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Keynote Address

By

Tom Chapman
I'm delighted to be in Singapore and honored to be your guest speaker at this important workshop. As I reviewed the program recently it occurred to me how much I would have benefited from something like this when I first got a taste of travel communications. Then I was 22 years old and a graduate student in the school of journalism at a big U.S. university. To get a master's degree at this school one of the requirements was a thesis. As a thesis topic I chose a subject sure to get me into deep waters. My title was: "The public relations practices and policies of major U.S. airlines in the event of disaster." I must have been having bad dreams about flying.

Seeking case histories I sent off 25 letters to 25 different airlines--this was long before deregulation--and quickly discovered that my topic was not a favorite subject of the airlines. About 19 airlines answered my letter politely, but their message was brief: "This is not the sort of thing we like to talk about. Thank you for writing. Good luck."

One airline public relations executive wrote to complain. Why do newspapers always give an airline accident full-page treatment? In one year more people are kicked to death by donkeys in Missouri than are killed in
airliners? Why don't we read more about fatalities by donkeys?

I thought this was a silly observation. I asked a journalist for a comment about donkeys and airplanes. He wrote to say that if a donkey kicked 90 people to death at a donkey auction this would also be front-page news, at least at his newspaper.

One airline invited me to its head office where I was greeted by a charming vice president of public relations. He told me that the philosophy of his airline and most airlines in the event of disaster is directed toward consideration of the passenger. There is a moral obligation to ensure the mental comfort of each passenger, and their relatives. This long interview became the nucleus of my thesis.

I was at home writing the thesis when the vice president's airline had a major accident. Many people died. Others survived. One of the survivors, a doctor, complained to the press that the airline refused to buy his family train tickets home after they left the hospital. They wanted train tickets because they didn't want to fly. Who could blame them? He complained that the cabin crew had not adequately performed their duties. He said he'd never fly again. The press made a lot of noise about the doctor's comments. The publicity was all negative. The airline suffered. I felt sorry for the charming vice president who had told me the corporate line.

Next week I drove to the home of the doctor to interview him. He talked to me for six hours about the gap between the image of travel, and the reality. He said, "One moment we were happily flying to Hawaii, and the next moment I thought we were dead."

I finished the thesis. I sent a copy to the doctor. I sent a copy to the vice president of public relations of the
airline. The doctor gave his copy to a law firm which was representing the families of the victims of the accident. The thesis was used in court as evidence against the airline. The vice president of public relations wrote to say that he wouldn't have granted the interview if he'd known I was going to make his remarks public, and then give my work to lawyers. Everyone seemed unhappy, except me. I thought, who could have dreamed there would be so much controversy in an industry characterized by endless myth and sunshine and cheerfulness.

I took my graduate degree out into the bitter world, and tried to get a job. No airline would hire me. Yet from this experience I was moved to think that travel communications might be an challenging field, so full of difficult decisions as well as romance. Today the company I helped start in 1971 in Tokyo is one of the world's largest publishers of airline magazines. In retrospect, I see how life does work in strange ways. I am constantly reminded of the Chinese proverb: "There is no stopping an arrow once it is on the string."

These are heroic days for travel writers and travel writing. Some call it a revival of the good old days of travel writing. Has there ever been a time when so many people were writing about travel? On my desk at this moment is a pile of manuscripts reaching near to the ceiling, by writers from a dozen countries, all hoping to get published in one of our inflight magazines. Contemporary tourism is stimulating a new guidebook every week: big, fat, gaily written tomes, usually in small print. There is now more to read about traveling the world than we've ever wanted to know. Is tourism the new world religion, as a British writer recently suggested?
Travel communications is everywhere. Magazines, newspapers, television, radio, cable tv, inflight video, brochures, the back of airline tickets and boarding passes, slide presentations, books, posters, audio cassettes, shopping bags, calendars, menus, pamphlets, tee-shirts, news releases, and not so long ago I opened a fortune cookie in a Chinese restaurant in California to read “Pack your bags and take a trip before it’s too late.”

