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3

NONVIOLENT ACTIVISM AND THE MEDIA

Gandhi and beyond

Sean Scalmer

In the early years of the twentieth century, the political experiments of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi helped to refine a new form of political activism. Gandhi called it *satyagraha*, a neologism that combined the Sanskrit words for ‘truth’ and ‘firmness’. Its promulgation signaled a break from earlier practice (for no English term was thought an adequate descriptor of Gandhi’s new approach), a connection with Indian traditions and a claim to embody spiritual as well as tactical imperatives. Advanced in efforts to win civil and political rights for Indians in South Africa and then to pursue Indian Home Rule, *satyagraha* impressed even sceptics with its capacity to inspire mass nonviolent sacrifice. But this was never simply a tool of self-assertion, and the Indian leader understood *satyagraha* as a ‘message’ or ‘lesson’ for the whole world, a means to secure ‘universal nonviolence’ across the globe (Gandhi 1964: 262, 1968: 127, 1977: 390–1). His experiments won international interest and then emulation. Gandhian nonviolence became an enduring form of political activism in the West as well as the East (Scalmer 2011). How were these political achievements secured? And what was their relationship to the mass media? In this chapter, I seek to provide answers, explaining how Gandhi created *satyagraha*, and how the media helped to develop, amplify, diffuse and transform it.

Gandhi’s political campaigns have been narrated and analyzed in several thousand works (see Pandiri 1995). The product of a fertile and creative mind, they rested also on a combination of political resources. There was an Indian tradition of nonviolent action, and Gandhi was able to invoke this lineage in advocating a practice he originally termed ‘passive resistance’ or ‘soul force’ (e.g., Gandhi 1921a). The *Bhagavad Gita* – one of the most sacred of Hindu texts – was widely interpreted as a parable of nonviolence. Gandhi especially cited the *Gita* as a means of justifying his actions to a predominantly Hindu community (Scalmer 2016).

Western political traditions offered additional resources. Jesus Christ could be considered an emissary of nonviolence (Gandhi 1962: 119, 1971: 438). Quakers and celebrated Christian pacifists – among them Count Leo Tolstoy – provided further exemplars of the nonviolent way (Tolstoy 1961). And Henry David Thoreau’s advocacy of ‘civil disobedience’ might be grasped as another significant precedent (Gandhi 1963: 65).

Western politics also provided recent examples of successful collective campaigning. Developing from the early nineteenth century, the modern ‘social movement’ combined a series of political tools in a new way: a repertoire of predominantly nonviolent political performances (among them the demonstration and the protest march); the building of

mass organizations; public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (see Tilly & Wood 2015). Over the succeeding decades, these methods were applied by campaigners against slavery, for Catholic emancipation and for democratic rights. Sometimes, they were tied to especially striking and dramatic performances of moral force: the petitions and processions of the Chartists; the passive resistance of English non-conformists; the theatrical militancy of the suffragettes.

Educated as a lawyer in London, Gandhi was exposed to such political techniques. He joined the Vegetarian Society from London and spoke and wrote in support of the cause (Guha 2013). He referenced the writings of Tolstoy and Thoreau. He closely observed the suffragettes, admiring particularly their boldness and commitment (Gandhi 1962: 453, 1963: 65, 189). These were political inspirations. They were also points of identification or commonality, through which Gandhi's original approaches might be legitimated and understood.

Satyagraha and the media

Alongside those many influences, the media was also a significant political resource. The invention of the telegraph in the 1840s had made possible the transmission of news reports across continents with an unaccustomed alacrity (Schudson 1978: 4). The establishment of global news agencies in the years afterward (most notably Reuters, American Associated Press, and United Press International) brought coverage of far-flung events within the reach of vastly greater numbers (Boyd-Barrett 1978: 192, 206–07). The development of photography and then newsreels helped to capture the visual character of political life, and to heighten the interest of the media in spectacular and arresting mass events (Tickner 1987: 58–9).

