

Wonks and War Rooms

S02 E08 - Networked Fourth Estate with Sherry Aske

Episode Transcript

Elizabeth: [00:00:03] Welcome to [Wonks and War Rooms](#), where political communication theory meets on the ground strategy. I'm your host, [Elizabeth Dubois](#). I'm an associate professor at the [University of Ottawa](#), and my pronouns are she/ her. Today, I'm recording from the unseeded and traditional territory of the [Algonquin people](#). Today, we're talking about the Fourth Estate and the Networked Fourth Estate with Sherry. Sherry, can you introduce yourself, please?

Sherry: [00:00:25] Yes, my name is [Sherry Aske](#) and my pronouns are she/her. I am currently a social media adviser with the Federal Public Service currently working at [Elections Canada](#)—but I am here speaking just from personal experience, not on behalf of my current employer. Before working or moving to the federal public service and doing comms advising, I spent six years as a multimedia journalist at [CBC Ottawa](#), working as a radio, television and online reporter and producer. And I went to Carleton, did the [Carleton Journalism Program](#). And then I went back and did my Masters in Communications to study journalism, and looked at the increasing pressures on newsrooms today and how they could be sustainable long term and if they were doing too much and published a research project about that. And I continue to, in my personal time, be super into digital news trends and social media companies and their evolving platforms, I guess, for news media as well as how the public is interacting with them.

Elizabeth: [00:01:33] Amazing. I am so excited to have you here today. We're talking about the [Fourth Estate](#) and the [Networked Fourth Estate](#), and I think that your background perfectly fits with this topic. So first off, have you heard of either of these terms before?

Sherry: [00:01:46] So the Fourth Estate we definitely learned about in [j-school](#). Just a general understanding of like, what is the news? What is the media? As sort of like a fourth set of eyes on the political sphere. The Networked Fourth Estate? Is that what you called it? That term itself I think was obviously covered, but I don't... when I hear it off the cuff I just think of: okay, we'll introduce online things. So if you had the Fourth Estate originally, it was a lot more segregated. It was snail's pace network, just being, "Okay, everybody is connected to it", as opposed to it being, I guess, an institution that would speak to people, [or] sort of a reference to two-way communication, or multi-way communication would even be a

better way of saying it. I have no idea [if] that meets the technical definition, but that is what I think of. And I apologize to any prof[fessor] that I had, that may have taught this at some point.

Elizabeth: [00:02:42] There's a lot of information you get while you're going through school. Not all of it sticks in your brain. That's fine. Profs know that!

All right. I'm going to give you kind of the standard academic definition and then we're going to go from there. So first off, the idea of the Fourth Estate comes from the idea of the [estates of the realm](#), which back in the day was the church, nobility, and the townsmen or the commons. Right? And this is very rooted in British tradition. And then a few other countries have their own sort of social political structures around it. And what's happened is as our societies have evolved, we've continued to use this idea of estates, but they've sort of shifted. So sometimes modern versions of these estates are [legislature, administration, and judiciary](#). And then the Fourth Estate is pretty agreed upon as being the press or the media, which are these individuals and organizations that are part of our political system, but they are outside of the formal structure of it. And really, it's that separation that's super essential right?

So we have the idea of freedom of the press and freedom of expression and the idea that the Fourth Estate [is] able to be this channel between those other estates, government, and the people. That they are able to kind of check-in with the people, be a bit of a barometer of public opinion, that they really crucially hold government to account, and they're a check on power and the rulers. Right?

So if we've got this idea of Fourth Estate doing those key things—the holding to account, barometer for public opinion, channel between government and people—the Networked Fourth Estate does those key things too, but [is] enabled by technology. Which is really close to what you were describing, right? It's like the same thing as before. Same same. But let's add on tech and now you're part of this networked communication. Great. It is partially that. But even beyond that, the idea of the Networked Fourth Estate is we've got a bunch of new actors that come in and get to be part of that Fourth Estate, get to be part of holding government to account, for example. So we've got traditional news media that still play a role, but we also have, like really popular news blogs, and citizen journalism, and civil society organizations that are able to produce and disseminate news in a way that maybe they wouldn't have before. We've got, you know, partisan and alternative blogs or podcasts, amateurs who are kind of playing a more professional role by reporting what they're seeing on the ground, and peer to peer information sharing. So, the Networked Fourth Estate basically is not just

enabled by technology for the traditional "I went to j-school" kind of actors, but also a bunch of new people and kinds of organization within it.

