

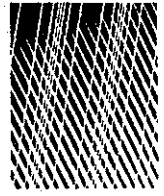
Dear George,  
Wishing you a very productive  
and peaceful New year, and  
looking forward to seeing you soon.  
Helen

# **DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATIONS IN THE INFORMATION AGE**

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Garamond Press, Toronto  
Ablex Publishing, New Jersey

1992



# *Elitist vs. Democratic Communication: Ronald Reagan and Mohandas Gandhi*

**Kusum Singh**

*So in what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen.  
– Thucydides, The Peloponnesian Wars*

**I**N THE TECHNOCRATIC WORLD of information management, the idea of “democracy” is an unwelcome stranger. It suggests the intrusion into top-level decision-making of untutored minds that have not yet learned the difference between a bit and a byte or plumbed the essence of front-end and friendly systems. Democracy may even suggest human values, interests, and needs, all those intangible basics that make human beings different from machines and that, if taken seriously, may lead Have Nots and Have Littles to claim human rights and freedoms that elites feel should be their exclusive privileges.

With enough money and top-top teamwork, however, information managers can program any formal system of representative democracy to sidetrack unfriendly intrusions by non-elites. The inexpert, unrich, unwhite, and even unmale multitudes can be held at bay by selective co-optation, divide-and-conquer strategies, and well-polished imagery. Thus can *representative* democracy, with its constitutional machinery for the bottom-up selection of top leaders, be converted into *image* democracy. Elected officials can then represent a minority of self-serving elites who finance electoral and lobbying campaigns while feeding the majority of people symbolic representation suggesting selfless service to their country.

The most revolutionary technology of our age is not the computer, atomic bomb, outer space travel, or bio-engineering. It is a new technology of undemocratic communication. A new breed of experts has devised effective techniques of manufacturing and disseminating images that undermine democracy by providing people with deceptive information about leaders, events, and countries.

These images invariably cast a mantle of benevolence and high moral commitment around the heads of the most visible political leaders in the "West," "East," and "South." They distract attention from corporatist establishments in which power is concentrated in the hands of behind-the-scene elites who run the machinery.

This corporatist-elitist-imagery apparatus tends to centralize power through undemocratic control of what – in the words of Thucydides – may be "nominally a democracy" (Warner, 1974:164).<sup>1</sup> Entrenched minorities can manipulate elections, legislatures, courts, political parties, and referenda. Westerners are quick to see how this worked in the Soviet Union and other countries with little experience of democratic institutions. But they are often blind to dangerously anti-democratic trends in the countries of democratic capitalism. Indeed, many of the best Western analysts of TV imagery confine themselves to "safe" studies that ignore the imagery that cloaks the highest citadels of power. In trying to avoid controversy, these analysts accept distorted establishment statistics as a touchstone of reality. "Why is it," asks Charles Henry, professor of African-American Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, "that so many American experts on human rights in other countries often close their eyes to the denials of basic rights in their own country?" One answer may be found in Daniel Boorstin's observation that "We are the most illusioned people on earth. Yet we dare not become disillusioned because our illusions are the very house in which we live; they are our news, our heroes, our adventure, our forms of art, our very experience" (Boorstin, 1985:240).

In *Understanding Media* Marshall McLuhan (1965) called television "cool." By that he meant that the "receptor" is drawn into the picture and "thus reaches a high level of involvement." Similarly, even liberals and radicals – along with conservatives and reactionaries – are sometimes sucked into the "cool" corporatist-elitist imagery. The majority of people, in turn, are mobilized as spectators to be titillated and as "human resources" to be shaped, stored, and exploited.

The reelection of Ronald Reagan by popular choice in 1984 is said to be due to "mastery of television." So we are told by many expert commentators who, in crediting or blaming the electronic media, ignore the impact of the substantive images that the Reagan administration had projected through the media. This approach gives the false impression that the technical mastery of television is the secret of image creation. It ignores the creative dramaturgy displayed by teams of competing political consultants, make-up artists, speech writers, policy analysts, researchers, and spokespersons. For a price, these people manufacture images that appeal to the subconscious aspirations, deep emotions, and latent values of target audiences. James Carey, on the other hand, sees a broader problem: "Reagan is not programmed by a conspiratorial class but by the entire culture of the mass media that has contained the real world of experience, politics and people" (Carey, 1987). The images of the Reagan presidency were indeed outstanding in this respect. Political observers are still puzzled by Reagan's personal

popularity (even after the Iran-Contra scandal) among large groups of people who rejected most of his policies. One possible explanation is the enormous appeal of a few deeply held values, simply presented, as contrasted with the confusing complexity of such basic issues as war, racism, sexism, poverty, taxation, underemployment, environmental degradation, homophobia, hunger, and homelessness.