So I did, and I came to Singapore. I’m probably the first PATA speaker ever to be moved by a fortune cookie. But as I sit here I’m beginning to wonder about the standards of travel communications. Are they falling on sloppy times? Some travel writers are important. The great ones are influential and envied. But most travel writers get no respect. Many are unread. Many can’t write. A large number are not taken very seriously by their peers and contemporaries. Is it because too much travel writing is witless and abominable? Is it because there are no professional standards for travel writers? Is it because many so-called travel writers travel at someone else’s expense, and must then sing their song? Is it because too many travel publications are sponsored by big travel organizations? Is it because much travel writing tends to ignore the pressing controversial issues of the travel industry? Is it all of the above? Let us try at this workshop to answer some of these questions.

Thinking about these opening remarks I wondered what we might discuss in the next two days to help the field of travel communications regain a measure of respectability. How can we endow travel writers and travel writing with a new serious sense of purpose? How
do we improve the art of the writer? How can we turn travel lemons into lemonade, without deceiving the traveller? How can the travel journalist improve his relations with his friends and foes, the airlines, hotels, government tourist offices, tour organizers, and on the other hand, have the courage to speak his mind?

It always troubles me that many great travel writers really hate to be called travel writers. In an interview I once asked the Welsh writer Jan Morris, perhaps our greatest literary traveler today, if she likes to be characterized as a travel writer. Oh, I hate it, she said, because, you know, people think of freebies, don’t they, free air tickets and hotel rooms. She said she once did a reading in Los Angeles. She was asked to read something from her book on Venice. So she chose a really purple, lyrical passage she was fond of. She went on and on about going to the piazza and into the basilica and the great organ thundering and the lights and the golden screen above the altar. The minute she finished, a guy in the audience said, “Excuse me, did you have to pay to get in that church?” And she said, that’s when she thought she didn’t want to be a travel writer.

Even the old English bard and critic, Samuel Johnson, in the 18th century, was heard to gripe about travel writing. He wrote: “You have often heard me complain of finding myself disappointed by books of travels; I am afraid travel itself will end likewise in disappointment.”
I note that one of my assignments with this keynote speech is to excite you with the future prospects offered by the travel and tourism industry to communicators and identify the challenges that await you.

My feeling is that there are too many kinds of travel communications to cover in two days. Let's first define our parameters.

The most exalted kind of travel writing is the great literature of travel. This is usually contained between book covers, or in magazines like *Granta*. At this workshop I don't think we have to concern ourselves with the masters of the genre, except to say that writing a book about travel is the best way to avoid the monstrous, scandalous conflicts of interest that dominate much travel writing.

Then we have newspaper and magazine travel communications: the Sunday supplements, the consumer travel magazines, national, international, regional.

There's the business travel press.

There's corporate sponsored, controlled-circulation publications: the inflight magazines, the credit card magazines, the hotel magazines.

There's the travel trade press: magazines and newspapers.

There is the visual art of travel: the tv talk shows, film documentaries, the inflight video programs, the computer CD ROMs.

There's the publications of the national tourist organizations, the brochures you pick up at the airport or are mailed to you when you send in a coupon.

There is commercial travel writing: advertisements, and lavish travel brochures designed to inspire and motivate, the stuff of myth and ecstasy and illumination that advertising and pr agencies create.

And don't forget my fortune cookie.
In two days we have a lot to talk about.

I have four observations about travel writing. Maybe they’ll provoke you.

One: The line between fact and fiction in travel writing seems to be thinning out. Are we reading truth or is it fantasy? And does it matter?

In my interview with Jan Morris, after she said she didn’t like to be called a travel writer, she talked about the line that’s getting more and more blurred in the literary travel book. She told about having written for so many years about real cities that she thought she would write a book about a totally imaginary city. Which she did, a novel called Last Letters from Hav. She discovered, she said, that people didn’t care whether it was fiction or fact, and even booksellers didn’t care. The latter sometimes put it on the travel bookshelf. “And people,” she said, “write to me about Hav just as they write to me about Venice or New York. I began to wonder whether it had been worth all the bother of going to those other places, if you can just make it up anyway. Everybody’s just as happy.”

Observation two: Most travelers have no interest in reading about the travel experience. I’m not even convinced they really care about what they’re seeing when they travel. I wonder, is mass tourism and the pleasure principle motive of most world travel diminishing the value of travel communications? How long can the exotic remain exotic?

