

WINTER 2023/24

WHITE PAPER

RETHINK DISRUPTION:  
**THE RISE OF THE  
FIFTH ESTATE**



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# **Rethink Disruption:** The Rise of the Fifth Estate

**Winter 2023/24**

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The background is a dark blue field filled with vibrant, multi-colored light trails and bokeh. The light trails, in shades of red, orange, yellow, and cyan, form a series of overlapping, wavy lines that create a sense of motion and depth. Scattered throughout the scene are numerous out-of-focus light spots, or bokeh, in various colors including blue, red, and white, adding to the abstract and futuristic aesthetic.

# INTRODUCTION

**In an increasingly interconnected world, public discourse and individual opinions are informed and shaped by a multitude of factors and shifting dynamics.**

Gone are the days when the public agenda was set exclusively by established centers of power—most notably, governments and other public institutions, business, and traditional media. Today, a new sociocultural power has emerged: the Fifth Estate, made up of independent commentators, alternative media, grassroots advocates, and cultural movements. Thanks to the breakneck speed at which digital and social media platforms have expanded, these nontraditional sources of influence increasingly shape how people act and think about life, politics, and societal issues.

By harnessing the power of the internet, the Fifth Estate creates new spaces for public dialogue, bringing

together and mobilizing people around shared interests, values, and causes. This new dynamic challenges traditional forms of power, allowing diverse—and previously overlooked—perspectives to come to the fore.

This pervasive and ever-strengthening societal force can wield its power for good or ill.

On the one hand, the Fifth Estate holds the potential to be a force of positive change, empowering individuals and communities to amplify their voices and advocate for better. By contributing to participatory democracy and equalizing access to information, the Fifth Estate can boost innovation and knowledge sharing, creating a more informed and inclusive society. Importantly, it can create spaces where the traditional centers of power and the public meet to devise a radically better path forward.

Conversely, the growing power of the Fifth Estate can be used to accelerate





the spread of misinformation and polarization, promoting “alternative facts” and ill-informed ideologies that further erode the societal fabric.

In a time of intense global challenges and flux, understanding both the positive potential of this transformative power and its pitfalls is critical for any organization that seeks to drive innovation and positive change. As this nontraditional force continues to evolve, individuals and organizations alike have a responsibility to harness its power for good.

Our hope is that this white paper will spark a conversation on the changes the Fifth Estate is bringing to the public discourse today and how it may affect society in the future. Crucially, the paper explores how we can collectively ensure the Fifth Estate becomes a trustworthy and constructive force. Only by championing critical thinking, collaboration, and a renewed insistence on fact over falsehoods can we set society on a better path.



**PEOPLE  
DRIVING CHANGE**

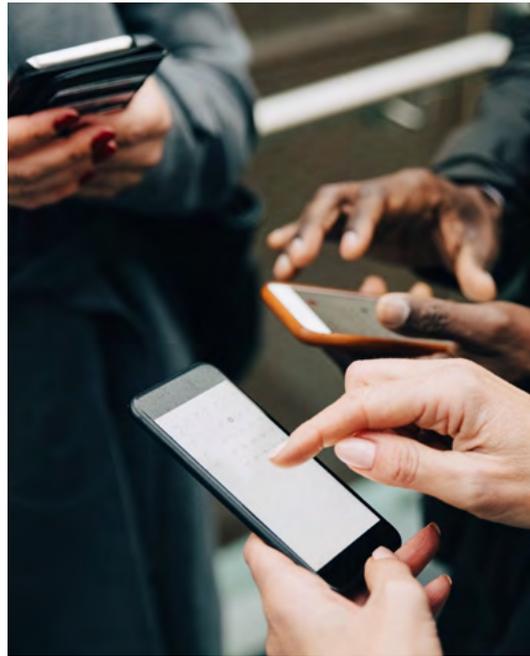
## Addressing big global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and public health crises requires broad societal action.

We can see, for example, that efforts to decarbonize the world's economies will succeed only once all entities—governments, businesses and other organizations, and citizens and consumers—change their behavior, priorities, and choices. For such a shift to happen at the necessary pace and scale, individuals cannot rely on businesses and institutions to act on their behalf. Rather than being passive beneficiaries of innovation, people must actively engage in the public discourse on issues that affect them. They must become change agents, motivated and empowered to bring about the positive change they seek.

Harnessed correctly, the Fifth Estate can catalyze people-driven change by providing platforms through which individuals can voice their perspectives and challenge traditional narratives. This dynamic interplay not only would amplify marginalized voices but could

also accelerate social, political, and cultural shifts.

To create a better future for people and the planet, it is imperative, therefore, that businesses, policymakers, governments, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) understand and embrace the power of the Fifth Estate in a responsible way to accelerate change.



## PMI Viewpoint



### Cigarettes belong in museums.

—Jacek Olczak, CEO

Philip Morris International (PMI) is on a mission to end cigarette smoking as quickly as possible. Embracing the role of individuals and encouraging a people-centric debate involving policymakers, public health authorities, and civil society is critical to achieving that goal.

Doing away with cigarettes would be an immensely positive disruption for the estimated 1.1 billion people worldwide who smoke today and for global public health. To champion and accelerate this change, PMI has transformed its entire business model. For well over a decade, the company has shifted its focus away from cigarettes in favor of developing and responsibly commercializing smoke-

free products that are scientifically substantiated to be less harmful than smoking. As of September 2023, more than a third of PMI's total net revenues come from these products and its ambition is to be a substantially smoke-free company by 2030, with over two-thirds of its total net revenues coming from smoke-free products. As PMI CEO Jacek Olczak has made clear: "Cigarettes belong in museums."

There's no doubt that the best choice any smoker can make is to quit tobacco and nicotine altogether. But we know that many won't. By empowering every adult who would otherwise continue to smoke to switch to a better alternative, we can make cigarette smoking—the most harmful form of nicotine consumption—obsolete.

Such transformative change, however, is a whole-of-society pursuit that requires the active involvement of tobacco companies, regulators, and the public health community to enable adults who smoke to switch to the better alternatives now available.



