them.

My first awareness of ENTER was through a colleague at Cornell University was in 1993 just prior to its second edition due to be held in Innsbruck, Austria in January 1994. This particular colleague knew of my interest in all things technology and in the hospitality and tourism arena, and secondly (maybe) that I was an enthusiastic learner skier! This seemed to be an ideal opportunity to see what other like-minded folks there might be out there in the wider world as there did not seem to be a great many fellow explorers in this uncharted terrain among my regular colleagues. Little did I know that Innsbruck, the Tyrol and Austria generally would feel like a second home to me for decades to come. Thus, with the approval of a somewhat sceptical Dean, I booked a ski package to Kitzbuhel and subsequently took the train to Innsbruck. I was flabbergasted to find myself in the company of so many kindred spirits in this emergent domain, such a diverse array of backgrounds and disciplines and it must be remembered that there was no common lexicon assisting our discourse. With inspiring speakers and enthusiastic delegates every session was genuinely informative and of real practical use. Of course, common nomenclature and common understanding became an obvious and immediate task in hand, the words and concepts we take for granted in everyday use now were being developed on the hoof! Terms such as eBusiness never mind eTourism were years in the future.

Regardless of the challenges, it was clear to all present and especially to the founding drivers of the conference such as Professor Hannes Werthner that the rapidly emerging developments in Computer Science and in Information and Communication Technologies more widely, would dramatically impact upon not only industry and business but society in general. It was equally clear for those of us directly concerned with the Hospitality and Tourism domain that this would especially undergo profound change with significant challenges to all aspects of business models. Disruptive Technology (whatever that means) was another phrase for the future. What could not have been foreseen was the profound changes it would bring to the sector. A great many of us around the world therefore have good reason to be grateful for not only the vision of the founders of the ENTER conference but also their practical determination to bring so many daunting variables under control to produce such a conference. My ski-ing also improved slightly too, thanks!

Following three successful years at Congress Innsbruck, Austria, it was clear that there was a growing global tourism community with a thirst for the kind of ICT engagement on offer at ENTER and it seemed inevitable that there needed to be more than this annual event to satisfy

this growing desire for shared communication among the participants. Not only information communication *per se* but the sharing of good practice and innovation adoption. Thus, the conference migrated to Edinburgh, Scotland for its 1997 edition, through the good offices of Dr Roger Carter, then CEO of the Edinburgh Tourist Board and enthusiast for tourism applications of the new technologies. The venue was Edinburgh's new flagship conference centre and the programme, packed with content was headlined by a number of outstanding speakers from industry, business and academia. To give a sense of the time, however, I remember one speaker representing a well-known international hotel chain suggesting that one-day, maybe, his organisation might spend, at some point in the future, as much as \$100,000 globally on this 'web thing'. So, some people got it, and some would get it eventually! However, the energy among attendees was very real and this groundswell led, during a meeting at the end of the conference, to the birth of IFITT under its first President, inevitably and appropriately, Hannes Werthner.

Of course, a relatively young conference and a newly minted association developing its mission, were going to face challenges. It was an interesting time. The conference moved the following year to Istanbul, Turkey, before returning once more to Innsbruck which for some years this became something of a routine, two new destinations then Innsbruck on a three-year rotation. This provided the predictable support and income for the ENTER conference and IFITT which allowed for the geographical expansion of the model into new and potentially 'riskier' destinations. It was also a time when the organisation was learning more about its field and what it was hoping to achieve. The conference had also started life with a bang in large venues, good sponsorship, active marketing and a glitzy Gala Dinner. The conference was now establishing a *de facto* core programme involving research and destination presentations. IFITT was beginning to understand more about the scale and scope of its membership and its membership needs, including building out a chapter structure.