“What are the values projected by the political image-makers?” This question can best be answered by applying to political speeches and campaign spectacles the same powerful tools of analysis pioneered by George Gerbner, Larry Gross, and their colleagues in probing imagery and violence in American TV entertainment. As founders of the “cultural indicators” school, these critics have sought to arrive at the “meaning structure” of dominant forms of television output by way of a systematic quantitative analysis of the overt elements of television representation (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; see also Gerbner, 1986). This requires the careful selection of symbols and theme and the development of imaginative hypotheses that can be tested, improved, or disproved by careful monitoring.

### **Image-makers and their Creations**

*The devices by which oligarchies deceive the people are five in number ... the assembly, the magistracies, the courts of law, the use of arms, and gymnastic exercises.*

– Aristotle, Politics

Today’s political scientists often proclaim the decline of old-style party machines without noticing the rise of the more powerful political machinery guarded by the image-makers. Or they debate party realignment while closing their eyes to the realignment of forces in modern corporatism.

If Aristotle were alive today, I suspect he might brush past the bodyguards of imagery and unveil the new corporatist devices of oligarchic control. The devices he enumerated 2,400 years ago still exist. But only the armed forces come near the top of the pyramid. Aristotle’s legislators, bureaucrats, courts, and sports are subordinated to superior organs. Nor can any military-industrial complex stand by itself. Rather, it is always part of a broader establishment supported – and at times led – by other powerful components:

Military Leaders	Big Business	Top Politicians
Police	Communication	Welfare
	Science	

The business-military-political elements appear in varying combinations.<sup>2</sup> In a Chile under Pinochet or a Pakistan under General Zia the military chieftains become the top politicians; the most powerful business interests are foreign companies. In most “state socialist” nations, despite the strength of the military and government monopolies, the party is usually top dog. In NATO countries the Big Three sleep together in close embrace.

In all countries the police are available as iron fists for domestic control. The media disseminate velvety myths that both hide and guide human behaviour. In

capitalist countries dissent and unrest are diffused by co-optation, mind management (Schiller, 1973), and varying levels of "welfare" benefits, such as income, medical services, education, or housing. In communist countries, even more extensive "welfare" benefits did not succeed in crushing dissent and unrest. In "Third World" democracies and dictatorships alike, the impoverished majorities are weakened by massive unemployment, poverty, hunger, and ill-health, with cinema, radio, and now TV being used to cultivate apathy, providing the masses with an escape from reality. In all countries, science – indigenous or borrowed as well as applied – underlies the growing forces of production, distribution, and destruction.

In such labyrinthine establishments, obviously, there can be no all-powerful or all-knowing Big Brother. If Orwell were to return to the post-1984 world, he would probably write about a *multiplicity* of Big Brothers. He might even note the hundreds of faceless *little* brothers operating above, alongside, inside, and below the machinery of nominal democracy.

In the nominal democracy of Athens, power was in the hands of rich elites (like Pericles and his fellow slave-owners) who treated other power holders with democratic deference. But neither in peace nor in war would these elites allow the great majority of slaves, foreign workers, or women to enter the exclusive circle of open discussion and majority voting. Centuries later a new aristocracy of industrial elites pushed its way into the charmed circle of representative democracy.

More recently, peasants, workers, peasant and working-class leaders, professionals, technicians, ethnic minorities, and women have insisted that what was good for VIPs would be good for them also: *democracy for everyone*. But their main impact, unfortunately, has been to help specialized – and usually docile – elites enter the exclusive circles. Thus representative democracy usually remains (in Michael Parenti's words) *democracy for the few* – government of the many by the few for just a few more (Parenti, 1980).

Moreover, the spirit of technocratic elitism pervades work, education, religion, politics, and science (Singh, 1977). A foreman, division head, dean, bishop, chairperson, or president enjoys ascribed superiority over his or her "inferiors." The superiority of the "superiors" is symbolized by more pay, fringe benefits, services, and respect. As certified specialists in economics, medicine, psychiatry, and law learn more and more about less and less, they win docile homage from "ordinary" people. Election campaigners speak the language of ego inflation: "I shall be a strong leader" or "My administration will do this or that ..." In so-called Marxist countries self-selected politburo big shots – now being put to the real test of direct elections – can hardly sit comfortably on super-elitist Olympian heights.

