6 Communication theory: insights for nonviolent action

In the previous chapter we surveyed a range of perspectives on nonviolent action and social defense, looking for insights into improving communication in struggles against repression, aggression, and oppression. Communication is fundamental to nonviolent action, centrally in the sense that nonviolent action is itself a form of communication and secondarily in the role of communication to coordinate nonviolent resistance and win over third parties. However, researchers on nonviolent action have not placed communication at the center of their analyses. So, while research provides a wealth of insight into the dynamics and strategy of nonviolent action, there is much less available about how to develop effective communication strategies. In particular, situations in which there is relatively little action receive virtually no attention. Johan Galtung's idea of the great chain of nonviolence seems to be the best starting point from within the nonviolence literature for a closer look at communication and nonviolence.[1]

In this chapter we continue this quest by examining a range of perspectives on communication, seeing what they can offer to nonviolent activists, especially in dealing with the problem of ebbs of action. We look at the transmission model, media effects theory, semiotics, medium theory, political economy, and organizational theory. Our aim is not a comprehensive overview of communication theory[2] — a mammoth task — but rather scrutiny of various perspectives in an attempt to draw out insights that can provide guidance for nonviolent activists. This means that our aim is not necessarily theoretical sophistication, and certainly not just for its own sake, but rather "useful theory" — in this case, useful for activists and sympathetic researchers.[3] A model that has some theoretical shortcomings may nevertheless be more valuable to activists than a "theoreticians' theory" that cannot be easily understood or applied in the field.[4] For example, Gene Sharp's theory of power, discussed in the previous chapter, has theoretical inadequacies but is very useful for nonviolent activists. In the following survey of theories, we aim at presenting core ideas in a simple manner, seeking to extract insights relevant to communication against repression, aggression, and oppression.

The transmission model

In the late 1940s, Claude Shannon developed a mathematical theory of communication aimed at solving the technical problem of working out how much information can be sent down a transmission channel. In the famous book *The Mathematical Theory of Communication,* Shannon's analysis is supplemented by a commentary by Warren Weaver that presented Shannon's ideas as a general model of

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1 Johan Galtung, "Principles of nonviolent action: the great chain of nonviolence hypothesis," in *Nonviolence and Israel/Palestine* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Institute for Peace, 1989), pp. 13–33.

2 For a useful overview, see Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 1994, 3rd ed).

3 A superb activist-oriented approach to communication is given by Charlotte Ryan, *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing* (Boston: South End Press, 1991). We follow Ryan's example in canvassing a series of perspectives on communication theory, looking for relevant insights. Whereas Ryan focuses on media strategies for US social activists, we look for insights specifically relevant to fostering nonviolent action against repression, aggression, and oppression.

4 See Brian Martin, "On the value of simple ideas," in *Information Liberation* (London: Freedom Press, 1998), pp. 143–163, on building theory that is useful to activists.

communication.[5] This model, which can be called signal transmission theory or message transmission theory, is encapsulated in Figure 6.1.

In the case of nonviolent action, the information source might be nonviolent activists and the destination could be the opponent (especially in a Gandhian attempt at conversion), other activists, or noncommitted observers, including people in another country. There are various transmitters and receivers along the way, such as telephones, journalists, and government officials. Thinking more broadly, an action group or an entire social movement might be said to be a transmitter too. Finally, the noise source can include things such as interference on telephone lines, government disinformation, journalists' news values, cultural mismatches, and preconceived ideas.

The limitations of the transmission model are many, including difficulty in dealing with interactive communication, difficulty in dealing with the meaning of messages (rather than just the quantity of information), and difficulty in incorporating the social context (such as organizational culture). From the point of view of many in cultural studies, the transmission model is primitive, tainted, and better relegated to technical arenas from whence it came. Nevertheless, for all its limitations, it is possible to extract valuable insights from the model, at least for our purposes.[6] In particular,

government control and censorship of communication — as occurred routinely in the Soviet Union and in Indonesia under Suharto — are more readily conceptualized in a transmission model than in a cultural model that highlights issues of meaning.

William Leiss demonstrates how the transmission model has been adapted to study communication of information about health and environmental risks, by speaking of problems of communication associated with the source, transmitter, channel, and message.[7] This is shown in Figure 6.2.

Difficulties in gaining support can be mapped onto the model. Consider, for example, the Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, and the challenge of alerting people around the world who might have taken action.

• Source problems would include fear of reprisals, self-censorship due to belief in the socialist project, and lack of understanding of what was occurring.
• Transmitter problems would include lack of technology for communicating directly with people outside the Soviet Union.
• Channel problems would include Soviet censorship as well as censorship by Western spy agencies and foreign affairs departments.
• Message problems would include language and cultural differences, and difficulties in explaining the dynamics of purges.
• Receiver problems would include militarist anticommunism in the West (causing receivers to use information to condemn communism rather than act effectively to stop the purges) and leftwing procommunism in the West (leading receivers to dismiss the information).

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5 Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

6 We are encouraged in this endeavor by three cultural studies scholars, Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen Wartella, and D. Charles Whitney, *Media-Making: Mass Media in a Popular Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), who state (p. 25), "Although many scholars assume that the transmission and cultural models of communication contradict each other — that they have to choose one model or the other — we strongly disagree. We believe that each model has something important to say about the complexities of communication in the contemporary world; the usefulness of each model depends on our particular questions about communication. Thus, we prefer to

think of the two models as complementary perspectives."

7 William Leiss, "Risk communication and public knowledge," in David Crowley and David Mitchell (eds.), *Communication Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 127–139. For an application of the model to information inequality, see William Wresch, *Disconnected: Haves and Have-Nots in the Information Age* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).
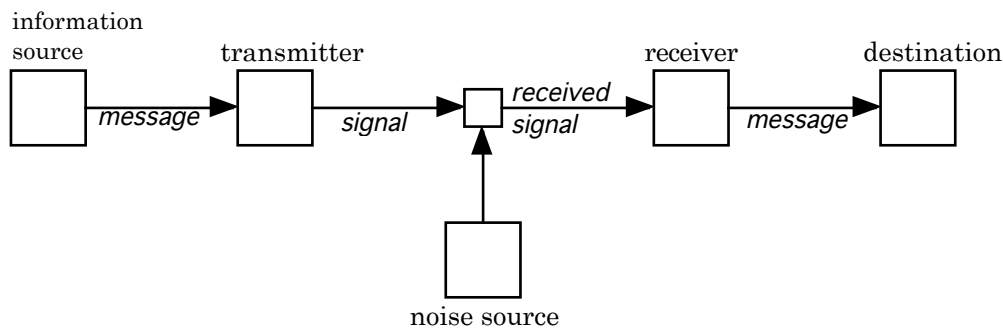
Figure 6.1. The transmission model of communication
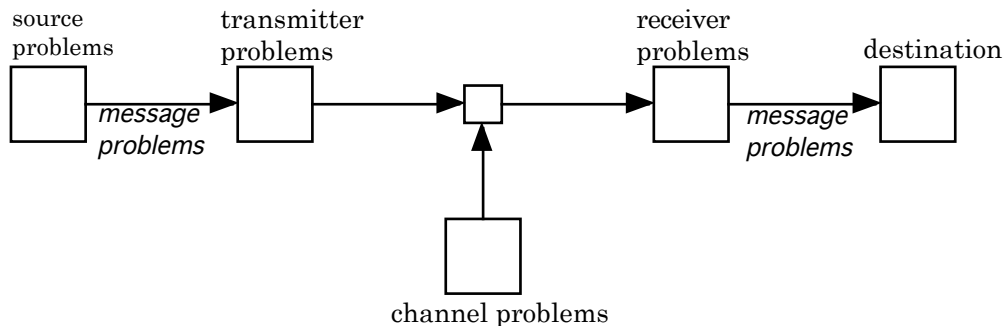
Figure 6.2. Problems in communication, in the framework of the transmission model

Similar applications can readily be made to other cases, for example problems in getting information about East Timor to potential supporters in other countries, and problems in getting information about the MAI to concerned citizens.

There is a fair bit of arbitrariness involved in applying the model to cases of repression and nonviolent action, especially in complex cases involving a chain of sources and receivers. For example, there is no rule on how to judge whether Soviet censorship is best described as a channel problem or a transmitter problem or some combination. However, this is not a major drawback, since the main value of the model is as a heuristic device to highlight communication blockages.

This approach is most effective in dealing with interruptions in information flow and least effective in dealing with issues of meaning. For example, in the case of East Timor under Indonesian occupation, the seizing of a radio transmitter in northern Australia was an obvious communication blockage, and can be conceptualized as a channel problem or, appropriately in this case, a transmitter problem, and seems straightforward. (Although called a channel or transmitter problem, the problem in this case was not technical breakdown but political instruction/obstruction.) In contrast, the process by which information about Indonesian oppression and atrocities in East Timor were interpreted in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs — namely as not requiring action or further dissemination — can be conceptualized as a receiver problem, but this is to simplify a complex process that needs unpacking. The receiver and transmitter problems in this example are linked, both arising from Australian government policy.

The transmission model meshes very well with the great chain of nonviolence model, which can be conceived of as a chain of senders and receivers, with each link in the chain subject to source, transmitter, message, channel, and receiver problems.

One of the greatest values of the transmission model is its relevance to absence of action. If we start with the assumption that action against oppression is more likely when people know about it and have a means of taking action, then the transmission model draws attention to where, between the oppression and the people who might take action, there is a blockage. As we will see in the following sections, other communication theories provide insight into particular types of blockages.

Media effects theory

The mass media — television, radio, major newspapers — are truly "mass" in the sense that they are consumed by large numbers of people. Since the messages contained in the mass media are similar, it is to be expected that media consumers will end up with similar understandings of the world. Or such, at least, was the conclusion of many researchers adopting the mass audience model.[8] A simple representation of this model is given in Figure 6.3. It is based on the idea that messages are "injected" directly into audiences.

Closely aligned to this model is the conception of "mass society." Let us first describe "non-mass society." When people are tightly linked to each other through local social institutions such as the family, churches, workplaces, trade unions, sporting clubs, political parties, and community groups, they are likely to formulate their views of the world through frameworks drawn from those institutions. The perspectives developed through

working in a family business or participating in a tightly knit congregation will likely take precedence over challenging messages from the media. For example, advertising promoting consumerism may not be able to overturn a family culture of frugality or a church culture of charity.
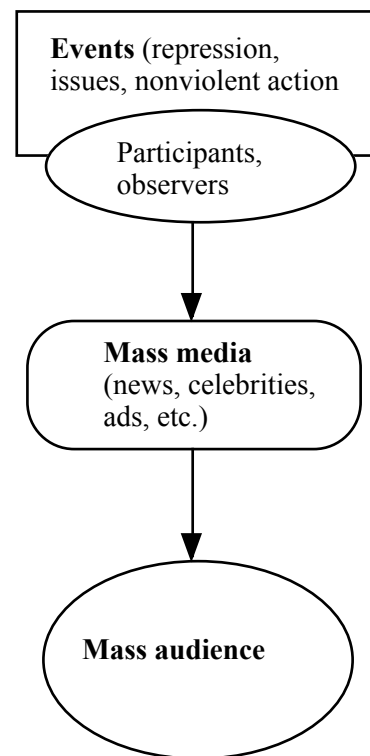
Figure 6.3
A simple picture of mass communication

A number of processes have led to a weakening of tight community bonds. For example, industrialization undermined the family farm and family business, leading to a more anonymous industrial workforce. Consumerism has fostered individualism, reducing concern for others. Secularization has challenged the cultural role of churches. The women's movement has contributed to a weakening of the patriarchal extended family. Multiculturalism has undermined ethnic exclusivity. There are various diagnoses of these trends, but in any case the observation is that individuals are less tied to local social institutions.

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8 For a discussion of work in the field, see for example W. Russell Neuman, *The Future of the Mass Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). We thank Chris Barker and an anonymous referee for helpful comments about terminology.

When local social connections that give meaning to life are drastically weakened, individuals can be said to be part of an anonymous mass. This is "mass society." In mass society, the individual is more susceptible to viewpoints presented in the mass media. Mass media in turn help to create a mass society since, for the first time, large numbers of people from different regions and different walks of life were exposed to identical messages. The classic case of concern is Germany under Nazi rule. Germany's defeat in World War I, the collapse of the currency in the early 1920s and then the depression devastated the middle and working classes, especially by destroying economic security. After coming to power in 1933, the Nazis systematically smashed or intimidated organizations that could pose a threat to them, especially left-wing parties, trade unions, and dissenting voices. Finally, Hitler brilliantly tapped into collective fears and fantasies, using mass rallies and radio, while the government stifled alternative views from appearing in mass forums.