A couple years ago in Geneva I interviewed the man who for a half-century was the dominant figure in the
encyclopedia-guidebook industry. He is Louis Nagle, now 84 years old and still an active publisher. In 1989 his company had published more than 175 titles and 100,000 pages of guidebooks, which were once considered bibles for serious, studious travelers. Think of that: 100,000 pages. These are amazing books, even today. His guide to China, a classic publishing event, had 1,504 pages plus maps. The Chinese government purchased it for reference. In my interview Mr. Nagle told me that he had always held ambitions to be the first person to do a guidebook on the whole planet. He thought he could change the world by creating guidebooks for everyman—the common tourist. His inclination was that, with increasing earning power and compulsory education, people would seek more knowledge, would read more, and study more, and want to learn more about other countries.

Boy, was he mistaken. He discovered he was wrong about the depth of travelers' curiosity. "They get off a charter flight, they go to the beach and eat and then make love," Nagel told me. "As they leave, another plane arrives. Meanwhile, the first group is saying, where were we? Was it Greece or Spain, or was it anywhere?" This supported his argument that people didn't really care where they were traveling and it was his biggest disappointment.

Nagel guides are hard to find in bookstores these days. Who wants to travel with 1,500 pages?

Observation three: Travel writing is being slaughtered by cliches and adjectives. But can there be effective travel communications without them?
My good friend, the Bangkok writer William Warren, has just sent me a humorous manuscript which he has called "Why I Gave Up Writing Guidebooks." He claims that writing guidebooks is hazardous to good mental health. He writes that people produce guidebooks for two reasons: one is to share an intimate knowledge of some very remote and unknown place, the other is to make money, usually for the publisher rather than the writer. One of the reasons why he'll never write another guidebook is because there are only so many ways to describe natural surroundings without courting madness. He asks: how many ways can you describe a beach? Snow-white sands. Translucent or crystal-clear waters. Lapping surf. Palm-fringed. Sun-drenched. Pristine. And every conceivable variation of "blue." Most guidebooks today cover the same territory, over and over, claims Mr. Warren. They mainly rely on clever art directors and snappy titles to create an illusion of originality.

Observation four: Many travel writers aren't respected by their peers in the travel industry. Often a strong adversarial relationship exists between the travel press and the travel industry, to the detriment of the entire industry. Is it because writers and reporters are lazy, poorly educated and vastly uninformed? Is it because corporations are dishonest and distrustful? Is it because companies are unprepared to have problems?

Here is what a feisty veteran airline pr director told me recently: Never underestimate the ignorance of a journalist.

Then he added: There are very few good travel trade reporters these days. The standard of knowledge in the travel trade press was much higher 20 years ago. Trade
writers used to know what they were writing about. These
days a lot of journalists don't do their homework. They
don't brush up on their knowledge. He says, there is
maybe only a handful of people in the world, aside from
the major aviation industry press, who can write well about
aviation affairs and the complex technicalities of the
aviation industry.

A lot of media coverage of aviation is grossly
inaccurate, he continued. Not only does the inaccuracy
hinder the probe for the real truth, it also creates a lasting
misconception in the minds of the public. Then when the
final truth comes out it may not even be believed.

He said: good news is no news. The media likes a
nice warm, human story, but basically they thrive on the
misfortunes of others. Because today's world is a harsh
world, all manner of things can go wrong: computer
systems break down, economic and financial problems dog
us, terrorism, crime, equipment recalls, destruction of
the natural environment, human error and acts of nature.
haunt us Standing by, waiting for corporations to put their
feet wrong, are the mass media.

He concluded: both media people and PR people
don't read enough, don't write enough, and both often lack
basic communication skills. Reading and writing is hard
work and these days people don't like hard work.

One danger of inviting an editor and writer to speak
at a communicators workshop is that he'll only want to talk
about writing. But I hope you'll agree with me when I say
that the best reason to be here is to talk about good
writing, which means we've actually gathered here to talk
about difficult and hard work. The American novelist Kurt
Vonnegut says writing allows even a stupid person to seem
halfway intelligent, if only that person will write the same thought over and over again, improving it just a little bit every time. Anyone can do it. All it takes is time.

Learning to communicate with style, substance and originality is a good reason to have a workshop like this. I would add that the future of quality travel communications depends on your ability to write clearly, accurately and and sometimes imaginatively about people and places and things. Writing well is the single most important skill you will ever have in this business.

I realize that the modern travel and tourism communicator is immersed in wonderful new communication technologies. But I also feel that these technologies pale before the sheer pleasures of writing or reading. My word processor is a beautiful machine to behold, but the dumb thing has never uttered a creative or productive thought without me pushing and proding. Technology has made me a faster writer, but not a better one. Writing is problem solving, and you have to do it all by yourself.

