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Nonviolence and Media Studies

This article proposes a meeting of media studies and the philosophy of nonviolence in order to better critique the tendency in popular media discourses about war and international conflict to naturalize violence as an eternal and essential human trait. Nonviolence exposes certain foundational myths about violence in the media; namely, the myths that violence is cultural (as implied in the "clash of civilizations" thesis), historical, or natural. However, this is possible only if nonviolence is retrieved from its present marginalization as a mere technique for political activism or personal behavior and understood more accurately as a coherent, universal, practical worldview that can inform a critical engagement with media discourses of violence. Using Gandhi's writings on nonviolence, this essay aims to initiate such an understanding, particularly in connection with existing critical approaches to media violence, such as cultivation research and cultural studies, and concludes by proposing a set of concrete questions for media research based on nonviolence.

> Nonviolence is an essential and universal obligation without which we would cease to be human.
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> —Iyer, 1973, p. 184

The history of communication theory has been closely linked to that of war (Hardt, 1992; Mattelart, 1994). The events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars present a timely challenge for scholars to take on one fundamental question that seems to underlie numerous media discourses about terrorism and war: Do the media naturalize violence? In other words, does the way in which media present news and entertainment about terrorism and war imply that the cause of conflict is some eternal, unchanging, and essential human tendency to engage in violence, particularly if the conflict in question involves members of different "civilizations" (Huntington, 1993)? If this is the case, as I outline in this article, then how adequate are theories of media and violence in

engaging with this phenomenon forcefully and knowledgeably? Although some of the leading approaches to the study of media and violence, such as cultivation research and cultural studies, have generated a useful critique of media violence, they have done so within a broader critique of social relations and power. However, what the present moment demands from scholars is the deployment of an intellectual framework that can critique the naturalization of violence as a "relatively autonomous" phenomenon in itself. The aim of this article is to show how the philosophy of nonviolence could serve as an intellectual foundation to advance communication and media theories in such a direction.

The Gandhian concept of nonviolence, or *Ahimsa* (Sanskrit *a*—non—and *himsa*—cruelty or injury), is not merely a political instrument or quasi-religious fad, but a profound and coherent worldview that can complement the critical edge of communication theories. In this article, I discuss the main features of the philosophy of nonviolence as they pertain to media studies in a time of pervasive media naturalization of violence and war and spell out some basic questions that would emerge at the intersections of nonviolence and media studies. My aim is not so much to advocate the injection of nonviolence as if it were a simplistic, narrow, rigid, and "ethnic" belief system into media studies, but to explore how a more accurate understanding of nonviolence as a vibrant, reflexive, universal philosophy can enable media scholars to address better what are becoming increasingly pervasive and powerful issues.[1]

As the content, scope, and goals of media seem to converge on the singular invocation of violence and suffering as somehow justified, inevitable, and often even entertaining, it remains to be seen how adequate media theories of violence are in engaging this bizarre and cruel phenomenon, for what is at the heart of these struggles is the question of what it means to be human itself, and whether humanity in general, and intellectual practices in particular, can create a modicum of agency to recognize and reshape the conditions and ideologies of violence in this world. I begin with a brief review of theories of media and violence and then spell out how, in the light of certain fundamental media myths about violence, the philosophy of nonviolence would strengthen our critique by treating violence not merely as an instrument of some explanatory master concept (such as capitalism or patriarchy) but as a systemic, "relatively autonomous" condition in itself, with its own ideologies, myths, and mass deceptions. My goal therefore is to interpret nonviolence, following Gandhi, as a natural, eternal, and universal condition so that media scholars may address the core question of whether violence is indeed "natural," or, at the very least, have more tools to critique the role of media in perpetuating conditions of unconscionable cruelty in the world today.

Media and Violence

My objective in this review is not so much to expound the scientific merits or fallacies of competing schools of thought, but to propose an outline of how some lines of the current research on media violence may be usefully articulated with nonviolence to allow us to engage more forcefully with our objects of study. In particular, I focus on the useful contributions of cultivation research and cultural studies approaches in this regard, and I argue that together with the philosophy of nonviolence, there is a growing need for media scholars to take on the "big picture," the putative "naturalness" of violence itself. Importantly, cultivation research and the cultural indicators project in general have drawn our attention to the ecological nature of the problem of media violence, treating it as part of a long-term, systemic problem rather than as a knee-jerk, sensationalistic phenomenon.

Acknowledging the pervasiveness of media violence, Shanahan and Morgan (1999) observed that the words "television" and "violence" are as deeply etched into the popular consciousness as "Mom and apple pie" or "Lennon and McCartney" (p. 43). However, outside of certain scholarly circles, the unusual levels of attention devoted in the public sphere to this particular media problem seem to follow a rather tedious pattern. As Barker and Petley (2001) put it in their critique of the pseudo-scientific nature of the media violence outcries, such responses tend to range from the "daft to the mischievous" (p. 1). It is often only in the immediate context of the public outrage over particular acts of violence that this sort of concern seems to manifest itself: "school shootings," as these are termed in the popular press, when the shooters in question belong to a certain privileged disposition; "gang murders," when the shooters in question do not belong to aforesaid privileged disposition; and a miscellany of mindless pranks, beatings, accidents with domestic incendiary appliances, and wrestling moves gone bad. These are, of course, the times when media scholars, ranging in their disciplinary orientations from the humanities and social sciences to health and life sciences, get called upon to address the abiding question: Does media violence "cause" real-life violence?