To accomplish this, every innovation, policy, and debate in this space must center not on ideology or one-sided arguments but on the voices, needs, and aspirations of those most directly impacted: adult smokers seeking a better path forward.

We can significantly accelerate the transition away from cigarettes by empowering those adults who would otherwise continue to smoke to change to better alternatives. The key to progress: enacting policies that build awareness and increase the acceptability, availability, and affordability of these better products. Crucially, this is about embracing a people-centric debate—based on science and free of misinformation—that acknowledges that it is adults who currently smoke who will ultimately make cigarettes obsolete through their choices and actions. It's our shared responsibility to empower them to effect that change—for their benefit and the benefit of society.

A close-up photograph of a hand pointing at a document. The scene is bathed in a strong blue light, creating a futuristic or digital atmosphere. The hand is in the foreground, with the index finger pointing towards the center of the frame. The document below is slightly out of focus, showing some text. The overall composition is centered and balanced.

# SHIFTING REALMS OF POWER AND INFLUENCE

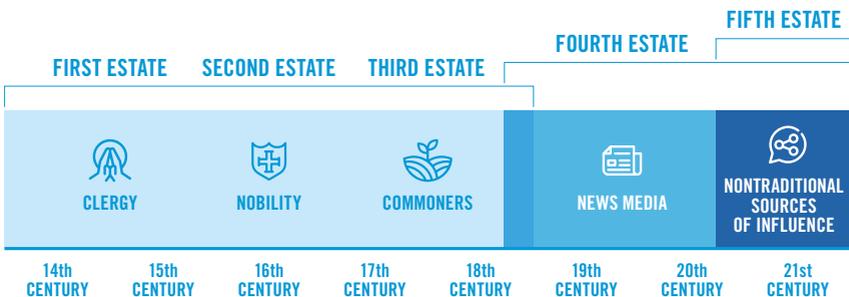
## The use of the term *estate* to describe realms of influence dates back to feudal Europe.

In prerevolutionary France, the *Estates-General* was a representative assembly made up of the clergy (First Estate), nobility (Second Estate), and commoners and the bourgeoisie (Third Estate). Different countries created systems to give those three estates a say in running the country, though power largely accrued to the first two.

Then came the Fourth Estate: the news media. In the 18th century, members of the British Parliament noticed outsiders following the proceedings and taking notes. As one commented: “The gallery in which

the reporters sit has become a fourth estate of the realm.” Those reporters were pioneers of the Fourth Estate.

Little could those 18th-century journalists with their quill pens have imagined the channels of communication and influence that would develop and give the Fourth Estate make-or-break power. In the ensuing two centuries, mass-circulation newspapers and magazines, then cinema, radio, and television dominated the dissemination of information. Neither could their 20th-century counterparts have been prepared to be scornfully dismissed as “traditional” or mainstream media (read: antiquated) and to find themselves increasingly displaced by yet another massive power, which has come to be known as the Fifth Estate.



While the advent of the internet and social media is credited for the rise of the Fifth Estate, there is another—perhaps more crucial—factor that led to this disruptive shift. The declining trust in mainstream media, public institutions, and their representatives has made people rethink where and how they consume news and which information sources they can trust.

Much like the platforms that have spurred its growth, the Fifth Estate has the potential to be a positive or negative force. It can spearhead a return to the original promise of social media and the internet—“bringing people closer together” and “making the world’s information universally accessible and useful”—or it can morph into a space where algorithms prevail, favoring echo chambers, clickbait content, and divisive debates. Its impact can go in a million directions, but one thing is clear: The people who make up the Fifth Estate have the power to determine its fate.

## The Rise of the Fifth Estate

Birthered by the exponential growth of digital media, the internet, and social

networks, the Fifth Estate is a shape-shifting, 21st-century newcomer and a source of burgeoning sociopolitical power and influence.

Some people think the Fifth Estate is just another way of referring to social media. They’re mistaken. Social media is but one of the digital tools members of this realm use to coalesce, grow, and wield influence.

So, if professional journalists and news organizations make up the Fourth Estate, who can claim membership in the fifth? To answer that question, it is helpful to compare the two.

Members of the Fourth Estate typically work in hierarchical organizational structures and run their output through editorial processes. They deliver content through traditional broadcast and print media. Their operations are costly, and they are funded through advertising and/or subscriptions. Some are owned by corporations such as Bertelsmann, News Corp, Hearst, and Lagardère. Others, such as Britain’s BBC, Qatar’s Al Jazeera, and France Médias Monde, are owned or funded by the state. Decades of

consolidation have resulted in most of the Fourth Estate being owned by conglomerates or big organizations.

In contrast, the Fifth Estate exists in a dynamic and continually evolving landscape of nontraditional nodes of power. It encompasses an enormous and diverse range of individual contributors and groups, incorporating everyone from independent commentators, citizen journalists, bloggers, and vloggers to the many hundreds of millions who use social media platforms and post in the comment sections of

mass media. Online communities and groups, grassroots advocacy bodies, consumer forums, and cultural and other movements that come to life through digital platforms are also part of the Fifth Estate.

Members of this realm are characterized far more by their mindset and behavior than by professional status or social background. First and foremost, they are actively engaged in online platforms and create their own content, typically on social media or in blogs, podcasts, or other digital



platforms. Like members of the Fourth Estate, they have a digital footprint; a key difference is that they own and control their footprints. Unlike professional journalists and news organizations, Fifth Estate members are independent and freewheeling. They operate outside traditional media institutions and publish whatever and

whenever they want directly to their audiences on self-publishing platforms. The platforms of the Fifth Estate are public and typically free to access, although these content providers are increasingly looking to get funding from subscription models rather than advertising. Few are regulated by industry or professional bodies. To the



extent that they are regulated, it is by the policies of the platforms through which they publish, by peer pressure, and by the laws of the jurisdictions where they operate.