Photographers and illustrators and art directors will say to me: what about us, we take the beautiful pictures and do the distinctive layouts? I am not moved by this. In travel communications, it all starts with the word. If you want to motivate people to travel, you have to master the craft of good, clean writing that is warm, alive and free of jargon. You have to nurture a deep involvement in language. The beautiful color photographs can follow.

Some of the things we are going to talk about in the next two days are how to generate travel writing ideas, where to find the inspiration for good stories in your head, how to live and breathe good writing, how to create a memorable style, and how to decide what is interesting and what is not. We are going to look at the virtues and
the pain of good travel writing and communications. And we are, I hope, going to take the appealing advice of the writer William Zinsser, when he said "what raises travel writing to literature is not what the writer brings to a place, but what a place brings out of the writer."

Aside from a serious examination of good writing, there are two other important areas of travel communications that I think it essential we investigate at this workshop. The first is how to deal with the growing issues of travel pollution and cries for conservation; the other is the conflict of interest between travel writers and the quasi-corporate sponsorship of much of their work. The two issues go hand and glove.

Let me set the scene by reading a brief passage from a new and often funny novel by the British writer David Lodge. One of his characters says:

"Tourism is wearing out the planet. The footpaths in the Lake District have become trenches. The frescos in the Sistine Chapel are being damaged by the breath and body-heat of spectators. A hundred and eight people enter Notre Dame every minute: their feet are eroding the floor and the buses that bring them there are rotting the stonework with exhaust fumes. Pollution from cars queueing to get to Alpine ski resorts is killing the trees and causing avalanches and landslides. The Mediterranean is like a toilet without a chain: you have a one in six chance of getting an infection if you swim in it. In 1987 they had to close Venice one day because it was full. In 1963 forty-four people went down the Colorado river on a raft, now there are a thousand trips a day. In 1939 a million people travelled abroad; last year it was four hundred million. By
the year 2000 there could be six hundred and fifty million international travellers, and five times as many people travelling in their own countries. The mere consumption of energy entailed is stupendous."

How should the travel communicator deal with controversial issues? Must we ignore them all for the good of the industry?

Two weeks ago I was in Honolulu when a newspaper headline in a local paper caught my eye. Here it is: HAWAII BEACHES TRASHED. The story notes that Hawaii's beaches are among the dirtiest in the United States, averaging more than 1,200 pounds of plastic, paper, glass and other trash per mile of shoreline. Shocking! I've read hundreds of stories and books about Hawaii, but I didn't know this. And then I started to wonder: what if I was a travel writer and the Hawaii Visitors Bureau invited me to visit Hawaii on an expense-paid junket, to promote these lovely isles? And in the middle of my trip I noticed this newspaper, with its provocative headline. As a responsible writer how should I deal with trashy beaches? Should I call a place paradise if its shorelines are filthy? Is my obligation to my hosts or to my readers? How should a serious travel writer handle such an alarming story? What are his alternatives? Are travel writers on a freebie always vulnerable to the truth? How should the travel communicator deal with poverty and pestilence, AIDS, sexual tourism, political and racial upheavals that disturb normal travel patterns? There is no doubt in my mind that we deal with these things with surprising meekness. The travel industry does not like unwholesome themes. We outlaw them. We prefer glamour and paradise and gorgeousness.

The historian Paul Fussell has noted that the travel industry often fails to prepare the tourist for his
experience, which makes tourism always something less than the ecstasy proposed. The sense that he is being swindled and patronized, or that important intelligence is being withheld from him, must trouble even the dimmest traveler at one time or another.

My colleagues at Cathay Pacific Airways tell me that the airline communications policy with our inflight magazine Discovery and other publications is not to take stands on controversial issues, or to make inflammatory statements. However—and this is an important however—Cathay Pacific doesn’t stand in the way of discussing controversial issues. This considerable editorial freedom allows us to publish a relevant, highly readable magazine that deals with subjects of interest to educated, affluent, professional travelers—the meat and gravy of Cathay’s revenues. Why else do an inflight magazine?