Although the widely disseminated answers to this question seem to change as quickly as friends and enemies in the novel *1984*, the scholarly engagement with media and violence has echoed the contours of broader philosophical and methodological problems such as determination and causality in media and social research in general. It is now also quite well known that the question of media effects, as well as the history of research on media effects, is not necessarily value-free, apolitical, and universal, as previously thought, but enmeshed in larger political and economic interests (Cruz & Lewis, 1994). The clout of the media

business ensures that the barrage of sometimes contradictory evidence, arguments, and conclusions offered essentially does not change anything in any fundamental way. At best, we are left with a modest broadening of our intellectual capacities in engaging with this issue, and perhaps an even more extensive use of the alphabet in devising a "ratings system" for parents.

Whereas the chicken-and-egg debates on media violence are perhaps the most well-known, if not the most intellectually rewarding example of this issue, there have been other ways in which violence has been treated (Von Feilitzen, 1998). If the effects school has been concerned with short-term behavioral effects, in the cultivation approach media violence and its effects are conceptualized not so much in terms of individual acts of aggression, but instead in the long-term impact that a pervasive media environment, with its systemic commercialism, has on the perceptions of audiences and on subsequent political implications of this impact. From the cultivation perspective, it is clear that the media do not necessarily make people act violently—which has been the basis of much public discussion—but that television does seem to impact the audience's perceptions of violence in the real world, leading heavy TV viewers to believe that there is much more crime in the real world than there really is.

The implications of the "mean world syndrome" for audiences and for cultural politics in general are very important from a critical cultural studies perspective. Although numerous audience surveys from a cultivation approach have shown a strong relationship between TV viewing and fear of crime[2] and the subsequent rise in public support for stronger law-and-order measures, the post-9/11 scenario calls for a deeper understanding of how TV audiences are being cultivated along lines of international fear and hatred. The international and geopolitical implications of cultivation have already been explored in the wake of the first Gulf War by Justin Lewis (2001), whose survey results show that the American public's knowledge (and not merely "opinions") about politics, foreign affairs, and war is remarkably similar to the myths and disinformation that are circulated in a tightly controlled media monopoly. This in turn leads to unwitting consent for unpopular politics by two-party system elites, particularly in the realm of foreign policy and war. It is clear from these studies that the American public tends to vastly overestimate the nature and degree of "threats" to public safety and national security by foreign nations and groups, and this may be in no small part because of the mythical and frequently misleading nature of mainstream TV news reporting about conflicts and war.

The rapid events of the past few years in terms of war and terrorism, as well as the increasingly pervasive role of mainstream media in cover-

ing these, and perhaps perpetuating, even if indirectly, conditions of violence, have made the emerging symbiosis between cultivation and cultural studies approaches all the more necessary. Cultivation research has provided a scientific, empirical, quantitative basis to the insights of cultural studies, whereas the latter has enriched the discourses of American mass communications research with the language of critique and politics (Lewis, 1997). In the context of the media violence debate, cultural studies scholars have shown how the very term *violence* in the media is not a given (Barker & Petley, 2001), and how media audiences enact varying meanings and values in relation to media depictions of violence (Hill, 2001). However, the question does remain as to how much these traditions, on their own steam, can equip us to face head-on the central question of violence itself. Although it may be true, as Barker and Petley (2001) say, that media violence is no different from other media elements such as music or photography,[3] few scholars would dispute the need to theorize, even if modestly, the relationship between this and the real world of violence.

In other words, if indeed cultivation and cultural studies can do justice to the question of this relationship, what intellectual resources are necessary to confront the question of violence directly? How can media violence be theorized not merely as a representation of existing real-world violence (or as nothing more than a behavioral stimulus), but instead as a complex articulation of discourses that naturalize ideologies of violence within a broader set of material social relations that are themselves embodied violence?

It is useful for media scholars to appreciate and overcome those certain disciplinary problems in the sociological study of violence in general that Jennifer Turpin and Lester Kurtz (1997) have pointed out. Rather than replicate turf-mandated fragmentations of violence into various levels and labels, they proposed instead an interdisciplinary engagement with what they call the "web of violence," a systemic entity that encompasses the causes and manifestations of violence at the personal, biological, social, local, and global levels. It is precisely the need for such a core conceptualization of violence that is confronting media scholars at the present time, especially when one considers that the broader intellectual legacies with which media scholars engage with this problem are themselves caught up ideologically and otherwise with the problem of violence. This implication becomes clear when we turn, momentarily, to the idea of nonviolence. The limitations of media studies, even in its most progressive, promising, and critical manifestations, are simply that there is as yet an unfulfilled theoretical inadequacy in addressing the issue of violence—and, of course, this is a problem not with media studies alone, but with the broader intellectual traditions within which me-

dia scholars operate, and specifically, the constraints of scientism in the modern Western episteme that devalue emotions and ethics in the definition of knowledge, as I show later in the article.

