

The Fifth Estate of the Internet Realm

Professor William H. Dutton

Director of the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

The rise of the press, radio, television and other mass media created an independent institution: the 'Fourth Estate', central to pluralist democratic processes. However, the growing use of the Internet and related technologies enables the networking of individuals in ways that create a new source of accountability not only in government and politics, but also in other sectors. How does the Internet create a space for this new form of social accountability? Is it indeed enabling a 'Fifth Estate'?

The Internet is a platform for networking individuals in ways that can challenge the influence of other more established bases of institutional authority, and that can be used to increase the accountability of the press, politicians, doctors and academics by offering networked individuals with alternative sources of information and opinion. Questions about the governance of the Fifth Estate are likely to become more prominent as people realize that the Internet is a social phenomenon with such broad and substantial implications for political and social accountability. The further development and vitality of the 'Fifth Estate' rests less on new policy initiatives than by responding to the strategies of its enemies -- the other four estates, and the mob, of the Internet realm.