The idea that the population is an undifferentiated mass susceptible to pitches in the mass media is of little practical value to social activists. After all, activists as a rule do not want to manipulate the population, but rather to encourage them to become informed and active on issues of concern. Nevertheless, the idea of the mass audience can give insights into the ways that mass media promote collective passivity. Our aim here is to see what can be learned from the mass audience perspective — commonly called media effects theory — for the purpose of developing nonviolent challenges to repression, aggression, and oppression. The focus in this theory is on the effects that media have on audiences, as opposed to the activity of audiences in interpreting and using media for their own purposes.

Before proceeding, it is important to note the severe limitations of media effects theory. Although this theory was once the dominant framework for media studies, it has come under sustained attack and is largely discredited in many circles.

First, no society has ever come close to being a "mass society." Most people are still connected to each other in families, workplaces, and a variety of groups. Though some social institutions, such as churches, have declined in significance, others have arisen such as women's groups and environmental organizations. While job mobility has undercut solidarity built around localities, there are new, constantly evolving networks of association based on technologies of mobility and communication, such as cars, planes, the telephone, and e-mail.

Second, the mass media have never been the only source of information and continue to be challenged. Word of mouth, leaflets, specialty newsletters and magazines, telephone, and alternative radio are some of the means by which people are exposed to divergent viewpoints about the world. With the increasing capacity of industry to produce a diversity of products at relatively low cost, there is ever more targeting and creation of niche markets. With vast numbers of television channels, for example, there is more "narrowcasting" and less broadcasting.

Third, the influence of the mass media on individuals is far weaker than postulated in the stronger versions of media effects theory. Most people do not just soak up whatever appears in the mass media, but instead actively filter, interpret, and transform the material from their own perspectives and for their own purposes.[9] For example, minority cultural groups may adopt corporate symbols — such as slogans or logos — as an ironic statement of their own identity.[10]

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9 The classic statement of the possibility of messages being read in ways differing from the encoded meaning, and more generally the importance of analyzing systems of meaning production, discourse, and decoding, is Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding," in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 128–138.

10 Rosemary J. Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Properties: Authorship, Appropriation,*

Cultural studies scholars focus their attention on difference and resistance, and are rightly critical of the simplifications inherent in the idea of mass society. However, it is possible to become preoccupied with difference and resistance to such an extent that processes fostering conformity and acquiescence are downplayed or overlooked. Heavy viewing of mainstream television is still commonplace. Some individuals seem to let their views be dictated by radio talk show hosts. Many of the new links that people make through e-mail and long-distance travel are quite superficial. Many people have only a limited capacity to reinterpret media messages. When atrocities occur but few people become aware or take action, it is time to ask why. Media effects theory may be able to offer some insights.[11]

It stands to reason that mass media will have the greatest influence on people concerning issues about which they have the least personal experience. If farmers know that prices have been disastrously low for years and that many of their neighbors are going broke and being bought out by city-based corporations, they are not likely to be convinced by newspaper reports about the virtues of tariff cuts or how deregulation has led to a more responsive banking sector. City dwellers are more likely to be receptive to understanding rural issues using frameworks underlying media stories. Few people have personal experience of terrorism or high-tech warfare. Therefore, media portrayals are likely to play a big role in constructing understandings of these issues for large sections of the population.

One area where few people have direct experience is politics at the level of government, including policy formation, election campaigning, and, especially, international affairs. Nearly everything most people learn about national and international politicians and activities is via the media. We read about or see television footage about a coup in Pakistan; we rely on the media because few people have friends or workmates with personal experience in Pakistani politics. (Even in Pakistan itself, few people have direct personal experience in national-level politics.) Some critics have argued that the mass media create artificial political realities which are so divorced from what is understood by those close to the events that they can be said to be "political fantasies." Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs argue that "Few people learn about politics through direct experience; for most persons political realities are mediated through mass and group communication, a process resulting as much in the creation, transmission and adoption of political fantasies as realistic views of what takes place."[12]

Various groups participate in the creation of political fantasies, especially governments and the media. We will look more closely at the processes by which this occurs in the discussion of organizational theory later in this chapter. For now, we look at some characteristic features of mass media framing of reality, concentrating on aspects of particular relevance to nonviolent struggle. We examine in

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and the Law (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

11 For a critique of the cultural studies approach of the active audience, see Robert Kubey, "On not finding media effects: conceptual problems in the notion of an 'active' audience (with a reply to Elihu Katz)," in James Hay, Lawrence Grossberg, and Ellen Wartella (eds.), *The Audience and its Landscape* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), pp. 187–205; William R. Seaman, "Active audience theory: pointless populism," *Media, Culture & Society,* Vol. 14, No. 2, April 1992, pp. 301–311.

12 Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Mediated Political Realities* (New York: Longman, 1983), p. xv. We follow Nimmo and Combs in our choice to examine news, Hollywood, celebrities, and sport. They also look at election campaigns and media melodramas. See also Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (Chicago: Markham, 1971); David L. Paletz and Robert M. Entman, *Media • Power • Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1981); Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

turn news, Hollywood, celebrities, sport, and advertising.[13]

News. In principle, the news provides an ideal platform for informing people about what is happening in the world and offering opportunities for intervening against repression, aggression, and oppression. In practice, news often turns people into spectators, making them aware of problems but with little sense of responsibility or power to do anything about them or any vision of an alternative.

Consider any of the many horrific events reported in the mass media, such as the wars in former Yugoslavia, the killing fields of Cambodia, or the Iran-Iraq war. In these cases, there was quite a lot of reporting on what was happening. (Many equivalent wars and atrocities receive little media attention, such as the 1965-1966 massacres in Indonesia.[14]) However, *knowing* about a problem and *doing* something about it are two different things. The news, in almost all cases, only tells about the problem. It seldom provides any encouragement for ordinary viewers or readers to do something.[15] Especially for international events, news reports assume that action is the responsibility of governments and interna-

tional organizations such as the United Nations. If citizens are called to participate, it is usually to contribute money or goods for relief efforts, as in the wake of "natural disasters" such as floods and earthquakes.[16]

For many people, the news becomes a spectacle, to be observed but with no implications for personal behavior.[17] The values that govern selection of stories (discussed later under organizational theory) lead to an emphasis on violence. Wars and violent clashes often receive attention in the media, whereas peaceful protests receive far less attention and patient trust-building efforts in local communities are virtually invisible.

Especially in the case of international news, governments are presented as the key actors, often via top politicians. The implication is that if action needs to be taken, it is governments that should be doing it. Therefore the news encourages appeals to governments.

However, there are many exceptions to this tendency. Many citizen protests are reported in the news, providing an example for viewers. Furthermore, news reports can be used crea-

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13 An anonymous referee correctly pointed out that many of the points made in this section can also be examined through a cultural studies lens. Our placement of this material in the media effects section is what we found convenient and is not intended as an endorsement of one approach over another. Since no body of communication theory has paid much attention to nonviolent action, it would be unwise to rule out or endorse any approach to communication.

14 For a detailed treatment of the US mass media's international news coverage of war and other crises, see Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

15 This point is well made by Eesha Williams, *Grassroots Journalism* (New York: Apex Press, 2000), p. 53: "More than anything, mainstream news coverage advocates passivity; next time you read the paper look for how many articles cover news that matters directly to your life and that you can act on. Not many."

16 This is implicit in the discussion by Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue.* She comments that "Compassion fatigue is a result of inaction and itself causes inaction" (p. 52). In other words, being unable to act makes people less receptive to images of suffering.

17 For assessments of the replacement of reality by images, in the media and elsewhere, see Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962); Ian I. Mitroff and Warren Bennis, *The Unreality Industry: The Deliberate Manufacturing of Falsehood and What It Is Doing to Our Lives* (New York: Carol, 1989). On the media specifically, see for example Robert Cirino, *Don't Blame the People: How the News Media Use Bias, Distortion and Censorship to Manipulate Public Opinion* (Los Angeles, Diversity Press, 1971); Donna Woolfolk Cross, *Mediaspeak: How Television Makes Up Your Mind* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1983); Bruce I. Newman, *The Mass Marketing of Politics: Democracy in an Age of Manufactured Images* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999).

tively by activist constituencies to mobilize further action.

Different groups respond to the news in different ways. For example, western reports of war in former Yugoslavia were interpreted very differently by Serbians, Croatians, and others who had emigrated to other countries. It is at this point that the mass audience model clearly breaks down: media consumers are far from a passive homogeneous mass when it comes to the news. While this point is vitally important, especially for nonviolent activists, media effects theory is still useful in pointing to features of the news that encourage spectatorship and passivity:

- news is often presented and accepted as a spectacle that is separate from day-to-day activities;
- news emphasizes violence and downplays nonviolent action;
- news encourages the idea that world problems are the responsibility of governments and seldom mentions the option of direct action by citizens;
- news reports on what *is* happening and seldom provides a vision of alternatives outside the political mainstream.

Eesha Williams advocates "grassroots journalism," aimed at inspiring action, as an alternative to conventional mass media news.[18] This sort of journalism is relevant to people's lives, emphasizes quiet as well as dramatic grassroots victories (and failures), stimulates action, and indicates what can be done, without preaching. Thus in every respect grassroots journalism is contrary to news that promotes passivity.

Hollywood. News is normally conceived of as reporting of facts, whereas Hollywood productions for television and film are, with some exceptions, fictional. Yet in the consumption of media, especially television, these distinctions become less salient. If news is a spectacle, it is simply another form of entertainment, to be followed by a popular television program. In the media construction

of reality, Hollywood portrayals can be as significant as those of the news desks and sometimes more so.

Violence is far more prevalent in Hollywood creations than in everyday life. In some genres, such as family comedies and game shows, violence is rare, but it is standard in others such as police dramas. Although the average member of the police never discharges a firearm in duty through their entire career, an episode in a police drama without use of guns is an exception. Other forms of violence, including fighting and beatings, are routine in television and films, again depending on the genre.

Most worrisome, from the point of view of nonviolent activists, is Hollywood's requirement for a happy ending in which good triumphs over evil — very frequently by force. The message is that violence is acceptable so long as it is for a good cause; sometimes a good cause even seems to be defined by the more effective use of violence. The star wars epics and James Bond fantasies are familiar examples.

Violence is often portrayed in a stylized and artificial fashion that has little connection to everyday realities. In fist fights on the screen, there are prolonged exchanges of blows, any one of which would normally be enough to knock out or disable an opponent, accompanied by unrealistic sound effects that dramatize the hits. Victims of gunfire are often killed outright or injured "cleanly," with few realistic portrayals of permanent disability or suffering for more than a short scene. Screen violence is curiously antiseptic, as if it does not really hurt and any "good guy" is bound to survive to fight again. Screen violence is almost entirely a masculine activity — one of its more realistic aspects.

Evidence about the effects of viewing violence on the screen is mixed. If it contributes to violence by viewers, the impact may be relatively small and may affect only a minority of viewers, since otherwise we would see punch-ups in the street every day following the previous evening's screen violence. On the other hand, exposure to media violence may have effects on psychological development,

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18 Williams, *Grassroots Journalism.*

interpersonal relations, and behavior under stress that are important but hard to quantify. However, sidestepping the long-running debate over the effects of viewing screen violence, we can make a simple point: there are very few Hollywood portrayals of nonviolent action as a method of social struggle. There are a few films that fill this role, including *Gandhi* (by far the best known example), *Milagro,* and *The Mission.* For the most part, nonviolence as a method is off the Hollywood agenda. The message coming out of Hollywood is that the way to obtain results is through violence, and the only way to overcome violence from bad guys is more effective use of violence by good guys.

Again, not everyone interprets Hollywood the same way, and Hollywood fantasies can be used by viewers for their own purposes. Furthermore, film and television production outside of Hollywood often departs from or directly challenges the Hollywood formula. Nevertheless, the mass audience perspective can alert us to the impact of Hollywood portrayals on the way many viewers conceive the world. Nonviolent activists need to take this into account in developing communication strategies.