### Reagan's Imagery

*I submit to you that I had told the truth.... The truth got there, and in other words, it can be attractively packaged.*

– Ronald Reagan, The New York Times, June 17, 1976

The Reagan presidency set a high standard of well-designed and brilliantly executed imagery. A preliminary monitoring of Reagan's major addresses during most of his two terms as U.S. president reveals at least five images of powerful emotional appeal: strength, freedom, individualism, patriotism, and sincerity. Using these images Reagan captured the "high ground" from any critics or opponents who countered in terms only of complex policy details or mundane facts. As far back as 1962, as governor of California, Ronald Reagan stated in his inaugural message: "For many years now, you and I have been shushed like children and told there are no simple answers to the complex problems which are beyond our comprehension. Well, the truth is, there are simple answers."

I have a few preliminary hypotheses regarding the Reagan imagery – hypotheses that, with some adjustment, could be applied to leaders in many other countries. I present them with unrestrained candour with respect to my own images of political reality. In other words, I reject the image of value-free objectivity as projected by positivist social "scientists." Instead, I think we should develop ways to unmask the deceptions often projected by all power structures, whether radical, liberal, or conservative. Such analysis involves transcending the manifest content of issues and probing into latent images that win support for a leader based on imagery rather than substance.

**Strength.** "Standing tall" has been one Ronald Reagan image. His "merry eyes and open smile" were combined with the confident jutting of his jaw, the thoughtful tilting of his head, and his quasi-athletic stance to project a well-acted image of strength. This image masked sustained subservience to corporate lobbies seeking larger war contracts. For seven long years the image flaunted the machismo of the nuclear and non-nuclear (but no longer conventional) arms race. Over two thousand years ago, the Athenian generals at Melos, confident of their military might, told the people there: "We have the right to our empire.... It is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can" (Werner, 1974:400-408).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Ronald Reagan exalted the power of an increasingly expensive and enormously destructive weaponry. But behind the image of nuclear might lies the reality of weakness. The men in the White House or the Kremlin or the other countries stockpiling atomic weapons could not use this might without destroying themselves along with the rest of humanity. Nor could either of the so-called superpowers subdue small, "backward" countries on or near their borders – not Afghanistan and not Nicaragua.

Reagan mimicry has not been limited to conservative leaders in Britain, Canada, West Germany, and Japan. Mitterand in France and Gonzalez in Spain weakly kow-tow before the new gods of "high-tech" militarism. In India and Pakistan, Rajiv Gandhi and the Pakistani militarists built up their images as strong men while meekly submitting to the pressures of transnational corporations, the desires of home-grown militarists, and the worst instincts of Hindu and Moslem extremists.

**Freedom.** The wolf and the sheep, wrote Abraham Lincoln long ago, seldom agree on the nature of freedom.

Today's wolves wear sheep's clothing designed by experts. Economists like Milton Friedman weave "free market" and "free trade" disguises. With their help, business oligarchies have more freedom to rig prices, swallow up small businesses, and devastate entire communities by moving to countries with the most efficient anti-labour dictatorships.

Western communications experts use the rhetoric of the "free flow of information." Behind this disguise, Western media disseminate the cultural values of Superman, Mission Impossible, and the NATO-dominated marketplace. They make the false charge that UNESCO is trying to licence journalists. At UNESCO, Second and Third World experts call for a "balanced flow" to provide more positive images of the East and South. But in "Third World countries dominated by repressive minority regimes" (to use the words of Gabriel Garcia Marquez of Colombia and Juan Somavia, a Chilean refugee), "balance" means censorship – often with the avowed purpose of suppressing unfavourable information (Singh and Gross, 1984; see also UNESCO, 1980). In India, after 2,500 people were officially reported dead due to the leak at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, the local government stopped issuing death certificates. At Union Carbide headquarters in the United States, Burston-Marsteller – one of the world's largest public-relations firms – developed a doctrine of apparent candour to guide the company's public statements (Everest, 1986).

