Meanings of the expression „internet as fifth estate”

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/lumenss.2017.0601.01

Covered in:
CEEOL, Index Copernicus, Ideas
RePeC, EconPapers, SocioNet

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Meanings of the Expression „Internet as Fifth Estate”

Ioan Mircea TURCULEȚ1, Roxana ACHIRICESEI2, Mihaela MUTU3

Abstract: We live in a world dominated by communicative technologies. Internet used daily is a habit for millions of people. Due to this large number of users the internet is described as the fifth power after the press and the classical state powers. But what kind of power is the internet? According to some scholars, the internet and web 2.0 are just another form of state or commercial surveillance for social safety or power maintenance or economic growth. For others, the internet is just a new form of the fourth estate - the press. The internet, especially the social media is seen as a tool for revolutions in authoritarian regimes and democratization. Nevertheless, the internet may be seen as a new form of technology of the self as seen by Michel Foucault and used by the political or economic power for different ends.

Keywords: Internet, Power, Fifth Estate, online communication.

1. Difficulty of a definition

We live today in a world obsessed with philosophical and political concepts that can be used as epistemological explanations of our society or even of our reality. Often, the understanding of a concept can be very problematic if that concept has for example different ways of being understood. They are concepts that have their one sphere of manifestations and can be used only by experts, for example, because they are the only ones who can understand their meaning.

Obviously, the discovery by the uninitiated of the meanings of a concept can bring a conceptual reformulation, but also after this process, the significance of the concept will tend to remain a fixed one, due to the attempt to avoid scientific inconsistency. Such a concept is power seen and analyzed as political power. The development of the open society idea

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resulted in the qualitative increase of analyses devoted to power. Indeed, Karl Popper's work (2005), The Open Society and its enemies, has led to important judgments about the best possible political order. But any social order is intrinsically linked to the concept of power. It exists as a concept at the level of theory and political philosophy, but at the same time there is also at the level of common knowledge, as a way of those endowed with a small amount of power, to relate to those who hold the power. But even so, the relationship between those who hold the power and those who submit to power is a social one. Every social manifestation is one of power. Every social act is an exercise of power, every social relationship is a balance of power, and each group or social system is an organization of power (Olsen, 1993, p. 13).

But along history, power has gained different definitions and meanings. Concepts of power can differ in the extent to which action $x$ is either sufficient, or necessary and sufficient, for action $y$ to happen or to be prevented. For instance, a possible condition for the coercion of an actor $B$, is that actor $A$ possesses a revolver and the skill to use it. Acquiring both does not yet cause anything, and hence it is not an exercise of power. If actor $A$ points the revolver at actor $B$ (action $x$), and the latter is induced(1) to do an action which $B$ had not thought of doing before, or (2) to refrain from an action $B$ had thought of doing (actions $y$), we have a causal nexus. Here, we have an exercise of power. Action $x$ is a sufficient condition for action $y$. If one can presume that there are other ways to cause $B$ to do $y$, this condition is not necessary for causing action $y$ (Guzzini, 2005, pp. 500-501). This is just one of the many meanings attributed to the concept of power.

It can be seen that power relations are specific to all human interactions, and politics is nothing but an exercise of power. A history of the concept of power would mean writing a whole book, surpassing what we propose in this article. However, we still remember two different definitions of power. For example, for Max Weber, power is connected with his interest in bureaucracy, and be linked power with concepts of authority and rule. He defined power as the probability that an actor within a social relationship would be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance to it. The activation of power is dependent on a person’s will, even in opposition to someone else’s. Weber was interested in power as a factor of domination, based on economic or authoritarian interests. He historically researched the sources of the formal authority that activates legitimate power, and identified three sources of legitimation or accordance of social permission, for the activation of power: the charismatic, the traditional, and the rational-legal (Sadan, 1997, p. 35). For the French thinker Michel Foucault the empirical activity of identifying those who possess power and of locating power loses its importance. His approach systematically rejects the belief in the existence of an ordered and a regulating rational agency. In Foucault’s world there is no source from which actions stem, only an infinite series of practices.
Decentralization of the position of power is one of the great innovations of his thinking. (Sadan, 1997, p. 38). The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics draws attention to the fact that, in general, regardless of the accepted definition, power is classified into five great forms. 1. Force - refers to the use of physical force for a person to carry out an action imposed by power. Only when they comply due to the threat of force can the relationship be called power and this becomes, strictly, coercion. 2. Persuasion - In other words, the powerless may persuade the powerful: the offer of ideas is not control until it creates dependence and, therefore, the ability to manipulate. 3. The authority that bears the name and legitimate power. But it can also be understood as the existence (in various senses) of the rights to command and the corresponding duties to obey. 4. Coercion - consists in imposing power on others through threats. Most power relations in the contemporary world seem to be a bargain between threats and deals to get the power-driven behaviour. 5. Manipulation involves control exercised without threats, typically using resources of information and ideas. Usually, people do not realize they are being manipulated or the process would not work. Arguably, it is a more durable form of power (McLean, 2009, see the definition for power).