Celebrities. Hollywood, through films and television, is the primary force behind the rise of celebrity culture in the 1900s. By bringing images of particular individuals onto the large screen or into living rooms, these individuals become "larger than life" and personally familiar. It is now hard to imagine the time just a century ago when there were no celebrities in the current sense and when prominent figures were primarily known for what they did rather than who they were. Celebrities today include TV and movie stars, sporting heroes, politicians, prominent news readers, and many others.[19]

There are a few celebrities known primarily for their association with violence, such as General Norman Schwartzkopf and movie star Sylvester Stallone. However, far more important than this is the way that celebrity culture emphasizes the significance of prominent individuals, so that collective social action is thrown into a shadow.

Nonviolent action does not need celebrities. None came to the fore in the collapse of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989, except possibly dissident Vaclav Havel who became president of Czechoslovakia. The anti-MAI campaign was a grassroots effort; none of the grassroots activists became celebrities. The toppling of Suharto was the result of people's action; no celebrities were needed.

Some nonviolent activists and leaders do become celebrities. The two most prominent are Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.[20] Others include Cesar Chavez and Danilo Dolci.[21] As we write, the most prominent figure is Burmese leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

Celebrities in the nonviolence area perform contradictory functions. On the positive side, their visibility helps promote the idea of nonviolence. Their example, by being widely circulated, provides an inspiration to others and helps recruit new activists.

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industry that is little recognized, see Irving J. Rein, Philip Kotler, and Martin R. Stoller, *High Visibility* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1987).

20 Gandhi and King are perhaps the two most prominent leaders in the twentieth century who were never heads of state. An excellent treatment of nonviolent action, building on the life and words of these two figures, is Mary King, *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr: The Power of Nonviolent Action* (Paris: UNESCO, 1999). We thank Tom Weber for helpful comments on Gandhi as celebrity.

21 Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement* (edited by Diana Hembree) (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997); James McNeish, *Fire under the Ashes: The Life of Danilo Dolci* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965).

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19 On celebrity culture, see P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Richard Schickel, *Common Fame: The Culture of Celebrity* (London: Pavilion Books, 1985). On the manufacturing of celebrity, a major

On the negative side, emphasis on celebrity activists draws attention away from the collective, participatory nature of nonviolent action and away from the importance of quiet, rational, behind-the-scenes leadership roles.[22] Inequalities in media attention can cause resentment among other nonviolence leaders. Any personal flaw or misjudgment by a celebrity activist holds the potential for serious damage to the movement. Finally, the presence of celebrity activists can distort campaigning by emphasizing media values at the expense of movement building and giving too great an orientation to charisma.[23]

As a consequence of the mass media creation of celebrities, many people are aware of nonviolent action only through the names of Gandhi and King. Whatever the pluses and minuses of this state of affairs, it needs to be taken into account by nonviolent activists.

Sport. One of the most popular things disseminated by mass media is sport, which has been transformed dramatically by professionalization and commercialization over the past century.[24] Sport is big business to a large extent through the creation of a mass audience, especially via television. The Olympics, originally set up as an amateur movement, have been transformed into a professional, commercial operation, with opportunities for earning money through the mass media responsible for much of the change.[25] In dealing with sport in relation to media effects theory, we are primarily interested in the impact of sport on spectators rather than on participants.

Although sport is normally conceived of as a "separate world," bounded by its own rules — which is one reason for its popularity — it has a number of connections with politics, economics, psychology, and so forth. Here, with our focus on nonviolence, we look briefly at sport as a metaphor or model for human relations.

Sport, in its most popular forms, is a competition between individuals or teams, in which, ideally, the rules are fair, adversaries use the same methods, and the better side wins. This provides a model for warfare and business competition, with the ideological advantage of obscuring the great inequalities in the strength of armies and corporations. The assumptions underlying sport are less congruent with the dynamics of nonviolent action. A nonviolent struggle is, in a sense, a competition between two (or more) sides, but the adversaries do not use the same methods, at least when one side is willing to use violence. The "rules" are not fair, since there is no umpire to prevent destruction, torture, and killing by the side using violence.

A nonviolent struggle is certainly a form of conflict, like sport, but typically a desired outcome is cooperation and a win-win solution to the conflict rather than outright defeat of the opponent. Such a cooperative result is not possible in competitive sport, where winning and losing are integral to the contest. Finally,

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22 Ralph Summy, "Ordinary mortals of nonviolence," *Gandhi Marg,* Vol. 22, No. 3, Oct-Dec 2000, pp. 279–290, powerfully argues that some nonviolence "heroes" operate out of the public eye, using political analysis and rational argument, rather than being highly visible figures with formal status, charisma, or celebrityhood.

23 Too great an orientation to the mass media can be a problem for social movements even when celebrities are not involved. For studies of movements and the mass media, see Stephen Dale, *McLuhan's Children: The Greenpeace Message and the Media* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1996); Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Marc Raboy, *Movements and Messages: Media and Radical Politics in Quebec* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984); Andrew Rojecki, *Silencing the Opposition: Antinuclear Movements and the Media in the Cold War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

24 One of the best accounts of the interactions between sport and media is David Rowe, *Sport,*

Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999).

25 See, for example, Andrew Jennings, *The New Lords of the Rings: Olympic Corruption and How to Buy Gold Medals* (London: Pocket Books, 1996).

it is worth mentioning that the most popular sports involve competitions between men, often involving violence or at least heavy physical clashes.

Sport is widely watched and to some extent provides a shared model for understanding the world, as suggested by expressions such as "scoring," "level playing field," "getting to first base," and "being a team player." Elements of sport, seen as a separate world, are used as a model for "real life." Though this provides some connections to nonviolent action — especially the elements of communal solidarity — to a greater extent the model of sport is uncongenial to the goal of helping people grasp the potential of nonviolent means of social struggle. Thus the mass media encourage an understanding of life as a form of sport, with an emphasis on competition and violence.

Advertising. Advertising is ubiquitous in capitalist societies, with the average person exposed to hundreds of messages daily. Although some advertisements are tailored for individuals or small groups, by far the majority are aimed at a mass audience, especially using television, radio, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, and billboards. How does this barrage of commercial messages affect the willingness to take action against repression, aggression, and oppression?

Advertisements are built on several assumptions, two of which in particular are likely to hinder mobilization for citizen action. The first key assumption is that solutions to problems are for sale, rather than being readily solved without purchases. A related assumption is that the most important problems are those for which purchases can provide a solution. Nonviolent action, in contrast, relies on people taking action themselves rather than purchasing security or freedom (such as through professional military forces). The second key assumption underlying advertising is that most problems are individual problems for which there are individual solutions, namely purchased products and services. Indeed, people's relationships with others are often insinuated to be competitive, for

example competing for status. Nonviolent action, in contrast, is a participatory, collective endeavor for addressing social problems.

Thus, in as much as people adopt the assumptions underlying the profusion of advertising, they are made less receptive to collective, participatory action as an approach to solving social problems.

Conclusion. The continuing displays of nonviolent action are a living testimony that mass communication is not a universal pacifier. Social institutions such as the family, workplace, and community groups provide sources of allegiance and meaning; mass media provide a range of messages that can be interpreted in varying ways; and there are many alternative sources of information. These are among the reasons why media effects theory is less than adequate, indeed misleading, on its own.

However, although the theory has deep flaws, it is still possible to gain insights from it. When there are reports of atrocities in foreign countries, few people join social action groups to take action. There are a number of possible explanations for this lack of response, one of which relates to characteristics of mass communication. There is much more attention to violence than nonviolence in news reports, Hollywood dramas, and sporting events. There is an assumption underlying much advertising that the only problems a person need be concerned about are ones for which a solution can be purchased. Most importantly, mass media position people as spectators rather than an active participants, except for the role of consumer.[26] While the mass media processes

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26 While from one perspective mass media encourage passivity, from another the mass media are only responding, in a competitive struggle for audiences, to what people want. The dilemma here is that what people want is not always what they know is good for them. This dilemma appears in many areas. People want to be healthy, but they also want to avoid exercise, preferring to drive a car rather than walk or ride a bicycle. They want to be healthy but will indulge their appetites for unhealthy food. They want to be healthy but want to smoke. In every case, government and corporate

that encourage passivity, individualism, and belief in the value of violence can readily be challenged, they do have considerable influence. It is vital that those who see nonviolent action as a means of challenging repression, aggression, and oppression are aware of the dynamics involved.

Semiotics[27]

Semiotics is the study of systems of meaning, especially by analyzing signs, which are things that produce meanings. Words are the most obvious examples of signs, but there are also pictures, gestures, physical objects, faces, film, and many others to consider. In most cases, meanings are not built into signs but are to a large extent arbitrary and socially constructed. For example, the word "boycott" is, in English, arbitrarily used to refer to certain actions involving refusals to purchase. Meanings vary from person to person, and from culture to culture. For many signs, there is a dominant meaning (the denotation) but also a range of associated meanings (connota-

tions), depending on the person and situation. A boycott might have a connotation of illegality or unfairness in some circles and a connotation of empowerment in others.

Semiotics is a huge field with its own terminology and ways of viewing the world. Our aim here is to indicate what insights can be drawn from the field for the purpose of developing effective nonviolent strategies against repression, aggression, and oppression.

The study of meaning provides an essential complement (or challenge) to the transmission model, which looks at the transmission of messages with no built-in attention to what meanings are involved. It does little good to ensure that a message gets from A to B if the meaning as interpreted by B is quite different from what A intended to convey. This is an obvious point, but can easily be overlooked in efforts to "get the message out."

Whereas media effects theory assumes that the impact of messages from the mass media are similar, cultural studies researchers, who use semiotics as a standard tool, emphasize differences in response to the same message. Messages may be ignored, challenged, or transformed for different uses, though there are limits to what is likely and possible. Figure 6.4 illustrates this point, showing "audience segments" — some of which may be as small as one person — that respond differently to messages from the mass media. In a sense, each audience segment has its own "filter" for interpreting and transforming the message.

There is an enormous scope for application of semiotics to nonviolent action. Gene Sharp lists 54 different methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion, which are classified as symbolic action.[28] They include public speeches, banners, skywriting, mock awards, wearing of symbols, protest disrobings, symbolic sounds, vigils, pilgrimages, demonstrative funerals, teach-ins, renouncing honors,

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interests have a stake in unhealthy habits, through selling cars, fatty foods, and cigarettes. There is less profit to be made, in the present system, in town planning to encourage exercise, in food production geared toward healthy diets, or in nonaddictive lifestyles. What might be said is that it is in the interests of powerful organizations to encourage people to give in to their immediate appetites (their wants) rather than collectively organize society to encourage activities and habits that lead to long-term health and satisfaction. The same applies to media. While it might be better for people to develop a taste for in-depth analyses and to link learning about the world to practical action to improve people's lives, the current system encourages media organizations to pander to people's immediate appetite for relaxation and entertainment. From this point of view, blaming either media organizations or media consumers is beside the point: the challenge is to participatively design a system that encourages organizations and people to behave in a way that genuinely satisfies people's needs in the long term.

27 We thank Mark Cerin and Tonya Stebbins for helpful discussions concerning this section.

28 Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), pp. 117–182.

and many others.[29] In each case the role of meaning is crucial. Semiotics potentially provides a means for understanding the creation of meaning in past events and for developing more effective actions.
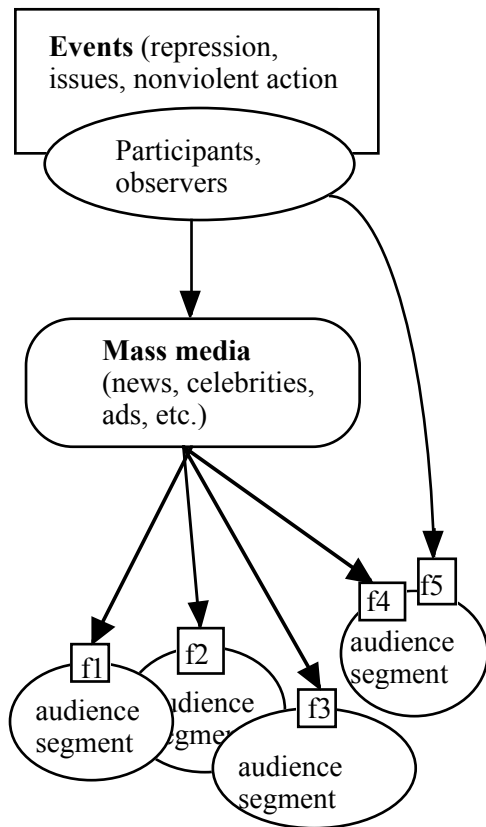
Figure 6.4.
Illustration of different responses to a similar message from the mass media. The interpretive filters of audience segments are shown as f1, etc. Audiences can also receive messages directly, with a different filter, as shown by f5.