Sherry: [00:05:46] Yes, it makes perfect sense. I think the other distinction that's important there is when you talk about who is involved in the network, like you mentioned, yeah you've got niche blogs and smaller news outlets or independent news outlets. Power is less centralized. But it also, I think, doesn't even have to be an institution - [it could be] an individual. And correct me if I'm wrong, but part of that networked public sphere, an individual is now a producer of content and can now act in a way they could not before, beyond writing a letter to an editor or some other form of civic engagement, participate in that public sphere, or act as the eyes on the other institutions of the state.

Elizabeth: [00:06:29] Yeah, yeah, exactly right. Like we used to have a Fourth Estate that was very highly structured and there was a limited number of kinds of actors that could exist within it. They were all mostly related to a particular organization. And now those organizations can continue to exist, but we also have all of these people who can kind of pop in and out. They may be associated with some sort of organization. They may be individuals. They may be anonymous collections of people. Right?

An example that has come out time and time again when talking about this idea of a Networked Fourth Estate is something like [Anonymous](#), right? The hacker group that is a collective of a bunch of different folks. And it changes over time. And we don't know what that organizational structure is at any moment, but we do know that they contribute to the amount of knowledge of what's happening in our political and social world in a way that is similar to what traditional journalists do. Or [WikiLeaks](#), right? And like [whistleblower](#) platforms that are collecting information from lots of sources and then sharing it back out, often via traditional media as well, right? Like within the Networked Fourth Estate, there's interaction among those kinds of players, too.

Sherry: [00:07:46] Yes. And I hope we're going to get to this, but maybe we can talk about how, even though there are new players in a Networked Fourth Estate, not all of those players have equal power. And I think it's a bit of a myth to assume that the networked - I don't know how to say this - but the Fourth Estate is fully networked. Because even though everybody has the ability to be an actor, the speakers don't all have the same level of influence. And I may be [jumping the gun](#) here, but I love the concept of the Networked Fourth Estate. I'm just pointing out there are some flaws in it. I'll let you come back. You steer the ship.

Elizabeth: [00:08:32] Yeah. No, I love that. I love that. And I think that absolutely the power dynamics within the idea of the Networked Fourth Estate are really essential to talk about. And you mentioned, you know, [that] the network is not fully networked. And I would actually argue that that is kind of essential to the idea of a Networked Fourth Estate, right? We have this sort of idea that has been around since the Internet became popular that like Internet tools should democratize things, everybody should be equally able to contribute and to participate. And, you know, in reality, that's not what the Internet does. The Internet routinely is used to reinforce existing social divides and existing power structures and power dynamics. And I think the idea of networked interaction, really, we need to think of that as fundamentally being a power dynamic distribution, because you don't actually see everyone in a network with the same amount of power. In fact, there are often highly central nodes in a network.

So in [network theory](#), we talk about at nodes and edges and the nodes are the individuals or organizations and then the edges are the relationships between them. And that relationship might be sharing information from one group to another group. And the ones that have a lot of people connected to them or a lot of organizations connected to them have more power and the ones with less connections have less power. And that's just from [the] "how information flows" kind of perspective. But I wonder if what you're getting at is even beyond that. Like, is it also the kind of power that is offered by being an established brand, for example?

Sherry: [00:10:23] Exactly. So I totally agree with what you're saying about nodes and how the bigger nodes have more connection with more people. I think you can also look at the fact that the mere existence of nodes means that some information doesn't get to some other nodes, or communities—if you want to use a non-technical term. But when you look at who is a citizen journalist or even a small independent news org, these, if they are to act as a full and fully engaged player in the Networked Fourth Estate, they don't have the same rights sometimes that a big player or an established player from previous times like the [Toronto Star](#) or the [Globe and Mail](#) or [CTV](#) might have. And so when you talk about things like [press galleries](#) and the [Ontario legislature](#), there are, even within Canada, some legislatures where not just anybody can ask a question. Or they keep certain news rooms out. Or even in COVID times, there's only so many questions that get asked in a news conference. And you're not there [physically]; you can't yell at the minister speaking as they walk by. You don't get the same access is basically what I'm trying to say. So how can you act as a fully engaged member of the Networked Fourth Estate if you don't have all of the benefits of being in the traditional Fourth Estate? I don't know if I explained that well.

Elizabeth: [00:11:52] Yeah, that is explained really well and hits on a really crucial point. There is this sort of tension, I guess, between the established Fourth Estate (the Fourth Estate that, you know, we are taught to believe in and to trust) versus these potential members of the Networked Fourth Estate who, you know, didn't necessarily go to journalism school or might not necessarily have journalistic standards that they have to adhere to because they are part of some sort of association or organization and are not recognized as being the same kind of information gatherer and sharer. Right?

