Democratic potential of the Fifth Estate

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An emerging network of individuals is enabling new ways of holding government, media and other institutions more to account, but its vitality is threatened by other estates of the Internet realm.

Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign illustrated the potential of a new, Internet-enabled political force of fund raisers, bloggers and social networkers who organize activities and post opinions and video clips online. The 2010 British general-election campaign was more centred on traditional mass media, particularly Britain's first TV debates among the main political-party leaders. Yet thousands of networked individuals also played an important role, for instance through rapid discussions and criticisms of the debates through live Twitter feeds, blogs and Facebook interactions.

Research at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) suggests that these examples are illustrative of the emergence of a new 'Fifth Estate,'[1] which both complements and challenges the traditional Fourth Estate of one-to-many mass media. The concept of 'estates of the realm' originally related to divisions in feudal society between the clergy, nobility and commoners (shown in Figure 1) and later (in the US) to the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government.

The Fifth Estate is not simply an extension or adjunct to traditional communication media. It reveals key uses of the Internet to enhance the 'communicative power' of individuals rather than institutions by enabling them to network locally and globally in ways that reconfigure their access to information, people and other resources.[2] This interplay between ever-changing networks of networks in the Fifth Estate can hold other estates more socially accountable, but does not mean that the Internet inevitably empowers its users.

Instead, we see individuals capable of networking with information and people in ways that can create a Fifth Estate role in relation to more institutionalized centres of authority. This is possible because individuals can gain access through the Internet to resources that lie outside more traditional institutions, such as their local newspaper or government. This happens as people increasingly go online, through search engines and social-networking sites, to find information and communicate

Figure 1. *Clerk, knight and workman. (From http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cleric-Knight-Workman.jpg.)*

with people rather than going to a place such as their local library, university or government.

Networked individuals involved in a particular sphere, such as medical professionals and patients, can reach trusted online sources of information and services in their field of interest. These can complement or challenge traditional institutions. Growing numbers within institutions rooted in the other estates are also networking beyond the boundaries of their organizations, such as when geographically distributed individuals come together online to form 'collaborative network organizations' (CNOs).[3] The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia and open-source software products such as the Firefox Web browser are examples of how CNOs can support the co-production of products and services.

The Fifth Estate is a global phenomenon fuelled by a critical mass of users rather than depending on universal Internet

Table 1. *Threats to the Fifth Estate from established institutions.*

Traditional estate	Modern parallel	Type of threat
1st: Clergy	Public intellectual	Internet seen as a space for amateurs without the knowledge and analytical rigour of experts.
2nd: Nobility	Economic elites	Centralization of information utilities and commercialization of Fifth Estate spaces.
3rd: Commons	Government	Censorship, regulation and other controls to constrain and block Internet access.
4th: Press	Mass media	Imitating and competing with the Fifth Estate.
Mob	Citizens, audiences, consumers, spammers, hackers	Malicious and accidental uses that undermine trust and confidence in the Internet.

access. This is why a Fifth Estate is visible in China and other developing nations that have large Internet user numbers, although these represent a relatively small proportion of their respective populations.

However, the success of the Internet's role in challenging traditional institutions is creating tensions with, and threats from, other estates of the Internet realm. These include issues such as government regulation (e.g., censorship laws), commercialization and malicious users among the lay public (which 19th Century philosopher Edmund Burke might have called 'the Mob'). Table 1 summarizes these threats.

The democratizing potential of the Fifth Estate could be lost if inappropriate forms of Internet regulation are introduced. Related OII research,[4] therefore, focuses on understanding the Fifth Estate to help inform wider debate on its social and political implications. A key aim is to guide regulators in approaches to effective protection of those participating in this transformative network of networks.

References

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