The term *Fifth Estate* refers to the internet — the system of communication between computers via commercial servers.

The name derives from the situation in France at the time of the 1789 French Revolution. The French political system was organised around three ‘estates’ — the nobility, the clergy, and the rest of the people. Each had political representation in the Estates General, the French parliament. However, there was a fourth body that had significant political influence — those writers who published pamphlets. They came to be called the Fourth Estate, because of their influence on the political situation. The name has come to describe the press and broadcast media. Now, with the development of a new broadcast medium, the internet, the term Fifth Estate has been used to show both its place in a continuing tradition, and the fact that it is a new and separate element in that tradition.

The theme in this section concerns the meanings and implications of the development of this new broadcast medium.