As the conference cycle progressed, one aspect which was becoming clear was that the annual ENTER proceedings published by Springer, were becoming a go-to repository of a good deal of the new knowledge being generated in our field and an invaluable reference source for research thinking, activity and application. The responsibility for the format, quality and dissemination of this source material rested principally with IFITT. It also became clear that the volume of good quality research papers needed more than an annual conference outlet, especially at a time when universities and other research institutions were beginning to increasingly predicate resources against identified research benchmarks. As more institutions became subject to more formal assessment of their research outputs so they looked to see research outputs from staff appearing in journals and particularly journals with the highest possible rating. This was by no means an entirely new pressure for academics, but it was clearly on an upward trajectory. In any event the need for researchers to see their work published in a recognised journal helped give rise to the establishment of the Journal of Information Technology in Tourism (often simply referred to as JITT). While this initiative was very much a publication channel for some of the better (and more fully developed) ENTER papers and was a natural complement to both the conference and the mission of IFITT, it was not itself an IFITT initiative and remains a privately owned journal published through Springer. The Editorial Board for the journal of course draws heavily upon appropriate IFITT members and others for its composition and has certainly established a solid and respected position in the journal literature. I will return to this area later.

In 2000 ENTER was hosted in Barcelona (co-ordinated by the late Oriol Miralbell a great friend to IFITT and an innovative eTourism thinker) and perhaps here was one of IFITT's first

real innovations for the community, the establishment of a Ph.D. workshop. This forum which was hosted by academics from the IFITT community experienced in Ph.D. supervision, provided the opportunity for early-stage Ph.D. researchers to present and defend their proposals or work in progress in a critically positive setting. By any measure this was a successful addition to the ENTER format and fostered a stream of new-blood academics into the IFITT community. It is gratifying to see how many of these workshop attendees have themselves over the years, become significant contributors to the field and in turn supervised further generation of Ph.D. work. Although different formats have been trialled it is unarguable that over the succeeding two decades since its establishment the workshop has proved a popular and successful initiative. At this stage I would argue that the conference in 2000 and its prefatory Ph.D. workshop were setting the stage for what would become the eTourism diaspora.

ENTER in Barcelona was also a turning point for me personally with IFITT, not only for my engagement with the Ph.D. workshop but in a personal resolve to contribute more to the organisation. I was delighted to be elected to the IFITT Board and subsequently undertook the role of Director of Research, which I enthusiastically embraced! ENTER 2000 had also marked the transition to a new IFITT President, Josef Magreiter, who brought not only his long-time support and engagement with IFITT but a fresh industry perspective. This next edition, ENTER2001@Montreal, Canada, was its first and to date only Atlantic crossing. Driven by Professor Francois Bedard as host the conference benefitted from a remarkable degree of local support and national sponsorship enabling for example the keynote presentation by Don Tapscott an internationally renowned author in relation to technology and its impacts. With unstinting and continuous support from colleagues, especially my co-editor of the ENTER 2001 proceedings, Professor Karl Wöber, during the lead up to this conference, we strengthened the full paper peer review process and standardised much of the guidance and submission and presentation processes. Those who attended the conference enjoyed a vibrant mix of participants from a rich variety of backgrounds – a real treat. Unfortunately, the number of attendees from Europe who made the long-haul was a little disappointing which of course the Board reviewed along with other elements of the overall IFITT model as we again returned to ‘home’ territory, Innsbruck in 2002.

ENTER 2002 in Innsbruck was once more a well-organised and well-attended conference but it also began to underline for the Board the sensitive areas of cost in hosting our conference, especially as we received so much local support from the host venue and destination. This was very much brought to the fore the following year when the dynamic Inkeri Starry took on our next edition, ENTER2003@Helsinki. The conference programme was perhaps our most ambitious to date with even more multiple parallel streams in part due to the large number of European Union funded projects being presented. It was breathtaking and utterly impossible to attend everything of interest, a packed programme and an amazing programme, one could almost forget the equally amazing low temperatures! Few of us on our first visit to Helsinki were fully prepared for quite such low temperatures, however, a very visible exception to that was Dimitrios Buhalis who happily arrived wearing the biggest and warmest jacket I had ever seen! However, the challenges in persuading a host destination to meet the increasingly substantial demands from IFITT were only overcome by the drive and determination of Inkeri who made it all happen with a smile.