It is difficult to find an explanation for the different definitions given to the concept of power. We can assume the existence of several factors such as transformations and historical evolutions, different mentalities or the emergence of social or political sciences in the twentieth century. For example, Bryan S. Tuner warns us about the relativity of the concept of power: in a discipline such as sociology, notorious for the difficulty it experiences in establishing widely and durably agreed definitions of its concepts, that of power (at any rate social power, which is our only concern here) stands out as one whose definition is particularly contentious and unstable. This in spite (or perhaps on account) of the fact that, however understood, this concept signals a particularly significant social phenomenon, arguably entitled to a central position in the discipline’s vocabulary and discourse (Tuner, 2006, p. 464).

2. Internet and the concept of power

Today’s society is dominated by the world of computers. The internet is a way of communicating between computers, computers – phones - tablets, etc., thus, radically altering everything in communication. Today’s society is one in which the computer ‘holds the power’ and it seems that its huge impact will not change for a long time (Moor, 2005). A similar model proposed by Moor can be used to explain the online social networking revolution. Using the method of logical analogy, we can establish similarities when it comes to the structure of the web sites as being a three- stage
construction, as well. The first stage is the unidirectional information one in which there were few web sites that handled the transmission of the information from the producer to the receiver. The second stage is the multidimensional one, in which the user can also produce information on his/her own. Blogs, forums and the possibility of posting comments on certain situations or information were developed. The third stage is that of global exchange of information. This is the stage where social media exists, in which each user has a face like a blog, and the personal information exchange is so important that it becomes a universal benchmark. It is important to mention that the part of the internet development is closely related to the extension part of the power stage that Moor described. When it comes to the third stage – the universal one, we discuss about the existence of Social Media. Trying to give a functional definition to social media, we refer to it as the interaction between people, by creating, sharing, changing and commenting social events of the virtual community and of certain social networks using specialized online sites. (Turculet, 2014, p. 968)

In the above lines we have tried to define the power concept within certain limits. As these definitions are known, it refers to the power that manifests itself in the realm of reality, not in the virtual world. The big question is whether the Internet, and in particular, Internet mediated communication, in some way changes the characteristics or the definition of the concept of power. Does power-as it is actually defined-apply also in the virtual environment? Or does the Internet create new features and definitions of power? It is worth mentioning here Max Weber’s observation that the analysis of any historical age should normally be made with the use of its specific concepts. Otherwise, there will be scientific and ethical issues. (Weber, 2003, p. 186) This means that we need new concepts for the relation between Internet and power, different from those used in reality. On the other hand, the use of classical definitions of power in the new internet environment could bring either new concepts or demonstrate that the virtual world does not change the already existing concepts.

The return to former philosophical theories does not have to mean only a renewed interest for these problems - a consequence of their universal applicability, but it may also represent an extension of this theoretic endeavour in relation to life’s and society’s adjustments. We do not read from Aristotle or Xun Zi for them and their time but for us and our time. As a matter of fact, whether we want this or not, we comprehend a work of any kind according to our status instead of understanding it in terms of the epoch during which it has been thought upon and written. The more open it is for present times and the more prospective it is, the more solidified to past philosophy it is, with the sum of its already settled values. (Vlăduțescu,
What we are trying to demonstrate in the next few lines is that in the world of the Internet there is a dual one in which both classical concepts of power existing in reality apply, but at the same time internet communication creates new definitions of power. This relativity probably stems also from the fact that in reality the definitions of power are multiple, and virtual environments can add others to them.