If Gandhian *satyagraha* was based on many precedents in the East and West, then its political efficacy rested especially on a capacity to exploit the increasingly global and visual character of the media industries. Gandhi's successful nonviolent campaigns were aided by the media in several ways. First and most obviously, nonviolent protest – often encompassing the conscious violation of laws, the deliberate courting of punishment and the mass assembly of the people – precipitated moments of heightened dramatic intensity. This, in turn, elicited the interest of the metropolitan media. And the media could bring the nonviolent challenge of the *satyagrahi* to an audience that straddled the globe.

Gandhi possessed an unusual capacity to anticipate media interest and to choreograph protest campaigns that might win great coverage. Observers likened him to a dramatist, a publicity agent, a playwright, a producer, a stage manager and a star (e.g. Fisher 1932: 47; Wheeler 1944: 200). But if sometimes scorned for an apparent desire for 'keeping up the publicity stunt' (Viceroy 1931), Gandhi's dramatic flair was necessary to the effectiveness of *satyagraha*. Without the interest of metropolitan media, the grievances and moral sacrifices of Indians could not be known. And the success of nonviolent appeal rested on prior knowledge as well as sympathetic understanding.

It was Gandhi's political creativity that helped from the early 1920s to make the case of Indian Home Rule a regular subject of Western debate. At this time, a large metropolitan audience first became aware of a major political movement, 'headed by a leader and conducted by methods which astounded and bewitched Occidental reporters' (Case 1923: 347). Attention waned somewhat over the mid-1920s, but rebounded by 1929. It reached unimagined heights in the first years of the new decade, as Gandhi's 'salt *satyagraha*' campaign mobilized participants across much of India.

Now a new generation of American correspondents joined an already substantial contingent of British reporters. Members of the South Asian community in America also took up the pen,

and Gandhi's emissaries (including Sarojini Naidu, Madeleine Slade, and C. F. Andrews) visited the West (Gordon 2002: 347). Gandhi's open civil disobedience came to dominate the news (Seshachari 1969: 58). He was named *Time* magazine's 'Man of the Year' in 1930, and the *New York Times* published more than 500 articles that referenced the Mahatma in that 12-month period alone. In fascinated and sometimes breathless news reports published at this time, an image of 'nonviolence in action' was compressed and shared with the Western world. The correspondence of Webb Miller and Negley Farson, initially censored, proved especially influential (Scalmer 2011: 47). Newspaper coverage of Gandhi in the major broadsheets increased by one-half again over 1931. African American newspapers also evinced considerable interest in the Mahatma at this time, as the early curiosity of the *Crisis* and the *Negro World* was succeeded by a more general enthusiasm for matters Gandhian (Kapur 1992: 25, 45).

Metropolitan interest dulled slightly thereafter, as the Indian campaign subsided. But there was a later (though less elevated) peak of interest in a new nonviolent campaign he led from the middle years of WWII, and then further attention upon the achievement of Indian independence in 1947. Gandhi's assassination in 1948 also served as a focus for reminiscence and argument, unloosening another 'flood of publicity', on the reckoning of noted American pacifist, A. J. Muste (Muste 1948).

While the journalists scribbled, the photographers snapped. One critic of the Mahatma argued that 'his prestige owes much to the press photographer' (Hodson 1941), and it is true that his unmistakable figure graced the pages of the leading journals more frequently than other Indian subjects, whether individual or collective. The craze to represent the Mahatma also crossed from the newspaper to the art gallery, and extended even to consumer items (Scalmer 2011: 28–9). Much more than a conventional leader of a political campaign, the Mahatma was eventually imagined into something of an icon. Whether the collective campaign for 'Home Rule' was relatively mobilized or quiescent, Gandhi – its symbol – maintained newsworthiness. For the adherents of the Indian cause, and for the advocates of peaceful protest, this proved a substantial political resource. Always, the attention of the press could be expected.

However, the Mahatma was not simply the object of media interest. Gandhi was conscious of the dangers of media misreporting, and frequently lamented its ubiquity (Scalmer 2011: 42). He responded with his own media interventions, using the media to support his claims and to share the virtues of the nonviolent way. Challenging media bias, Gandhi composed press releases especially for inquiring journalists, and even for news agencies themselves (Pyarelal and Nayar 1991: 15). He also sent informative cables to expatriate Indians in the metropole. When marching and protesting he employed early forms of the sound bite (Hardiman 2003: 253). The Mahatma edited independent publications that attained an influential circulation in the West (Gandhi's *Collected Works* would eventually sum to around 100 thick volumes). And he eagerly embraced any opportunity to use the radio, or directly to answer his critics in hostile newspapers (Scalmer 2011: 63).