The main problem, though by no means an abominable one, with critical approaches to media violence, has to do with the enduring tendency to reproduce an instrumental notion of violence itself. In other words, even when scholars of media violence have shown a profound commitment to denouncing violence through intellectual practice and activism at various levels, ranging from domestic issues to antiwar movements, in our present theoretical schema, violence remains an instrument, rather than a motor, of history. For example, as Shanahan and Morgan (1999) observed in their review, a chief concern for George Gerbner and the Cultural Indicators Project researchers was not just violence in the media, but "*commercialized* violence" (p. 44; original emphasis). Their critique, to some extent, is hence that there is a disjuncture between the claims to naturalness embedded in TV violence, which are then accepted tacitly by heavy TV viewers, and the fact that the violence on profit-driven TV is far from "natural." Shanahan and Morgan further noted that cultivation researchers do not necessarily treat media violence as a "conspiracy" by media producers, although media content does have a systemic elite bias as well as the imperatives of a commercial agenda. These observations certainly do not mitigate their critique of violence, real and media versions, but offer at best a theory about violence in media under capitalism, rather than a theory of media violence in itself—which is perhaps what is increasingly needed as the "web of violence" is naturalized and articulated with newer forms and ideologies as media saturation coverage of wars and conflicts grows.

Marxian theories of the media and their cultural studies cousins, including postcolonialism and feminism, of course, may not always take violence as their objects of study in and of themselves, but the question remains how violence can be dealt with as something more than a mere effect of some master concept, such as capitalism, colonialism, or patriarchy.[4] Of course, a committed critique of violence as a secondary phenomenon, whether in forms of class, race, nationality, or gender, is far more useful, humane, and closer to a nonviolent understanding than a putative theory of violence in itself that offers some eternal, universal, natural justification for violence (often invoking ancient Greek and Roman wars, or a peculiar sort of Darwinism) under the guise of some transcendental, apolitical science. This is especially true because media discourses seem to have articulated ideologies about violence with such complexity and vehemence that merely attributing these to capitalism or imperialism does not do justice to the severity of their consequences. In the following sections, I discuss some of these ideologies and popular

mythologies[5] and show how these may be confronted by critical media scholars through a reading of the philosophy of nonviolence that shows how violence and its representation in certain media mythologies may be understood as something not quite reducible to other master concepts.

Media Mythologies of Violence

The critical thrust that nonviolence can lend to media studies is warranted at the outset by the specific articulation of the ideologies of violence in the present mediascape. In this section, I identify three broad assumptions about violence in popular media discourses that seem to elide independent critique from the usual sources.[6] These assumptions have become particularly pervasive in recent years, and in the aftermath of 9/11 in particular, although some of their intellectual origins and trajectories are far more complex. I outline below three popular myths about violence that have been naturalized in media discourses at an almost foundational level, and naturalized to such an extent that a simple cultivation or cultural studies analysis may not suffice. Simply put, these are the notions that violence is "cultural"; violence is "historical"; and violence is "natural."

Violence Is Cultural

The idea that violence is cultural is perhaps the one media myth that is most easily identified in the context of the present discourses on terrorism and war. At its most sophisticated level, this idea has expressed itself in Samuel Huntington's (1993) battle-cry manifesto, the "clash of civilizations." Huntington's quasi-relativistic argument essentially is that cultural, or rather, "civilizational," differences are the root cause of conflict in the post-Cold War world:

> Differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition, and most important, religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. (p. 25)

In the wake of 9/11 the widespread currency that the notion of a clash of civilizations has gained shows that the idea that cultures (or religions, or ethnicities) are somehow responsible for violence is a pervasive one in the mediascape. In addition to this popular rendering of cultural differences as the cause of violence, there is another aspect to this myth, a selective distinction made between good and bad uses of violence. A recent study (Fishman & Marvin, 2003), for example, has found that

even in the case of a respected newspaper like *The New York Times,* there is a systemic tendency to justify violence perpetrated by Western agents as somehow acceptable because of "universal" ethical codes such as law and order, whereas the violence perpetrated by members of other nations is less salutary.[7] The obsession in the popular press with the idea of *jihad* in the coverage of terrorism, and the obsession in broader discourses with only the most violent and least representative examples of global cultures and traditions (such as "Sati" in India and female genital mutilation in Africa), all reinforce violence as being somehow an integral aspect of cultures, especially if these cultures are, or were, somehow deemed "inferior," "savage," and generally in need of the Western "civilizing mission" (Davies, Nandy, & Sardar, 1993). In this manner, the idea of cultural difference is magnified to such an extent that the only cultural similarity that seems to exist across cultures is that of a propensity for violence (although "our" [Western] violence is legal[8] and "theirs" is cultural). The key question that this particular myth raises for scholars is whether it is indeed possible to conceive of cultural difference in a global context without naturalizing the idea that violence is universal.