Though there are exceptions, members of the Fourth Estate typically abide by a well-defined set of values and

principles such as accuracy, objectivity, and impartiality. They think in terms of audiences, and their communications are transmitted from content creators to content consumers, with occasional audience participation and feedback. Depending on the ownership model, the Fourth Estate is accountable to shareholders or governors.

In contrast, the Fifth Estate is driven by peer-to-peer dynamics in interactive communication with communities of people who share common interests. Few Fifth Estate participants are accountable to shareholders or a governing body because few are established organizations. They are not bound by a code of conduct (other than the policies of the platforms on which they communicate), are not required to fact-check, and can freely amplify their opinions on any given topic.





# THE FIFTH ESTATE IN ACTION

## Few people consciously distinguish between the Fourth and Fifth Estates when searching for information, following a media platform, or engaging with online content.

However, most of us regularly interact with a mixture of both.

To better understand how the public engages with the Fifth Estate, PMI commissioned independent research firm Povaddo to conduct an international survey in December 2023.

The survey found that two-thirds of respondents believe most people get their news and information from individual and community-based online platforms, such as online communities, bloggers, social media, and podcasts. Conversely, only 29 percent believe most people get their news and information from traditional sources such as television, radio, and newspapers.

Most respondents use, watch, read, or engage regularly with one or more of the following sources: social media

Povaddo conducted the online survey on behalf of PMI between December 6 and 13, 2023. The survey was fielded among 6,048 general population adults aged 21 and older in six countries: Brazil, Italy, South Africa, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Approximately 1,000 interviews were administered in each country. Data were collected in a balanced way to reflect national population statistics and were not weighted. Results are accurate to a margin of error of  $\pm 1$  percent at the overall level.

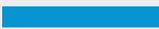
timelines or feeds (37 percent); product or service reviews on Amazon, YouTube, Tripadvisor, or another platform (28 percent); social media groups or communities (27 percent); specific individual commentators or contributors—e.g., a content creator publishing posts, podcasts, videos, or other content (22 percent); and comments sections accompanying news articles and social media posts (22 percent).

**Why do you typically follow or engage with individual and community-based online sources? (Please rank your top 3 reasons.)**

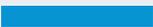
They are more accessible / easier to use than other sources of information

**55%** 

They give me an opportunity to engage in conversation or discussion with like-minded individuals

**47%** 

They offer independent views

**45%** 

They are more relevant to me and my daily life

**44%** 

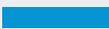
They are free or less expensive than other sources of information

**39%** 

They are more enjoyable than other sources of information

**38%** 

They are more trustworthy than other sources of information

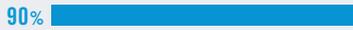
**32%** 

When asked why they engage with individual and community-based online sources, respondents highlighted that these sources are more accessible or easier to use than other sources of information (55 percent), provide an opportunity to engage in conversation with like-minded individuals (47 percent), and offer independent views (45 percent).

Survey respondents were also asked whether they had taken any action based on information or recommendations from individual or community-based online sources. The top responses were as follows: “Talked to friends or family about something I read” (90 percent); “Made an online purchase” (84 percent); “Browsed a company’s website” (84 percent); and “Made an in-store / in-person purchase” (79 percent). Notably, 69 percent reported that they had changed their views about a particular issue based on the information to which they were exposed.

**Have you ever done any of the following based on information and/or recommendations from individual or community-based online sources?**

Talked to friends or family about something I read



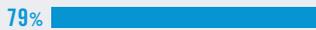
Made an online purchase



Browsed a company's website



Made an in-store / in-person purchase



Changed my views about a certain issue or topic



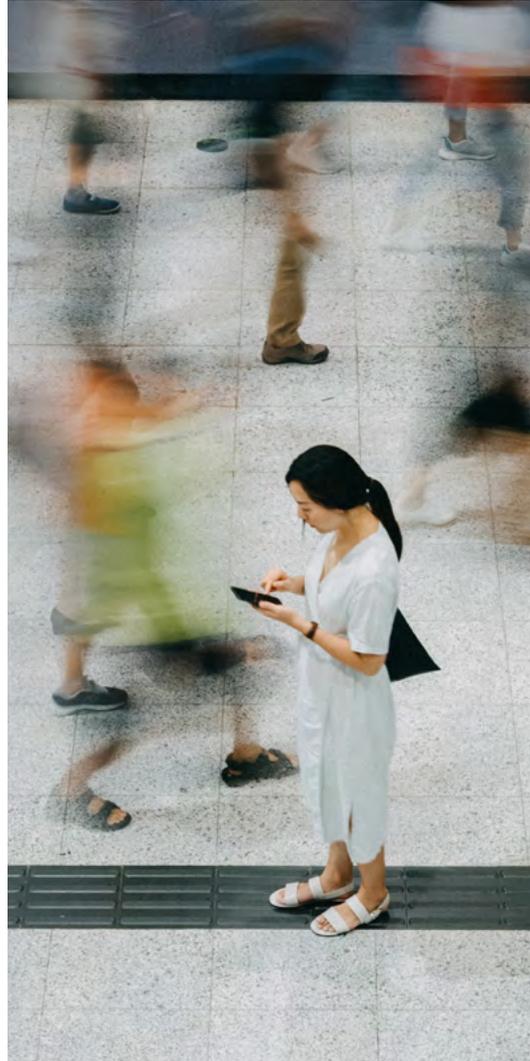
Followed a company on social media



Shared my own commentary or social media post



Attended an in-person event





The Fifth Estate landscape is as broad and diverse as the voices that comprise it. Below are a few examples of the actors that make up this sector.

## Individual Commentators and Contributors

Individual commentators and contributors form a vital segment of the Fifth Estate, using various content forms and digital platforms to share their views, create conversations, or inform their audiences on a specific topic. These independent voices range from bloggers dissecting political intricacies and content creators exploring the latest cultural trends to vloggers giving their take on anything from technology and sports to the art of making the “perfect” cup of coffee.

