Defining Social Media: the importance of historical context

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In advancing any definition of social media, one must take into consideration why and how social media first came about. Having an understanding of the historical and functional reasons for the existence of social media, one is better placed to approach questions of regulation. The aim here is to avoid potential misunderstandings of what social media is and how it functions within society and thereby avoid the risk of dismissing social media as a simplistic fad of the masses or any other pejorative descriptions that some pundits (usually non-participants) advance. How one defines 'social media' will have corresponding relationships to how it is perceived for the purpose of how and whether or not to regulate.

Law – a function of time and of ethics

To properly define social media, it is pertinent to trace the development of social media from its electronic inception and the following posts will endeavour to do just that. This is because laws 'are posited … and created by human beings,'[1] and are predicated on the basis of a range of variables that the lawmakers at the time deem necessary – such variables are said to be linked to the moral standards at that juncture in time.[2] Therefore, any law pertaining to regulate social media is defined by the relevant lawmaking authority pursuant to a definition in time and place of that lawmaking authority. For example, if social media is defined in terms as something that is harmful or detrimental to the overall social fabric then it can be asserted that any corresponding law will be based on that perception. Likewise, if at the time, social media is viewed as a fundamental tool, crucial to fulfilling the social and economic dimensions of humanity, then the regulation of social media will be judged in that light. Problems arise of course, when there are clear instances of both harmful and beneficial aspects that stem from social media.

The question is whether it is at all possible to fully define social media given the diverse uses and complexity that is characteristic of its current use by hundreds of millions of people who are interacting with social media at any one point in time. A further question lies in selecting which definition of social media is appropriate since this requires a value judgment on the worth of social media.

In answer to the first question, it is possible to elucidate meaning from observing social media in a range of contexts in order to come up with a general definition. This definition should strive to incorporate a broad array of characteristics that fully describe social media – including both the harm and the benefits.

Therefore, in order to define social media, it is not advisable to reduce the meaning of social media to one statement. Rather it is crucial to have an understanding of the historical, social, political, economic and technical contexts where social media exists.

[1] Frederick Schauer and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *The Philosophy of Law: Classic and Contemporary Readings with Commentary* (Harcourt Brace College, 1996) 29.
[2] Ibid.