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# Netizenry as the Fifth Estate

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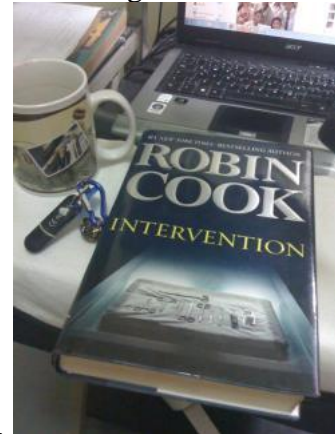
As a mass communications student in the eighties, I was educated with the intimidating thought that I would be joining the rank of the members of the “fourth estate,” a reference to the legitimate practitioners of the print and broadcast media. The prestige attached to that title was one that was both awe-inspiring and daunting, knowing the vast power that mass media wielded in the scheme of politics and nation-building.



Little did I know that more than two decades later, with or without the bachelor’s degree, I would be counted as one of scores of millions of people belonging to the cybercitizenry the world over, armed only with a computer or smartphone, and a wifi connection.

When American pioneer on internet studies, Michael Hauben first coined the portmanteau “netizen” (from the words internet and citizen) in the nineties, he theorized an emerging societal force that can safeguard democracies with the increasing availability and popularity of the internet. Hauben died in 2001 without seeing the phenomenal rise to power of netizenry as a

socio-political and cultural force to reckon with. It can arguably claim the ambiguous rank of the



“fifth estate” to include the bloggers and all avid users of the internet.

Watchdogging governments used to be the calling of mainstream media, priding themselves with the monicker “free press.” Civil society later joined the elite guardians of democracy, although its composition had the clerical blessing and backing of the church, an independent pillar in itself, but one of three Estates under the French Monarchy in the olden times. Politics continue to evolve since the radical idea espoused by French political thinker Baron de Montesquieu during the Age of Enlightenment that the administrative branches of government – executive, judiciary and legislative – should stay separate from and at the same time dependent on one another to maintain a balance of power.

Nowadays, netizens hardly need prodding to rally for an issue or cause, or even to go out in the streets, like in the civil society days of public protests. They virtually come in staggering numbers from the comfort and safety of their homes by posting comments, liking and sharing files in cyberspace. All they need is a stimuli – celebrities having a scuffle at the airport, political TV ads offending the public intellect, and just about anything from the mundane to the lollapalooza – that their senses can perceive in a strongly offensive way, instigating a social interaction that can instantly go viral.

And when it did go viral, “all hell broke loose.” Netizens’ campaign would instantly go berserk, if not contained. Calling in the anti-riot squad would probably not be an exaggeration in some unforeseen cases given the immense power of the netizenry phenomenon. A close example is last year’s #Amalayer viral video that is now history, but not after the antagonistic young woman has gotten her dose of cyberbullying. The netizenry did not relish her rude and arrogant verbal assault on a lady guard, thus ganged up on her with a conflagrative hate campaign.

On heaven’s side, a candid photo of a young streetboy, sneaking into a bookstore, also in Manila just recently, to read in a corner his favorite “Ang Pagong at ang Matsing” (“The Tortoise and the Monkey”) fable, went viral, too and became the destitute boy’s ticket to fame and good

fortune. A number of philanthropists has come forward in their desire to help put the boy to



school.

Still trending in social media sites is the fiasco that comedy bar gay talent Vice Ganda, now a top TV and movie personality, got himself into when he made the butt of his toilet humor during his own concert a highly-respected Filipina journalist and TV news executive, Jessica Sojo, for her excessive weight and femininity, both lampooned unrestrainedly with the tasteless “gang rape” punchline by the comedian. Within days, Vice Ganda was quick to express regret for the incident, with Jessica slightly hinting about the lack of purity of intention by bringing that wish to the forefront of the much-publicized apology. Had he allowed pride and arrogance to take their sweet time, Vice Ganda would be black and blue from cyberbullying. His racist diatribe against newly-proclaimed senator and daughter of the Philippines’ vice-president is another item that netizens recently feasted on.

Netizens do not rest. They are full-time cyber armies protecting the people’s morals, ideals, and democratic beliefs. Paradoxically, left on their own, without knowing the full potential of their innate power, netizens can destroy the very same ideals that they should be guarding.

Virtually operating 24/7 in the free world, netizens may just lay claim righteously to the fanciful “fifth estate” title for being vigilant watchdogs of cyberspace where all the world is connected. The Hauben word has come of age.