Violence Is Historical

If the clash of civilizations thesis has naturalized a view of violence as the result of the obstinacy of "other" civilizations in refusing the universalism of Western civilization despite some notable attempts in the past half a millennium by the West to "civilize," this thesis also makes some historical generalizations that are by no means isolated in the present mediascape. Apart from the very obvious example of the entertaining but unrepresentative content of the so-called History Channel in the United States, there is ample evidence that violence is naturalized in the media not only as being universal, but also eternal. Critical media scholars are well aware of how the present-day conflicts are frequently presented in an ahistorical and decontextualized manner in the mainstream media, with broad sweeps of history invoked instead to explain them. For example, the al-Qaeda and Taliban are connected in this version of events not to their glorious past as the Communist-fighting, freedom-loving Mujahidin, but as part of some larger, older, religious conspiracy from the days of the crusades. Unfortunately, the popular renderings of history, with their emphasis on conquests, conquerors, dates, and death-tolls, clearly make such vast generalizations about the allegedly violent nature of human history difficult to contest.

Although enlightened scholars such as Howard Zinn (1995) have profoundly challenged the simplistic telling of history as one of a simple conflict between good and bad people (and good and bad uses of violence), the question remains whether critical media scholars have the resources to reshape the view that human history has been exceedingly

violent. This supposition has also acquired a curious twist in light of the present-day public interest in violent entertainment (and perhaps the singularly entertaining film *Gladiator*, which I mention largely because of the frequency with which it used to come up in my class discussions as historical evidence for this myth). Some communication scholars believe that it is not only violence that is as old as human history, but the craving for violent entertainment as well (Guttmann, 1998), a strong generalization to make indeed, from the circumference of the coliseum to that of the whole wide world. The key question for scholars facing these media ideologies is whether history is indeed violent, rather than peaceful.

Violence Is Natural

With the whole world and the whole of human history under the sway of this particular ideology of violence, it would not be surprising to find that nature in general, including "human nature," is widely believed to be violent as well. For this, it is not just media discourses that may be culpable, but some aspects of the broader intellectual traditions of modern Western philosophy in general. Darwinism and a narrow interpretation of evolution have so permeated the modern popular consciousness that the idea of violence as being necessary for survival has elevated a politically derived inflection of science to the level of contemporary mythology. Similar to the contradictory positioning of "man" and "nature" in modern Western philosophy, media discourses present nature as violent, competitive, and ruthless, and human nature, at best, as an occasional endeavor to rise above this.

In the popular media discourses, though, there is no dearth of examples. Although myths of violence in general serve to naturalize a view of violence as universal, eternal, and natural, there is no greater channel for this particular indoctrination than that of the discourses of nature themselves. The obsession with sensationalizing even wildlife and natural history documentaries on channels like Animal Planet has led to a skewed understanding of nature as consisting of "Animals Gone Wild" on a "Savage Planet," or some such catastrophic, violent catchphrase. The allegedly "villainous" portrayal of animals in the media was actually borne out in one of Gerbner's studies, which found that animals are more likely to be portrayed as violent than humans and more often as villains rather than heroes (Morgan, 2002). If the popular culture has conjured up a vision of nature as one of savage hunts, fights, and dismemberments, it has not fared much better in terms of stories of natural (pre)history either. A popular obsession with carnivorous dinosaurs and imaginary lineages descended from nobly barbaric icemen and cavemen revolves around the elevation of a singular myth, that of a violent nature. The question for media scholars, though, is simple. If nature is

savage, and civilizations doomed to clash, what hope do media and cultural studies have?

Nonviolence as Being and Belief

One possibility lies in the philosophy of nonviolence, not only because of the specific critiques available in Gandhian thought[9] to refute the ideologies of violence discussed above, but also because of the larger rise of what scholars like Richard Falk (2004) are calling "a Gandhian moment," which is marked by the rise of a "worldwide revulsion against war and violence" (p. 6). At the outset, though, it may be useful to clarify what the term nonviolence, or ahimsa, to be precise, stands for in Gandhian philosophy because there is a tendency in popular media and some scholarly circles to use the term "nonviolence" somewhat loosely, literally, and often inaccurately.[10] The first premise of nonviolence is that nonviolence is not merely a personal belief, but the very condition of our existence, a premise that may be seen as the very bedrock of Gandhian philosophy and political practice (Iyer, 1973). As Shinn (2000) wrote, "Ahimsa (nonviolence, injury, cruelty) was not just a way of living (for Gandhi), but an eternal quality of truth itself" (p. 219). Nonviolence and truth are in fact so interchangeable in Gandhian thought that his method of action came to be called *satya-graha,* or "the force that is born to Truth and Love or nonviolence" (p. 218).

From this perspective, it is the discourses about violence discussed earlier that would appear as beliefs, albeit beliefs that have come to acquire a sense of normalcy through a process that Gandhi (1965) described as the "enthronement of violence as if it were a natural law" (p. 44). Thus, the main impediment to an accurate understanding of nonviolence in modern cultures has less to do with the beliefs of individuals than with the deep and pervasive insinuation of the ideologies of violence into every corner of the imagination. In other words, the fact that even the ideas that are discussed below as "nonviolence" are indeed entering the discourse under the label "nonviolence" suggests how powerful, widespread, and normative the ideology of violence is.