Tourist Board and Destination hunger for information on the new technologies which had been frenetic at the outset and their willingness to financially and practically support the conference was waning, perhaps a by-product of our success in helping destinations get up to speed from such a low base! It was becoming ever more challenging to encourage potential host

destinations to come forward. Nevertheless, the IFITT Board kept an ongoing watch on costs and potential income sources as ENTER was our flagship event. In addition to the lessening interest from destinations it was also clear that the mix of attendees was beginning to crystallise towards an emphasis on the academic side, yet from the outset IFITT was very clear that its mission sought the engagement of all relevant parties across the field. However, it would have been unrealistic to expect full spectrum engagement from day one, and IFITT had to raise its profile, spread the word and have an exciting offer to attract participants from all sectors. That said with a relatively small community, volunteer Board members and limited income streams, options were restricted, nevertheless, ENTER again spread its wings with ENTER04@Cairo. This edition of the conference will possibly go down in the annals of IFITT as perhaps our most challenging with local communication channels at times proving at least interesting. At one point local news carried the headline that Bill Gates was in town and would be speaking at our conference! He was in fact in Cairo on other business, but we enjoyed the attention. In fact, Professor Craig Knoblock, the innovative computer scientist (University of Southern California) was our Keynote. He gave a spellbinding and thought-provoking presentation, alas one of the decreasing number of occasions when computer science was to the fore in ENTER. Again, I shall return to this later.

Also, in 2004 IFITT I was honoured to have members very kindly elect me as the President to succeed Josef Magreiter. Josef handed over a very slick administrative structure for IFITT managed by a consummate professional in the form of Helene Forcher. With both former Presidents being based in Austria, our financial systems based in Austria and our secretarial support based in Austria you can imagine that for me as incoming President based in Scotland there would be some interesting times ahead! The most immediate challenge was our core model; the member subscription base was too small to carry the scale of administrative overhead and underlying funding assumptions underpinning ENTER, a major source of our income, were beginning to fail or at least weaken. I thus saw my central role as President to ensure that the worrying financial trend for the organisation was reversed and that we further sought to broaden our appeal and our offer. What we did have, and IFITT has always been very fortunate in this regard was a Board full of energetic and imaginative members willing to give their time. A successive array of developments from prizes, workshops and chapter growth and other initiatives were generated and rolled out and indeed have been very creatively enhanced by our Boards ever since. ENTER was no longer IFITT's 'one-trick pony' but remained both its most visible activity on the global stage and a huge component of its income. So it was that we returned in 2005 once more to Congress Innsbruck where we could always rely upon a supportive and cost-effective venue it was becoming ever more apparent that the generosity of the host venue and the Tyrol Tourist Board could not continue indefinitely. The following year saw our first academic venue, Lausanne, Switzerland followed by a return to a large conference centre in 2007 in the form of Ljubljana, Slovenia so the ENTER adventures through Europe continued and again back to Innsbruck in 2008.

By 2009 there was only limited interest from potential bidders in hosting ENTER and, in the end,, we agreed to a bid from a Dutch Event Management company to bring the conference to the Amsterdam Conference Centre. Although IFITT still managed to produce a great conference and social programme it was one of the most difficult conferences to facilitate with very limited support from the local host. By this stage in 2009 attendees were used to having decent Internet connections available at ENTER and one highlight (!) I recall was the local council which in fact ran the conference centre proposing a fee of 15,000 Euro to offer WiFi to participants! Ultimately, I think Amsterdam provided a wake-up call which was hard to ignore – our ENTER model was unlikely to be sustainable going forward. That said, during the