However, despite a vast literature in linguistics and cultural studies drawing on semiotics, there is very little to be found that explicitly addresses the concerns of nonviolent

activists.[30] The classic work in nonviolent action is Gene Sharp's massive book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action,* but there is no corresponding work that might be called *The Semiotics of Nonviolent Action* or perhaps, more alliteratively, *Satyagraha Semiotics.* Why not? It is possible to speculate that cultural studies researchers, with their postmodernist rejection of universal narratives, are not attracted to the area of nonviolent action which is commonly underpinned by a belief that certain problems (such as genocide, war, and oppression) can be unambiguously identified and should be opposed. A simpler explanation is that nonviolent action is "off the agenda" for most scholars and that it just happens that no activist-oriented semioticians have yet delved into the area. Another factor is that cultural studies researchers often analyze what appears in the mass media and, since

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29 Methods of noncooperation and intervention also involve issues of meaning. However, creation of meaning is more central to symbolic actions.

30 There are some relevant articles, for example David William Low, "The greenie genre: noble saviours or planetary fools," *Australian Journal of Communication,* Vol. 23, No. 2, 1996, pp. 101–109.

A good example of discourse analysis oriented to activist concerns, though not directly related to nonviolent action, is studies of how citizens testified against a pulp mill in Canada, challenging experts: Mary Richardson, Joan Sherman and Michael Gismondi, *Winning Back the Words: Confronting Experts in an Environmental Public Hearing* (Toronto: Garamond, 1993); Joan Sherman and Michael Gismondi, "Jock talk, goldfish, horse logging and star wars," *Alternatives Journal,* Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 1997, pp. 14–20.

It is possible that nonviolent activists could gain insights from some cultural studies analyses that give much more attention to violence than nonviolence, such as Begoña Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), Chris Hables Gray, *Postmodern War: The New Politics of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1997), and Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben (eds.), *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). We thank an anonymous referee for comments relating to this point.

violence is featured far more prominently than nonviolence, give little attention to nonviolence. Deconstruction, after all, involves taking apart what exists and gives scant attention to constructing alternatives.

Much of the scholarly literature using semiotics is very difficult to understand, and the gulf between theory and activist application appears enormous. But studies with practical relevance are certainly possible, given that semiotic analysis is regularly used by advertisers. Just as technological development for defense is oriented by massive military expenditure with virtually none for social defense, so semiotic development is shaped largely by scholarly and commercial imperatives, with little attention to activist concerns.[31] Given the shortage of relevant studies, we restrict ourselves here to outlining some possible applications of semiotics to nonviolent struggles.

Anti-advertising. Advertising is a central feature of contemporary capitalism, providing both the practical means for promoting commercial goods and services as well as conditioning people to think in terms of commodities as solutions to all problems. Campaigns to challenge advertising offer a means of challenging capitalism. Some actions are based on noncooperation, for example when individuals put "No junk mail" notices on mail boxes and when organizations refuse corporate sponsorships. However, since the deeper effects of advertising are psychological, some of the most potent challenges aim to undermine standard meanings attached to ads. Defacing billboards can be a creative exercise in altering meanings. Cigarette ads have been prime targets.

In 1979 a group of Australian activists calling themselves BUGA UP (Billboard Utilizing Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions) took to "refacing" billboards, using spray cans. Sometimes they changed the wording very minimally, sometimes they made very elaborate changes to both the text and illustrations, but always the original meanings were challenged and replaced by others. For instance, Benson and Hedges sought to appeal to upwardly mobile people who liked to be seen as having good taste. One common advertisement for these cigarettes showed a famous painting. BUGA UP added the text: "What's this, a Van Cough?"

Although most BUGA UP targets were tobacco billboards, the group also challenged advertisements for other unhealthy products such as Coca-Cola. One billboard, enticing young people to "Smile ... with Coke" and showing young beautiful people, obviously part of the "in crowd", with flashing smiles and drinking Coca Cola, had some of the teeth blacked out by BUGA UP. This both undermined the alleged beauty which Coke was suggested to be conferring and reminded observers of Coca Cola's high sugar content, detrimental for teeth. Sexist advertisements were also targeted, with an advertisement for Lace Perfects panties, claiming to be "the Perfect Billboard," changed to read "the Pervert Billboard."

Other similar groups started up elsewhere. In London there was COUGHIN (Campaign on the Utilization of Graffiti for Health in the Neighborhood) and in Bristol AGHAST (Action Group to Halt Advertising and Sponsorship of Tobacco).[32]

More recently a Canadian group called Adbusters started up. It runs "subvertisements" to expose consumerism. *Adbusters* magazine details how advertising practices work and offers "culture jamming" strategies, as well as running parodies of advertisements, such as one for Nike which includes information about the appalling conditions under which Nike shoes are made in Third World

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31 On military influences on communication theory, see Christopher Simpson, *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare 1945–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

32 Bobbie Jacobson, *Beating the Ladykillers: Women and Smoking* (London: Pluto, 1986), p. 134.

countries. Adbusters have also promoted Buy Nothing Day.[33]

Defaced ads and caricatures of ads are potent symbolic challenges to the commercial culture. Many of the activists who undertake this have a brilliant intuitive grasp of how to best disrupt conventional interpretations of advertising messages. Surely semiotic analysis could contribute insight here, not just to decode ads[34] but to give guidance on how best to challenge standard meanings and create alternative meanings. At a grander scale, analysis could be undertaken to suggest which ads are the best targets for the purpose of questioning commercialism altogether, or building greater support for alternatives to capitalism.

The meaning of violence and nonviolence. Nonviolence scholars have devoted considerable labors to classifying types of violent and nonviolent action and to discussing the most appropriate terminology. However, much of this work is oriented to scholarly purposes, with a primary aim being clarity of conceptualization as a foundation for further analysis and insight. It is not designed specifically for practical use. Sharp's classification of types of nonviolent action — symbolic action, noncooperation, and intervention, with various subcategories — is an exception, in that it has proved valuable for both intellectual and activist uses.

In the early 1970s, Monica Blumenthal and colleagues investigated attitudes to violence by surveying over 1000 US men. Among their revealing findings were that more than half the men thought that burning draft cards was violence and more than half thought that police shooting looters was not violence. The researchers concluded that "American men tend to define acts of dissent as 'violence' when they perceived the dissenters as undesir-

able people."[35] In other words, many of the US men used the label "violent" when they thought something was bad and "nonviolent" when they thought it was good. This is a dramatic contrast to the way nonviolence researchers use the words, namely "violent" for actions that hurt or destroy and "nonviolent" for actions that do not. Researchers try to avoid mixing judgment and meaning.

Suzette Haden Elgin draws on Blumenthal et al.'s findings to propose a semantic breakdown of the word "violence" for US males as being marked by five features: [+fierce], [+strong], [+unnecessary], [+avoidable], and [+bad]. Elgin says that all five features need to be present before "violence" is seen as the appropriate word. If US males think that burning draft cards is avoidable and bad, then it should be labeled violent, whereas if shooting looters is seen as unavoidable, then it is not violent.[36]

Nonviolent activists are also tempted to mix judgement and meaning in speaking of violence and nonviolence. Gandhian nonviolence is conceived of as much more than an absence of physical violence, but rather a way of life committed to selflessness, service, and the search for Truth. A semantic analysis of "nonviolent action" as understood by Gandhians would include [+action], [-physical violence], [+good], and probably other fea-

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33 Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America™* (New York: Eagle Brook, 1999).

34 Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978).

35 Monica D. Blumenthal, Robert L. Kahn, Frank M. Andrews, and Kendra B. Head, *Justifying Violence: Attitudes of American Men* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972), p. 86.

36 Suzette Haden Elgin, *Success with the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 114. The semantic differential, as used for example by Blumenthal et al., is a standard method of investigation of features associated with words. In semiotic terms, the semantic differential is a way of studying the connotations that different people associate with words: see John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies* (London: Routledge, 1990, 2nd ed), pp. 145–150. Elgin's semantic assessment is based on picking out characteristic connotations. Naturally, her assessment does not apply to every individual.

tures. (A survey or an analysis of usage would be needed to make a full assessment.) Gandhians would be reluctant to refer to circulation of a leaflet advocating racial discrimination as "nonviolent action" even though this involves no physical violence. Activists refer to their own rallies, sit-ins, and strikes as nonviolent but do not normally think of any actions by corporations, such as withdrawal of capital investment (a "capital strike"), as nonviolent.

The term "structural violence," used by peace researcher Johan Galtung[37] to refer to systems of oppression that cause harm without the necessity of direct physical attack — such as starvation resulting from the operation of capitalism — seems to have found a receptive audience among activists, perhaps because it applies the label "violence," with all its connotations, to complex systems.[38]

If many US men have one conception of violence and nonviolent activists have quite a different one, this is fertile territory for further investigation. Given the divergent meanings attached to "violence" and "nonviolence," are there alternatives that would serve activists better, especially when it is necessary to communicate to wider audiences? Is there any good alternative to the term "nonviolence," which unfortunately attempts to define something through a negative? Is there any way to fully eradicate the misleading term "passive resistance" which has not been used by nonviolent activists for decades but keeps popping into discussions?[39]

Whereas it may be suitable for scholars to choose terms that avoid mixing meanings and judgements, for activists a more suitable goal may be to select terms that combine meanings and judgements in the most effective fashion for activist goals. Words with positive connotations are likely candidates. Activists do not control meanings but their choices have some impact.

Semiotic analysis could also provide more detailed guidance. What terms or other symbols are best for recruiting new members to action groups or attracting attendance at events? What symbolic constructions serve best to encourage nonviolent discipline at actions? What conceptual frameworks are best for building solidarity in a major campaign? What logos, slogans, and T-shirts should be chosen? What types of dress and behavior are most effective for winning over allies? In selecting the focus for a campaign, what target or goal has the greatest symbolic resonance? Issues of meaning pervade nonviolent struggles. Activists have come up with their own practical solutions. Semiotic analysis may or may not be able to provide improvements, but it is surely worth trying.

Medium theory

What difference does it make whether messages about repression, aggression, and oppression, or between activists, are conveyed face to face, by telephone, in a newspaper, on television, or via e-mail? There are several ways to approach this question. We pick out two approaches here, which can be associated

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37 See, for example, Johan Galtung, *The True Worlds: A Transnational Perspective* (New York: Free Press, 1980).

38 This conclusion is our own observation on talking to and corresponding with nonviolent activists.

39 Gandhi originally used the then-standard expression "passive resistance" but dropped it in the 1920s. He and his followers have tried to exorcise it ever since. Nonviolent activists use the term "nonviolent action," which emphasizes action — the antithesis of passivity — as does Sharp in all his writing. Yet it is our experience that many people unfamiliar with the area come up with the expression "passive resistance." It is not clear

where this comes from. For a discussion of the change in terminology, and an argument for resurrecting the expression "passive resistance," at least as an etymological tool for investigating pre-Gandhian nonviolent action, see Steven Duncan Huxley, *Constitutionalist Insurgency in Finland: Finnish "Passive Resistance" against Russification as a Case of Nonmilitary Struggle in the European Resistance Tradition* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1990).

with the pioneering scholars Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan.[40]

Harold Innis developed a sweeping analysis of civilization in terms of information monopolies. When a society's elites have control over information, they are better able to exercise control. Part of the power of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages stemmed from its exclusive control over religious information and hence its interpretation. The printing press helped break this monopoly and enable a challenge to the Church. A more recent example is the Soviet Union, in which the Communist Party exercised control over the expression of political views, especially through newspapers, books, radio, and television. Because unauthorized reproduction of information was a threat to the regime, new information technologies could not be fully exploited since they opened the gates for expression of dissident views. For example, foreign broadcasts had to be jammed and guards were needed around photocopiers (incidentally providing potent symbols of censorship). This restriction on open information exchange hindered the development of the Soviet economy and can be seen as one factor in the collapse of the state socialist system.

Following in the footsteps of Innis, but with a narrower focus, we can examine which communication technologies are most useful for supporting repression, aggression, and oppression and which are most useful to nonviolent activists.[41] In the 1991 Soviet coup, the mass media were taken over by the coup leaders. Although opponents were able to undermine the dominant message in some cases — by including certain stories in newspapers or providing revealing shots on television — by and large it can be said that the mass media were a great advantage to the coup leaders. In contrast, opponents used e-mail, graffiti, leaflets, and word of mouth to great advantage, suggesting that these sorts of media are more useful to nonviolent activists.