Throughout the world transnational corporations have spent millions to prevent the free flow of information on their use of chemicals that damage workers, consumers, and the environment or on the trickery in their pricing and tax evasion schemes. This helps expand their own freedom to cultivate a high-cost executive addiction to power and privilege. Their efforts are helped by statistical misinformation on the true extent of unemployment and underemployment, particularly in Third World countries. In turn, labour movements have helped out by abandoning serious efforts to organize the unemployed, raise the banner of "the right to earn a living," or mobilize people behind full employment programs (Gross, 1987). This failure is particularly striking in countries such as India, China, Yugoslavia, and Mexico, where underemployment is of massive proportions and appears to be getting worse.

Meanwhile, the great majority of people also have different freedoms. The jobless and the underemployed are free to "take it or leave it." They are free to starve, languish on public assistance (where available), or risk life and limb in the "underground economy." In most countries everyone is free to vote. In some countries people are free to vote for only one candidate and in other countries they are free to choose among opposing candidates with converging policies. In the United States, they are also free not to vote – and in 1984 47 per cent of potential voters used this freedom. Thus, in 1984, with 59 per cent of the votes actually cast, Reagan was supported by less than 32 per cent of the voting-age population. Some 68 per cent of the voting-age population voted for either Democratic candidate Walter Mondale or nobody – with many having little idea of the difference

between the two. In 1988, Michael Dukakis's imagery concentrated on technical issues rather than values, while George Bush, with the brilliant help of Lee Atwater and other media manipulators, pinned on Dukakis the image of an unpatriotic bureaucrat who was weak on crime, defence, and even saluting the flag.

**Individualism.** "Look out for Number One." This individual-as-hero image is a favourite of free-market ideologues. It helps mask the political and economic networks that nurture the accumulation of wealth and power in Silicon Valleys and military-industrial complexes. It also promotes the social fragmentation that diminishes the power of all others. Already divided by galloping specialization, people in both the middle and lower classes are further divided into single-issue interest groups and then privatized down to narcissistic "me First" atoms.

In an overcomputerized world, everyone (like adults in many countries today) will have a unique identification number. But in terms of political power, a few billion people could end up with numbers even lower than the rights of three-fifths of a person granted to slaves in the U.S. constitution of 1789. Many might even be close to ZERO.

People are already learning how to survive as near-zeros. TV, films, and music – along with high dosages of alcohol, drugs, and pornography – suck people up into delusions of individual power: superconsumerism, supercharm, supercleverness, and – hurrah – supersex. Some people feel they are only half-zeros, trying to work their way up to full-zero status.

Outside this dream world, some people compensate for a sense of inadequacy by adopting nightmarish stereotypes that demonize WASPS, "uppity blacks," "pushy females," "money-grubbing Jews," "drunken Irish," "stupid Poles," or Third World "rabble." These racist, sexist, and chauvinist horrors are outdone by the atomization of entire populations through state terrorism in Central America, "religious" wars like the one between Iraq and Iran, and the "state socialist" wars that devastated Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Ethiopia.

**Patriotism.** "Patriotism," wrote Samuel Johnson, "is the last refuge of a scoundrel." Ambrose Bierce retorted: "I beg to submit it is the first" (cited in Gross, 1988).

I submit that they were both wrong. Like some of the people I know, Johnson and Bierce were reluctant to express their own love of country. They each made the mistake of equating militarism, chauvinism, or xenophobia with love of country. They failed to detect the difference between genuine patriotism and the "pretended patriotism" that George Washington warned against in his farewell address.

In both West and East, North and South, flag-waving is a favourite way to project vested interests as national interests and protect them from criticism. To the extent that this strategy is successful, bogus patriots can then mobilize support for imperial adventures that distract attention from domestic failures. They can condemn as disloyal any genuine patriots whose loyalty to country surpasses their tolerance of self-serving leaders.

George Orwell pointed much of this out decades ago:

One cannot see the modern world as it is unless one recognises the overwhelming strength of patriotism, national loyalty.... As a *positive* force there is nothing to set beside it. Christianity and international Socialism are as weak as straw in comparison with it. Hitler and Mussolini rose to power in their own countries very largely because they could grasp this fact and their opponents could not. (Orwell, 1941:75)

For the Soviet militarists, patriotic flag-waving justified for decades their special privileges at the cost of inflicting death and destruction on the people of Afghanistan and more sluggishness on the Soviet economy. For the leaders of Communist China, brutal suppression of non-violent student demonstrations for reform and democracy was justified on the ground that the demonstrations were undermining national interests. For the United States, flag-waving helps justify the excessive military spending that bolstered the U.S. economy while wrecking the economies of Southeast Asia and Central America – and slaughtering tens of thousands of people there.