conference we were unexpectedly approached by Professor Lorenzo Cantoni (a future IFITT President) who offered to host ENTER at his university in Lugano. This was a great opportunity to once again explore the opportunities of a university environment for the conference and gave the Board some breathing space to further reflect on the best ways forward. Indeed, subsequent years saw us draw more heavily on the university sector to host ENTER. That said, although IFITT had now been put on a much more solid financial footing, the underlying challenges of the ENTER model persisted and it is very much to the credit of Presidents, Board members and all those involved in organisation that despite the inherent problems of model and challenges of programming the conference, ENTER happily survived the next decade!

And so here we are, ENTER@YOURPLACE 2021 and I can only congratulate all the dedication and work put in by those who have made it possible. Behind the scenes of ENTER organisation is always busy and frenetic and a real challenge for the organisers and this year must have presented some very unusual obstacles along the way.

While I have identified some individuals along the way, so many people have contributed to the developed of IFITT that giving all a name check would have been impossible. Those involved in the initiating and developing the early culture of IFITT were instrumental in getting us where we are today; the omnipresent Hannes, the quiet insightful academic intelligence of Pauline Sheldon, the humorous but always invaluable constructive destination perspectives of John Rafferty, the energy and industry drive of Peter Dennis – I could go on for pages! However, like them I shared a passion for the coming transformations in information and communication technologies and the excitement of the *zeitgeist* and in many respects, we were seeking to disprove Roy Amara's rule/observation:

“We tend to overestimate the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run”

So, pick your technology – from the Internet to the Web, from AR to AI – our desires for early adoption often run far ahead of realised timelines. What you may ask is the relevance for IFITT? The organisation has ICT as its *raison d'être* and we must always keep this in mind but my contention is that our journey has taken us to a crossroads of choices. Despite the quote above and to paraphrase Henry Kissinger – if something must happen ultimately it should happen immediately! The defining timescale for immediately is in our hands but I think it would be helpful if some things happened soon. So let me conclude my trip by arriving at some summary thoughts hopefully worthy of debate and no doubt open to challenge.

How relevant today are the mission and vision of IFITT?

Mission

The IFITT **mission** is to share knowledge, experience and a true passion for ICT in travel and tourism, being relevant for the industry and responsible for society at large, as well as ensuring scientific excellence.

The IFITT **vision** is to create THE global eTourism knowledge network and community.

No shortage of laudable ambition there but after more than two decades perhaps a time for reflection on how far we have progressed in achieving these. There are clearly many hard or soft metrics which could be employed here but perhaps the most direct measures might relate

to IFITT membership and ENTER attendance. The sector upon which we are focused is enormous and diverse from small businesses to international conglomerates. The travel sector alone comprises many transport players, travel agents, tour operators, tourist boards and so forth before we even begin to consider the accommodation sector, hospitality providers, consultants, software developers...it is a long list. Despite our best efforts and the early central role played for many years by tourist boards and destinations, IFITT has to date failed to attract anything close to a full spectrum of members or conference participants despite these being within scope of our mission and vision. Unless we are to revise and reduce the scope of our mission and vision (another question), we must ask why. One possibility that merits consideration is that the early attractors of ENTER and IFITT lay in the excitement and potential surround the hard science outputs from computer science and information and communication technologies. We had for example substantial participation from representatives of these fields, something which has declined over time. As I have written elsewhere, we can see a shift over time reflected in the ENTER proceedings with the emphasis inexorably moving from more scientific elements through to business applications and social impact research.

If we seriously wish to retain and address our mission and bring all areas of activity into the fold, then we must seriously think about how to reach them and how to persuasively 'sell' what we consider to be our USPs. It is hard to think of any upsides to the current pandemic we are all in the midst of but perhaps there is an opportunity for IFITT to utilise the remarkable shift in online and technology activity necessitated by the many imposed restrictions. Our industry in many parts of the world has been brought to its knees by the pandemic, could there be a role for IFITT in stimulating and disseminating research towards assisting recovery. One must imagine that there will be an unprecedented willingness to consider new modes of ICT adoption and use.

