
CHAPTER 1

FOUR ESTATES OF THE REALM: COULD WEBLOGS BECOME THE FIFTH?

Throughout history, the relationship between governments and society has been a complicated mix of dominance, complicity, and mutual coercion. Even in the most authoritarian states, pressure from various social groups has never been completely absent, be it from the clergy, the nobility, or, to a lesser extent, the commoners. Like today, governments that ruled centuries ago could benefit from thoroughly defined political structures and effective distribution of roles within society. The latter was particularly characteristic of the feudal social order and in many aspects defined the political and economic development of states featuring it. The separation of social roles in many medieval societies was characterized by the emergence of the so-called *Three Estates*, or social classes: broadly defined, these were the Clergy, the Nobility, and the Peasantry. Each *estate* had its own role and privileges within a society, and some, particularly the clergy, exercised a striking amount of pressure on the monarch and his entourage throughout the Middle Ages.

Many experts agree that *estates* were able to play such an important role in medieval political life because of the high level of decentralization in the medieval feudal societies. Interestingly, many of today's Western governments are also seen as being decentralized, and are thus prone to the external influence of various forces within society. Growing democratic freedoms have already certainly played their role in limiting the power of the countries' leaders and allowing various social groups to have an important impact on government decisions and political course. In light of these political changes, as well as due to the development of the modern political thought, the concept of *estates* has evolved and matured.

Following the works of Montesquieu on the separation of powers, or *trias politica*,¹ the medieval concept of three *estates* has found a new meaning in the modern world: today, this term is applied

to the three functions of the state – executive, legislative, and judicial. Under the model developed by Montesquieu, each of these branches of state power has separate and independent powers and areas of responsibility; yet, each branch is also capable of placing limited restraints on the power exerted by the other branches. The way each state performs these functions is an important criterion in analyzing its overall political ideology and course of action. Each of these newly defined *estates* is a crucial part of the modern political process and an inherent component of a functioning democratic society.

However, the modern power *estates* are not limited to the branches of the government. For over two centuries, a “fourth estate” has been playing an important role in the democratic process. This term, said to have been coined in the late 18th century by Anglo-Irish political theorist and philosopher Edmund Burke,² first referred to the print press, and later came to symbolize the media as a whole. It was broadly used throughout the 19th century, both informally and in official sources, as a widely recognized reference to the media, and served as the title for F. Knight Hunt’s 1850 publication “The Fourth Estate: Contributions Towards a History of Newspapers, and of the Liberty of the Press.”³ Since then, the expression has become “naturalized” not only in the Anglophone world, but well beyond it. The 1997 Jeffrey Archer novel “The Fourth Estate,” which tells the story of two media moguls and their quest to control the world’s biggest media empire, gave the term additional currency.⁴

The media’s role in defending the public interest and in fulfilling the role of a watchdog on government’s activities has been heavily debated, analyzed, and investigated, and its power on the political scene and influence on the policy-making process cannot be denied. In the past ten years the spread of the Internet and other advanced technologies has had a dramatic effect on the way people access and perceive information. Major national media outlets have ceased to be only easily accessible source of news. Nowadays, virtually anyone who has access to the Internet or to satellite television can receive direct news updates from the world’s leading news agencies and consult hundreds of independent or even fringe media sources. Moreover, common citizens are increasingly taking part in the daily news exchange by providing their comments and sharing their opinions via so-called “weblogs,” or blogs – online sites with little or no external control run by individuals who share their views with other Internet users on a variety of different issues.

The remarkable changes that modern media have gone through over the past decade, as well as the emergence of blogs and other alternative sources of news and opinions, have been part of the process dubbed the “information technology revolution,” or “digital revolution,” which has transformed the way people perceive world events and applied growing pressure on policy makers by making them aware of the increasing (and in a certain sense imposed) transparency of their political actions. Today, information and news, public policy, and national and international political discourse are no longer the exclusive domain of politicians and professional reporters.⁵ The emergence of blogs has allowed regular citizens with no political or journalistic background to reach a substantial Web audience, make their voices heard, and have a real effect on public opinion and policy making. **The potential and real influence of blogs on policy-shaping, and the impact they have already had on numerous facets of international politics, including elections, media reporting from zones of conflict, and corporate and congressional policies, have led us to claim that blogs deserve the title of the “fifth estate.”**

Blogs are often seen as a natural evolution of traditional media, and some observers believe that blogs will be able to eventually replace it entirely. It is hard to predict whether such possibility is real, but finding out whether or not such development is possible is not the most exciting challenge. More interesting and valid questions to ask oneself could be the role that blogs will play in the policy making of the future, their acceptance by the general public, evolution of their relations with the media, their ability to establish themselves as credible and efficient sources of information and their potential of becoming a useful tool for communicating public opinion to policy makers.

The analysis that follows will allow us to determine whether the “blogosphere” has indeed reached the status of a “fifth estate” or has a true potential to do so in the future. It will also propose recommendations and guidelines to enhance their role in present-day policy making and make it a more credible and powerful communication tool in the years to come.