The range and volume of content made available by individual contributors is hard to grasp and impossible to catalog. Indicatively, a report [notes](#) that as of June 2022, more than 500 hours of video were uploaded to YouTube every minute, equating to approximately 30,000 hours of newly uploaded content per hour.

In recent years, an increasing number of individuals with a point of view or information they're eager to share have turned to podcasting for the creative freedom, audience engagement, flexibility, and potential global reach this medium confers. Unlike radio shows, podcasts don't depend on broadcast networks and affiliates for production and distribution. Podcasters can simply record whatever they want and upload it to a [hosting service or platform](#) such as Spotify, Acast, or Podbean or host it on their own website.

Although podcasts supported by mainstream media brands loom large on [media charts](#), they vie with shows from independent networks such as Podmasters, Goalhanger, and Radiotopia. And beyond the top 1,000 podcasts, there is a massively [long tail](#) of hundreds of thousands of active shows.

Audiences value podcasts for on-demand listening while multitasking, for the variety of content, and for the sense of personal connection with the podcasters. Encouragingly, many also value hearing [other people's opinions](#).

## Influencers

Influencers can be considered a subset of individual contributors, although they are arguably the most visible players of the Fifth Estate. These individuals are center stage on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, where brief, punchy visual content attracts the most attention. They are typically focused on consumer culture, creating entertaining and engaging content fast and driving the medium's evolution as they experiment. They can affect the purchasing decisions of multitudes because of their style, authority, knowledge, position, charisma, or relationship with their audiences.

Fashion influencers such as Komal Pandey, Chiara Ferragni, Camila Coelho, and many others blog and vlog to millions of followers. At the geekier end of the influencer spectrum, with longer content, YouTuber Rick Beato has evolved from music producer, enthusiast, and reviewer to full-blown influencer. Such is the authority he has accrued that he now interviews some of the biggest stars in music.

## Independent Journalists and Information Platforms

Competing with the mainstream journalism of the Fourth Estate are the independent news blogs and websites of the Fifth Estate. These platforms typically take an independent stance, often providing a different viewpoint from mainstream media. As they are not required to fit into broadcast schedules or toe the line of a corporate owner or charter, they can conduct in-depth and investigative journalism without the restrictions that constrain so many mainstream sources.

Prominent examples of this area of the Fifth Estate are ProPublica and The Real News Network, both U.S.-based nonprofit newsrooms that focus on investigative journalism in the public interest. Similar content creators are staking out their patch on the self-publishing platform Substack, which bills itself as “A New Home for Readers,” or on Ghost.

While the above examples are arguably Fourth Estate 2.0, others are very much 21st century. For instance, Bellingcat is an award-winning

independent investigative collective of researchers, investigators, and citizen journalists specializing in open-source research and open-source intelligence or OSINT. Also using open-source information, the website Snopes has become a go-to reference for checking out suspected misinformation, and WikiLeaks continues to generate buzz—and no small amount of controversy and scandal—by publishing classified documents and other media provided by anonymous sources.

## Citizen Journalists

Ordinary individuals have contributed to mainstream journalism from the start—offering firsthand accounts of events they witnessed, which were then channeled through traditional media to reach a broader audience. The advent of the internet cut out the middleman, allowing individuals to reach audiences directly. Many credit South Korea’s OhMyNews, founded in 2000, as the earliest platform for amateur-generated news and information. In the years since, virtually anyone with a smartphone has been able to capture events as

they unfold and post them to social sites with their perspective and commentary. Collectively, these posts have had an enormous impact, including by holding authorities to account for bad behavior, as we saw with the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020—an event that likely would have gone unreported without [video](#) captured and shared on Facebook and Instagram by a bystander. Content creators can use their own platforms or submit articles and videos to sites such as Wikinews, Slashdot, and Global Voices.

## Online Communities and Groups

Community-based platforms and groups form another dynamic and influential segment of the Fifth Estate, serving as hubs for information sharing, engagement, and mobilization among groups with shared interests, goals, or identities. Such online communities come in all shapes and forms, leveraging a range of social and community-based platforms. For example, platforms such as Reddit host forums discussing niche topics,

Facebook groups bring together people with common affiliations or hobbies, and neighborhood platforms such as Nextdoor bring together neighbors to exchange community news. There are also many issue-based communities convening people to raise awareness, share information, and advocate for change. Examples include environmental groups mobilizing for climate action, social justice communities, and forums dedicated to mental health. Through platforms such as Change.org, these communities can mobilize to effect change.

The impact of online communities is often seen, felt, and heard in the real world—shaping culture, the news, and sometimes even the economy (think “[Taylornomics](#)”). Consider other examples, too: the traders on Reddit forum [r/WallStreetBets](#) who helped [spike](#) GameStop’s stock price in early 2021 (much to the displeasure of the short sellers who were betting on the stock falling) or the [#FreeBritney](#) movement that drew global media attention in 2020.



# TOP DOWN IS ON THE WAY OUT

## **In the traditional four-estate model of previous centuries, changes were decided at the top by lawmakers beholden to the political elites.**

While lawmakers were held to account by news professionals in what may have seemed a contentious relationship, they all operated in the same high-level orbits of the centers of power. With the exception of those in the uppermost strata, individuals and communities didn't move in these orbits. Even in democracies, the unmoneyed and unconnected didn't exert direct influence. They were not actively involved in making laws. To the extent that they exerted influence, it was by voting for and communicating with their representatives, voicing their views at town halls, and participating in public protests. The traditional four-estate model was top-down with occasional bottom-up input.

The emergence of the Fifth Estate through interactive platforms and democratized channels of communication is changing this dynamic profoundly. Instead of waiting for changes to be decided on high, individuals and communities are becoming proactive agents of change. Instead of pressing for change by communicating their views to their elected representatives, they are

hashing out their opinions and saying what they want in public digital spaces that are accessible to all. Instead of waiting in line for a chance to get into the audiences of chat and debate shows on established TV channels, they create their own debates on platforms such as YouTube. Instead of going along with the formalities and bearing the costs of opinion polling, they are gathering their own data by conducting polls using technologies such as SurveyMonkey.