In writings, speeches, interviews and public letters, Gandhi explained his purposes and values. Repeatedly and clearly, he framed the underlying moral and intellectual basis of *satyagraha*: an unwavering commitment to nonviolence, whatever the circumstances (Gandhi 1917: 51, 1930a: 694); the pursuit of truth rather than victory over an antagonist (Gandhi 1921b: 158, 1930b: 70); love for one's enemy (Gandhi cited in Dalton 1996: 40); a willingness to suffer, in the hope that such conscious suffering might convince an opponent to 'see the error of their ways' (Gandhi 1910: 224); the expectation that political conflict would end in conversion of evil-doers, not in a personal triumph (Gandhi 1930a: 698). These were radical and unfamiliar ideas to most Westerners. Gandhi needed to use the media to illuminate the meaning of his actions. His media interventions served both to enhance the effectiveness of his campaigning and to win a broader interest in *satyagraha* as a means of change.

Globalizing satyagraha: the media and other forces

Alongside Gandhi, a cosmopolitan group of supporters emerged to publicize the Indian cause and to explain the intricacies of the Mahatma's approach. All adroitly used the media, especially the print media, publishing pamphlets, books and articles; delivering lectures that were frequently the object of press interest. They included Non-conformist Ministers; Christian women; African American pastors; and Indian expatriates (for details, see Scalmer 2011: 93–103). Their efforts helped to transmit *satyagraha* to the world.

The major Western institutions dedicated to peace – The Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Peace Pledge Union – also acted to publicize and promote *satyagraha* to Western audiences. From the early 1940s, the Fellowship of Reconciliation's 'racial-industrial' department in the US started to organize conferences dedicated to the application of Gandhi's ideas to the problems of racial oppression and conflict (Scalmer 2011: 128). Soon afterward, a fragment of the Fellowship broke away as 'the Congress of Racial Equality', and began to experiment with nonviolent direct action (Meier & Rudwick 1969). A similar dynamic was evident in the United Kingdom. There, the Peace Pledge Union served as a home of vigorous debate around Gandhi's ideas for several decades. After many false starts, those activists most convinced of the merits of *satyagraha* formed a new organization, 'Operation Gandhi', in the early 1950s. This grouping later became the 'Non-Violent Resistance Group', and launched a series of nonviolent campaigns against nuclear weaponry.

Western experiments of these kinds were reliant on the media. The attempt to adapt Gandhian techniques was prefaced by persistent discussion of Gandhi and *satyagraha* within the movements' own alternative media (Scalmer 2002). The pioneering Western acts were framed and justified in special movement publications and newsheets that were frequently the object of intense activist debate and attention (see Scalmer 2011: 140–2). And the novelty and radicalism of these first Western protests self-consciously influenced by Gandhi drew a very broad media coverage that helped to secure notable success.

Building on such experimentation, large-scale nonviolent protests inspired by Gandhi shook the major Western polities some decades after the Mahatma's death. From the later 1950s, movements for civil rights and against nuclear arms perfected *satyagraha* as form of mass politics for the West. In Britain, the campaign to 'ban the bomb' encompassed invasions of rocket sites from 1958 and 'sit-down' demonstrations in central London from 1961. At Easter time that year, 150,000 people joined the 52-mile march from the Aldermaston nuclear reactor to the national capital; later that September, 1,300 were arrested in a knowingly illegal demonstration in central London. In the United States, the movement for African American civil rights mobilized earlier and ranged even further. A boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama began in December 1955, when 50,000 residents united under the leadership of a young pastor, a certain Dr Martin Luther King Jr. From February 1960, a 'sit-in' movement spread from Greensboro, North Carolina. Within a month, mass protests had jumped the borders of seven states; nearly 4,000 demonstrators were eventually arrested in more than 100 cities. A 'freedom ride' to desegregate bus terminals across the South left Washington, DC in May 1961. Marchers converged upon Washington two years later, where a quarter of a million listened to Martin Luther King's dreams. Community-wide protest campaigns convulsed Albany in 1961, Birmingham in 1963, and Selma in 1965. In these heroic and thrilling acts, Gandhian non-violence became a powerful and enduring presence in the Western world.