From a purely nonviolent perspective, there would perhaps be no such thing as nonviolence, it would be "natural," or simply the way things are, and it is violence that would be named as such. If such a possibility seems marginal, it is, once again, not because of the natural, historical, or cultural ineluctability of violence, but because of the aberrations in our understanding of nature, history, and culture caused by the centrality of violence to the present global condition[11] (whether this is apprehended, sociologically, as modernity; politically, as imperialism; or economically, as capitalism).

The key issue for media researchers here is whether, despite the fairly successful track record of nonviolence in the real world, from the decolonization of India to the birth of the United Farm Workers in California, the notion of ahimsa as satya (nonviolence as truth) has some empirically verifiable basis to it. Whereas the task of critiquing the ideologies of violence in the natural and social sciences would be enormous, one beginning could be made in relation to the media mythologies of violence discussed above. In the following sections, I show how some of Gandhi's writings on culture, history, and nature reject the notion of any of these as causes of violence.

Violence and Cultural Difference

An important aspect of Gandhian philosophy is its unique, nonmodern universalism. Gandhian nonviolence does not make sense if nonviolence were to be seen as a belief unique to any one religion or nation, or as a mere technique of "turning the other cheek" to a violent aggressor.[12] Gandhi believed, in complete contrast to the media mythologies discussed above, that it was nonviolence not violence that was universal, eternal, and natural. Violence, whether in the forms of open conflicts and wars, or in more systemic forms such as colonialism, was for Gandhi the real aberration. To this end, he refused to view British colonialism in India as the result of any inherent flaw in British culture or the Christian religion, nor as some sort of cultural misunderstanding between the colonizer and the colonized. He abhorred the violent and dehumanizing nature of colonialism, but saw the British as victims (in their own way) of it as well:

> (Modern) Civilization is irreligion . . . it is eating into the vitals of the English nation . . . if you think over this . . . you will cease to blame the English. They rather deserve our sympathy . . . they are enterprising and industrious and their mode of thought is not inherently immoral. I therefore respect them. Civilization is not an incurable disease, but it should never be forgotten that the English people are at present afflicted by it. (Gandhi, 1993, p. 18)

Gandhi saw colonialism and its violence not as the inevitable outcome of some essential cultural difference, but instead as an "affliction" of "civilization" (a term he often used synonymously with modernity and capitalism). In his writings and his life, he sought to embody a form of nonmodern universalism that would affirm the equality of humanity (and all life, as a matter of fact) and his belief in nonviolence as truth. In other words, if the British had brought great violence in their wake to India or elsewhere, it was not because of their "culture," according to Gandhi, but simply because they had been alienated by modern industrial civilization from their own origins, which were not fundamentally

different, or less nonviolent, than that of any other civilization. Thus, what Huntington[13] would call a "clash of civilizations" would for Gandhi be nothing more than an irrational "fear of the foreigner" (Gandhi, 1965, p. 41) produced by alienation from a nonmodern, nonviolent *universal* sensibility.

Violence and History

Another distinction between Gandhian nonviolence and the media mythologies of eternal violence pertains to the writing of history in its conventional forms as a linear chronology of wars, conquests, and conquerors. Gandhi characterized wars as an aberration from the normal flow of history, which is largely nonviolent, and perhaps precisely for that reason, not widely noticed as such. With a clever comparison reminiscent of the "man bites dog" example used to teach news values to journalism students, Gandhi argued that history is not as necessarily violent as its popular interpretations make it out to be:

> History as we know it is a record of the wars of the world . . . but . . . if this were all that happened in the world, it would have ended long ago. If the story of the universe had commenced with wars, not a man would have been found alive today. . . . The fact that there are so many men in the world still alive today shows that it is not based on the force of arms but on the force of truth or love. History is a record of an interruption of the course of nature. (Gandhi, 1993, p. 47)

Gandhi thus directly refuted the idea of violence as somehow culturally or historically normal and advanced an alternative universalism based on nonviolence and nonmodernity rather than that of violence and modernity. Gandhi's reading of nonviolence in nature is however more nuanced. Contrary to the misconception in some circles that nonviolence is a naïve or untenable notion that fails to account for the existence of violence in the real world, the presence of violence is dealt with at various levels by Gandhi. Although Gandhi may not have necessarily believed in the notion of nature as innately savage, or violent, he recognized the existence of both violent and nonviolent impulses in it. He made the distinction between "man as animal," who may be violent, and "man as spirit," who is nonviolent (Shinn, 2000). Despite (or perhaps precisely because of) this acknowledgment, it is important to note that this idea is very different from the simplistic media myth, discussed earlier,[14] that violence is natural.