In short, the Fifth Estate knows how things work. Its members are familiar with the organizing and influencing methods of the First, Second, and Fourth Estates—the traditional centers of power—and have pioneered new methods enabled by digital media and social platforms. This prompts us to ask: Do the conventional centers of power truly understand what the Fifth Estate is and how it attains—and wields—its power?

The situation is comparable to the 1990s when innovators embraced IT while stick-in-the-muds held on to paper and fax machines. It's like the early 2000s when innovators understood the internet's potential to bypass traditional systems of production and distribution. Those who failed to understand and seize the opportunity lost out to online retailing and streaming services pioneers.

The background features a dynamic, abstract composition of thick, flowing lines in shades of green and yellow. These lines curve and swirl across the frame, creating a sense of movement and depth. The colors transition from bright yellow-green to a darker, almost black green, with the lines appearing to have a slight texture or grain. The overall effect is reminiscent of liquid or smoke in motion, set against a muted, greyish-blue background.

# **A POWER SHIFT**

## If information is power, then communication is crucial to how that power is wielded and deployed.

The Fifth Estate is reshaping how information is created, shared, sought, and consumed. It is fundamentally altering the landscape of influence and power in modern societies.

In the traditional estates, each had its own form of power. The First Estate, the clergy, had religious and social power that they exercised within and far beyond places of worship, instructing the faithful on what to believe and how to live their lives. They owned land, levied taxes, and accumulated great institutional wealth.

The Second Estate, the aristocracy, owned land, levied taxes, and had a virtual monopoly on high positions in the government, military, and church. This gave them social, financial, and political power.

For centuries, the Third Estate, the common people, had virtually no power despite far outnumbering the members of the First and Second Estates combined. Then came the Age of Enlightenment, followed by the American and French revolutions, and the Third Estate began to assert itself, demanding effective political representation and rights. Their power grew as ordinary people became crucial to industrial production and consumption, driving economic growth and military power. As they gradually earned more than just enough money to survive, their spending preferences as consumers had the power to make companies and their owners rich. And as voting rights were extended to the whole adult population of democracies through the 20th century, the Third Estate exercised political power by choosing whom to support in elections.

The power of the Fourth Estate rose in tandem with the third. As more commoners learned to read, newspapers flourished. Journalists

provided information about people in power and social issues. This shaped what politicians and the electorate discussed and prioritized, influencing public opinion and policy. As the mass communication channels of radio and TV spread, so did the reach and influence of the Fourth Estate. It could not only broadcast news and opinions but also advertise consumer goods and services. Still, only the gatekeepers of the Fourth Estate had the financial and organizational means to produce, market, and distribute mass media. This made (and still makes) media owners enormously powerful. With a de facto monopoly on mass communication, only the gatekeepers of the Fourth Estate could make money from that power.

Now, with low-cost, powerful technologies widely available, expensive equipment and television crews, dedicated communication links, editorial operations, and high-priced distribution channels are not necessary to reach huge audiences. This gives the Fifth Estate unprecedented power. It can bypass the mass media networks of the Fourth Estate and deliver real-time information (or misinformation) much faster than traditional media

can. The Fifth Estate also provides a much broader range of perspectives and opinions—at least for those willing to look for and consider them. At the same time, it enables others to focus on a narrow range of perspectives and opinions, creating their own digital echo chambers.

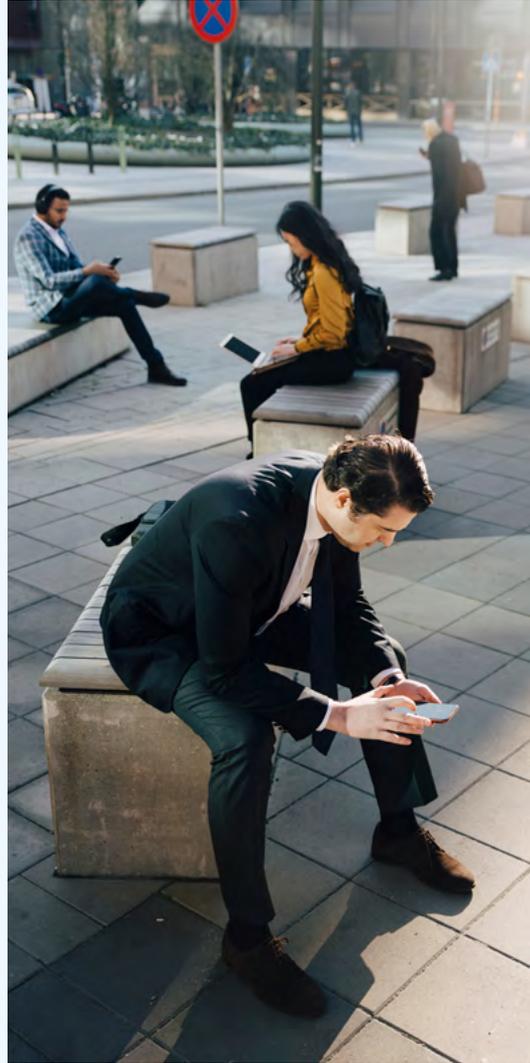
As audiences shift their attention from traditional media channels and mainstream media outlets, so, too, are advertisers shifting their spend in pursuit of audiences. With far fewer ongoing costs, the Fifth Estate can afford to offer its content free to most. Those who build a substantial audience base can attract advertisers and offer ad-free premium content to subscribers.



## Traction, Virality, and the Network Effect

In the Fifth Estate, all opinions expressed are open to virtually the entire world. Beyond the rules and policies enacted by the various online and social platforms, there are few gatekeepers—if any—deciding what can or cannot be said. But not all opinions get noticed. Traction, virality, and the network effect act as de facto gatekeepers, determining which opinions and content gain prominence.