These were nonviolent protests launched in a television age, and they quickly became television news. Gandhian-style acts were at first unusual, and that made them interesting (Gamson 1990: 157). The initial Aldermaston marches, southern sit-ins and urban sit-downs all reached the nightly bulletins. And with generous media coverage came the prospect of

powerful political effects. It was a pattern of attention most evident in the struggles of the civil rights movement in America's South. There, the initiation of peaceful protest was answered with a terrible violence; images of martyrdom were broadcast to the world (Garrow 1986: 239–40; Arsenault 2006: 165–66). The brutality of white police dramatized an obvious battle between good and evil (Kertzer 1988: 92). In consequence, a new generation of supporters swept into the movement, and the notice of elites was riveted upon the disorder as well as its deeper cause (Gitlin 1987: 144).

A theorist as well as a practitioner of nonviolent protest, Martin Luther King Jr's 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' analyzed the workings of this political technique in perhaps the most sophisticated and influential terms. As King explained, nonviolent direct action possessed the capacity to 'create' a 'crisis' and to 'dramatize' an issue, thereby ensuring that it could 'no longer be ignored' (King 1964: 78–9). Through the 'creation of tension', and the attraction of outside interest, social evils would face a new scrutiny. Exposed to debate and to an increasingly aware public, change eventually became possible:

Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

King 1964: 85

The initial success of King's strategy had implications not just the cause of racial equality, but also for the fact and the utility of nonviolent protest. Television news captured the power and effectiveness of nonviolent display. It thereby served as a means of recruitment to political campaigns. Over a few heady years, nonviolent protests in the West rapidly increased in size and in number. Soon, 'mass direct action' replaced smaller demonstrations (Bell 1968: 17), and nationwide events became regular features of the activist calendar. The process was evident not just in the battle for racial justice, but also in movements for student rights, peace, women's rights, sexual liberation and the environment. Indeed, successful mobilizations led by 'early risers' opened the way for a cluster of later challengers (Tarrow 1998). What came to be called 'new social movements' emerged as potentially transformative political actors (Touraine 1974).

Diffusion, transformation and the media

The attention of the mass media was central to both the efficacy of nonviolent protest and the diffusion of Gandhian nonviolence to new polities and new causes. But if the media aided nonviolence, then it was not simply a means of transmission: it transformed as much as it spread nonviolent activism. For India's Mahatma, *satyagraha* rested on a bedrock of principle: it was not simply a tool of politics, but rather a creedal commitment. Gandhi's initial Western disciples shared these principled attachments, too (Scalmer 2011: 137–48). However, those swept into the mass campaigns of the 1960s typically lacked long-term exposure to Gandhian writings or ideas. For them, nonviolence was a 'tactic' or a 'utilitarian' practice, not a creedal commitment (Sutherland 1965: 30, Ryan 1988: 194). Observing nonviolent protest through the mass media, they largely understood this form of activism as a pragmatic means to win attention to a favoured cause.

This less philosophical attachment to nonviolent activism was increasingly evident on both sides of the Atlantic. April Carter, secretary of the Direct Action Committee (one of the most

significant of British organizations at this time), noted even in the early 1960s that the tenor of nonviolent protest was therefore changing. She identified a 'move towards mass civil disobedience by a number of individuals who don't believe in n.v. [non-violence] in Satyagraha terms'. As such, she admitted, 'inevitable risks' were involved: the hegemony of 'nonviolent' activism was increasingly threatened (Carter 1960).

Writing a few years later in the United States, American sociologist Inge Powell Bell discovered a similarly 'shallow' view of non-violence in the civil rights movement, characterized by an emphasis on 'practical techniques' and an absence of 'soul searching' around the 'inner attitudes' of the activist (Bell 1968: 26, 42–3). Eddie Gottlieb, considering the peace movement in the US, also hit upon an equivalent view. Writing in 1968, Gottlieb looked back on what now seemed a too-rapid growth, as participation and expectations inflated unduly over a few exciting years. 'We were too successful for OUR own good,' he now felt:

The Movement swarmed with newcomers who successively wanted to take off from each new height. They were enticed by the victories of the non-violent Movement but they looked for total success by the short cuts that violence seemed to offer.