In the anti-MAI campaign, e-mail and the web were key tools internationally, supplemented by telephone in local organizing. In the early stages of the campaign, the mass media were largely uninterested in or impervious to critical views about the MAI. Only after considerable opposition had developed, facilitated by the net, was there much mass media coverage.

The Indonesian government under Suharto used information management as a central element in its authoritarian rule, with censorship of the mass media. In the development of opposition in 1998, word of mouth was crucial, supplemented by e-mail.

In each of these three cases, mass media were tools of the dominant groups, with opponents only able to use them in marginal ways. In contrast, communication face to face and by e-mail was extremely valuable to opponents. This is a pattern found in many other struggles, and is readily explained.

Mass media — especially television, radio, and large newspapers — are means of communication in which a small number of people control what is conveyed to a very large number of people. They are "one-directional": messages controlled by a few flow to many others, with little return flow. Therefore they are ideally designed for control by elites, of which repressive governments are the archetypal example. It is for this reason that in a military coup, one of the first tasks is to capture television and radio stations.[42] In as much as people are dependent on mass media for their understandings of political reality — as in the model of mass society discussed earlier — control over the mass media provides a powerful means of manipulating and controlling the population.

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40 Our framework here draws on the convenient overview by Joshua Meyrowitz, "Medium theory," in David Crowley and David Mitchell (eds.), *Communication Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 50–77.

41 Brian Martin, "Communication technology and nonviolent action," *Media Development,* Vol. 43, No. 2, 1996, pp. 3–9.

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42 T. E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1962); Edward Luttwak, *Coup d'Etat: A Practical Handbook*, (London: Allen Lane, 1968).

In contrast, technologies that allow people to communicate with each other independently of central control and on a one-to-one or small group basis provide the most secure basis for resistance to repression, aggression, and oppression. Face-to-face conversation is a model for this sort of communication; technological mediations include the post, leaflets, telephone, fax, short-wave radio, CB radio, and e-mail. There are various ways to characterize such media, including networks (or network media), decentralized media, and one-to-one media.

Of course, the existence of network media does not guarantee communication for liberation. After all, the telephone and e-mail are widely used by military forces and, more generally, they can be used for intimidation as well as dialogue. Furthermore, dominant groups attempt to control these media, for example by restriction, regulation, and surveillance. In the Soviet Union, surveillance of telephone conversations was commonplace. In the United States and other countries, government regulation has hindered the development of community radio, and micropower radio was made illegal, with challengers subject to government harassment.[43] The connection between media form and power is one of tendency and potential rather than necessity. Mass media are more likely to be useful to elites and network media are more likely to be useful to grassroots activists, but the actual connections depend on particular circumstances.

From this analysis of media, several important lessons can be drawn. First, nonviolent activists should not rely on mass media to get their message out. While access to the mass media is incredibly powerful, it is precarious, precisely because mass media are so easily controlled from the top. Therefore, while it is certainly worthwhile to make great efforts to use the mass media when possible, it is wise to make provision for getting the message out in other ways. In this, network media should be the prime focus of attention.

Second, activists need to think beyond simply using existing media; they need to develop policy for communication technology. Technologies do not simply develop of their own accord, but are the product of intense investigation, development, investment, and promotion.[44] The dominant forces behind the introduction of communication technologies are governments and large corporations, with the primary considerations being control and profit. Fortunately, some technologies that are introduced have liberatory aspects. Rather than just using what becomes available, activists can seek to actively intervene in the process of technological choice and innovation. This is not easy but is necessary for the long-term project of building a society that can defend itself nonviolently.

A second approach to media is that pioneered by Marshall McLuhan, who saw media as extensions of human senses.[45] Communication through the human sense of sight has different characteristics than communication through hearing; hence, communication through television has differ-

43 Peter M. Lewis and Jerry Booth, *The Invisible Medium: Public, Commercial and Community Radio* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Ron Sakolsky and Stephen Dunifer (eds.), *Seizing the Airwaves: A Free Radio Handbook* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1998); Lawrence Soley, *Free Radio: Electronic Civil Disobedience* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999).

44 On the values involved in technology, see for example Michael Goldhaber, *Reinventing Technology: Policies for Democratic Values* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Richard E. Sclove, *Democracy and Technology* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995). On the social movements behind the introduction of computers — a process which is normally seen as resulting from technological and efficiency considerations alone — see Rob Kling and Suzanne Iacono, "The mobilization of support for computerization: the role of computerization movements," *Social Problems,* Vol. 35, No. 3, June 1988, pp. 226–243.

45 Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

ent characteristics than communication through radio. To some extent, the nature of the medium shapes or overlays the content of the message, as dramatized in McLuhan's famous aphorism "The medium is the message" (or the later "the medium is the massage"). This is represented in Figure 6.5, in which each medium has its own filter.
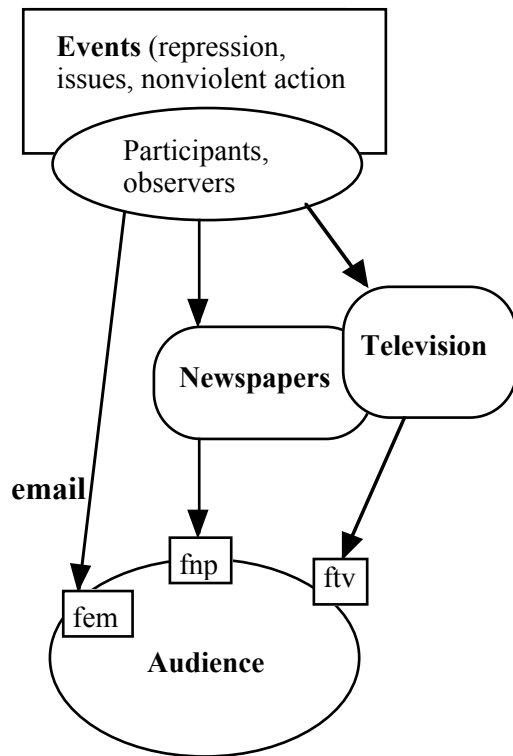
Figure 6.5. An audience responding differently to different media, with filter "fem" for e-mail and so forth

It is useful to activists to be aware that a style of message that works well in print may be unsuitable for television and that, in general, messages should be tailored for the medium, while media should be chosen for their potential to carry certain types of messages as well as the "message" built into the medium itself. However, beyond this general insight, in medium theory it is hard to find specific guidance for activists. To publicize repression in Indonesia or some other country, what is the most suitable medium: television, radio, or newspapers,

assuming in each case a message appropriately styled for the medium? Of course, activists seldom have ready access to mass media, so this question is hypothetical. But the choice can be made meaningful by looking at what activists can produce, including leaflets, articles, audio cassettes, and video cassettes, which can be circulated to individuals and played at meetings. For example, Noam Chomsky has written many books and articles, many of which deal with repression and the role of elites in fostering it or allowing it to continue.[46] Chomsky is also available on audio cassette and there is a film featuring him, *Manufacturing Consent.* Which medium is most effective for providing understanding? Which is most effective for generating concern? Which stimulates the most action? These questions are of great significance to activists. There is a great deal of informal knowledge about what is thought to work best in certain situations or for certain individuals, but we know of no studies addressing these questions systematically.

The question of the "choice" of medium is made more difficult by the reality that the biggest impact can come from mass media, which are not freely available to activists on their own terms. This applies as well to sympathetic journalists, who cannot run any story they like. Crusading journalist John Pilger, who has tried for decades to expose Western government complicity in atrocities in East Timor through both film and print, and who has had an enormous impact, has never had anything approaching full access to the mainstream media and indeed has come under fierce attack by ideological opponents. Therefore, the issue of choice of medium is complicated by questions of access and size of audience.

The choice of medium is perhaps especially important when addressing absence of action. If there are massacres occurring somewhere but no coverage in the mass media, activists have to use their own channels. Which is

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46 For example, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (Boston: South End Press, 1979).

likely to be more effective for generating concern and mobilizing action: videos, audio cassettes, articles in newsletters, e-mail circulars, or public meetings? Is there some optimal combination? How much does the choice depend on the nature of the repression, aggression, or oppression? (Are photo opportunities available?) The answers to such questions depend on a range of factors besides characteristics of different media, including opportunities for gaining information, production skills, and financial and human resources. Medium theory potentially has much to offer, but so far little appears to have been done.

Activists can improve their chances of communicating effectively if they know their audience really well: what they do, how they think, what communication media they use and trust, and what moves them to action.[47] With this sort of in-depth knowledge, a more informed choice of medium can be made.

Political economy

The ownership and control of media have a big impact on their potential to be used to oppose repression, aggression, and oppression. Most mass media are owned by governments or large corporations, and all are regulated by governments. There is a large body of writing about media monopolies and their influence on what is published and broadcast.[48] Powerful groups can intervene to block or curtail coverage of unwelcome stories; corporations may threaten to withdraw advertising, while governments can threaten legislative reprisals or just loss of journalistic access. Government-owned media are frequently subject to direct censorship or undertake their own self-censorship to pre-empt reprisals. Most of all, media corporations seldom report critically about themselves. In short, media empires, whether government or corporate, have enormous political and economic power, a fact that influences the sort of stories that are run.

One obvious consequence is that capitalist media are pro-capitalist, in quite a number of ways. Stories critical of capitalism, or describing the advantages of alternative economic systems, are scarce. There are numerous business stories, all of which assume the importance of business, and few stories from workers' points of view. There are vast amounts of both overt advertising — clearly defined advertisements — and covert advertising, in the form of stories based on corporate public relations,[49] corporate-sponsored "advertorials", spin-doctoring (interventions to include or exclude certain material),[50] and cash-for-comment deals (in which columnists or commentators receive covert payments in return for making apparently

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47 We thank an anonymous referee for this point.

48 See especially the now classic treatment by Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997, 5th edition). Hard-hitting attacks on corporate domination of information and culture, focusing on the US, include Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Gerald Sussman, *Communication, Technology, and Politics in the Information Age* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997). For a propaganda model of the media, based on the five filters of ownership, advertising, sourcing from powerful organizations, attacks on

unwelcome programs, and anticommunism, see Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). For global perspectives, see Cees J. Hamelink, *Trends in World Communication: On Disempowerment and Self-Empowerment* (Penang: Southbound and Third World Network, 1994) and Edward S. Herman and Robert W. McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism* (London: Cassell, 1997). For many other sources, see James R. Bennett, *Control of the Media in the United States: An Annotated Bibliography* (Hamden, CT: Garland, 1992).

49 Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

50 David Michie, *The Invisible Persuaders: How Britain's Spin Doctors Manipulate the Media* (London: Bantam, 1998).

sincere endorsements). So it is no surprise that opposition to the MAI received little attention in the mass media until well down the track after activists had mobilized significant grass-roots concern.

The political economy approach is most valuable in examining the influence of powerful interest groups on media dynamics. For example, in the 1990s the governments of Serbia and Croatia controlled the dominant mass media through a variety of means, such as restricting competition and pushing out dissident journalists, and used them to powerful effect to promote national chauvinism, while allowing a marginal dissident media with little impact. The Serbian and Croatian media used selective reporting and disinformation to serve their respective governments' positions, and were a key tool for the two governments' forging of centralized power and pursuit of war aims.[51] Another example, on a lesser scale, was the concerted attempt to discredit Arthur Scargill, President of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the most prominent trade unionist in Britain, which involved the Conservative government, the spy agency MI5, and media proprietors, editors, and journalists who were willing to lie and then, as facts appeared, move on to new lies. The Scargill affair is best understood as part of the Conservative government's campaign to destroy the NUM.[52]

While political economy has great value for analyzing the dynamics of the mass media, it also has significant limitations. Understanding patterns of ownership and control at the top gives insight into driving forces but is too blunt to grasp what happens on a day-to-day basis in news rooms (something we will

address under organizational theory below). Political economy is good at explaining hegemony — the dominance of certain ways of thinking — but not so good at explaining resistance. Specifically, political economy helps to explain absence of action, for example the relative absence of action against advertising, but is weak at providing clues for generating action. In short, political economy gives little guidance to activists on how to generate concern about repression, aggression, and oppression.