2.1. Internet and power – nothing changes

In a famous book published in 2011, *The Net Delusion. The dark side of freedom*, author Evgeny Morozov, tries to demonstrate that the development of Internet communication has not brought major changes in authoritarian, totalitarian or democratic societies. Morozov, whose book appeared before the 2011 Arab Spring, draws attention to the fact that relations between power and supervision do not change in the virtual world; moreover, the internet is a perfect tool for expanding authoritarian power. *Failing to anticipate how authoritarian governments would respond to the Internet, cyber-utopians did not predict how useful it would prove for propaganda purposes, how masterfully dictators would learn to use it for surveillance, and how sophisticated modern systems of Internet censorship would become.* (Morozov, 2011, p. 14). To demonstrate his theory, Moruzov uses a series of examples such as the Iranian protests in 2009 closely guarded by the authorities, but the conclusion is one that raises a lot of questions. *If the only conclusion about the power of the Internet that Western policymakers have drawn from the Iranian events is that tweets are good for social mobilization, they are not likely to outsmart their authoritarian adversaries, who have so far shown much more sophistication in the online world.* (Morozov, 2011, p. 29). Moreover, online oversight of dissidents in countries such as China or Vietnam provides the authorities with new and sophisticated means to identify their intentions. For example, China has even developed a national political propaganda agency for the Internet. Moruzov's ideas are not new. Supervision as a power tool was very well described by Foucault in his famous theory of the relationship between power and panopticon as an instrument of power. For Foucault, power produces, observes and multiplies from its own effects. Power is not related to ignorance, but rather to a whole series of mechanisms that provide training, investment, cumulation, and the increase of luggage of knowledge. (Foucault, 2002, pp. 58-59). Starting from these statements, we can see that power adapts to new challenges, including those coming from the online environment. Morozov's negativism is given by the rapid intervention of authoritarian power in the online environment. The Panopticon is a circular building with a watchtower center in the center.
Those in the tower can watch the detainees in the cells, but they cannot see the guards in the tower. Thus, it can be inferred that the Panopticon has two important functions for surveillance: 1) it allows the guard to monitor and collect knowledge constantly and act to mitigate risks; and 2) the permanent visibility of the inmate instills in him a particular discipline, to regulate his behaviour and follow the norms of the prison. Of course, this does not mean that the inmates always conform to the rules and self-regulate themselves, resistance is also a feature as the inmates will either feign conformity as opposed to internalizing discipline or find alternative ways to evade the effects of power\(^4\) (Mukane, 2016).

It should not be forgotten that the panopticon is a true machine of power. The existence of the panopticon in the online environment is probably the richest literature on the relationship between power and the internet. However, here is a very important factor. Surveillance is not necessarily what the state actually does. The Internet is also under surveillance for commercial interests by large corporations. On the one hand, one can criticize that web 2.0 is a marketing ideology, that the notion of participation underlying web 2.0 is only pseudo-participation, that web 2.0 is dominated by large corporations and commercial interests, that it is an advertising machine, that communication and community-building has also been supported by older Internet applications. (Fuchs, 2011, p. 137). A basic feature of the internet is that many world wide web platforms store, process and sell personal data and online user behavior. We should never lose sight of the fact that companies such as Facebook or Twitter are only pursuing economic profit, in a word, money. Facebook is a panoptic sorting machine. It first identifies the interests of the users by requiring them to upload personal data for registering and allowing them to communicate in interests groups, with their friends, and to upload personal user-generated content. When registering a Facebook profile, users are required to input the following data: first name, family name, email, gender, date of birth. Other personal data that users can provide are: school, year of school leaving examination, universities attended, year of final degree, programs studied, employer, former employers, type of job, job description, place of employment, duration of employment, profile picture, place of residence, hometown, district of residence, family members including degree of kinship, relationship status, political attitude, religious belief, activities, interests, favourite music, favourite television programmes, favourite movies, favourite books, favourite quotations, self-description, Internet messenger usernames, mobile phone number, fixed line phone number, address, city, neighbourhood, zip code, website address. (Fuchs, 2011, p. 40).