Gottlieb 1968

This interpretation has been supported by later historical analysis (e.g. Gitlin 1980: 30, 128–9). Untutored or unbelieving, many participants in large protests increasingly rejected the nonviolent faith. And as the size of the campaign grew, so the nature of the problem, and the difficulty of asserting control, expanded to equivalent dimensions. On both sides of the Atlantic, large demonstrations were successively disrupted by the activity of determined opponents of the *satyagraha* way. The sheer size of the developing movement made complete non-violence almost impossible (Goodman 1967: 36).

The tastes of the mass media appeared to intensify this dynamic. While at first highly attuned to the novelty of Gandhian-inspired protests, journalists came with time to regard most peaceful demonstrations as relatively routine and familiar. Episodes of more obvious insurgency and physical conflict increasingly drew a greater share of attention (Bond 2001: 31; Lee 2002: 143–4). This made nonviolence less effective as a form of mediated appeal; it thereby contributed to the adoption of increasingly disruptive and violent protest techniques.

The (always incomplete) rejection of nonviolence by many of the social movements of the 1960s was, of course, driven by forces beyond the media. Peaceful appeals to wrongdoers were met most often with violence rather than conversion (Scalmer 2011: 206–8); the growing conflict between protesters and police polarized radicals and convinced many that violence was now the only way (on polarization: Della Porta 1995: 76–7, 137, 214); early advocates of *satyagraha* were exhausted or dejected by years of repression (Farmer 1968: v); and the increasing rejection of formal authority nurtured an 'anti-disciplinary protest' which made the order and control of Gandhian nonviolence appear restrictive and somewhat old-fashioned (Stephens 1998). But among these many forces, the media's priorities undeniably contributed to a disaffection with nonviolence. Contemporary activists wrestle still with the complicated legacies.

Conclusion

Inspired by Gandhi and drawing strength from the genuine success of other nonviolent campaigns since the 1960s, many activists around the world retain a faith in nonviolent protest. Some of the most successful campaigns of recent decades have encompassed the widespread

deployment of nonviolence: human rights advocacy, especially in Latin America and Eastern Europe; the revolutions that overthrew communism in 1989; the environmental direct action of Greenpeace; the anti-austerity mobilizations of the *Indignados* and of the Occupy movement; the Arab revolutions of 2011. Moreover, recent nonviolent campaigns (including explicitly anti-violence campaigns) have sometimes combined peaceful and creative protest with creative use of new information technologies and social media (Bock 2012; Gerbaudo 2012). And the internet itself has increasingly been conceptualized as a space for new forms of nonviolent direct action, including hacking and cryptography (see Assange 2012: 5). Reflecting and sometimes contributing to these developments, many scholars have come to more fully appreciate the efficacy of nonviolence, to refine its tactical basis, and to argue for its adoption (e.g. Ackerman & Duvall 2000; Schock 2005).

None of this is to suggest that the relationship between the media and nonviolent activism is completely harmonious, for it remains beset by tensions. Reflecting these tensions, nonviolent activists continue to adopt various attitudes to the media: there is no consensus. Some activists court the mainstream media with relatively moderate and respectable interventions; others focus attention on developing alternative media; others still choreograph potentially disruptive performances, expecting that their nonviolent acts will be criticized and even caricatured, but believing that hostile coverage is preferable to relative silence or neglect (see Maddison & Scalmer 2006: 215–23).

Gandhi, of course, never promised that the path of nonviolence would be easy, or that he possessed all the answers. On the contrary, he self-consciously presented *satyagraha* as an experimental science, not yet fully understood; his aim was to encourage others to continue to ‘experiment’ with the method, according to individual ‘inclination’ and ‘capacity’ (Gandhi 1927: x). Gandhi’s injunction to continued experimentation challenges activists to new nonviolent campaigns. It implies, too, the possibility that these might generate fresh political discoveries, among them unforeseen means of attracting, influencing and deploying the media in the quest for peaceful political change.

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