To Eat or Not To Eat?

---A Study of the Fourth Estate From the event of Ractopamine

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I Introduction

The impact of the Fourth Estate has been widely discussed in recent years, especially in this generation of mass communication. According to a study, on average, people spend one to three hours every day in watching television or getting information from the Internet. And as we turn on the television, computer or read the newspapers, we will receive all kinds of information from all over the world.

We may well say the emergence of the various means of mass communication has totally changed people’s lives and ways of thinking. As a matter of fact, we can now easily know what is happening around the world and see many politicians express their political views in some talk shows or commercials on TV. What’s more, we can learn the traditional customs of other countries and celebrate them as well. As a result, people nowadays are not only concerned about the things that happen around them but also the situation of the whole world. While mass communication can be used effectively and wisely, people who have no sense of justice or right attitude toward it can also abuse it. People may easily believe something that is totally untrue or comes from a suspicious source. Therefore, the proper use of the Fourth Estate is getting increasingly important as the development of mass media has upgraded with each passing day.

As a member of the global village, we should all be aware of the significance of the Fourth Estate, and the Ractopamine event, which happened in July 2007, just serves as a very good example. In Taiwan, Ractopamine is regarded as an illicit drug. However, in America it is allowed to be used in the procedure of breeding fowls, but there is a certain dose limit. Unfortunately, in July 2007, it was found that some pig
farmers without conscience had abused Ractopamine when breeding pigs in order to advance the price and the quality of the pork. In no time, the abuse of Ractopamine was uncovered by the media, which forced the government to investigate the many cases of abusing Ractopamine. On the other hand, the series of reports on Ractopamine also reveal some problems lurking in the news system and show that the way the media report an event still leaves something to be desired.

This essay will discuss the significance of the Fourth Estate, the event of the Ractopamine and the relationship between them. It will also introduce the characteristics of the Fourth Estate and its advantages and disadvantages.

II. Thesis

1. The Fourth Estate

(1) The origin of the Fourth Estate

The origin of the Fourth Estate can be traced back to a man called Edmund Burke(1) (1729-1797), who was a British politician. One day, he looked up at the Press Gallery of the House of Commons and said, ‘In the Reporters' Gallery Yonder sits the Fourth Estate, and they are more important than them all.’ As centuries went by, the fourth estate came out on top of the other three estates and became the most important one. Other modern commentators also interpreted the term ‘Fourth Estate’ as the fourth ‘power’ which checked and counterbalanced the three state 'powers' of executive, legislature and judiciary. Originally, the first three estates referred to the British parliament. The First Estate consisted of three hundred clergy, the Second Estate consisted of three hundred nobles, and the Third Estate consisted of six hundred commoners. As time went by, these estates gradually came to refer to the executive, legislature and judiciary. Later on, the term ‘Fourth Estate’ began to be used to refer
to the mass media as a powerful watchdog in liberal democracy, revealing the state authority’s abuse of power and defending the rights of the public.\(^{(2)}\)

\textbf{(2) The significance of the Fourth Estate}

‘The Fourth estate is a term commonly applied to the public press. It is an extension of the use of “estate” to signify the three traditional social orders of feudal society as the lords spiritual, lords temporal, and commons-and formerly was applied to other groups, such as the army and the mob, until journalists claimed the title.’

— Encyclopedia Americana\(^{(3)}\)

Stewart Watt, the chancellor of Supreme Court, once expressed his opinion of the Fourth Estate in “Or of the Press”\(^{(26)}\) saying, “To create a fourth institution outside the government as an additional checks on the three official branches.”\(^{(4)}\) That is, the Fourth Estate has been regarded as a watchdog rather than any regulatory body for the media. Although in a democracy the press do not have any regulatory power over the three official branches of executive, legislature and judiciary, they can report the misfeasance of government from the standpoint of the public. However, once the press is no longer a watchdog but an attack dog or a lap dog, who will be watching them?\(^{(5)}\) So mass media should be careful in using the Fourth Estate in today’s society.