\(^4\) See online: [http://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/19/knowledge-is-power-the-internet-panopticon-as-a-weapon-against-terror/](http://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/19/knowledge-is-power-the-internet-panopticon-as-a-weapon-against-terror/)
It would be interesting to analyse whether the patrons of these companies really represent a new social class called netocracy. Although information is the source of income for the future, we must not forget that it is done and it will be made for money, despite the opinions of certain futurologists. It seems that the internet is only a new form of capitalist relations. Turning to the power of online information, we must not forget the daily posts made by users on social networks. They represent, or rather, give important data about everyday activities, political and social views, reactions to different events, meetings or travels. There is a lot of debate if online posts reflect or not the reality experienced by the user. A simple instrumentalist theory would say that the computer is an extension of our mind, a means of making our thoughts and experiences known to us. This openness raises both the truth about online postings and their supervision. In an article entitled *Experiența Facebook: Expresivismul digital și cyber-bioputerea* [Facebook Experience: Digital expressivity and cyber-power], Cristian Iftode performs a subtle analysis based on Michel Foucault's philosophy of self-techniques on Facebook. Particular attention is paid to the idea of self-writing. Recent literature devoted to how digital turning transforms social reality, interaction types, as well as the self-reporting of human beings, attests to "self-writing" as one of the key functions of these virtual networking nodes called social networks (Iftode, 2016, p. 5). Through my status, everything I post, comment, redistribute or simply appreciate, I want to make known and accepted by my real or virtual friends as they really are. However, this will not stop me from presenting myself online in the best light ever possible. We could say that nowadays the (public) confession no longer has the air of repentance, but that of "self-publicity." In a network of narcissistic imperatives, the self-cult cult - rather than the "culture of self" - even the public expression of our most intimate embarrassment, of our break-up, loss, or separation from the past, get the allure of a commercial, with the scope to draw attention to us (Iftode, 2016, p.14). The big issue here is that of the truth of online confessions. If they are false, then power as a form of manipulation, control or panopticon based its actions on lies. And yet, are online posts true or not? A partial answer to this question came indirectly from the U.S presidential elections in 2016. It seems Donald Trump has hired an English company specializing in developing online psychological profiles based on users' likes stored in so-called Big Data. On their basis, the U.S candidate was able to send well-

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defined online messages to a certain type of voter. The company that made Trump's online campaign also took part in the election campaign of the Brexit camp in England. Achieving these profiles is based on the user's online behaviour, choices, purchases made, etc. 

First, the company buys personal data from various sources, such as land registers, car dealers, store chain databases: what magazines you read, what churches you are attending (Pădure, 2017).

We can add to what you like or post on different social networks. What is important, however, is that beyond the narcissism of online postings there is a certain truth of the personality of the user in these posts, which allows not only online surveillance but also manipulation of users to have a certain type of behavior in order to transmit what they want to hear or to vote with a particular candidate. Although some believe that this is a novelty in the relationship between power and the online user, this is not exactly accurate. The Greek military regime, for example, tried to keep track of everyone's reading habits by monitoring their choice of newspapers, thus quickly learning about their political leanings. The Greek generals would have loved the Internet. (Morozov, 2011, p. 149) However, the possibility of creating psychological profiles based on data sold by companies that have social networks for example, raises many issues, especially ethical ones.

2.2. Everything changes: The Internet as the fifth estate

Some authors, however, consider that the Internet is a new form of power called the fifth estate. In addition to the classical legislative, executive, judicial, and media estates, there is another estate: the Internet. The term comes from an American magazine with the same name that first appeared in 1965. Over time, the expression of the fifth power has acquired different valences. For some thinkers the power belongs to non-governmental organizations that could influence the political act, for others the concept represents think tanks. Think tanks are public policy research, analysis, and engagement institutions that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues that enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues. Think tanks may be affiliated with a political party, a university, or a government; they are independent institutions that are structured as permanent bodies, not ad hoc commissions. (McGann, 2016, p. 10) The first to use the term Fifth Power to describe some of the internet's activities was Thierry Crouzet in his book: Le cinquième pouvoir. Comment internet bouverse la politique. Unlike William Dutton, Crouzet performs an inductive and empirical Internet analysis based on repetitive examples to reach some theorizations. The Internet is the fifth power because it allows certain
processes and aptitudes for non-existent users before it occurs. It is the Internet that allows citizens to play an important role in political life (Crouzet, 2007, p. 44). Due to technology, people are getting closer and social differences, at least in the online environment, tend to fade away. This new power tends to become one of all by creating personal networks, hence the expression people’s power or power to the people. This power tends to become central, the other powers being subordinate to it. The fifth power is a competitive one in the first phase with the other state powers. *It is the power of the people, the power that will dominate the democratic life, but which has so far lacked the necessary means. Today the internet provides us with these means. When they interconnect, they become connectors-citizens that take their own destiny in hand. The fifth estate are we, the civil society.* (Crouzet, 2007, p. 72) But what are the means by which citizens become the fifth estate? First of all, citizens tend to become themselves journalists and sources of information by creating blogs or posting information on social networks. The fourth power, the classic press has a one-way, easy-to-control information transmission, while the internet has a multidirectional, interconnected one. There are specialized sites for downloading information directly from users. Such a site was OhmyNews, where 50000 cyber-reporters participated. These are forms in which the fifth power competes with traditional media channels. *The fifth estate is no longer one of the barricades. It’s a power of interpellation.* (Crouzet, 2007, p. 101) Another form of manifestation of the user's information power are blogs, especially those with political themes. Politicians are no longer those who impose the themes that should concern the citizens, but on the contrary, the citizens become the ones that gradually impose the political agenda. The way this power works is the idea of the network. However, creating and displaying information on the network does not work after a specific pattern or in a particular order. A network is never centralized and has no obvious structure. Users of such networks, which may also be sites, tend to be considered equal among themselves. Such a network of sites and information has influenced, for example, the vote on the 2005 European Constitution in France. For the first time, the information in network nodes managed to defeat the classical press favorable to the poll. *In a network, an isolated militant may sound as much as an army of sympathizers.* (Crouzet, 2007, p. 157) For this reason, each node of the network counts. The internet also contributes in new ways to the development of an idea debate. The blogosphere, for example, represents a space for discussing ideas taken from the traditional media. The opportunities in time and space to discuss an online problem are unlimited. The internet also allows redistribution of information according to the nodes of each network. For 1,000 users, if each
has 1,000 members on a network, the information is actually sent to 1,000,000 people. All of these factors turn the internet into the fifth estate.