**Sincerity.** Reagan's sincerity flowed from a well-acted illusion of deep thought and conviction. He appeared to believe the illusions he himself helped create. This ability is not surprising considering that he was an actor before being a politician. Actors succeed or fail, one would think, based not on the truth of what they say but rather on the effect of the lines scripted for them by others. Any viewer of network news will recognize "Reagan's choreography of candour" (Wills, 1987). Reagan explained it in his autobiography, *Where's The Rest of Me?*: "So much of our profession is taken up with pretending that an actor must spend at least half of his waking hours in a fantasy" (Reagan and Hubler, 1965). Has Reagan helped U.S. politics to cross some invisible line between reality and imagery? John Buckley, a Republican political consultant, maintains: "There is no longer a value judgment on the need to tailor a message to television. It's now a matter of survival, not a matter of ethics or intellectual honesty" (*The New York Times*, October 2, 1988).

This need might also justify Reagan's remarkable capacity to mould all information to fit his ideological conviction. Stories that demean welfare recipients were accepted as true while information detrimental to the Pentagon was held suspect. He would rather change facts than his mind (Green and MacColl, 1983). Was Reagan, then, insincere or negligent with the truth? Did he really believe that he had never favoured voluntary social security, or that he had never expressed indifference to nuclear proliferation, or that he had appointed more women to government posts than his predecessor, or that he had vastly reduced the welfare rolls in California? In a triumph of belief over reality, Reagan seemed to have persuaded himself that he was forever stating nothing but the truth. "It is a psychodrama starring President Reagan and bringing his listeners into communion with his experience of interpreting the original texts" (Erickson, 1985).

### Comparing Reagan With Gandhi

Mohandas Gandhi, who came to be known as the Mahatma (great soul), provides an intriguing, if somewhat startling, comparison to Reagan's imagery and style of leadership. There are, of course, fundamental sociocultural and political differences, not only between India and the United States but also between the two men themselves. Reagan was tall and handsome, with a strong, square jaw, broad forehead, clear almond-shaped eyes, and dark eyebrows. Gandhi, on the other hand, was tiny, barely five feet tall, with "his ears flared out from his oversized head like the handles of a sugar bowl." Obviously, nature had not meant him to belong to the distinguished galaxy of "politically attractive" leaders. And yet Gandhi, in a century of ranting demagogues and shrieking dictators, captivated not only the foreign press but also people around the world through sheer moral force – and without raising his voice.

My review of Gandhi's imagery may appear to some critics as more "friendly" than critical. I recognize the fact that leaders, like most of us, have both good and bad characteristics. Therefore, conclusions based on a "critical" review of Gandhi's imagery could be quite different, as they would be coming from a "friendly" review of Reagan's imagery. More importantly, Gandhi's relationship with his people was influenced by the fact that he was leading a national liberation movement against a powerful foreign enemy, whereas Reagan, as leader of a "superpower," was more preoccupied with remaining *in* power. However, in today's precarious post-Cold War world, Gandhi's legacy of non-violent activism is of special interest and of some relevance for people around the world. It was Gandhi, the little old man whom Winston Churchill had called "the naked fakir," who shook the power of the imperialists in India by leading a non-violent movement against their military might. How was this "communication miracle" achieved by Gandhi and his associates when they had almost no access to the media of communication: the press, the radio, the schools, and the major bureaucratic organizations? Their genius lay in the fact that they set out to develop a more effective means of communication through interpersonal, mass, and political organizations that enabled them to transcend the divisions imposed by religion, caste, language, gender, and social role. To the extent that this bottom-sideways outreach was successful in reaching hundreds of millions of illiterate peasants, workers, and tradesmen across the country, Gandhi's messages up the ladder of the British monarchy were no longer humble petitions from submissive subjects: they had people's power behind them.

Comparing Reagan with Gandhi might help reveal some fundamental symbolic behaviour of politicians whose substantive meaning may be strikingly different. At the risk of simplifying a complex process, the question that needs to be addressed is: How do we identify the genuine democratic characteristics of a leader from that of an elitist one? What styles of leadership encourage the dependency of followers on the leader and what kind of behaviour and action on the part of a leader encourages the self-reliance and self-confidence of followers in doing things in co-operation with other people?