Inside the airline, though, where travel writers are often invited on free junkets, there is a somewhat different feeling. I was told by Nick Britton, Cathay’s senior publications editor, that when the airline invites writers on a press trip Cathay naturally expects positive media coverage of the event. In fact, it’s an unwritten understanding. Says Mr. Britten, to his travel writers, “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” On a positive note, he says he would never ask to preview or alter an article after it was written.

Since the public relations staff of Japan Airlines was the winner of the best airline media/public relations award in 1991 given by the magazine Air Transport World, I went to talk to Geoffrey Tudor, JAL’s director of international PR.
He said: When a freelance writer comes to me for a ticket to Hokkaido because he wants to write about the suffering of the aborigines, I think twice. If he later writes, I flew to the aborigine concentration camp courtesy of JAL, I don't want to read that. Usually I'll give him half-fare and let it go at that.

The limits of hospitality need watching, said Mr. Tudor. How far do you go? He said: "If we invite people on a trip, I want some exposure. If it's an inaugural flight to a new destination, I want some news even before service is inaugurated. Overall, what we're looking for when we bring a media group to Japan is an objective report on their experience, given in a reasonable style. We never make conditions. We do try to select the media carefully, when we invite them."

Planning is the key. The way JAL works is to always provide good story material and then make sure all arrangements work well. They give the travel writers ample free time for their own interests, and offer them assistance if they need it for their stories. Or leave them alone, if they wish. "We never set conditions," says Tudor. "We find that we don't need to if we've done our work properly."

Tudor has this advice to travel PR people: Choose your writers carefully. The struggling freelance writer today may be the hot travel writer of tomorrow.

He has this advice to travel writers: Don't abuse the system.

I've been writing about my travel experiences for 20 years and today, for the first time, I'm going to confess what I've been offered as part of my hospitality by
governments and travel industry organizations along the way. Here is the partial list:

Tickets, food, beds, gold, money, pens, calculators, books, sunglasses, tee-shirts, jackets, perfume, sandals, music recordings, brochures, paintings, neckties, folkart, plates, radios, clocks, cups, glasses, dolls, and women.

The women I had to leave behind; everything else I could take home.

Some of these things I accepted, and others I didn't. I'm going to leave it to you to decide whether or not my objectivity might have been prejudiced in any way by these humble gifts.

Many freelance writers need the help they get to travel to distant places and write stories. I hope they do not have to feel obligated to their hospitality when they sit down to write.

I don't know a single freelance travel writer who wouldn't rather pay his own way, if he or she could afford it. The trouble is, travel writing doesn't pay very much. A writer told me recently that the only way out of the problem is for magazines and newspapers to pay more for good travel writing. She added, fat chance for that.

I would say to travel organization representatives here today: please do not embarrass writers with your generous hospitality. Be sensible.

I would say to travel writers: never accept gifts that corrupt your best judgment. Be sensible.

I hope I am setting the stage for a productive workshop, as I was asked to do. I have an inkling that the future development of the travel industry rests as much in the hands of travel communicators as it does in the hands of the airlines and hotel people and tour operators. It
might be said that unless travelers know what a place is like, probably they'll never want to go there. In your capable hands, you have the abilities to take them places they want to go—and places they've never been before. What greater power could you ever want!?

I close with this memory. In 1989, I was in Egypt to do some travel writing. In Cairo friends arranged for me to interview Naguib Mahfouz, the celebrated novelist and the first Arab to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Flabbergasted that Nobel laureates would speak to travel writers, I jumped at the chance. Mr. Mahfouz was 77 years old, with health problems, a hearing aid, thick glasses, and a hearty laugh. What a wonderful man! We worked through a translator: I asked questions in English, they were interpreted to Mr. Mahfouz in Arabic, and then he responded to me in fluent English. We talked about how the visitor could get to know Cairo in a hurry. It's a difficult, chaotic, confusing city. He had cautious descriptive answers to my questions. Finally I said, "Please let me ask one last controversial question. If for some reason you were put in a room with Salman Rushdie, the other writer, what might you say to him, as one writer to another?" When she heard the question, the translator, an Egyptian woman, muttered loudly, "Oh my God." But she quickly translated.

Mahfouz paused. He became serious. He leaned forward. He frowned. Then he addressed me: "I would say to Rushdie, every writer is free to believe or disbelieve. But no matter, he must deliver his thoughts with respect to others."

Many times I've thought about Mr. Mahfouz' answer. Lately I've come to the conclusion that he would have made a very good travel writer.