It is no secret that I have always considered our collective research strength to be key for IFITT so here I have a couple of things to say that once again I am sure will be food for thought and debate! Our research, as an attractor for ENTER and IFITT has been, I would argue, less diverse and less well disseminated than it could be. Let me explain my thinking with reference to institutional inertia. Going back to the Guilds of the Middle Ages and probably earlier, people have sought to gate and protect expertise, providing barriers to entry and concomitantly resistance to change. Resistance to innovation has been the norm for a very long time in all societies (persuasively argued in Matt Ridley's latest book, *How Innovation Works*) and two of the most relevant in our context is the relationship between university and research institution output and publication. These institutions are in the main very slow-moving beasts resistant to change without significant external pressures, they tend to do what they have always done and in the way they have always done it. Research is often based around research leaders, who in turn develop groups of researchers centred on a limited number of areas of expertise and who seek resource support from their institutions, and ever increasingly important, external sources. These institutions look for evidence of success in a small number of measures; income generated for the institution, publications produced, industry application and perhaps to a smaller extent Ph.D. student developed and graduated, i.e. the next generation of academics and researchers. As mentioned earlier, institutions prefer well-established and well-rated journals for such outputs and to date have tended to be sceptical of newer output media.

This is slowly beginning to change but has led to a vicious circle of ossification where, on the one hand, the most prestigious journals have ridiculously long lead times to publication of

articles; and, on the other, the barriers to entry and eventual acceptance for new forms of dissemination remain formidable. If we stand back and reflect for a moment on the fundamental importance of getting new, validated research findings into a widely shared domain then these limitations and timelines look increasingly insane. It is not just the institutions which are sluggish let us also consider the role of publishers, timeline gatekeepers. Researchers do the research work, write it up and submit it, often laborious and challenging tasks, then, via the journal editorial process this is then normally, if considered within the scope of the journal, distributed to two or three reviewers in (ideally) a double-blind review process, work by the way undertaken in their own time. The review feedback is sent to the journal editor and back to the communicating author, with the loop being usually being traversed at least once more depending on the review outcomes. Once the editor is satisfied the final paper is then queued until sufficient papers are gathered to be submitted to the publisher for printing in the relevant issue of the journal. Most journals have a pipeline and of course each volume has a release schedule. A great number of submissions to a journal does not really translate into more volumes/issues per year regardless of quality as in general publishers constrain these. What happens is high volumes may transfer into high rejection ratios which many editors consider to be a badge of honour! I have worked with a number of publishers over the years and generally found them to be very supportive, however, in 2021 do journal publishers really do much more than market, print and distribute? The vast majority of the effort involved in ultimately generating the content for a journal is undertaken by the researchers, but it is the publishers who reap the financial benefits and introduce historical mechanisms and brakes on publication.

What does this mean for IFITT? As mentioned earlier we have a longstanding association with JITT which is published by Springer and under successively strong editorial stewardship has succeeded in establishing its niche in the journal landscape – it has taken time, but it is now on the institutional radar in many places. However, the move to open-source publications has gathered significant pace in recent years with more and more institutions recognising these and national research assessing bodies not only recognising but encouraging their use...*if something must happen ultimately*...I would argue that the time is now more than ripe for JITT to move fully online and be open-sourced under the auspices of IFITT or if not, IFITT should develop this channel directly. It is the future.