Violence and Nature

The larger worldview in which nonviolence is derived is the idea of the "kinship of all life" (MacQueen, 2000), which holds all life—human and nonhuman—to be sacred and inviolable. The philosophy of nonviolence may acknowledge the presence of "natural violence," but would

not accept the notion that violence in itself is natural, inevitable, eternal, or universal. This distinction may be further appreciated in the light of how violence is treated within the broader social vision of nonviolence. Gandhi was neither delusional nor in denial about the existence of—and accepted in some forms—the natural inevitability of violence:

> We are helpless mortals caught in the conflagration of himsa. . . . The very fact of . . . living—eating, drinking and moving about—necessarily involves some himsa, destruction of life, ever so minute. (Gandhi, 1927, p. 257)

Violence, for Gandhi, was to some extent a natural or physical inevitability, but the important distinction between this and the dominant ideology of natural violence is that Gandhi was acutely aware of the necessity to consciously minimize the levels of violence it took to sustain a way of life in the world. As Bhikhu Parekh (2001) wrote:

> Gandhi called the body the "house of slaughter" and was deeply anguished by the violence its survival entailed. Since violence was built into the human condition and was thus unavoidable, he thought the only course of action was to minimize it by reducing one's wants, and to compensate for it by taking tender care of nature. (p. 51)

It may be clear from this observation that Gandhi's acknowledgment of the presence of violence as a physical necessity does not contradict his view of violence as an aberration in the flow of history. The injunction to minimize violence is a central theme in this distinction because from his perspective, violence becomes a manifest aberration whenever it is taken beyond the bare minimum levels required for survival. His critique of "modern civilization," and capitalism in particular, was basically that it exacted a profoundly unnatural, unwarranted, and violent toll upon the world for its existence, and this, together with the spiritual crisis it created, made it well near impossible to compensate for. Gandhi's emphasis on compensation derived from a broader philosophical notion that bridges the realms of nonviolence as a philosophy for personal meaning and nonviolence as the means and the ends for social and political action.

Gandhi believed that everyone was a "born debtor" (Parekh, 1997, p. 51)—to one's parents, country, and nature in general—and human agency was best put to the use of repaying these debts—and the "debts" incurred, by individuals, families, and countries, because ways of life based on violence would be stupendous. Furthermore, given that the idea of indebtedness itself is derived from a deeper cosmological understanding of interconnectedness and causality, it is not difficult to see why Gandhi perceived violence as part of an "inflationary spiral" (p.

67). To put this idea colloquially: What goes around, comes around. From a nonviolent perspective, therefore, the mythologies of violence in the media fundamentally mistake the phenomenon of violence feeding on violence for some sort of natural, historical, or cultural "necessity," and a useful compass for critiquing violence would entail dealing with it on its own terms, that is, on the notion of the levels of violence required for existence, indebtedness for it, and finally, inescapable cyclical causality of violence.

Nonviolence and Media Studies

If nonviolence can inform media scholars' critical engagement with the problem of violence in the face of intense conditions of violence and media spectacles of violence in the world, there is an important role that media studies can play in rejuvenating nonviolence as a cultural force and social movement for the media age. The difference between a utopian vision of nonviolence and a viable practice of nonviolence as a mounting historical necessity lies in one important first step. Gandhi acknowledged that a complete and literal practice of either nonviolence or the broader repayment of one's "debts" would be impossible; as Parekh (1997) wrote, "All that human beings could do was to begin by 'recogniz(ing) the conditions of their existence'"(p. 52). In the present media environment, such a recognition is, of course, profoundly complicated resulting in mind-boggling obfuscations instead.

The critiques of cultural studies and the endeavors of scholars in our field have at least opened up to some of our students and future media practitioners the possibility that what is widely and deeply held to be true in the mediascape is not always so, and that recognizing the true "conditions of our existence" demands an interrogation of the ideologies of consumerism, imperialism, racism, sexism, orientalism, and many others. To comprehend, however, the consequences of the violence that underlies all of these calls for recognizing these conditions on the basis of nonviolence as well. For nonviolence, ultimately, is not about the "seizure of power" (in the name of nationality, class, race, gender, etc.) but about "the transformation of relationships" leading to a "peaceful transfer of power" (Parekh, 1997, p. 67). Media scholars are well-positioned to play an active role in heralding such a transformation, for, from a true nonviolent perspective, it would be natural and inevitable that at some point in history the agents of opposition to violence would emerge in relation to the same institution that has been responsible for the most widespread propagation about the supposed inevitability of violence.

However, nonviolence, as this essay has outlined, is not a simple program or 10-step technique for some utopian conflict resolution. It is a

philosophy, with its paradigmatic assumptions and particular positions vis-à-vis contemporary social philosophy. What media scholars could do, though, is to make the necessary theoretical and methodological connections between contemporary approaches and nonviolence, rejuvenating both in the process. This will, however, require a broadening of current approaches to media and violence so that nonviolence comes to acquire in its usage the full import of its potential as nothing less than a universal, global alternative to modernity's violence. In terms of the three broad areas of media studies, institutions, texts, and audiences, the following questions may serve as preliminary guidelines for such an attempt:

What Levels of Violence Does It Take to Sustain Media as Institutions?

The complicities between the media and the military and organized violence industries are now well known.[15] Future research could examine other connections to violence in the media business, such as the undue influence that advertisers and manufacturers of violence-based products exert on the media. In one well-known instance of this, no less than Oprah Winfrey had to back down from a story on "mad cow disease" because of legal threats from the meat industry ("Oprah Accused," 1998). This would be a particularly relevant line of exploration for nonviolent media studies because the implication of media in the "political-economy (of) animal bodies" (Wolch & Emmel, 1998) is yet to be documented. The notion of "levels of violence" could also be conceptually and methodologically refined to explore the broader social and environmental costs of media and media-infrastructure building, particularly in the global South.[16] Finally, ethnographies of production could also focus on the particular role that institutional ideologies play in the reproduction of violence and the marginalization of nonviolence in media institutions. For example, what sort of professional cultures and workplace myths lead to rationalizations like "violence sells" to justify violent programs ?

