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ACTIVIST MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY

Antidote to Extremist Worldviews

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At this writing, I am 35 years older than I was when, as an anthropology student, I so innocently wondered why anthropologists and journalists did not provide combined training for those of us wanting to work in public education. The impulse to share anthropology's enlightening and grounding insights—about holism and whole-system perspectives, about connectedness and the interdependence of the earth and its creatures, about the twin survival requirements of diversity and commonality—seemed so sensible to me. In fact, I have pursued this bridging work throughout my professional life.

In *Media Anthropology: Informing Global Citizens* (1994), I speculated that perhaps those of us who were learning to see anthropology's holistic principles applied to “whole” cultures at that chaotic time were in a position to notice that they also applied to any system, from subparticles of atoms to relationships to the universe itself.

When I thought seriously about the ways in which anthropological perspectives would improve journalism and at how the information channels and methodologies created by journalists could allow the essence of anthropology to reach a critical mass of global citizens, I was, in

the vernacular of the day, blown away that no one was training people in both skills sets.

It seemed clear to me, for example, that it was wrongheaded to define *balance* in a journalism story as the inclusion of opposing points of view. Emphasizing polarities rather than taking into account the richer complexity of our reality leads to the dualistic thinking that results in absolutist and extreme positions.

That either-or, point-counterpoint framework is what I think we, as individuals and societies, need to grow beyond. Our goal as journalists and educators should be to broaden perspectives, not validate polarization! This insight about holism certainly is not new, but it did come out of the blue, in a manner of speaking. It arrived, for me, in December 1968, with the pictures of the earth seen from space for the first time.

What has happened since those early insights? We all know the answer. Despite all of our miraculous tools, with which we now can conceive of a “global village” and inform the entire global citizenry, we are constantly limited to a view of events and issues (peace-war, good-evil) that is simplistic, not complex; extreme, not contextual; short sighted, not far reaching. We are shown a black-and-white world instead of the more realistic

continuum of possibilities between extremes or the spectrum of influences and connections in which seemingly single extremes exist.

With respect to public information, surely the Fox News Network represents the zenith of a swing toward extremist, corporate journalism. The question is open, however, whether we citizens—and we media anthropologists—will sit by while journalism's fundamental role in American democracy crumbles or whether we will insist on and create something better.

As my little activist mother would say, it is “high time” for some responsible group of professionals to begin systematically bringing perspective-building information and insights to global citizens, and, as fortune sometimes has it, that is exactly what media anthropologists can do.

In retrospect, one sobering reality and one encouraging insight have most influenced my thinking about media anthropology in the years since I edited *Media Anthropology: Informing Global Citizens*.

THE SOBERING REALITY

Guardians of the status quo have reasserted (what they perceive as) their historic privilege since we began talking about media anthropology in the late 1960s. Those who held the social-economic-political reins of power liked that control just fine, thank you very much, and they did not sit idly by when citizens began to gain perspectives that would cause them to further question traditional assumptions. In retrospect, we naive folk who were working to share ideas that could move the world toward greater power sharing did not have a chance—at least, not if quick victory was our only goal.

Although (actually, because) the changes we had in mind would lead to more justice, not more inequity; to stronger democracies and less chance of tyranny; and to a safer and more sustainable world, the “tragedy of the commons” effect continued to influence “the few” who have an upper hand to want to keep the power over “the many”—at any cost to the many.

We simply did not foresee the strength of resistance to inclusive social justice from power

holders in threatened, tradition-bound societies who, by this time in our history, had institutionalized their power into our social structures, including the communications media (which we saw as the primary vehicle for progress).

We thought individual human beings were ready for a “league of nations” and to function as a global citizenry. As it has turned out, we were and still are tightly controlled by something akin to a band of 14-year-old boys who prefer violence, entitlement, and short-term gain to peace, justice, and long-term sustainability.

With respect to media anthropology specifically, those who opposed the teaching of critical thinking skills; “wiring more people into the system,” as futurist Alvin Toffler (1972, p. 124) said; and disseminating diverse views through media channels calmly went about their Business, with a capital B. They asserted their privilege by strengthening control over the media through writing policy, spending wildly, and severely limiting media access. In addition, some media-savvy, politically astute power holders began tutoring a cohesive and willingly regimented block of the population (mostly religious fundamentalists) in how to use (and buy) new media technologies to organize opposition to economic, political, and religious change. That group has succeeded practically unchecked.

