

Freedom of Speech in a Digital Age

There is no question that the exponential growth in digital communication over the past five to ten years has brought great benefit to all sectors of society. All of us rely heavily on the internet or our mobile phones to receive and transmit information of every description. It could be said that such reliance has now become dependence – as proven last weekend when the modem at my home decided to malfunction leaving me with no internet connection and greatly frustrated!

The growth of the digital age, however, has raised questions of privacy and freedom of speech. You will have heard about the action of the founder of WikiLeaks to bring to public attention thousands of documents relating to military activities of the USA, the United Kingdom and the Iraqi defence forces. The release of this material on the world wide web was staunchly opposed by western governments and military authorities on the grounds that such disclosures would place operations in jeopardy and the well-being of active servicemen and women at risk. To WikiLeaks, however, their action was simply a matter of freedom of speech and the right of a public at large to have access to such information.

Another case in the media spotlight in recent months regards the popular website TripAdvisor. This company provides excellent information to those planning a business trip or holiday to destinations around the world. It is the site of choice for many people who are looking for information on hotels, airlines and other travel services. The popularity of the site is based on the posting of comments from people who have stayed at a hotel or eaten at a particular restaurant. As one would expect, the ratings given in these postings embrace a wide range of opinions although at the end of the day an overall impression can be formed. One would not question the right of a customer to comment on their experiences – good or bad. However, what an increasing number of service providers are deeply concerned about are the comments posted by anonymous consumers. A flood of nameless negative comments, particularly when unsubstantiated, might place in jeopardy the livelihood of the owners of a small hotel or restaurant. What is not known is whether these anonymous postings have come from a competitor or a disgruntled former employee. The dilemma for TripAdvisor is whether to allow freedom of speech to take its course or to enact some degree of censorship of the comments posted to its site.

One company that should, in my opinion, introduce censorship of user comments is YouTube. I often turn to YouTube to remember singers and groups from my youth, only to be bombarded by disgusting comments below the video clip from registered users. More often than not these remarks are not about the music clip but rather a tirade of abuse directed at those who posted earlier comments. Is this freedom of speech or simply carte blanche to say whatever one likes?

A website that I do refer to regularly is Wikipedia. This has become my 'instant reference' although I always check the accuracy of what it uploaded to this public encyclopedia. Unfortunately, even Wikipedia needs to tackle the issue of material that might be malicious, unfounded or simply inaccurate. Three years ago the SPC page on Wikipedia contained damaging remarks about two purported former students – remarks that were flatly untrue. To the credit of proof readers at Wikipedia, the material was eventually removed.

Comments posted on social networks, particularly Facebook, or distributed via Twitter, can also create harm and damage to individuals and organisations. Unlike TripAdvisor and Wikipedia, however, people have the choice of belonging or not belonging to a network group. Freedom of speech remains intact on Facebook- even if we might not like or agree with what is written!

It is somewhat sobering to remember that Wikipedia was created 9 years ago; Facebook 6 years ago; Twitter 4 years ago; and WikiLeaks only in recent times. One is left wondering what the next decade will bring.

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