What Quantitative Patterns and Qualitative Themes Characterize the Ideologies of Violence in Media Texts?

As the Cultural Indicators Project has shown, there are numerous messages about violence that are embedded in the commercial media culture, notably the idea that violence is successful (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999), but a nonviolent perspective needs to take on how violence is ultimately portrayed in the media as being natural. Although the media myths that naturalize violence can be theoretically refuted through Gandhian nonviolence, as discussed in this article, what will be useful is the evolution of an empirical and quantifiable basis to such a critique.[17] For instance, content analyses could focus not only on the more obvious

examples of violence in the media, such as gunfights and body counts, but also on implicit violence that is naturalized. This would include representations of scenes or settings in which violence is not present, but would have been logically required, such as scenes depicting people with bruises and wounds or scenes depicting meat and other slaughter-based products. In short, textual analyses could focus on the whole range of discourses through which a heightened degree of violence is maintained and naturalized. In addition, particularly in the context of journalism and war coverage, the whole paradigm of realism in which international conflict is framed for popular consumption could also be critiqued.

What Are the Politics of Knowledge in the Popular Reception of Violence?

It is in the area of audience studies that the full potential of nonviolence for media studies may be realized. Empirical audience research could not only provide evidence of the degrees to which ideologies of violence may be naturalized, but more importantly could indicate the potential that unnamed nonviolent sensibilities among the audience may have for nonviolence to emerge as a popular practice. To some extent, some of the present findings of cultivation research also suggest such a possibility. Justin Lewis's (2001) study of public knowledge and opinion, for instance, indicated that it is a lack of correct information about foreign policy and security, and not, as one might infer, an innate violent impulse, that drives the American public's seeming support for overseas aggression. Another broad finding of cultivation research that has tremendous potential for development from a nonviolent perspective is that of the "mean world syndrome." Although media scholars have argued that the fearfulness shown by heavy TV viewers has resulted in greater public support for harsher punitive measures, there are other implications for this phenomenon as well.[18] If fear is indeed the dominant emotional condition of contemporary television audiences, as popular books have also argued (Glassner, 1999)—especially in the wake of 9/11, which brought us its constant flux of color-coded alerts and panic survival shopping sprees—it calls for a much deeper understanding of the conditions of contemporary television audiencehood. Such an understanding may be possible by recognizing that the development of nonviolent media studies is ultimately about the politics of knowledge.

Conclusion: Nonviolence and Knowledge

One limitation of audience research in particular and media studies in general has been that reception has been theorized as largely a cognitive process rather than emotional process because of the antiquated "ratio-

nal/emotional" binary in Western philosophy. There is a need to overcome this distinction and understand the social and political dimensions of the emotional experience of reception as well (Juluri, 2003) if a nonviolent perspective is truly to take shape in media studies. At its heart, nonviolence is an epistemology based on emotions and ethics, as opposed to a mere scientism that purports to produce value-free knowledge with scarcely a nod to the ethics of causing suffering and pain (Nandy, 1987). Thus, from a nonviolent perspective, the emotional aspects of media reception, whether it is the much-documented fear or something else, would be the primary terrain of analysis.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that one such key "feeling" pervasive in the contemporary mediascape and yet not often named in American discourses, is that of cruelty. While reading a recent review of new television programs in a local language newspaper in India, I was struck by the frequent use of the term *kruratvamu* (Telugu for "cruelty") by the reviewer to describe the emerging genre of local reality shows that involved people endangering and humiliating themselves before the camera. Comparable discussions of this genre in public fora in the United States (programs like *Fear Factor* or MTV's *Jackass*) seem to entail terms like "stupidity" or "greed" at worst, but not "cruelty." Is this because cruelty is not quite seen as such in the public discourse in the United States? Learning to name cruelty is a first step, but the bigger challenge for the academy is its capacity and willingness to invest in an epistemology that confronts a world based on himsa. The meeting of nonviolence and media studies could be the foundation of such an epistemology.

The immense sweep of violence that has seized the world, first as colonialism, and now as globalization, seems even more inexorable. The fact that there are still spaces of recognition that can name cruelty for what it is suggests that Gandhi was perhaps not naïve or irrelevant in his philosophy of nonviolence. Perhaps there was something universal or eternal in nonviolence that has been missed in its marginalization by decades of intellectual saturation in the ideologies of violence. If nonviolence seems like a fad that has passed, its necessity is coming back all the more in the wake of the media world, for the seeming marginalization of nonviolence in recent years has less to do with its validity than the social and cultural despair that surrounds it. As B. P. R. Vithal (2001), a respected Gandhian freedom fighter and civil servant wrote, "I . . . gave up the Gandhian way of life . . . not because I was disillusioned with Gandhi, but because I began pursuing other illusions" (p. 7).

Perhaps it is time to move away from media-generated illusions about the inevitability and naturalness of violence and return to what Gandhi would simply have called the truth.