Traction is the initial grip an idea needs to stick and be shared. Virality follows when the content resonates deeply, prompting widespread sharing thanks to a rare alchemy of timing, relevance, and emotional impact. And the network effect amplifies a message, with each share increasing the value and reach of the information. An infinitesimal fraction of individual opinions posted make a ripple on their own merits. Only by striking a collective nerve or serving an emerging discourse is content subsumed into the waves of the Fifth Estate's complex, interconnected currents.



## Driving Narratives

Another power of the Fifth Estate comes from its influence on public discourse—shaping the topics people discuss, how they talk about them, how many people talk about them, and how quickly the topics achieve currency. The narratives the Fifth Estate communicates become the frameworks through which events, issues, and experiences are interpreted and communicated. These narratives largely determine which types of information attract attention and how that information is understood, discussed, and remembered by the public.

Consider, for example, #MeToo. In 2017, the hashtag went viral following sexual misconduct allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. On Twitter (now X), actor Alyssa Milano urged victims of sexual harassment and assault to post their accounts and include the hashtag. In subsequent months, the movement and variations on its hashtag spread to Australia, France (#BalanceTonPorc), Italy (#QuellaVoltaChe), Hispanic cultures (#YoTambién), and beyond, including China, where the authorities



banned it but locals found a workaround (米兔—meaning “rice bunny,” pronounced mi tu).

There’s nothing new in high-profile accusations of wrongdoing nor in public shaming and boycotting. What’s new is the speed and scale at which the public can learn about such allegations and act on them. As the Fifth Estate democratizes public discourse, it gives voice to the marginalized. As with the Fourth Estate, members of the Fifth Estate can hold influential figures and entities accountable. Also as with the Fourth Estate, this mechanism is imperfect and can all too easily lead to



hasty trials in the court of public opinion where allegations are taken as facts. Ad hoc groupings form around the issue and demand that the accused be boycotted, ostracized, and removed from public platforms. In a word, canceled.

Across national borders, the Fifth Estate has mobilized around a range of serious and often contentious issues. In the same way that the #MeToo movement highlighted sexual harassment and violence, #BlackLivesMatter became the rallying cry for protests and heated debate about racial justice. The environmental pressure group Extinction Rebellion

has made effective use of social media to organize protests, disseminate information, and rally support.

The Avaaz movement, founded in 2007, is one of the most developed and structured examples of the Fifth Estate. In what could describe the entire Fifth Estate phenomenon, Avaaz [claims](#), “Our model of internet organizing allows thousands of individual efforts, however small, to be rapidly combined into a powerful collective force.” Unlike movements such as #MeToo and campaigning organizations such as Greenpeace, Avaaz is not dedicated to a specific issue. Rather, its global team is mandated to work on any matter of public concern its members raise.

As these examples show, the Fifth Estate already is significantly affecting social and political discourse, with serious real-world consequences. It can rapidly mobilize communities around various causes and lead to swift change, as seen in the influence of grassroots campaigns on political or corporate decisions. Whether the causes and changes are prosocial or antisocial tends to be a matter of opinion.



# **THE PROMISE OF CIVILIZED CIVIL SOCIETY**

## We believe that most people have positive, prosocial intentions.

By this, we mean that they want to foster what they judge to be in the best interests of themselves, their loved ones, their communities, their countries, and global society. Yet many have neither the time, energy, resources, and skills nor the tools to put those intentions into effective action. Moreover, some may base their judgments on partial, misleading, or intentionally inaccurate information.

This is one area in which the Fifth Estate can bolster the power of civilized civil society. It can fight misinformation and disinformation—promoting in their stead critical thinking and respect for science and facts. It can help people turn good intentions into good actions. As a decentralized network of digital platforms and communities, the Fifth Estate can create spaces for informal, informed, constructive dialogues across diverse societal groups. Particularly on complex issues such as climate change and economic and racial equity, it has the potential to deepen understanding, spur individual actions, and hold corporations and governments to account.

Experience shows that the Fifth Estate has the potential to foster prosocial developments, but it also shows that it has the power to harm.

## Time to Update Outmoded Mindsets

For people's prosocial intentions to be supported, traditional power structures, including governments and corporations, must take the Fifth Estate seriously. They must recognize it as the shape of things to come and not a passing craze. They must become familiar with the Fifth Estate and learn how to work with it as an emerging force within civil society. An essential first step would be to recognize existing prejudices regarding emerging forms of power and influence. This requires identifying blind spots and moving past the tendency to fall back on old models and outmoded mindsets. They must move beyond the temptation to view the Fifth Estate as just another channel in their media strategy.

To understand and respond effectively to the Fifth Estate, one must recognize two of its most fundamental features: agility and creativity. Members

of this realm have gotten exceptionally good at quickly trying out responses to events and seeing which work best within the evolving digital ecosystem. For example, during the 2019–2020 Australian bushfires, communities and organizations such as [GIVIT](#) quickly came together on digital media platforms to coordinate relief efforts, spread awareness, and raise funds. The agility of the Fifth Estate was evident in the rate at which relief reached afflicted areas, with [efforts amplified](#) by influencers and celebrities using their platforms to encourage donations and other support.

It's hard for traditional power structures to act so quickly. They are constrained by established chains of command and the need for due process and accountability. Unencumbered by such constraints, the Fifth Estate will always be more agile. This opens up the potential for traditional centers of power to work cooperatively with the wider population to create a better future. Such collaboration will require that the more established powers work respectfully with the Fifth Estate and understand that it is a decentralized and unregulated space where different dynamics and unwritten rules apply.

## A Smart Complement to Opinion Research

Governments, NGOs, companies, and media organizations rely on public opinion surveys to understand society's expectations, concerns, and aspirations. Engaging with the Fifth Estate offers a smart complement to their traditional methodologies. It can deliver real-time, unfiltered insights into public sentiment, capturing a broader and more diverse range of voices.

Unlike structured surveys, the expressed views of members of the Fifth Estate offer a more nuanced understanding of public attitudes and trends. The interactive nature of digital platforms allows for a deeper exploration of the reasons behind opinions. While not scientifically structured in the manner of formal surveys, the Fifth Estate's vast and varied content can reveal emerging issues and shifts in public sentiment. Monitoring such communications can be a valuable tool for gauging the pulse of the wider population and an opportunity to engage peer-to-peer with civil society. This will require a serious commitment to learning how best to identify and parse the most valuable insights and information out there.

