Swallowing Camels:
How the Media Misinterpret Nonviolent Struggles

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Civil Resistance/Nonviolent Conflict: Core Dynamic

- Strategic Nonviolent Conflict (Civil Resistance) is a method by which ordinary people mobilize and fight for their rights using disruptive actions without using violence. *Disobedience is at the heart of nonviolent resistance.*

- SNVC can take many forms, including protest, persuasion, non-cooperation and nonviolent intervention.

- SNVC is an active phenomenon that empowers people by uniting them in a vision and giving them a shared stake in the outcome of their struggle.

Common Misconceptions

- Nonviolent action is inaction, the avoidance of conflict (passivity) or passive resistance.

- The effectiveness of nonviolent action is a function of the ideology or repressiveness of the oppressors.

- Nonviolent action is a last resort, used only when the means of violence are unavailable.

- The occurrence of nonviolent action is determined by culture, economic system, geography, or other structural conditions.

- Participation in nonviolent action requires the holding of certain ideological, religious, or metaphysical beliefs.

- Nonviolent campaigns need a charismatic leader to succeed.

Framing and Frame Analysis

- A media or cognitive "frame" creates the conceptual structure around our perceptions of reality. It determines what parts of a (news) story we find most significant, and it helps us draw subconscious conclusions about the meaning behind the events and actors in the story.

- To engage in framing is to select aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text (news story), in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or policy prescription.

What do you see?

- Organized or spontaneous actions by people?
- Victims or empowered action-takers?
- Externally-driven or indigenous events?
- Chaos or strategy?
- Hope or demoralization?
- Violence or nonviolence?
- Success or failure?

Fragmentation

- Story is covered in isolated, seemingly unrelated pieces.

- At worst, a story is completely removed from its larger historical or political context.

- "Trees" rather than forest are emphasized.

Dramatization

- News is encapsulated in short, sensationalistic bits

- Intended to provoke an emotional response

- Absence of serious analysis of the policy issues, institutional interplay or larger social setting.

- Thrives on confusion and skepticism (e.g. "fear mongering.")

- Unconscious emphasis on the visual drama in a story

Euphemism

- Language selected specifically to shift emphasis, distort meaning or downplay significance of key phenomena.

- Occasionally, meaning is turned upside down, e.g. regime "restoring normalcy."

Authority-Disorder Bias

- Where information is sparse or of questionable veracity and official (government) forces are being challenged by civil society forces, media tend to default to the perspective of the officials, regardless of regime type or ideology.

- Government provides perceived solution to crisis.

Other Culprits in Distortions

- Lack of assiduous on-the-ground reporting
- Lack of understanding of subject matter/expertise
- Lack of grasp of larger context
- Intellectual/journalistic laziness

Common Meta-Frames on Nonviolent Struggles

(and how they reinforce misconceptions)

- Repression more interesting than resistance
- Power is top-down
- Power is monolithic
- Conflict is undesirable
- Successful campaigns are accidents
- Violence is most effective means of waging conflict

Conscious Citizenship

- Hold media accountable and minimize access to MSM
- Always ask if frame's assumptions are valid
- Use accurate language consistently
- Address not just surface framing, but deep framing
- Role for "media from below"/authentic journalism
  - Twitter: Iran's "Twitter Revolution"
  - Video Journalism: Burma VJ
  - Blogging: Honduran Coup

Media coverage in the ideal…

Further Resources

- George Lakoff, *The Political Mind*
- W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*
- Rampton and Stauber, *Weapons of Mass Deception*
- Cognitive Policy Works: http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com
- Center for Media and Democracy: http://www.prwatch.org
- Cynthia Boaz, "Framing the Green Revolution in Red: Iran Through a Lethal Media Scope." *Truthout.org*