And so that, I think, is really interesting: the idea of what [the] government perceives and allows and how that filters into what you as an actor can then do. It also makes me think about something that [Yochai Benkler, who is the originator of the idea of the Network Fourth Estate, talked \[about\] early in his writing on this idea, like back in 2013 or so](#). About how the Networked Fourth Estate members who are kind of these citizen journalists or whistleblowers or other folks who are not part of that traditional Fourth Estate, are maybe more at risk because of those traditional players kind of feeling like their identity, their role, their income, potentially is at risk and then sort of trying to push these new players out of the system. Does that ring true for you? Did you see that play out? I mean, 2013 was a while ago. We've had some time to figure out whether or not that's happening.

Sherry: [00:13:47] Yeah, that's a really good point. I think that is a fear that we still hear from time to time. I have not experienced it personally, but I also, I mean, I would be speaking from a point of privilege having, when I was a journalist, I was at CBC and would have been one of the people that had access.

You know, even just calling someone up for a story or for an interview, the ability to say, "I work for a well known news organization" gives you a sense of credibility and trust. It can work both ways. It can also [be a disadvantage] if there are people [who distrust the media, for example] Indigenous communities would be one that had distrust in the media. And there are definitely people who would hear that and think, "Well, I'm not going to talk to you" or associate biases with different news organizations. So I guess to go back to the question, I don't know if I would have been the one who would have seen it. And so I don't think I can speak to whether or not it happens often.

I do want to point out something interesting that it also brings up. It doesn't answer your question, but I think some of those "protections", if that's the right word, that established players or legacy media have are eroding and have eroded in the last year particularly, or we have seen certainly that narrative [of erosion]. Maybe it's just that we're hearing more of it at this particular time. But when you look at the US election or protest times when it used to be sacred, that you were not [arrested \[as a\] journalist](#), or a [journalist](#)

[would not be subject to tear gas](#). Or another example would be in January before the pandemic started, when there were protests happening in D.C., there were [barricades set up largely by Indigenous Communities on the rail lines](#) and rail traffic stopped for a little while, but some journalists were trying to get access to those blockades and local authorities were keeping them back or keeping them removed so they could not see what was going on. And there were people speaking out vocally at that time saying, “You have to let journalists in, they have to have access”. So I think it's an example of how you can see some of those "protections" that are eroding for one reason or another.

Elizabeth: [00:16:05] Why do you think that is? What has led to this erosion of protections that you're observing?

Sherry: [00:16:11] I hate to say Trump and point it at that, but I think that has been part of it. It's just more of a narrative that we see in terms of lack of trust in the media, lack of respect in the media. And when I say Trump, I more mean a narrative and a reality that, if you look at the latest [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) that went out, that confidence in news media and the Fourth Estate in general has gone down. And part of that is because of people with loud voices discrediting different organizations by stating false things or accusing media of lies or increased polarization, or bias, which I think we do see. And I think all of that plays a role.

Elizabeth: [00:17:01] Do you see those voices that are calling into question what legacy media have been saying, do you see them as part of the Fourth Estate—or the Networked Fourth Estate, rather?

Sherry: [00:17:13] I think they definitely would be part of the Networked Fourth Estate. Now, I'm rethinking that. I mean, they are part of the network, are they... I think whether they're part of the Networked Fourth Estate depends on [if] you consider them journalists or not. I think the majority of the criticism is coming from individual citizens and public figures as opposed to other news organizations, although we do see some of that.

Elizabeth: [00:17:39] Right.

Sherry: [00:17:40] Because there are news organizations on the left and on the right that will point to other news organizations as sharing false information or misinformation or just problematic narratives. So I think they're, I mean, they are part of it, but not all of them would be considered, I think, part of the Fourth Estate. And that kind of definition also runs into a bit of trickiness.

Elizabeth: [00:18:02] Definitely it does. And we haven't done an episode on [the] [Public Sphere](#) idea yet, but it's in the lineup for a future episode. But I personally like to think about our political and journalistic system as a larger media environment with a bunch of different actors, which we could talk about as a network itself if we wanted to. We've done [an episode on assemblages](#) back in Season One where I talked about [how] we've got all of these different kinds of actors that show up. So we've got politicians, and parties, and we've got government, and journalists, and journalistic organizations, and civil society, and individuals who are average citizens or maybe who are activists, and all of these different folks. And then I guess the question is, what grouping of those kinds of actors actually is part of the idea of the Networked Fourth Estate and which are just actors that interact with the Networked Fourth Estate?

