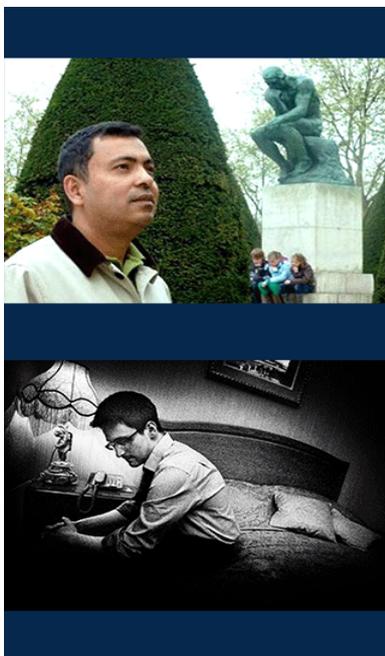


The internet revolutionized politics, trade and social interactions. Blogs contribute so much to that revolution, and in 2007 author, philosopher, neuroscientist and geostrategist Nayef Al-Rodhan referred to them as the “fifth estate.” The designation of “estate” for media is often “contested simply because the media does not implement policy or mandate particular activity, yet these criticisms miss the larger point,” Al-Rodhan writes in this YaleGlobal article. “The essence of 'estates' as used here refers to sources of power.” The tool has potential for great good or harm. Such power in the hands of ordinary and observant citizens terrifies some nations which then impose restrictions. Bloggers who use the tool to incite violence and radicalization draw restrictions for all. Al-Rodhan concludes, “Governments must ensure that the power of blogs is cultivated and implemented in collaborative ways, with a view to preserve peace and human dignity.” - YaleGlobal

Free-Wheeling Web Commentary Challenges Media's Traditional Power

Blogs continue to wield influence; governments and bloggers could coordinate on regulations to increase the potential

Nayef Al-Rodhan
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Power and peril: Bangladesh-born American blogger Avijit Roy paid with his life for the influence he exercised (top); US whistleblower Edward Snowden unleashed a firestorm

OXFORD: The internet and global interconnectivity, while often taken for granted, has changed the face of social reality. Weblogs, more commonly known as blogs, have emerged and in many ways manifest both extremes of positive and negative potential.

Because blogs have tremendous potential to be used either for good or ill, they could be dubbed a new avatar of a power group supplementing the old. The modern expression of the separation of powers in the executive, legislative and judicial branches became known as the three estates, later to be followed by a “fourth estate” in the form of the media. The designation has often been contested simply because the media does not implement policy or mandate particular activity, yet these criticisms miss the larger point. The essence of “estates” as used here refers to sources of power.

When the term “fourth estate” was coined by Edmund Burke and referred to by Thomas Carlyle, their astute observation was that the press had come to wield an equal or occasionally greater power to influence policy than the original three state powers. The internet multiplied this power, providing the possibility for previously unheard voices to gain an audience as well as provide another check on the power of the other estates. This led me in 2007 to designate blogs as *the fifth estate*.

The revelations of Edward Snowden via WikiLeaks are a resounding example. The evidence he provided about the extent and mechanisms of US state surveillance have sparked overdue global [discussions](#) about the limits of privacy in the age of the Internet, as well as closer investigations into the legal and technical aspects of spying and surveillance. [Blogs](#) have emerged almost imperceptibly, especially as so much content is non-political. Still, blogs nonetheless represent a tremendous capacity for the masses to disseminate information, encouraging public participation and interest in politics, and opinions, which in many countries can be openly expressed without censorship, barriers or editorial boards. This realization has started to cause anxiety in some countries that have a poor record of civil liberties. In China, for instance, blogs like “[China Change](#)” have emerged as sources of news and commentaries on human rights and civil society issues in the country.

Blogs have been bolstered by more frequent contributions from experts and shown themselves to be the least constrained forum. [Examples](#) come from established journalists, members of parliaments, and political parties from different ends of the political spectrum or key figures in global politics such as [John Kerry](#).

In a hyper-capitalist environment dominated by media giants, the means available to independent journalism have narrowed considerably. The advent of blogs has reinvigorated such possibilities of independence, giving not only journalists but anyone with access to the internet the capacity to express views and disseminate information. At the same time, some adverse effects have been recorded as so-called netizens and [bloggers](#) covering political events or revolutions in real time later became targets of backlash. Recently Avijit Roy, an influential Bangladeshi-born American blogger, was hacked to death in Dhaka. He was a persistent critic of the Islamist radicals.