If powerful groups control the mass media, one implication is that activists should not rely on these media, but instead use and promote alternative media such as community radio, the alternative press, leaflets, telephone, and e-mail, that are not so easily controlled centrally.[53] This conclusion is exactly the same as that drawn from medium theory. Medium theory shows that mass media are more easily controlled by elites; political economy documents the empirical reality of this control.

Organizational theory

The different theories we have canvassed so far give a variety of insights into barriers to communication. The transmission model readily captures physical barriers such as seizing of a transmitter. Media effects theory helps explain the passivity of audiences in the face of information. Semiotics points to processes of meaning creation that can vary from issue to issue and person to person. Medium theory shows that some types of media are more

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51 Mark Thompson, *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1999). For a similar case, see Article 19 [Linda Kirschke], *Broadcasting Genocide: Censorship, Propaganda and State-Sponsored Violence in Rwanda 1990–1994* (London: Article 19, 1996).

52 Seumas Milne, *The Enemy Within: MI5, Maxwell and the Scargill Affair* (London: Verso, 1994).

53 Tony Dowmunt (ed.), *Channels of Resistance: Global Television and Local Empowerment* (London: British Film Institute in association with Channel Four Television, 1993); John Downing, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Bruce Girard (ed.), *A Passion for Radio: Radio Waves and Community* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992); Edward Herman, "Democratic media," *Z Papers,* Vol. 1, No. 1, January-March 1992, pp. 23–30; Sakolsky and Dunifer, *Seizing the Airwaves*; Soley, *Free Radio*; Williams, *Grassroots Journalism.*

useful for elites and others more useful for dissidents. Political economy highlights the power of those who own and control media to shape messages. If we look at a diagram of potential information flow from events of concern to members of audiences who might take action, the different theories provide insights at a range of points along the way. Two areas that still require examination are portrayed as the boxes "mass media" and "government," acting as filters between events and recipients. To delve into what happens in these boxes, we turn to organizational theory.

Within any organization, some sorts of messages are easier to convey than others. Within families, for example, members have deep understandings about each other and group dynamics that have been cultivated from birth. A "message" can be interpreted in a particular family unerringly whereas the same message in another family would be meaningless. While watching television, particular tone of voice by one individual may signal pleasure; another may indicate a wish to switch channels. While preparing breakfast, a certain smile by an individual may suggest an interest in talking, whereas a certain movement of shoulders may mean "leave me alone." Family members are especially adept at reading danger signs when an individual is likely to verbally abuse or physically assault others.

While some "messages," invisible or very subtle to outsiders, are read easily, there are usually areas of discourse that are off limits within families. Topics that are not discussed might include a child's low self-esteem, parents' unequal attention for different children, habits in the bathroom, certain decisions about money and jobs, or sexual fantasies. Sometimes dialogue is denied by assertions that there is nothing to discuss, as when parents say "We love you all equally," precluding a discussion of perceptions of unequal love.

So, inside a family, communication can be amazingly subtle and precise in some areas and be denied or blocked off entirely in others. A family member may find things quite different in other circumstances, for example with friends, co-workers, or complete strangers, finding some family-specific understandings unavailable but being able to discuss certain topics openly that are off limits in the family.

Thus we may say that the family is an environment that acts as a communication filter, facilitating some messages while blocking others. Alternatively, the family can be said to be a framework for meaning construction, providing tools for understanding certain types of messages (including very subtle and family-specific ones) while lacking tools for grasping other types of messages. The key point is that the family, as an organizational unit, is not a neutral conveyor of messages and meanings. Quite the contrary: messages and meanings are shaped by the family environment, in all stages from creation to interpretation and action in response.

Organizational theory proposes that communication is shaped by an organization's structure and dynamics. Besides families, this applies to corporations, government departments, trade unions, churches, sporting clubs, and activist groups. There is great potential value in applying this approach to problems of communication about repression, aggression, and oppression. Groups undertaking nonviolent action need to understand their own internal communication dynamics as well as the way they filter messages received and the way they construct messages to others. However, we are not aware of much work done along these lines. Hence we concentrate on two areas where there is research and where there are obvious implications for communicating about repression, aggression, and oppression: groupthink in government bodies and news values in the mass media.

Figure 6.6 illustrates the processes involved. The mass media and government each filter incoming information and, through their organizational dynamics, shape their outputs. Filters should be assumed at the end of all arrows in the figure.

Groupthink. Irving Janis in his classic book *Groupthink* argued that several major disasters in US foreign policy were due to a cohesive group of government decision makers aligning

their thoughts around a single way of thinking and excluding dissenting views. He called this phenomenon "groupthink," which he defined as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action."[54]
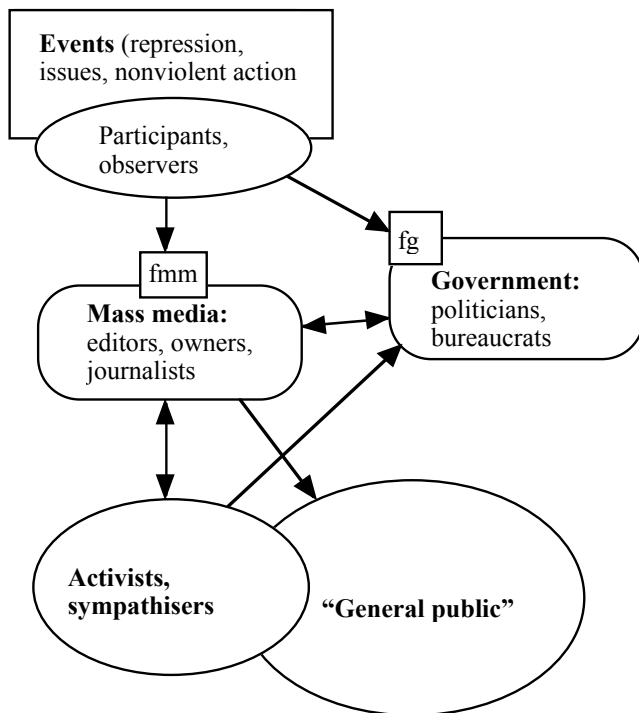
Figure 6.6. Government and mass media as communication filters. The filters are the result of psychological, organizational, and political economy factors.

For example, in the lead-up to the 1961 US-sponsored invasion of Cuba, US president John F. Kennedy and his closest advisers became convinced that the invasion would be a success. Contrary information, for example, intelligence reports that there was little support within Cuba for a challenge to the Cuban government led by Fidel Castro, was rejected.

The invasion, at the Bay of Pigs, was quickly defeated, resulting in a propaganda victory for Castro, a major embarrassment for Kennedy, and the consequence of driving Cuba towards the Soviet Union.

Within the policy-making elite, there was no shortage of information: reports and critical perspectives casting serious doubt on assumptions underlying the invasion were readily available. The problem was not lack of information, but rather a systematic rejection of information and ideas that ran contrary to the prevailing consensus, which was maintained through an illusion of invulnerability and unanimity and by suppression of personal doubts and those of others. A certain way of viewing the world had become dominant — in this case, a belief that the Cuban government was detested and fragile and that the invasion would not fail or rebound against the US government — and was not easily dislodged by contrary information or viewpoints.

Every person interprets the world through a set of assumptions or filters, screening out incompatible information. That is essential if one is to draw a conclusion or take an action. Groupthink is simply the same process operating with a group of people who, through a collective process, develop a common framework for understanding the world. There is nothing unusual about this: it goes on all the time. Janis highlighted foreign policy fiascoes that sometimes result from this process, but his concept of groupthink applies in many other situations.

Groupthink is to be expected in any group, and is especially likely in bureaucratically structured organizations, characterized by hierarchy and a division of labor.[55] In bureaucracies, orders are communicated down the hierarchy and information communicated

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54 Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies in Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983, 2nd ed), p. 9.

55 We use here the sociological conception of bureaucracy, in which characteristic features are hierarchy, division of labor, standard operating procedures and rules, advancement by merit, and impersonal relations between workers. In this sense, most large corporations, churches, and environmental groups are bureaucracies just as much as government bodies.

upwards, with little genuine dialogue. Although information flows upward, it is often tailored to what workers think bosses want to hear. Therefore the top management may have a very distorted view of conditions at the coal face. Thus, in a hierarchical organization, communication is structured by the hierarchy, a process that has serious ramifications.[56]

The problems of communicating "against the hierarchy" are shown by the fate of whistleblowers, who are workers who speak out, typically about corruption or dangers to the public.[57] A typical whistleblower is a conscientious worker who discovers a problem — such as misuse of funds, bias in promotions, violations of procedures, or cheating of clients — and reports it through proper channels, such as notifying the boss or using a grievance procedure. However, the whistleblower's communication is unwelcome since it challenges established ways of doing things and sometimes threatens to expose crime, negligence, or incompetence by managers. Hence, the usual response by management is to attack the whistleblower, with reprisals including ostracism, threats, petty harassment, reprimands, punitive transfer, and dismissal. Rather than deal with the message, the response is to "shoot the messenger." For a whistleblower's charges to be taken seriously,

with proper investigation and penalties for wrongdoers, would be a major threat to the hierarchy, since it would mean that information from lower down could be used to undermine those higher up.

Groupthink is one way in which those with power in organizations protect against challengers. Dissenting views are ruled out of bounds by the prevailing way of thinking.[58] This allows whistleblowers to be crushed with a clean conscience — they are simply workers who do not understand how things work. It also allows a wide range of other disconcerting information to be filtered out, such as that morale is poor due to bad management, that executive salaries are undeserved, or that sexual harassment is rife.

From the point of view of mobilizing concern about repression, aggression, and oppression, various organizations act as filters along the communication chain. An organization may receive information: the question is what to do about it. For example, consider a church that receives information about Indonesian repression in East Timor.[59] This might be via the mass media, through letters from an East Timor support group, or from church members who raise the issue in discussion. There are various things that could be done by the church:

- distribute information to all members;
- address the issue in a church service;
- make a formal statement, circulated to the media;
- encourage other churches to take a stand;

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56 Fred Emery and Merrelyn Emery, *A Choice of Futures* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), pp. 150–165. The authoritarian dynamics of large organizations have long been known, with Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" being a classic treatment: Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracies,* translated by Eden & Cedar Paul (New York: Dover, [1915] 1959).

57 David W. Ewing, *Freedom Inside the Organization: Bringing Civil Liberties to the Workplace* (New York: Dutton, 1977); Myron Peretz Glazer and Penina Migdal Glazer, *The Whistleblowers: Exposing Corruption in Government and Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Marcia P. Miceli and Janet P. Near, *Blowing the Whistle: The Organizational and Legal Implications for Companies and Employees* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992).

58 On the psychological dynamics of bureaucracies, in particular the interaction of hierarchy and employee psychology, see Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Howard S. Schwartz, *Narcissistic Process and Corporate Decay: The Theory of the Organization Ideal* (New York: New York University Press, 1990).

59 In practice, the Catholic Church was one of the main routes for getting information out of East Timor during the period of greatest Indonesian government control over outside media, 1975–1989.

• provide financial support for East Timorese victims of repression;

• invite church representatives from East Timor to visit;

• provide asylum for East Timorese refugees;

• support protests against Indonesian repression.

These are just a sample of possible actions; the point is that there is no shortage of ways to expose and oppose the repression. Concerted action is most likely when it is supported by church leaders, but some actions can be taken on the initiative of church members or affiliate organizations.

On the other hand, it is also possible that nothing is done. This is the case that is our concern here. For example:

• information about repression is discounted as incorrect or misleading;

• information is set aside because church leaders do not consider repression in East Timor to be their concern;

• information is set aside because church leaders do not think there is anything they can do about repression in East Timor;

• information is not acted on because church leaders are afraid that action might generate opposition or bad publicity among members, the church hierarchy, media, the government, or some other group.

How can such lack of action be explained? Groupthink is one way: it captures the cohesiveness of perspective that can develop in a policy-making elite but also in all sorts of other organizations. Another term, adopted from the history of science, is "paradigm," which has come to mean a dominant way of conceiving the world and guiding interactions with it.[60]

At a more general level, we can talk about the "social construction of reality," namely the social processes that help to shape the way

people understand the world.[61] When people who have been blind from birth gain their sight through an operation, they cannot immediately "see," since they have no way of conceptualizing the sensory inputs coming through their eyes. To decide whether something is a triangle, for example, they may have to count the number of points or sides. "Seeing" is a skill that must be learned, and since this learning takes place in an environment built on certain assumptions about the world, seeing is a social as well as a physical process. Much learning is required to understand the significance of the images on a television screen, for example. Africans who have lived their entire life in the forest may not be able to correctly interpret the visual panorama of open spaces, for example not believing that buffalo observed at a great distance are actually insects since, without trees for comparison, they appear to be tiny.[62] Similarly, viewing television requires a set of acquired skills.