## A Space to Develop Participatory Democracy

Some of the most influential movements of the Fifth Estate operate on the basis of participatory democracy. Rather than having an issue-focused agenda set by an organization's leadership or their financial backers, they implement agendas set by their members and then help their members spring into action.

In the case of Avaaz, the organizers don't set goals and then try to convince members to meet them. Instead, they listen to members' concerns and then facilitate actions to ameliorate those concerns. The global campaigning organization Ekō (formerly SumOfUs) employs a similar approach. Likewise, Australia's GetUp movement has one million members, movement partners, and a central team of expert strategists who work together to create a more equitable nation.



A man's face is shown in profile, looking towards the right. The image is composed of several vertical slices of the same face, creating a fragmented, multi-layered effect. The lighting is dramatic, with the right side of the face (from the viewer's perspective) being brightly lit, while the left side is in deep shadow. The man has short, dark hair and is wearing a dark jacket. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**ALL IS NOT  
SWEETNESS  
AND LIGHT:  
CHALLENGES AND  
CONTROVERSIES**

## The Fifth Estate comes with risks and challenges, some of which are serious.

As in any social phenomenon, the most prominent members of the Fifth Estate tend to be the most energized, the most determined, and, in some cases, the most radical. They tend to be far more strongly opinionated than those who rarely engage in advocacy.

Although many causes that animate the Fifth Estate may well be prosocial, the people who espouse them are not necessarily any more benevolent than those in other human communities. On the contrary, digital and social platforms have been known to amplify some antisocial attitudes, making people less benevolent in their behavior, if not their intentions. The lack of subtle in-person social cues can prompt people to say and do things they would hesitate to say or do in person, or even in emails and text messages. This can be even more problematic on social media platforms, where algorithms are designed to keep people's attention and stir their emotions. These platforms tend to exploit social biases rather than foster

social learning. Together with the speed of information exchange and the rise of technologies such as AI, this can help spread misinformation and disinformation, distorting individuals' perceptions and encouraging disruptive or damaging actions. A recent study in the U.S. found, for example, that neighborhood apps increase perceptions of high crime rates in the area when the facts don't bear that out. At the extreme, this may cause some homeowners to arm themselves and react violently when confronted by a stranger, no matter how innocuous the stranger's intentions. Recent months have seen U.S. homeowners shoot and kill people for simply knocking on their doors or pulling into their driveways.



In the international survey conducted for PMI by Povaddo, respondents were asked how significant they consider risks related to the rise of the Fifth Estate. According to the survey results, people believe online sources pose a significant risk in terms of spreading misinformation (59 percent), sharing opinions without evidence (53 percent), and lacking transparency on sourcing (50 percent). Many respondents are also concerned by the divisive potential of individual and community-based online sources, noting that they pose a significant risk in terms of enabling the spread of radical ideologies (47 percent), exacerbating divisions in society (44 percent), and fueling cancel culture (40 percent).

As in any social system, power accrues to individuals and entities that go to the trouble to learn and deftly navigate the system dynamics. Those who develop a good understanding of the Fifth Estate can better leverage it to influence debates and further their aims. Whether those aims are positive or negative, benevolent or malevolent, prosocial or antisocial is subjective. There are few major movements or pressure groups whose aims and

**How significant, if at all, are the following risks of the rise of individual or community-based online sources? (% indicating a “significant risk”)**





methods are regarded with universal approval or disapproval. Actions in the Fifth Estate that some admire as “smart” may be criticized by others as “gaming the system.”

The Fifth Estate is also a natural home to populism—political programs and movements that claim to champion the interests of ordinary people, standing against the perceived elite or establishment. Populism typically combines elements of the left and the right, opposing large business and financial interests but frequently being hostile as well to established liberal, socialist, and labor parties. The anti-establishment ethos of the Fifth Estate and its digital platforms enable

populist movements to reach vast audiences with punchy and emotionally appealing messages. While a natural fit for the Fifth Estate, given the realm’s positioning outside traditional power structures, populism can exact a heavy price. It can easily mutate into authoritarianism, which is contrary to the ethos of the Fifth Estate.

**For better and worse, the Fifth Estate is set to cause and amplify a lot of disruption. Traditional power structures must do their part to ensure that disruption is for the better.**

An abstract graphic design featuring a large blue background. In the center, there is a red sphere. Surrounding the sphere are several overlapping, curved, ribbon-like shapes in various colors: purple, light blue, yellow, and pink. The background is divided into sections of gold, red, and blue. The overall composition is dynamic and colorful.

# **HARNESSING THE POSITIVE POTENTIAL OF THE FIFTH ESTATE**

## Corporations and established institutions inevitably are part of existing power structures.

Many may well be the sort of organizations that elements of the Fifth Estate aim to challenge and disrupt. If those institutions are smart, they will be open to the challenges posed by the Fifth Estate so they can learn and grow, as PMI explored in its 2022 white paper, [“Rethinking Disruption: Innovating for Better in an Era of Division.”](#)

The business-as-usual approach of traditional power structures certainly needs disrupting. Pollution, resource depletion, energy and food insecurity, refugees, cybersecurity, disinformation, aging populations, and global warming are among the myriad chronic problems that risk becoming catastrophic if allowed to continue on their current trajectory. All too often, they are addressed with incremental change, with authorities tinkering at the margins until

disaster strikes—then it’s temporary “fixes” until the dam bursts anew.

We believe that for positive disruption to happen at the necessary pace and scale, individuals must become change agents. There is no deficit of motivation to contribute to positive change. What people need is the time, energy, resources, skills, and tools required to step up and do their part. Some of the Fifth Estate individuals and organizations covered in this white paper are showing how to put such a desire for change into action.