I have referred earlier to the potential opportunity for IFITT to perhaps catalyse research to help the sector recover, although to be clear I am by no means suggesting this research agenda should be the only game in town. That said, I have been at pains to point out that IFITT would benefit from reflecting on the over-emphasis on academia and research unless it is to revise its mission. This of course should be taken to mean growth in other areas under the scope of the mission and not a diminution of the importance and volume of research. However, a general truth in research is that research leaders continue to focus on area of expertise they have worked on previously and in which they have demonstrated competence. Their groups work on this and closely allied research areas and the research training is always in danger of producing comfort zones of least resistance often with Ph.D. graduates from the groups going on to establish individual work or similar groups emulating those of their supervisor. I would argue that the IFITT community despite its relative novelty has not escaped this trajectory and that now is the time to encourage a much greater degree of creativity and innovation in the research agendas – this is primarily but not exclusively a job for research leaders. Too much Ph.D. work in recent years has begun to look like simply a schedule for getting the qualification or becoming a supervisor clone. This may seem harsh, but I honestly believe IFTT can genuinely

help support the drive for meaningful, satisfying and timely research which pushes the boundaries of our ICT in Travel and Tourism.

Next, the ENTER model which of course has an integral connection to the other issues, what needs to change? You might think this is a rather silly question given the virtual nature of this year's conference! However, if ENTER 2021 had not been virtual what would have been different? It is still our highest profile flagship but is it addressing enough of our mission? This it seems to me throws the main challenge into sharp relief. If we are content with a steady-as-she-goes model for ENTER with the kind of attendee profile, we have seen in recent years then in effect this is a tacit acceptance that our mission perhaps needs to change. The logical progression for this is that ENTER becomes an entirely research paper focused conference, hosted by universities and to which is invited some sectoral speakers. Undeniably, it is an option and if adopted certainly the business and organisational model for ENTER would be greatly simplified. If this radical approach were adopted and IFITT still wished to retain its unaltered mission, then the missing elements would need to be addressed through further developments of the current outreach programmes with more targeted sectoral audiences. The alternative of course is to seek to continue down the path on which ENTER started and push for wider participation reaching a more representative cross-section of membership and participants in ENTER and beyond. It is not for me to say, but perhaps one mechanism for this would be to re-structure the IFITT Board to include a wide range of 'Advocates' from every sector under the mission's umbrella. These advocates would be non-voting members of the Board and indeed could be informally adopted without constitutional change, however, with the ongoing use of online meeting technologies it would in my opinion offer a nice bi-directional channel through which to elicit the best ways in which to encourage their relevant sectors into the community and to allow IFITT to further disseminate our activities and outputs back to these sectors.

I apologise for such a long piece but in my defence, it could easily have been ten times longer! So here is a selection of questions for consideration at a time when external forces have given us the opportunity to reflect and take stock of our future direction.

- Should our mission change?
- Should ENTER change?
- How do we engage with a broader cross-section of the sector?
- Should we seek to re-introduce and re-emphasise the science and technology aspects of IFITT and ENTER?
- How do we best open-source our community's research outputs?
- How can we stimulate more diverse and inspiring research work?

Professor Andrew J Frew

Following a Ph.D. in Synthetic Organic Chemistry, Andy left the world of pharmaceuticals behind to pursue a career in education leading also to a change in direction which included a spell, (1988-1991) running a Hotel Systems company. He held the position of Head of Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Queen Margaret University (QMU) in Edinburgh where he subsequently was appointed as Director of Research in the Business School. His appointment to the university in 2000 was notable in that he was awarded possibly the first specifically designated professorial chair in ICT and Tourism a field within which he has spent the rest of his career and currently holds the title of Emeritus Professor within QMU. Andy has engaged with a full spectrum of activities within the sector including supervising and widely

examining Ph.D. students, publishing regularly, active on editorial boards and a frequent conference speaker and keynote. Throughout, he has always maintained a constant link with industry through extensive consultancy work. Andy was privileged to serve as IFITT President (2004-2010) and also held the post of President of the Hospitality IT Association for a number of years. In 2018 he was the proud recipient of the Hannes Werthner Lifetime Achievement Award and now spends his semi-retirement apparently working harder than ever and still hoping to improve his ski-ing!