And so that then brings us to the next question of, "Okay, well, who gets to be in the Networked Fourth Estate?" Right? Like, we had a very clear definition of who got to be in the Fourth Estate when we were talking about legacy media—it's the established journalistic organizations. It's the people who went to journalism school and then got a job at one of these recognized organizations as a media outlet. Right? So now that we're thinking more broadly about who gets to be doing those roles of channel between government and people, barometer of public opinion, holding government to account, like, do you have to be a journalist anymore to be considered part of that?

Sherry: [00:19:51] So I think that's a really good point, because you can be in it without—and I'm making maybe a weird distinction—without being an actor in it. So I think maybe what Benkler was getting at is the idea that you now have a voice that you did not before. Whether you are a citizen journalist, or an independent news org, or a citizen, the influence of your voice varies. And the power that that voice has varies. Whereas in legacy media, the only way to participate in the Fourth Estate was as a source (so a journalist comes to you and you are part of the story). [Or] you could write a letter to the editor or send a letter, I guess, to complain to the [CRTC](#) if you didn't like something that you saw on television. Whereas now you can be part of the Fourth Estate as a commenter on a story, [or] as someone who shares it, because we are all now sort of like our own newspaper delivery people sharing articles on social media platforms with our friends. We can choose which articles we show our own networks - we have that power. It's just not the same amount of power as a CBC, a CTV, a Globe and Mail [journalist] would have. And so I think that's a more helpful way of looking at it: you're part of it. But we have to recognize that the degree to which you are part of it varies drastically depending on the nature of your situation.

Elizabeth: [00:21:21] I really like that explanation. I think that really captures the kind of variety of contributions that different types of actors, different people make within that system. So thank you for that.

It also makes me think about this idea of citizen empowerment, citizen engagement. You know, we talk a lot in democratic context about how important it is that citizens are aware and connected and involved in their political systems. Do you think that the Networked Fourth Estate has allowed for increased citizen engagement generally? You know, we've talked specifically about like, OK, there might be specific citizen journalists who take it on and they're like, "I'm going to write a blog and I'm going to dedicate all kinds of time to this". But I'm speaking more broadly [now].

Sherry: [00:22:11] So I'm really torn on this. I'd say I'm 50/50. Like 50 percent of me is like, "Yes, it is awesome!" Where I struggle is [that] I'm not sure that sometimes the online interactions that we have hold the same weight and have the same impact as civic engagement that you would do in person through protests, or going to a meeting at City Hall, or writing an actual letter, even if it's an email to your MP. I think what we see a lot of is people engaging in comment sections or sharing something with their opinion, whether it's to disagree with something or support something, and I think that matters, but I think there are still things that hold more weight. Like if you actually send an email to your local representative, or write a physical letter, or show up at a city meeting to speak about something that is happening in your community that upsets you, whether you want a road closed or opened, or parking rates changed, you name it. I think that goes farther in terms of showing the other institutions of society that hold power what citizens want. And that's something that still bothers me is I think we do - and always have I guess - we do a lot of sharing our opinions or liking things online or signing an online petition. And it doesn't mean those things don't matter and it doesn't mean they're not important. But I think sometimes we... that's all we do and we think our job is done.

Elizabeth: [00:23:52] Mm hmm.

Sherry: [00:23:53] And civic engagement for me personally goes beyond voting. It goes beyond changing your profile picture to include a rainbow, or something like that. Again, not to say these things aren't important and aren't helpful. They are. It's just what else? Like, OK, do that, but what else can I do?

Elizabeth: [00:24:12] Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And the "What else?" might change depending on the context. And sometimes something that you do via social media is sufficient for the particular goal of that moment. But sometimes you need to do things

that are different and it depends on whose opinion you're trying to change and what voice you want to have.

Sherry: [00:24:38] Another interesting thing to think about—because I may be conflating the topics here—but, there is a difference [between the Fourth Estate and citizen engagement]. Like journalists are not advocates, and the Fourth Estate's job is, at least traditionally as it has been taught in journalism schools (and there's probably arguments going on, you know, "Should this change?", because we are revisiting a lot of what we teach in journalism schools now and rightly so) but we're taught to research, find out facts, and lay out those facts. We are not taught to be advocates for certain causes. And I think the other way that the Networked Public Sphere can make that interesting is citizens do take on that role and sometimes niche media and independent media do take on that role

Elizabeth: [00:25:27] Mm hmm.