\textbf{2. The Ractopamine event}

\textbf{(1) The Ractopamine}

When the press first uncovered the abuse of Ractopamine in 2007, panic spread quickly all over the island. The price of pork dropped sharply overnight because of
the continual reports on TV and in the newspapers. A lot of people who used to have pork on their table started to buy chicken, beef and lamb instead. However, Ractopamine is not really as bad as the press reported. In fact, Ractopamine is just what makes people like to eat pork. In the beginning, Ractopamine was invented as a cure of asthma. Decades ago, the Eli Lilly and company in America accidentally found that a small dose of Ractopamine used in pigs would increase the lean muscle mass and reduce the fat. Although the Eli Lilly and company failed to turn Ractopamine into a cure of asthma, they did start to sell Ractopamine as a product that could reduce the fat of pigs. Nowadays, Ractopamine is being used all over the world with a limitation of the dose. Nevertheless, if overused, Ractopamine can still cause some problems such as an increase of the heart rate, palpitations, tremor and insomnia. It may also cause a rise in blood pressure and an increase in anxiety.\(^{(6)}\)

(2) The revelation

In July, 2007, some pig farmers in Taiwan were found abusing the illicit drug, Ractopamine, by the Department of Health (DOH). As with many other cases, the press immediately made a fuss of the finding by DOH. The TV stations broadcast the news almost 24 hours a day, and the newspapers covered the event for several days in a row, all of which successfully made the viewers and readers believe that the pork they bought and ate everyday was poisoned without any reliable data source. Seeing that they had aroused people’s interest, the press continued to dig into this topic by themselves for days on end. Some even sent their own correspondents to the pig farms to find the source of Ractopamine abusing as well as the Ractopamine distributors. In the end, their investigation went even deeper and faster than the DOH’s, and of course, they reached their goal, the amazing viewing ratings. As a consequence, the higher the viewing ratings were, the lower the pork’s price was. However, when we go back to
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the original report of DOH, we found that the pork only had a hint of Ractopamine (0.37ppb), and it was much lower than the UN’s standard (10ppb) (7). In fact, the problem of Ractopamine-abusing didn’t seem to be as serious as the press reported. According to the statistics, the intake of Ractopamine for a man of sixty kilograms won’t exceed the standard of the UN unless he eats more than one hundred and fifty kilograms of pork with Ractopamine each day. But in the long run, Ractopamine-abusing could still be a problem for our health.

(3) The following problems and their impact

Several days after the press had intensive reports of this issue, the government finally started to attach importance to the sequence of Ractopamine-abusing events. The Council of Agriculture decided to forbid pig farmers to use Ractopamine during the whole breeding process of pigs in order to calm the people. However, this decision in turn caused a lot of complaints from the pig farmers, who claimed to be the victims of only a few pig farmers’ bad deeds. Most of them were law-abiding; some pig farmers had even refused to use Ractopamine because they were afraid of the sequel of it, but the Council of Agriculture’s slow reaction made the pig farmers even angrier. However, as the case stands, the pig farmers in America were the biggest victims of this event. In America, the pig farmers use Ractopamine to advance the meat’s quality and make people willing to purchase the pork. Since the Council of Agriculture in Taiwan had forbidden using Ractopamine, they could no longer promise the taste of the meat and it would definitely strike at their exportation of pork to Taiwan. So the local pig farmers might have good prospects of gain. However, by virtue of the Ractopamine event, the meat marketing came to a low point of popularity, and the pig farmers had to face the challenge of low Consumer Sentiment Index.

(4) The relationship between the Fourth Estate and the Ractopamine event
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As was stated above, the press did play a major role in this Ractopamine event. At first, the DOH said that they had found Ractopamine, the illicit drug, overused in the pork by certain pig farmers. Then, the press took part in the investigation of the event and even predominated over the following development. Nevertheless, the press, as people’s watchdog, has the responsibility to provide factual, objective and impartial information. That is, although the Ractopamine events were newsworthy, the news reports should be based on truth instead of catering to the audience and high audience ratings. To get to the bottom of this event, it was the minority’s wrongdoing that caused the majority to take the consequence. At the beginning of the event, the press should have gone through the whole thing first, and then let the audience receive correct information from a reliable source. Otherwise people would not be able to really understand what was going on but get the wrong idea that the pork they bought everyday was poisoned. Although the press could report the Ractopamine event the way they liked, they had no right to cause damage to anyone innocent. In the process, the Fourth Estate became a horrible monster rather than a symbol of justice.