Lots of people noticed this social right turn, which began with renewed permission after the 1980 U.S. presidential election, although in 1994, those of us working on the first media anthropology book continued to expect more “promise” than “threat” (Cherry, 1971, quoted in Allen, 1980) from the new communications technologies. We still thought that if we learned to use the new technologies, combined them with our world-shrinking “anthropological” insights, and used these tools for public education and real democracy building (including our U.S. “democracy”), we could help global cultures evolve toward a more sane, equitable, and sustainable future.

President Kennedy had said, “Our greatest challenge is to make the world safe for differences,” and that is what we had intended to do.

Generations of progressive people, working in fields as diverse as physics, economics, environmentalism, religion, and journalism, had taken steps in

that direction. Anthropology contributed by building a whole-world database of information that illustrated clearly the biological, as well as cultural, need for diversity, as well as revealing our common ground. We thought that if decision making and problem solving could occur from within the framework of this holistic cognitive frame of reference, people would make more fair, inclusive, and sustainable decisions. People would agree to work toward dynamic balance in the greater system because to such “global citizens” it would be obvious that to sustain life as we know it on our interconnected, interdependent little planet, we must either achieve win-win solutions—or eventually we would all lose.

American journalism had created channels for mass communication and a philosophy that called for an informed, educated populace. At the time we wrote, just a dozen years ago, there still were thousands of independent American newspapers, radio stations, and many points of view among traditional media outlets.

The idea of anthropology, journalism, and public education joining forces to create ways and means to bring grounding insights to everyone seemed like a logical next step toward global social justice and a more peaceful future. Those interested in the history and philosophy behind my version of media anthropology might look at my 1994 book and 1980 dissertation.

In retrospect, where did our plans fall short? For one thing, human lifespans are shockingly short compared with social evolution, a fact we did not fully appreciate. The communications and transportation revolutions, in fact, have brought us closer together and made apparent the necessity to our survival of mutual interchange and more creative problem solving.

It could be that we media anthropologists and our allies just have not finished our work.

THE ENCOURAGING INSIGHT: REFRAMING MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY AS PART OF A LARGER SOCIAL CHANGE MOVEMENT

In the years after 1994, I discovered that my distress about corporate takeovers, capitalist greed,

fundamentalist religious uprisings, and the resulting crawl of progress toward anything akin to “wholeness” in the world had jolted me into the very same polarized thinking I had been so hopeful that media anthropology would help transcend!

I used to talk about media anthropology providing “a tree to climb” to get a perspective on the entire forest. It took some years for me to see that we could reframe and revitalize media anthropology by grafting our healthy branch onto a bigger tree. We do not need to resign ourselves to the black-or-white mode of thinking that does not seek the whole color wheel of alternatives.

Today, my view is that media anthropologists can be part of a larger movement of people who are working for organic balance in the world. Some call it the global social justice movement. I call it the nonviolence movement. By whatever name, we can work together to share perspectives that will help citizens grasp the survival requirement of organic balance in relationships and systems, and that, in my mind, is the underlying mission of media anthropology. Now, however, I think we need to develop smarter strategies and multiple ways of sharing our information and insights, including using smaller, more personal, and less controllable media, as well as using “people power.”

We can practice “media anthropology” through “The Media,” as we said in 1994, and also by recognizing and collaborating with groups of citizens (large movements and small groups, as Margaret Mead said) who have changed their minds about how they want to interact in relationship with one another and the earth.

IN THE MEANTIME—LINKING MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY AND NONVIOLENCE

I took a position as director of a university women’s center following publication of the 1994 book. It seemed like an odd job for someone who, by training and temperament, is a media anthropologist. In fact, my interest in the patterns of culture and some knowledge of social change turned out to be helpful in my new job, because I seem to have looked at problems of violence on campus with different eyes than those people who typically

are in charge of responding to it. Ultimately, the real-world problems at the Women's Center helped me see the links between media anthropology and larger social change movements.

Here are two examples of how anthropology and my new work are connected.