Sherry: [00:25:27] And I don't personally have a problem [with] that as long as it is disclosed. Like as long as you say, "We are a media organization that fights for better protections for the salmon industry" as an example or whatever. If you make that clear and people know that, [then] I don't have an issue with it. It's when it's not clear, or you're hiding, or pretending to be something else, or pretending to be non-biased, I guess in any way, that I start to have more of an issue with it. But it shows how complicated the Networked Fourth Estate becomes because we used to have very clear definitions for things and everything fit into a certain box and then in a Networked Fourth Estate that doesn't happen.

Elizabeth: [00:26:13] Yeah. So one thing is it's important to remember that this idea of perfectly objective, non-biased journalism is not a necessity in [the sense that] to be named the Fourth Estate it does not require that. Certainly in Canada, that has been our norm. And in a lot of Western democracies at this point, we expect that the mainstream media at least is going to be relatively balanced in its reporting, relatively objective. Of course, they're still humans and they're still making choices based on what's going to get attention. And so to imagine that anything can be completely free of bias, I think is a little bit of a delusion. But we try our best out in this world.

The point, though, that you make of, "Okay, but we actually allow for a lot more perspectives and a lot more opinion can be shared by using the tools and tactics of a Networked Fourth Estate" is really important to think about. And that means that our media environment as a whole and the kind of information system that we exist in can have a lot more there. Right? There's a lot more to choose from. And I've talked

previously about the [high choice media environment](#). We're not going to get into that right now, we don't have time, but certainly what you've brought up then brings up new questions of, "Okay, but what parts of that Networked Fourth Estate are people actually paying attention to?" And that's important because if we're thinking of the Fourth Estate as being able to connect government and people, well, which parts of government and which people are being connected? If it's a barometer of the public opinion, okay, but which subsets of the public's opinion are actually being voiced in a way that government's paying attention to it and which ones are maybe being ignored? If we're talking about holding government to account, which parts of government are being held to account and from what perspective? Right? Depending on what your political partisan leanings are like, maybe your version of really strongly holding to account looks different than somebody else's. And so when we're thinking about what the Fourth Estate is supposed to do and how they do it, the variation that you point to is really important to understand and really difficult to actually get at.

Sherry: [00:28:48] Totally true. There are so many different like... Yes. I think like... [When] I was talking about advocacy versus, like you said, my version of holding someone [to] account versus someone else's version of holding someone [to] account may look very different. I think that's important. And I think it's important that we revisit these things when we look at the Networked Fourth Estate and what we want it to be.

Elizabeth: [00:29:23] Mm hmm. Yeah, fascinating. And we could record for a lot longer, but unfortunately, we are at a time now. So instead, I gotta switch gears and ask you one final question. Can you, in your own words, please explain to me what the Networked Fourth Estate is?

Sherry: [00:29:42] Oh, put me on the spot! Even though we just talked about this for 40 minutes.

Elizabeth: [00:29:46] It's the pop quiz.

Sherry: [00:29:48] The pop quiz. OK, well, for me, I think I understand the Networked Fourth Estate to be journalism as we experience it today, through various online or digital connections. That includes a broader mix of players, including legacy media, niche media, independent media and individuals. [And] that is partially shaped by individual citizens who now have increased access. That was very long. But I think there's two main parts, which is you still have players, but you also have participants and you have a digital setting with an increased number of participants, even though their power is not equal. Is that OK?

Elizabeth: [00:30:46] Yeah, I think that's great. I think that's wonderful. It's really good. The only things that I would sort of add or tweak: you mentioned journalism at the beginning and you know, we didn't really dig deeply into what journalism is in this conversation. But I have started talking more about news creation and news creators because journalism brings with it this assumption of training and particular sets of ethics and whatnot. And that's not necessarily part of the Networked Fourth Estate. It is for many actors, but not for all of them. And then-

Sherry: [00:31:24] One hundred percent.

Elizabeth: [00:31:25] Okay awesome, I'm glad that resonates with you. The other tiny bit that I would add is just, I guess, calling back to what that Fourth Estate is supposed to do in the first place. And that's the link between government and people, barometer of public opinion, holding government to account. But, yeah, your explanation focusing on the power dynamics, the kind of participants' involvement. All awesome. Thank you.

Sherry: [00:31:51] You're welcome.

Elizabeth: [00:31:55] Elizabeth: All right, that was our episode on the Networked Fourth Estate, I hope you enjoyed it. If you'd like to learn more about this or any of the other concepts or theories we talked about today head on over to PolCommTech.ca.