As a mechanism of positive policy reform, blogs continue to face challenges:

How the blogosphere tends to be perceived: Despite general acknowledgment that freedom from influence or constraint of major media channels or ideological bias is a favorable quality, blogs often suffer from the concern that their authors lack journalistic experience or other relevant credentials.

Absence of oversight: Questions are raised about blogs’ lack of editorial review and insufficient fact-checking mechanisms. Such shortcomings leave readers in a dilemma. Yet well-researched and reviewed information from dominant media outlets can be prone to biases, too.

Doubts can also emerge by the perception of the blogosphere as a source of entertainment and “light” information, rather than contributor of serious content. Further issues of credibility arise also as some bloggers joined programs like the “[paid blogger program](#)” where they commit to endorse companies or products in exchange for money.

A source of polarized views: Without oversight and checks, blogs can serve morally dubious intentions by those who aim to spread propaganda, radicalize readers or exacerbate antagonisms. For readers who deliberately seek out only blogs that reinforce their views without checks, such content ceases to become a source of understanding.

Sensitive or dangerous information: Blogs can disrupt society, business and government activities, such as by [disclosures of secret information](#). Apple Computers, for instance, reportedly filed a lawsuit against bloggers who communicated confidential company information on their blogs. Other blogs disseminate information or blueprints for constructing weapons of mass destruction or

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propagate [anarchist messages](#). All of these concerns would be ruled out in more traditional media sources by journalistic integrity and institutional checks.

A primary countermeasure to these negative implications is education. The ways in which readers encounter and relate to information is dramatically influenced by their education as well as their awareness of the pitfalls relating to the information source.

Furthermore, serious bloggers should welcome expert guest commentary, critical feedback and open dialogue in their blogs.

Only through education and critical engagement can readers become more demanding and circumspect, which in turn improves the quality of blogs.

The question of oversight-free authorship remains the prevailing concern, and people must become critical readers with a heightened sensitivity to unjustified positions or unsubstantiated claims.

Other regulatory steps are also necessary to limit the extreme abuses of blogs. The question of absolute anonymity has a downside from the viewpoint of global security. Anonymity can protect activists working in the world's most brutal areas, but can also allow rogues or criminals to spread ideas without being easily tracked.

Governments must combat bloggers engaging in deliberately radicalizing rhetoric, employing hate speech, or engaging in criminal activity including human trafficking or pornography.

These recommendations might raise concerns about censorship and rights to free speech, but just as there are reasonable limits to free speech in public life, the same logic and amount of regulation should be applied in the digital domain. There are inherent difficulties about establishing such limits in an even-handed way yet this should not mean that these limits should not be sought and imposed.

The blogosphere must function as an extension of the public space, where people can be held accountable and liable for their actions as well as potentially investigated for threats of violence or criminal activity. Nevertheless, the plurality of legal systems and [many interpretations](#) of freedom of speech or hate speech remains a persistent challenge in the blogosphere. Conundrums are bound to arise as the internet is a global medium and the removal of some content will be problematic especially if the servers are located in countries where those messages are not illegal. As an information stream that reveals public opinion largely free from outside influence, the capacity of blogs for shaping attitudes positively is tremendous. Governments must ensure that the power of blogs is cultivated and implemented in collaborative ways, with a view to preserve peace and human dignity. Contributors, too, must become more proactive and committed to integrity and responsible content. The idea of [abloggers' code of ethics](#), proposed a few years ago, deserves renewed consideration.

Undoubtedly, the future of information holds high potential for blogs. Their political relevance is only expected to expand.

The question is not whether or not the influence of the fifth estate will increase, but what form this influence will take and what regulatory mechanisms are necessary to implement to cultivate blogs' positive potential.

The blogosphere must function as extension of public space, where people can be held accountable for their actions.

Nayef Al-Rodhan is a neuroscientist, philosopher and geostrategist. He is an Honorary Fellow at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, and senior fellow and head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Programme at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. He is also the author of The Emergence of Blogs as a Fifth Estate and their Security Implications (Slatkine: Geneva, 2007).