For William Dutton the internet is also the fifth estate. An increased use of the Internet, WEB 2.0 and information technologies create a new reality. Individuals connected to networks go beyond institutional and physical boundaries to create a space of streams rather than a space to reflect the governance process. In this space of information flows, people search for information and services. They can be located anywhere in the world and are related to local, regional, national or international activities. More and more people are searching information on search engines or recommended social networking sites rather than looking directly at the official sites of different institutions. When information is no longer under institutional control, the door is opened for users to exert influence and control in new ways. In other words, there are changes in the communicative power of citizens and users. Members of the fifth estate are citizens connected to networks with the help of the Internet, independent of institutions, accessing resources and people in a way that increases their communicative power. This power allows them to hold accountable institutions. Individuals connected to the network become sources of information. (Dutton, 2010b pp. 5-10) Unlike Crouzet, Dutton goes into his analysis from general to private, from theory to his empirical demonstration. For example, in the study The role of social media in Societal Change: Cases in Finland of the Fifth Estate on Facebook (Dutton, 2015) demonstrates with close data from some Facebook users that a definition in the sense of communicative power, with examples from Finland, exists on this social network. Dutton agrees with the idea that the fifth estate will become more important than the others, even having the ability to hold the other estates accountable. The concept of the Fifth Estate envisions the Internet as a platform through which networked individuals can perform a role in holding institutions such as the media and government more accountable. Networked individuals as source information, independent of any single institution, using capabilities provided by search and social media. (Dubois & Dutton, 2014, p. 252). Such manifestations of accountability of certain institutions take place at a planetary level. If Dutton describes cases from China and Canada, we can take as an example the role of the fifth estate in the Romanian protests from January-February 2017. The Romanian government attempted to amend the criminal code and, as a result, with the help of the social site Facebook, over 200,000 Romanians went out on the street to protest. The result was that the government has dropped the criminal codes. It is a proof that the executive power is held accountable by the fifth state - the people. Internet as the fifth
estate must nevertheless be reported to the other estates and we must realize that they can pose Internet hazards.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional estate</th>
<th>Modern parallel</th>
<th>Type of threat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st: Clergy</td>
<td>Public intellectual</td>
<td>Internet seen as a space for amateurs without the knowledge and analytical rigour of experts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd: Nobility</td>
<td>Economic elites</td>
<td>Centralization of information utilities and commercialization of Fifth Estate spaces.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd: Commons</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Censorship, regulation and other controls to constrain and block Internet access</td>
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<td>4th: Press</td>
<td>Mass media</td>
<td>Imitating and competing with the Fifth Estate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mob</td>
<td>Citizens, audiences, consumers, Malicious and accidental uses that undermine spammers, hackers</td>
<td>Malicious and accidental uses that undermine spammers, hackers trust and confidence in the Internet.</td>
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(William Dutton, 2010a, online: http://www.perada-magazine.eu/pdf/003003/003003.pdf)

Conclusions

We live in a world where technology has an unprecedented development, so far. The emergence of new technologies, especially computers and the internet, often makes changes to the conceptual device in philosophy or humanities when it comes to discussing the effects of these technologies. Similarly, the concept of power suffers two approaches in the online environment. A classic one, in which the existing power continues to manifest itself with the same predilection and virtually a new approach, according to which the Internet changes the way we understand and define power. Social networking technology creates a new power that belongs to the people. The Internet democratizes societies, as it was the case with the 2011 Arab Spring, or it helps to hold accountable the excesses of the top
three estates in the state. However, the lack of clear definitions provides the concept of the fifth power with a certain degree of ambiguity.

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