3. The Fourth Estate’s power

(1) Where does it apply?

In the age of urbanization and industrialization, the relationship between people is not as important as before. The various means of mass communication has become the main source of information for people. We may well say that either at work or at school what people talk about mostly is based on what they learn from the mass media. For example, Students will talk about the hottest TV shows and the news they read in the newspapers. In short, we can divide the application of the Fourth Estate into two parts:
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(A) In the daily life

According to the research of the General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, R.O.C in 2002, the TV penetration in Taiwan is 99.47% and the Internet penetration is 53.15%\(^{(8)}\). That is to say, TV and the Internet are both playing a very important role in most people’s daily lives. As a result, the quality of the TV programs and the Internet has become many people’s main concern. To maintain the quality, the Fourth Estate should be able to supervise the mass media. For example, if there is something inappropriate in a TV show, it will be attacked by the public because it is not acceptable to most people. What is more, TV stations that produce inappropriate programs may be fined or have their licenses revoked by Government Information Office.

(B) In the politics

Although in a democracy everybody can show concern for public affairs, the power is still in a few people’s hand. To prevent the politicians from abusing the power that people trust them with, we need the Fourth Estate to watch over these politicians. The most famous example is Watergate scandal, which was revealed by two reporters from Washington Post. At that time, the revelation even caused the president, Nixon, to step down.

(2) How does it apply?

According to the master of the mass media, W.Schramm, the Fourth Estate’s right of the press can be summarized in five functions\(^{(9)}\):

(A) Watchman’s function: Media should take the responsibility as a watchdog to supervise the government on behalf of people.

(B) Teacher’s function: Media should provide objective opinions of the hottest news and the latest information to satisfy people’s thirst for
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knowledge.

(C) Decision-making function: The media can help express public opinions in order to press or force the government to enact bills or change a policy.

(D) Entertainment function: The mass media can provide an outlet for people’s stress and turn out to be many people’s favorite recreational activities.

(E) Commercial function: Through advertisements and placement marketing in TV shows, the mass media can encourage consumption, industry, commerce and the development of economy.

4. The advantages and disadvantages of the fourth estate

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantage/Disadvantage</th>
<th>Advantages (Using it wisely)</th>
<th>Disadvantages (Abusing)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universalism</td>
<td>People can get news easily.</td>
<td>Sometimes people will get wrong information.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>The press can resist the interference from the government.</td>
<td>Malicious competition will arise among the press.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Immediateness</td>
<td>Mass media can provide people with quick and the hottest news.</td>
<td>The reports might not be from reliable sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of speech</td>
<td>People can get the factual, objective and impartial views.</td>
<td>The press don’t have to take responsibility for their reports.</td>
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III. Conclusion
We may conclude from the above essay that the Fourth Estate has a great impact on our lives. Through the event of Ractopamine, we can examine whether the press in Taiwan have been using their rights in the proper way. Regrettably, all we see has been malicious competition among the press because all they care about is the sales number only. However, the press should be more careful about their reports since most of us can only depend newspaper or news reports on TV to decide what to think of those events. Therefore, they should play the role of people’s watchdog as well as the role of a teacher who provides knowledge and information to satisfy people’s thirst for knowledge. Otherwise the press might lose the status as a reliable source or fail to work as people’s watchdog.

There is no denying that the Fourth Estate could be a weapon to hurt others when abused by some evil people. From the event of Ractopamine, we could understand how press disseminates something that might cause ferment through mass communication. To sum up, since time is changing, people nowadays are more concerned about the things that happen around them and the situation of the whole world than ever. It is important to have the Fourth Estate in today’s society and make it call into full play. We need the Fourth Estate to play the role of a powerful watchdog in our lives, revealing the abuses of the state authority and defending the rights of the public. However, the Fourth Estate can be used wisely or be abused by the mass media, so it is vital that every citizen should take the Fourth Estate seriously and be acquainted with it. To sum up, being a member of the global village, we should all be aware of the significance of the Fourth Estate and its impact on our lives.

IV. Reference
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