In Europe and North America the popular image of Gandhi is that he was a charismatic leader. This is correct only for Gandhi's image after he was killed in 1948. From that time, he was deified. But during his long struggle for liberation – particularly during the 1930s and the 1940s – the strength of Gandhi's leadership derived from the fact that his image was that of an ordinary person, a common man with a common touch. And this image was based on reality, not on ingenious concoction. He developed a style of democratic leadership that was not quite in keeping with the elitist traditions of the Indian Congress Party. While the Indian intellectuals discussed and wrote papers and articles about how to approach problems and organize the masses, Gandhi and his associates were out among the people, sharing their daily hardships and poverty and speaking a language that the people understood. Thus Gandhi was able to transform an elite struggle into an open popular movement.

There is no doubt that both Reagan and Gandhi captured the "high ground" from their adversaries through strong symbolic appeal. They enunciated positions that were strongly held and simply formulated. Both performed well on the world stage and were hailed as "Great Communicators" by supporters and opponents alike. While Reagan was a successful deliverer of homilies off a Teleprompter, Gandhi used the foreign press (and to some extent the anti-Gandhi national press) to make the world his confessor in matters large and small, from his inmost spiritual longings to the life of the bed and the latrine. While Reagan had at his disposal the most sophisticated communication technologies and professional advice, Gandhi relied on the extremely primitive but intimate human system of mass communication. As Gandhi declared in his newspaper, *Harijan*, which was often shut down by the British, "Let everyone become his walking newspaper and carry the good news from mouth to mouth.... This no government can suppress. It is the cheapest newspaper yet devised, and it defies the wit of government, however clever it may be" (October 24, 1940).

Gandhi exercised his authority from an *ashram* that had no radio, electricity, or running water, and the nearest telephone was thirty miles or so away by foot.<sup>4</sup> Yet his message reached the remote corners of an enormous continent. He used his life as a great drama and kept the world's attention on his historic marches and fasts against the injustices inflicted on the "poorest of the poor" by the Indian elite and the British regime.<sup>5</sup> One can only speculate how he would have used television and the new technologies of communication. It is safe to assume that he would not have fallen a prey to the merely "photo opportunity" gimmickry of the media at the expense of addressing the serious human and political problems of our times.

Furthermore, Gandhi, unlike Reagan, believed that ends and means were inseparable, which precluded the possibility of using violence. His principle of *satyagraha* (truth-force) helped build a political movement based on "soul-force" rather than "physical force," a movement concerned with reaching the heart and the conscience of an opponent through the activist's own personal suffering and

self-sacrifice. Gandhi's struggle, in other words, was firmly based on the principle of conversion, not domination.<sup>6</sup>

The clue to the sharply different qualities of Gandhi's leadership is suggested by his own often repeated remark that "He was all the time fighting on three fronts – against himself, against Indians, and against the British" (Joshi, 1980; Singh, 1979). The key to the achievement of national freedom, Gandhi pointed out, lay in remoulding national character and in developing the capacity for self-governance. And the remoulding of national character required much more than struggle against the enemy outside (that is, the colonial system of exploitation); it required continuous struggle against the enemy inside (against the ignorance, selfishness, cowardice, and moral degradation of people and leaders alike).

How are we to differentiate Gandhi's sincerity from that of Reagan's? A "critical" analysis of latent images might reveal that Gandhi was indeed a shrewd politician who was able to win over the illiterate peasants by appealing to the spiritual heritage of the Indian culture. As one of my students very wisely inquired, "Wasn't Gandhi tricking people when he changed his clothing from western dress to that of a loin cloth?"<sup>7</sup> It would indeed be easy to perceive of this transformation as a confidence trick, if it were not for the fact that Gandhi did more than merely change his clothes: He risked his own life in non-violent combat against the military might of the British (Singh, 1984; for more detail, Singh, 1978). It was this personal example of courage that aroused the moral conscience of most followers and even of many adversaries. Indeed, it was this example that inspired a spirit of trust and fearless initiative among the so-called powerless people of India, which in turn brought about the overthrow of a ruthless imperial power through non-violent action.

### **Replacing Elitist Imagery**

This leads me to examine those truly democratic currents in American life today that Mohandas Gandhi would certainly applaud, if he were alive. Although still weak and fragmented, nevertheless these currents have the potential of replacing present-day elitism, corporatism, and false imagery.