If learning is required to make sense of sensory inputs — and assumptions about the nature of reality are involved at this level — then it should be no surprise that more complex conceptions, such as the dynamics of organizations, foreign policy, and human rights, are "social constructions." Each person's ideas about how the world operates are an outcome of personal experiences, prior learning, and, not least, the ideas of those with whom one interacts. It is to be expected that the organization where one works will have a strong influence on one's conceptions of the world. Furthermore, it is to be expected that the dominant conceptual framework in an organization will reflect the interests of dominant individuals or groups both inside and outside the organization. This is the old idea that material conditions influence — though do not determine — conceptions of the

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60 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, 2nd ed).

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61 The classic statement is Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

62 Colin M. Turnbull, *The Forest People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), pp. 252–253.

world. Those who are rich are likely to believe that the economic system is fair and, through a complex set of processes, the idea that the economic system is fair is likely to become the dominant view, so that cheating by welfare recipients is seen as a serious offense whereas massive government handouts to the super-rich, or systemic corporate fraud, are ignored.

The social construction of reality is the most general process, applying to individuals, groups, and entire societies. Within this process, particular frameworks for under-standing and dealing with the world, which can be called paradigms, develop and are perpetuated within specific domains. Organi-zations are important shapers of social reality, so many paradigms are specific to certain types of organizations. In a government department, we can talk of a "policy paradigm" that sees certain issues as unim-portant or out of bounds and certain actions as inadmissible. Groupthink is perhaps a more appropriate term for smaller groups dealing with specific issues, whereas paradigm is more appropriate for deep-seated frameworks for understanding the world.

The options for action and explanations for non-action that we have outlined for a church apply as well to many other organizations including trade unions, corporations, govern-ment bodies, community service organizations (such as Rotary), and professional associa-tions. From simple observation, it is apparent that most organizations do little or nothing against repression except sometimes when it is close to home. The usual assumption is that what is happening somewhere else to someone else is not our business. Action is much more likely when there is a bond or if authorities expect it.

In the case of a church, one powerful bond is when those subjected to repression are members of the same religion. Most of the East Timorese are Catholic, so it is to be expected that Catholics and Catholic churches around the world would be more likely to act than would Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, or Baptists. (This generalization needs to be qualified by the observation that some religious groups, such as Quakers, have a

record in social activism.) But for most Catholics, East Timor is far away, physically and mentally. Without some stronger link, it is easy to say that repression there is not our concern.

In Argentina, for example, Catholics would be much more concerned about attacks on Argentine Catholics. There is no historical link with East Timorese Catholics. In Portugal, though, there is a strong historical link, since East Timor was colonized by Portugal, which indeed is the main reason most East Timorese are Catholic.

Another possible connection would be an East Timorese refugee in an Argentine congregation, or an Argentine priest working in East Timor. Such personal links are power-ful means of overcoming physical and psy-chological distance. They also illustrate the operation of the great chain of nonviolence.

Finally, there is the role of authorities. If the Pope takes a strong line on East Timor, this may encourage more churches to take stands themselves. With the backing of the Pope or the head of a country's Catholic church, a priest or church members are likely to have less difficulty taking initiatives. However, there are limits to the power of authoritative endorsement. In the Catholic church, the Pope's edicts no longer command automatic obedience.

In international affairs, another source of authority is the United Nations. In the case of East Timor, the General Assembly condemned the 1975 invasion and repeatedly condemned the Indonesian occupation. However, this did not cause the Indonesian government to withdraw. Unlike the case of Iraq, whose invasion of Kuwait led to a massive UN-endorsed military operation in 1990-1991, the UN took no action against the Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor until 1999, as described in chapter 2.

The most important source of legitimacy for action or non-action against repression remains governments. Other organizations can take action on their own but usually don't. But if called into action by their government, things are very different. This is most obvious in wartime. Corporations, for example, which

normally are happy to make a profit in any country, may be instructed to withdraw investments or to produce certain products. Even in so-called peacetime, government regulations and policies vis-a-vis other countries are strong factors in corporate decision making. Similar considerations apply to trade unions, community service organizations, professional associations, and many other organizations. Therefore special attention should be given to governments, especially foreign policy elites, as filters of information about repression, aggression, and oppression.

Exactly who are the foreign policy elites? This will depend on the issue, what political party is in power, insider networks, and personalities. They are likely to include a few key politicians, personal advisers, and government bureaucrats, especially diplomats. For example, in the period just before the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in December 1975, key Australian foreign policy elites included the Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, the Australian ambassador to Indonesia Richard Woolcott, the Minister for Foreign Affairs Don Willesee, and the head of the Department of Foreign Affairs Alan Renouf.[63]

In order to gain insight into government foreign policy elites as information filters, it is useful to try to elucidate elements of the policy paradigm underlying their operations. Policy paradigms are bound to be somewhat different between countries, historical periods, and even issues. To focus the discussion, we look at the sort of assumptions that can explain US and Australian foreign policy in relation to Indonesia from 1965 to 1998, characterized by open or de facto support for the Indonesian government even when it was responsible for massive killings and other human rights violations.

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63 Rodney Tiffen, *Diplomatic Deceits: Government, Media and East Timor* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001). Detailed analyses of foreign policy elites and their operations are unusual except for the most prominent issues. For a classic treatment of US policy making on Vietnam, see David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

Table 1
Elements of a foreign policy paradigm
1. The influence of the foreign policy elites must be maintained.
2. Serving the interests of the government is the foremost consideration, subject to point 1.
3. Friendly foreign governments should be supported, subject to points 1 and 2.
4. Domestic corporate interests should be supported, subject to points 1 and 2 and sometimes 3.

This is essentially the paradigm of "realpolitik," in which international relations is a game of strategy in which power and influence are the key considerations and moral or humanitarian issues are primarily of symbolic rather than substantive importance.

Foreign policy elites, naturally enough, have developed a view of the world that puts them in a key position of power and influence. By keeping international relations a matter of government-to-government interaction, foreign policy elites maintain their own role. The United Nations is not a strong challenge to this model, since it is essentially a meeting place for states, where nongovernment groups are outsiders. US and Australian foreign policy elites supported the Suharto government in Indonesia for more than three decades because it was friendly to the West, namely anticommunist and open to Western investment.

Nonviolent action is potentially a deep challenge to the foreign policy paradigm. To challenge repression in Indonesia, a nonviolent action strategy would involve grassroots action within Indonesia plus grassroots support from outside the country through broadcasts, boycotts, personal links, and many other options. This would marginalize foreign policy elites: rather than being at the center of influence, they would be simply one player among a host of activists. Rather than interacting with elite counterparts in Indonesia, they would have to interact with workers, peasants, and imprisoned dissidents. A strategy to encourage nonviolent action against a foreign tyrant would provide skills to people that might be used to challenge the govern-

ment at home, reducing its power and, in turn, the influence of the foreign policy elite. It is not surprising that the idea of social transformation through nonviolent action is unthinkable within the policy paradigm of real-politik.

The entire Cold War was waged using the conceptual framework of real-politik, with communist states treated as the enemy to be countered by military might. The 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe were totally unexpected because the significance of nonviolent action was not grasped.

Let us now turn to the government as a communication filter. When it comes to foreign affairs, government pronouncements usually reflect the framework of foreign policy elites. Governments collect massive amounts of information, including diplomatic correspondence, spy reports, commercial information, news reports, and much else. All of this is interpreted through the foreign policy paradigm. So while lots of information goes into the government, what comes out is quite small by comparison and usually reflects the foreign policy orthodoxy. When it came to Indonesia, the US and Australian governments commented on government-to-government talks, and sometimes on investment issues, but seldom if ever reported on long-term political prisoners or exploitation of workers by multinational corporations.

Consider the case of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs[64] and Australian government policy on Indonesia. Ever since Suharto came to power in the late 1960s, the department pursued a line of support for the Indonesian government, including fostering high level diplomatic meetings, Australian corporate investment in Indonesia, Australian arms sales to the Indonesian military, training of Indonesian military officers, and, later, recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor. The basic premise of Foreign Affairs policy on East Timor was that keeping on good terms with the Indonesian government was the top priority. That it was an anticommunist, procapitalist government was

crucial in this alignment, but also involved seems to have been a desire to align the Australian government with other powerful governments, especially allies of the US government.

In this consistent policy over many decades, anything that threatened the Australia-Indonesia government alliance was ignored, downplayed, denigrated, or, if the pressure to act was too great, given lip service. The 1965-1966 bloodbath in Indonesia was largely ignored, as were Indonesian political prisoners and the practice of imprisonment without trial. Indonesian internal colonialist policy, involving repression of movements for independence or autonomy in East Timor, Irian Jaya, Aceh, and elsewhere, was supported. Suharto's repression of potential challengers and grassroots movements was accepted and its democratic facade left unchallenged. Exploitation of workers was ignored, as was massive corruption linked to Suharto.

The task of Foreign Affairs was not easy, since many voices within Australia challenged the government's policy of accommodation and appeasement. There was enormous popular support for the East Timorese cause, including a strong support from within the Australian Labor Party, with some parliamentarians taking a leading role. There was committed and persistent action groups supportive of freedom in Indonesia. There was media coverage of atrocities in East Timor and other regions (including the killing of five Australian journalists in 1975 by Indonesian soldiers), exposés of Indonesian corruption, and other abuses. In the face of popular agitation for change, Foreign Affairs worked hard to convince Australian governments to maintain its support for the Indonesian government, and was remarkably successful at this. Only in 1999 did this change. Following the overwhelming East Timorese vote for independence and the immediate Indonesian government-sponsored scorched earth policy, there was an enormous outpouring of concern and rage in Australia, aided by saturation media coverage, leading to a change in government policy that overturned the Foreign Affairs model.

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64 The name of this department has varied; we use "Department of Foreign Affairs" for convenience.

It would be possible to go more deeply into how Foreign Affairs developed and maintained such a cohesive worldview about Indonesian foreign policy. This would involve a long tradition of anticommunism, the influence of a small number of pro-Indonesian government intellectuals who trained a whole generation of diplomats, elitism in the Australian public service — Foreign Affairs perceives itself as "superior" to most other departments — and the acquiescence by most cabinet ministers to department advice.[65] Also important is the role of dissident voices within Foreign Affairs, and how they have been silenced or marginalized.

It is time to step back from specifics and summarize what a study of organizations can reveal about communication about repression, aggression, and oppression. Communication in any organization is shaped by the structure of the organization: certain things are said easily and some not expressed at all. In a hierarchical organization, it is difficult to express viewpoints that challenge the interests of elites or question the hierarchical structure itself. In addition, organizational elites may have access to information unavailable to others, and have control over official statements from the organization. Communication is also shaped by the organization's environment, especially other organizations and controllers of or stakeholders in the organization itself. Communication practices tend to develop to reflect what aids the organization's survival in its current form in its environment. In the case of hierarchical organizations, this means interacting via elites, control over unofficial information transfer and acute sensitivity to what is required to maintain power and influence. Within the constraints and influences of organizational structure and environ-

ment, standard ways of understanding the world develop in any organization, which persist while being gradually modified by various influences such as new staff, environmental changes, and imposed structural changes. These standard ways of understanding constitute a socially constructed reality. At a general level, a cohesive framework of ideas and practices can be called a paradigm, while for making decisions about a particular purpose, cohesiveness can be called groupthink. Those who challenge paradigms or groupthink are commonly ignored, dismissed, or attacked.

As a result of these processes, it can be said that organizations act as communication filters. From the great diversity of information that comes into the organization through many channels, only a tiny portion is treated as relevant or important. Outputs from organizations reflect organizational structures and paradigms. In the case of hierarchical organizations, elites control key outputs, especially the ones treated authoritatively by most others. Those who communicate in defiance of the chain of command, such as whistleblowers, are attacked ruthlessly.

In communication about repression, aggression, and oppression, government bodies are crucial. A repressive government typically makes every effort to present its activities in a favorable light, as in the case of the Indonesian government under Suharto. Other governments can hide or expose repressive actions in other countries. In either case, communication is usually based on the assumption that action, and decisions about action, should be by governments alone. Repression in foreign countries with "friendly" governments is generally ignored, denied, or downplayed, whereas repression in countries that are considered "enemies" are treated as a tremendous scandal. The option of encouraging nonviolent action by citizens is almost always off the government agenda, and communication outputs reflect this assumption.