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Notes

[1] Nonviolence for Gandhi was a universal condition and aspiration. I am opposed to the reduction of nonviolence to an "ethnic" or similar "trait" in orientalistic discourses so as to emphasize this universalist aspiration. Gandhian universalism, as I discuss later, does not imply that nonviolence is somehow "acultural" in its universality, but merely present in different forms in various religions and civilizations.

[2] For a comprehensive discussion of numerous cultivation studies, see Shanahan & Morgan (1999). The collected writings of George Gerbner shed light on the various implications of cultivation findings in general and the dramatic portents of media violence as well (Morgan, 2002).

[3] Despite the useful data generated by large-scale content analysis-based studies of media violence such as the National Television Violence Study, the methodological question of how media violence is defined and operationalized in such projects has been pointedly raised by some scholars (Leo, 1999). Also, it is relevant to note the literature that questions the validity of the category of violence itself, such as sections of Barker and Petley (2001). I would also like to clarify that I use the term violence somewhat broadly, but do not wish to imply that interpersonal, domestic, political, and ecological violence (to name some examples) are all the same thing.

[4] Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to estimate whether violence is a cause, effect, or a tendency, what I would like to highlight is the consciousness that arises of human society, when viewed from the perspective of ahimsa, as one based on conditions of violence. Whereas causality may not be a central issue here, what is relevant is the fact that violence can and perhaps must be critiqued independently.

[5] My concern here is with certain myths about human society, history, and nature in general found in a wide range of media discourses, rather than myths about media violence, which is the subject of James Potter's (2002) book.

[6] I would like to acknowledge that these media mythologies are proposed on the basis of personal observation and my own judgment of relevance at this stage, and do not purport to be an exhaustive set of categories. However, taken in conjunction with the research questions I propose later in this article, these may serve to guide more precise content analyses as well.

[7] It is ironic that one of the ways in which cultural difference is predicated is on the basis of "respect for life" (which the West supposedly has and the rest do not) because, as I show later, one of the key principles of Gandhian universalism is the belief in the equality of all life, not just human.

[8] Lewis and Brookes (2004) found that "procedural correctness" is a theme that is often emphasized in British television portrayal of British soldiers in Iraq.

[9] Gandhi's writings are too vast and diverse to warrant an easy reduction to any one definitive text. With the exception of his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, most other writings of Gandhi, many of which were letters, are found in numerous collections. For a convenient online introduction to his articles (and contemporary activities), see the website of the Gandhi Institute in Tennessee (www.gandhiinstitute.org). For an astute discussion of Gandhian philosophy vis-à-vis contemporary social and political theory, see the works of Raghavan Iyer and Bhikhu Parekh, who are cited elsewhere in this paper. It may also be noted that Gandhi did not claim authorial credit for nonviolence and acknowledged a number of religious and secular influences from the Bhagawad Gita to Tolstoy (Parel, 2000).

[10] For example, the term *nonviolent* is sometimes used as a literal adjective to describe a scene from a movie or TV show in which there is no overt depiction of violence, or at best as a form of self-restraint. In the popular imagination, nonviolence is presented as something vague that modern day heroes like Gandhi, King, Chavez, and Mandela did, relegating the finer points of the philosophy for the cult of personality instead. More recently, though, even this shallow respect seems to have been dumped by sections of the media, as the controversy over the MTV cartoon *Clone High* caricaturing Gandhi and the *Maxim* article depicting Gandhi being violently beaten has shown (Juluri, 2003, February 14).

[11] I refer on more than one occasion in this article to the "centrality of violence" to everyday life under modernity, not to suggest that modernity is any more or less violent than nonmodernity, but

simply to highlight the fact that elements of the contemporary social epoch are more routinely based on violence than in previous ones. For instance, the quotidian dependence on commodities ranging from oil to hamburgers in advanced capitalist societies is based on different forms of violence, ranging from wars of occupation to indirect "structural violence" against farmers, indigenous groups, animals, and the environment (Falk, 2004).

[12] The popular description of nonviolence as refraining from hitting back is compared brilliantly by Simon J. Harak (2000) to describing marriage as nothing more than refraining from sleeping with someone other than one's spouse.

[13] It is ironic that Huntington (1993) wrote that "(t)he very notion that there could be a 'universal civilization' is a Western idea, directly at odds with the particularism of most Asian societies" (p. 41). It is fairly obvious who is being particularistic here.

[14] A similar acknowledgment of the struggle between violence and nonviolence is also made by Gandhi in his reading of the Hindu treatise, the Bhagavad Gita (Parel, 2000).

[15] For an unusual but evocative treatment of this topic, see Galeano (2000).

[16] For instance, the state of Andhra Pradesh in India has seen, as a result of World Bank-driven policies, on the one hand, the rise of a huge information technology industry and television audience base, but on the other, the suicide of hundreds of poor farmers marginalized by the privatization of electricity and other such economic "reforms."

[17] A preliminary attempt in this direction may be found in parts of the content analysis of international news magazine coverage of the Iraq war being conducted by the University of San Francisco Media Research Group (Juluri, 2004).

[18] For a brilliant discussion of fear from a nonviolent perspective, see Chernus and Elmore's (2000) essay on the Cold War. Edward Said's (1978) Orientalism also implicitly engages with the theme of fear, particularly of the "other."

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