There are many people today in the United States who are trying to organize effective movements on behalf of extremely important, even structural, reforms in the social order. The most effective thus far have been people struggling for women's liberation, labour, civil rights, the rights of the disabled, environmental protection, and the cessation of U.S. intervention in certain other countries. Many people have been actively trying to build stronger movements in the fields of peace, gay and lesbian rights, reproductive rights, the "right to life," crime prevention, victims' rights, and drug addiction. A new spirit of initiative and self-help seems to be arising to counterbalance the power of foremen, know-it-all professionals, politicians, bureaucrats and plutocrats, hierarchs and husbands. They are trying to cure themselves as well as others of deep-rooted social diseases: sexism, racism, ageism, anti-semitism, and homophobia. Without falling into the *laissez-faire* trap of "everybody do your own thing," they are inventing new styles of

democratic and accountable leadership. They are trying to organize the unorganized in ways that might counter inevitable tendencies towards oligarchy. "We too," they say, "are smart enough to take charge of our own lives."

There are also important examples of resistance to corporatism: for instance, the displacement of dictatorial or authoritarian right-wing regimes in Argentina, Haiti, the Philippines, and Uruguay, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. More recent examples are the dramatic pro-democracy movements in China, Poland, Hungary, and South Korea, and in East European countries where people have displaced well-armed dictatorships. In some countries of constitutional capitalism a new idea is arising: a *democratic* corporatism to replace behind-the-scenes planning by the exclusive corporatists. In this idea, labour would win senior, not junior, status – something possible only if labour can become stronger, more transnational, and more democratic. The bottom-sideways-and-up machinery of formal representation can yield more genuine representation when people and groups reach out to each other across many boundaries that divide them.

At a time of moral disarray, new attention is being given to basic moral values as a guide to policy on specific issues. The high ideals of justice and community have long been professed – but often forgotten – by Christians, Jews, Hindus, Moslems, and Buddhists. In Latin America, liberation theologians have revived them in reaction against oppression and poverty. In more positive terms, the American Catholic bishops have tried to apply them to the United States. They hope to spark a popular movement against (in the Bishops' words) "the sins of indifference and greed."<sup>8</sup>

Finally, there are many – uncelebrated by the media and virtually unknown to everyone except those among whom they live – who are making more democratic use of media as well as reviving non-media (people to people) communication. In India, after the British were thrown out and Gandhi assassinated, there were still thousands of Gandhi's followers who wanted to continue in Gandhi's tradition. But they were overwhelmed by a new surge coming from the new elites of modern India to convert Gandhi into a unique charismatic leader (Willner, 1984).<sup>9</sup> Today, however, some progress has been made in developing both the philosophy and practice of non-commercial communication through decentralized use of small-scale, low-cost, and intermediate technologies.

Basically, the central potentiality for the emergence of more democratic leadership lies in the scepticism of those who reject the notion of charismatic solutions to democratic problems (Singh, 1981). After the experience of Vietnam, Cambodia, Watergate, and the Iran-Contra affair, people have become wary of inflated claims of elitist superiority on the part of today's leaders. Fortunately, this negative opposition is shaping into something more positive. The moral vision that Gandhi envisioned can move the hearts and souls of people and would surely include:

- the *strength* that utterly rejects the tradition that Might (in the form of violence) Makes Right and is based rather on non-violent resistance to militarism and aggression;

- the *freedom* that consists of a fabric of rights and rules that, as Gandhi put it, “guarantee to our opponents the same freedom we claim for ourselves”;
- the genuine *individualism* that can thrive healthily among persons who see themselves as part of a human community rather than lonely specks of dust;
- the true *patriotism* that recognizes interdependent interests in a deeply divided world and, in Gandhi’s words, “admits of no enmity or ill-will” towards people of other nations and is based upon open debate concerning national interests rather than blind acceptance of the narrow interests of self-serving leaders;
- *sincerity* reflecting deep conviction and selfless action towards the building of a solid democratic society.

Could action based on these values not only save people from the destructive policies but in fact save the elites and corporatist leaders themselves?

“Improbable!” is the first response. The hopeful currents seem hopelessly divided. They are fragmented by single-issue myopia, by localism, by nationalism – and, alas, by sexism, racism, and religious prejudice. This is a tragedy of our era.

Can intellectuals help reverse this trend?

In part, without doubt. Many communication researchers have already shown remarkable strength – both intellectual and moral – in exposing the myriad misuses of the media. Where would we be today without the contributions – to mention but a few – of Ben Bagdikian, Eric Barnouw, Luis Ramiro Beltran, Noam Chomsky, K.E. Eapen, George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Cees Hamelink, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Colleen Roach, Juan Somavia, Herbert Schiller, and Janet Wasko?