The challenge for nonviolent activists, in relation to communication, is to figure out what strategies have a chance of transforming or sidestepping organizational filters, espe-

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65 The key figures are the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister. The power of government departments over ministers is a well-known phenomenon that is brilliantly portrayed in the British television series "Yes, Minister." Public servants in Canberra have told us that watching this series is the best way to understand how the government works.

cially those in government. There are several options.

• Use alternative media to sidestep organizational control. This has the advantage that activists retain control of their messages, but does not directly challenge the organizational filtering process.

• Attempt to influence or use the organizational filtering process, for example by building links with sympathetic insiders and by developing methods for obtaining information and influencing outputs. This undermines organizational control from within but leaves elites intact. Sympathetic insiders are always at risk of exposure, attack, or co-optation.

• Attack the organization's paradigm and power directly through open critique, public campaigns, and pressure on the organization's controllers. This provides the only real prospect of long-lasting change to an existing organization, but is extremely difficult to carry off.

• Set up alternative systems that replicate what the organization does but with structures that promote open communication. In the case of foreign affairs, this would include systems for person-to-person diplomacy, grassroots gathering of "intelligence," and networks to support popular participation and nonviolent action. This strategy is necessarily long-term and would have to be part of a wider process of structural change.

News values. We have described how organizations, through their structure and operations, shape the form and content of communication within and through the organization. Concerning communication about repression, organizational shaping by governments is especially important, since they are both responsible for much repression and authoritative commentators on repression that happens elsewhere. Organizational shaping of communication is also important in a range of other bodies, including corporations, churches, trade unions, and other bodies for which repression is not normally a primary concern but which potentially can play a strong role (positive or negative), and social action groups such as Amnesty International that are directly

concerned about repression. There is one other type of organization that is vitally important in this picture: mass media organizations, especially those that report news.

Organizationally, the mass media are quite similar to government departments and corporations: they are large and bureaucratically structured. In fact, mass media are corporations or government bodies themselves, so it is more accurate to say they are quite similar to *other* government departments and corporations. Therefore, it is to be expected that information is controlled by organizational elites with a special brief to serve the elites. However, there is one vital difference: it is part of the mass media's brief to report news, and media organizations compete with each other to supply it. (This does not apply in countries where the government monopolizes the media.) This creates a very different dynamic from that occurring in other government bodies and corporations, where elites seek as a matter of course to control information and restrict outputs, and where public relations — the official output from an organization — is routinely designed to serve organizational interests. The key point is that corporations and government bodies control their own communication outputs: there is no internal competition. They are, in this sense, like authoritarian governments.[66]

News media are no different in regard to their own internal operations — they are as reluctant as any other organization to expose what happens on the inside — but for all other activities have as a mandate the reporting of news. The question is, what counts as news? What everyone sees on television, hears on the radio or reads in the newspaper is so familiar that it seems like a fact of nature: political controversy, wars, natural disasters, accidents, and sporting and celebrity highlights. However, what is selected out as news —

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66 Deena Weinstein, *Bureaucratic Opposition: Challenging Abuses at the Workplace* (New York: Pergamon, 1979), argues generally that bureaucracies are similar to authoritarian states, notably in their treatment of dissidents. We apply this idea here to organizational communication.

especially in the five-minute or half-hour broadcasts that most people use as the basis for their understanding of what is happening around the country and the world — is just a tiny fraction of what is reported and is only one special way of approaching events.

Journalists and editors learn through experience what makes a good story, so much so that they have an intuitive grasp of what will or won't work. In principle, any story, told in any way, could lead the evening news or hit the headlines. In practice, what is selected by editors is tightly constrained by experience, competition, expectations of audiences, and responses of powerful interest groups. The constraints are the result of the complex environment of news-making. One way to talk about them is in terms of "news values," which are the criteria for what makes a good story. They include prominence, proximity, conflict, timeliness, action, human interest, and perceived consequences. For example, the O. J. Simpson saga scored highly on several of these criteria: it involved prominence (Simpson was a well-known sports star and media figure before the murders), human interest (Simpson himself), conflict (a murder), action (Simpson's flight from the scene), and timeliness (the court case was reported as it occurred). In contrast, a small community initiative to arrange visits to people living alone would rate very lowly in terms of news values. There is no prominent person involved, there is no conflict, there is nothing that makes it timely (since the visits are an ongoing process), and there is no "action" (for television purposes). In terms of consequences, the visits might well provide support that prevents illness or even death due to neglect, but such potential benefits are not visible, so the initiative rates low on perceived consequences.

The impacts of the news and the consequences of news values have been analyzed at length by media analysts. The news is both lauded as providing unexcelled insight into what is happening in the world and condemned as selective, biased, overly violent, giving only a superficial understanding, and much else. Out of the vast amount of material

on the media, our interest is in the actual and potential role of mass media in communication against repression, aggression, and oppression. Even with this brief, there are many fruitful directions for investigation. Here we just mention a few key observations.

• Mass media are far more likely to report violence than nonviolence.[67] Violence provides action (especially for television) and is a visible indicator for conflict.[68] Nonviolent action, especially when it involves resolution of conflict, is less newsworthy. The campaign against the MAI, involving no violence, had low media visibility. Reporting on events in Indonesia in 1998 emphasized rioting and gave little attention to opposition to Suharto by artists.

• Mass media sometimes report atrocities, massacres, genocide, and other horrors, but sometimes do not, depending on their relevance to the media's own country, the cost of coverage, the availability of graphic image, the scale of horror, and whether other crises are happening at the same time.[69] Governments

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67 For example, Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 35, states of US media's coverage of foreign news about political conflict and protest that "foreign conflicts must be more dramatic and usually more violent than their domestic equivalents in order to break into the news. By and large, peaceful demonstrations are rarely covered, unless they are anti-American."

68 This is most dramatically the case with terrorism, which can be interpreted as communication activated and amplified by violence. See Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London: Sage, 1982).

69 For excellent discussions of news media and war reporting, see Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military: From the Crimea to Desert Strike* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997). See also Bruce Cumings, *War and Television* (London: Verso,

usually try to cover up their own violence; this was routine practice in the Soviet Union. Media coverage is one of the best ways to overcome government censorship. A range of factors determine media attention and slants. Some mass killing receives little critical media coverage, such as in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and in Indonesia in 1965-1966. Other mass killing receives saturation coverage, such as Kosova in 1998 and East Timor in 1999.

• As described earlier in the discussion of media effects theory, mass media coverage often presents events as a spectacle, namely as something to be watched with no implications for personal action. Nevertheless, action groups can build on awareness of events generated through the media.

• Mass media are part of the culture and subscribe to dominant values, so that some alternative views cannot obtain visibility. For example, terrorism is almost always portrayed as something done by small political or religious radicals or by stigmatized governments and virtually never as state policy by powerful governments.[70] When news is presented in tiny sound-bites, the only sort of message that can be easily gotten across is one that resonates with the listener's pre-existing conceptual framework. To present an alternative perspective requires more time, which is seldom available.

• Although the mass media virtually never express some viewpoints, nevertheless the mass media are relatively open to divergent views, certainly in comparison to organizations such as governments and corporations. Therefore nonviolent activists, human rights groups and many others can obtain coverage sometimes, though their message will normally be configured within reporting conventions.

In a study that highlights the problems of relying on mass media coverage to stimulate action, Peter Viggo Jakobsen analyzed "CNN effect," namely the idea that media coverage forces western government intervention into conflicts.[71] Jakobsen points out that actually most conflicts are ignored by the media, that pre-violence and post-violence stages receive little attention, that government decisions to intervene are only marginally influenced by media coverage, that governments favor symbolic involvement to give the appearance of action without the substance, and that emphasis is shifted from long-term prevention work to short-term emergency work. Jakobsen focuses on the difficulties of stimulating government action. He notes that nongovernment organizations usually can't get issues on the media agenda unless there is significant killing. Thus for NGOs to push governments to act via media coverage, they must get their message through two stringent filters: the mass media filter based on news values and the government filter based on groupthink.

Our account of the shaping of communication by the organizational form of the news media is built around the idea of news values, themselves an outcome of the structure of media organizations in the context of other powerful organizations.[72] Explaining the organizational shaping of communication in terms of news values has the advantage of being close to the way journalists and editors actually conceive of what they are doing.

Understanding organizational influences on communication is one thing; doing something

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1992); Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (London: Prion, 2000); Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue.*

70 For the view that terrorism by dominant states is by far more important than the type of terrorism reported in the media, see Edward S. Herman, *The **Real** Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda* (Boston: South End Press, 1982).

71 Peter Viggo Jakobsen, "Focus on the CNN effect misses the point: the real media impact on conflict management is invisible and indirect," *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol. 37, No. 2, March 2000, pp. 131–143.

72 See W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion* (New York: Longman, 1988, 2nd edition) and Rodney Tiffen, *News and Power* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), among others.

about them is another. Those who are concerned about repression, aggression, and oppression and want to mobilize action against it have several options.

• Use the mass media by adopting actions and messages so that they make good stories, or in other words rate highly in terms of news values. This is a common approach used by nonviolent activists but it only works for certain types of issues and actions.

• Build links with sympathetic journalists and editors so that normal reactions to what counts as a story are modified. This can be helpful but the influence of individuals is limited in the face of the wider organizational dynamics.

• Educate members of the public to be more informed about how news is constructed and more willing to take action.[73] This is essential but does not by itself challenge the way news is constructed.

• Challenge the driving forces behind the media: government and corporate power, including media power. This is vital for the long term but exceedingly difficult.

• Use alternative media, such as community radio and e-mail, that are more participatory. Alternative media are not a major challenge to the mass media in the short term but are the only long-term solution to problems of media power.

In our discussion of organizational theory, we have focused on two types of organizations that are crucial in communication about repression, aggression, and oppression: governments (especially foreign affairs departments) and mass media (especially the news). The organizational perspective is a powerful one in showing how organizations shape

messages. A basic driving force in government bodies is control of information by elites in order to serve elite interests. Media organizations have as a basic rationale the dissemination of information; the processes by which this occurs are shaped by government and corporations, but with considerable opportunities for insertion of alternative or challenging messages.

We have only touched on shaping of communication by other types of organizations: churches, trade unions, professional associations, charities, sporting clubs, neighborhood groups, and many others. In every case, there is the potential to mobilize or dampen concern and action. Understanding the way the organization shapes communication, and perhaps changing this process, can lead to greater mobilization.

One type of organization is especially important: social action groups. Some of them, such as Amnesty International, seem to be especially good at mobilizing concern among lots of people over a long period through formal organizational structures and rules. Others, such as affinity groups, can motivate high-level nonviolent direct action, such as civil disobedience to blockade arms shipments. How do different structures shape communication? How do they encourage (or sometimes inhibit) action? Which structures are best suited to challenging or circumventing control over communication by governments, corporations, and mass media? These questions deserve considerable investigation.

Conclusion

In our whistle-stop tour of communication theories, we have found much of value for the task of challenging repression, aggression, and oppression, as well as much that needs to be investigated.

• The transmission model helps draw attention to communication blockages, including censorship and absence of suitable information technology.

• Media effects theory points to the ways that passivity is induced in audiences, espe-

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73 Martin A. Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* (New York: Carol, 1990); Eleanor MacLean, *Between the Lines: How to Detect Bias and Propaganda in the News and Everyday Life* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1981).

cially by presenting news as a sort of spectacle, something that is especially important in dealing with absence of action.

• Semiotics is vital in pointing to the ways in which meanings are constructed; information on its own is meaningless.

• Medium theory highlights the importance that the type of communication technology has on the ability to communicate.

• Political economy shows that the ownership and control of media greatly affect what sorts of messages are carried.

• Organizational theory reveals the potent influence of organizational structure on the form and content of communication, something that is especially important in government bodies and the mass media.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, we have not set out to develop a comprehensive theory, nor to deal thoroughly with any of the communication theories surveyed here. Rather, our aim has been to pick out insights, wherever they may be found, that may be helpful for opposing repression, aggression, and oppression. Every one of the theories we have discussed has deficiencies, some very substantial, yet even each contains useful insights for our purposes. As one example of how to apply these insights, in chapter 7 we propose a set of steps that nonviolent activists can use in developing a communication strategy.