Corporations and institutions can support the best of the Fifth Estate by fostering open debates on issues that matter, promoting diverse voices, and engaging responsibly with online communities. And all of us, as citizens, can contribute by critically evaluating information, constructively participating in online discussions, and supporting platforms that prioritize accuracy, civility, and the open exchange of ideas.

As shown in the international survey conducted by Povaddo, a majority of people want governments, regulators, and platform owners to support positive change online by improving law enforcement’s ability to investigate

**Which, if any, of the following actions should governments, regulators, or platform owners take to enable the most positive use of individual and community-based online sources?**

Improve ability of law enforcement to investigate and hold to account those who misuse online platforms  
**63%**

Undertake initiatives that improve transparency  
**62%**

Undertake initiatives to combat the generation and spread of misinformation  
**61%**

Promote digital literacy for users  
**42%**

None of the above  
**5%**

Other  
**1%**

**Which, if any, of the following actions should individuals take to enable the most positive use of individual and community-based online sources?**

Avoid sharing content without verifying authenticity  
**66%**

Insist on sources that fact-check information  
**55%**

Report inappropriate or inaccurate information or sources  
**55%**

Self-educate or learn more about safe and appropriate use of online sources  
**53%**

Seek out a variety of opinions to inform views  
**49%**

Avoid or boycott sources that do not foster civilized debate  
**38%**

None of the above  
**3%**

Other  
**1%**

and hold to account those who misuse online platforms (63 percent), implementing initiatives to improve transparency (62 percent), and combating the generation and spread of misinformation (61 percent). Online users, too, have a role to play. Our survey respondents agreed that people should avoid sharing content without first verifying its authenticity (66 percent), insist on sources that fact-check information (55 percent), report inappropriate or inaccurate information (55 percent), educate themselves about the safe and appropriate use of online resources (53 percent), and seek out a variety of opinions to inform their views (49 percent).



## Cultivate Digital Literacy

For the Fifth Estate to become a trustworthy source of information and a space for productive dialogue, it's essential to address its weaknesses and threats, including misinformation, disinformation, and manipulation by bad actors. This has made digital literacy a hot agenda item. The American Library Association's Digital Literacy Task Force defines digital literacy as "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills." It covers seven elements: technical, civic, communicative, collaborative, computational thinking, investigative, and productive. Other important factors extend from the basics (e.g., access to digital devices, reliable

connectivity, and an understanding of everyday applications) all the way to critical thinking and cybersecurity. In other words, digital literacy covers a wide range of issues. All are important to enable the Fifth Estate to grow and flourish to the benefit of all.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of digital literacy programs, including a range of free resources from [EdApp](#) and [Microsoft](#). [Data to the People](#) is an Australia-based organization that equips leaders and organizations to assess individual and organizational data literacy and design bespoke programs to improve the data competency of their workforces. Some U.S. states are addressing digital literacy in the classroom. California recently joined Delaware, New Jersey, and Texas in requiring [media literacy in struction](#) for students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

If corporations and institutions recognize that digital literacy is essential to putting society on a path to better, they should make resources available to support it. This could mean offering workshops on how to identify misinformation and fact-check online content or funding

specialized training for educators who want to teach digital literacy.

## Foster Responsible Practices and Ethical Standards

At a minimum, corporations and institutions that interact and engage with the Fifth Estate must demonstrate their commitment to ethical standards by establishing and upholding clear principles and practices. These should be designed to ensure transparent engagement, responsible content sharing, and



a commitment to recognizing and combating misinformation. Partnering with organizations that promote ethical standards, fact-checking, and transparency in digital media can complement these internal initiatives.

## Work Respectfully with the Fifth Estate

Many entities of the Fifth Estate are likely to regard traditional power structures as arrogant or even antithetical to their goals. This is understandable, even if it may be unfair.

If traditional power structures want to work collaboratively and productively with the Fifth Estate, they must identify those entities therein whose values and aims are most closely aligned with their own. They must engage with genuine openness and respect in two-way dialogues and be willing to listen, understand, and respond to concerns and critiques. This is all about working in the public interest to increase the power of civilized civil society. To achieve the progress we all seek, traditional corporations and institutions must create or seize opportunities to work with NGOs, advocacy groups, and members of the Fifth Estate on projects that serve the public interest.



A close-up photograph of a hand pointing its index finger towards the left. The background is a blurred digital screen with a grid of small, colorful bokeh lights in shades of blue, green, and orange. The overall mood is futuristic and technological.

# CLOSING THOUGHTS

## With all its complexities, challenges, and opportunities, the rise of the Fifth Estate underscores one crucial dynamic: the transformative power of individuals as drivers of change.

In this digital and interconnected world, people have become not just consumers of information but active contributors, shaping narratives and influencing the public discourse. Platforms such as social media, online communities, and issue-based groups as well as the overall democratization of information have empowered individuals to challenge established norms, raise awareness of critical issues, and advocate for change.

As established power structures navigate this evolving landscape, they must embrace and amplify diverse voices, practice transparency, and promote civilized debate. This demands a commitment to facts, critical thinking, and collaborative efforts to co-create a better future with the people at the heart of any given issue.

Clayton Christensen's *The Innovator's Dilemma* uncovers the tendency of incumbents to fail to adapt to new conditions and opportunities because

they remain focused on optimizing the status quo. It's a pertinent reminder of what the established centers of power should avoid.

Just as smaller, more agile newcomers disrupt established players in the market, the Fifth Estate is disrupting the information-sharing and societal engagement landscape. Traditional power structures risk becoming obsolete if they fail to understand the new ways people find and join forces with like-minded others.

Christensen emphasizes the importance of understanding and responding to customer needs. For established power structures, this translates to listening to and addressing the concerns of the public, as embodied by members of the Fifth Estate.

The challenges of the modern world are such that every corporation and institution of size has a moral obligation—as well as self-interested reasons—to contribute to solving them. So, too, does every individual. We can continue on the current path, relying on traditional centers of power to find and force solutions, or we can devise ways to support the enormous potential of the newest estate and progress faster.





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