But there are also obvious difficulties. The best work of these and hundreds of less well-known researchers has been “against the stream,” underfunded, and – as one might expect – either ignored or distorted by the mass media. Moreover, it is not easy for any researcher to escape the dead hand of value-free positivism and face up openly to the value premises that guide all research. It is not easy to invigorate creative thought and observation by openly participating in the great debates and struggles of our era. I would like to think that most mass communication researchers will surmount these difficulties, and get engaged in serious image analysis, as suggested by Kenneth Boulding (1956).<sup>10</sup> These days we hear a great deal about the power of image, but very few have yet admitted that this power expresses an important change in our way of thinking.<sup>11</sup> What are the epistemological and philosophical implications of this change?

Apart from the natural beauty of our planet, good things have always been improbable. For millennia human life on earth was itself improbable. So, for centuries, was freedom from slavery and serfdom. So was the beginning of women’s emancipation and of civil rights for African Americans. In 1972 we saw the “impossible” come to pass, as the fiercest anti-communist in the United States suddenly went to China and then signed the first détente agreements with Leonid Brezhnev. More recently a Soviet leader who had worked loyally under Brezhnev slowly emerged as the spokesman for a new generation of Soviet intellectuals and workers who were fed up with the Brezhnev version of Stalinism. And in slow re-

sponse to Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*, Ronald Reagan started to put some new content into his old-time symbolism. After astounding his militarist constituents by advocating the elimination of all nuclear weapons, he backed an INF treaty that won more support from Democrats than from Republicans. Above all, he helped usher in a new era in which the "cold war" confrontation with the Soviet Union began to wind down. Under these new circumstances, many hawks and doves – and even the academic owls who study and teach communications in departments of literature, drama, politics, anthropology, sociology – are struggling to reconceptualize, in the timeless phrase of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. – their "inarticulate major premises."

## Notes

1. As an aristocratic critic of Athenian democracy, Thucydides helped establish the tradition of exaggerating. He suggested that the power was really in the hands of "the first citizen," namely Pericles. While this argument ignored the elite companions of Pericles, it also had the great historic merit (thus far ignored by most commentators on the classics) of making the first recorded distinction between "nominal" and "real" or "true" democracy.
2. The chart is an oversimplified summation of the more complex presentation in Gross (1982).
3. In *The Republic* Plato has Callicles "declaring openly what the rest of the world think, but do not like to say": namely, that the strong rule the weak. In addition to arguing this point stubbornly, Callicles quotes the poet Pindar to the effect that *law itself* "makes might to be right."
4. The *ashram* was a communal settlement under Gandhi's direction and devoted to the purification of its members. Through spinning, vegetarianism, and asceticism, the members of the settlement were to become servants of truth.
5. For example, on April 6, 1930, when Gandhi picked up a few grains of salt from the Dandi beach and thereby broke the law, the eyes of the nation followed his every move. His simple symbolic gesture told India what it must do, while the foreign press held its breath to see what the British would do.
6. In the United States, Martin Luther King, Jr. embraced *satyagraha* as the only moral and practical way for oppressed people to struggle against social injustice. See Oates (1982).
7. This question came up in my January 1987 interdisciplinary course on "Two Faces of Charisma" at Saint Mary's College of California. It was further analyzed by the Communication seniors in the following spring semester course, "Image and Charisma."
8. In their pastoral letter on the U.S. economy the Bishops called for "a new American experiment" in overall planning based on the ethics of social justice and community solidarity. They united morality with economic policy through the principle that "All persons have rights in the economic sphere." They advocated a package of full employment policies to guarantee the right to earn a living at good wages. Beyond this, they affirmed most of the rights formally accepted (but largely deserted) by the many signatories to the UN Covenant on Economic and Social Rights.
9. In my courses on charisma, while I used the classic writings of Max Weber and many other authors (including the writers on the religious aspects of the subject), the students found that Willner (1984) not only provided the best overview of the subject but was also the only text that went far beyond Weber.

10. The concept of image in Boulding (1956) relates basically to anything that is *perceived*, as distinguished from Boorstin's concept, which relates only to those images defined by him as "pseudo-events."
11. Brian McNair (1988) looks at recent developments associated with the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and their effects on Western media coverage of Soviet affairs.

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