While doing fieldwork on international news flow in the South Pacific in the 1970s, I became fascinated by what Johan Galtung (1971) referred to as the "structure of imperialism." I could plainly see how the vertical, linear power structures of former colonial governments continued to overpower attempts at horizontal, "weblike" regional communication organization. For example, if a hurricane hit an island in French Polynesia, news of the event traveled up the communication chain to Tahiti, then to Paris, then to the United States before it was transmitted back down to American Samoa, which is geographically next door.

I also could see the confusion and growing anger from "rising expectations" in poorer regions when new satellite transmissions brought television advertisements for goods and opportunities in rich countries that, of course, were not accessible to the poorer areas.

In other words, I stored away some experience with issues of personal and institutionalized power (and imbalances of power) that applied to social change, including those addressed by small organizations such as women's centers. I had not thought about imperialism in the context of personal relationships, but I knew in the recesses of my mind that the global nonviolence movement idea of "If you want peace, work for justice" translated locally to, "If we really want a safe campus, we need to work for equality and better balances of power."

Those lessons from media anthropology fieldwork applied to the issue of violence at all levels because oppression is oppression; abuse of power causes injustice and dysfunction in any system; and power is never given up or shared easily, no matter the arena.

After recognizing that dynamic, the challenges in my new job became: How could we create a grassroots movement for change that could underlie the hierarchy (and, actually, the patriarchy)? How could we develop a gender-neutral, non-threatening language that would create allies

instead of opponents? How could we work around resistant but powerful people when necessary? How could we use public education and private communication as tools for organizing our efforts?

These insights led me to help create a campaign for nonviolence in our small community "system." Those interested in hearing more about how we accomplished this may want to read my article "Activist Anthropology in a Women's Center" (Allen, 2001).

My point is that being assigned the task of attending to problems of violence on a college campus helped me see that the aims of media anthropology applied in daily life, not just globally or philosophically. Muddling around in the culture of violence led me to see that *relationship* (within a partnership, a group, the globe) describes "connected systems"; that dynamic, organic balance in these systems is sine qua non to a relationship that lasts; and that the underlying goals of a women's center and media anthropology are essentially the same: to help people break out of thought prisons caused by "reductionist" thinking—specifically, to share holistic perspectives.

In 1994, I advocated using journalism to share these kinds of perspectives. Now I think we can make use of many more tactics, tools, and strategies for tackling the job of global public education and rebalancing power.

UNDERLYING ISSUES

When I began working on the front lines at the Women's Center, facing problems caused by abuses of power against less-powerful people (women, gays and lesbians, ethnic minorities), I began once again to bump against people's inability to view the world beyond "this-or-that" extremes. I also began to grasp the very real threat of system failure that lurks beneath any situation of imbalance, because I could see first hand the inevitability of violence in situations where there is too little justice or when violence is met only by counterviolence.

In this case, I consistently ran into the unwillingness of the powers that be to address violence in contexts more encompassing than the isolated, individualistic "solutions" offered by the

legal-health-economic-education systems. I noticed also that others in the population inevitably go along with the ineffectual handling of conflict because adequate information to assess the situation is not available to them.

I began to wonder why people failed to examine these issues within the honest complexity of organic systems, where intervening variables can be examined both now and through time. Why wouldn't they budge beyond a simplistic view of conflict that isolates single events and ignores systems, as well as isolating individuals and ignoring community?

I thought that if we examined violence in its holistic context, where strings in the knotted ball of interconnected precursors to violence could come into view, we might then convince people that it is in their own best interest to assume some responsibility for violence as a systemic public health problem rather than deny it or push it out of sight by labeling it an individual aberration. In addition, we might show one another that widespread, anticipatory participation in problem solving before the crisis stage might actually be effective.

Guess what! I again came up against the same resistance to change that occurs any time someone is asked to share power. Even modestly powerful people in "small ponds" (and their inattentive followers) would rather keep conflict out of the public agenda than make changes in themselves or in the power structures that, in the near term, appear to keep them safe and financially sound.

Needless to say, the barriers we face trying to change local systems governing violence in our community parallel the problems we media anthropologists faced when trying to bring real change to the U.S. media monolith—the same problems faced when anyone attempts to alter the seeming safety of the status quo.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Eventually, issues from the Women's Center—and my insistence on the need to "get ahead" of the violence instead of only "cleaning up after" it—led me to think about conflict as it actually exists: within one whole, systemwide spectrum of

possibilities that encompasses both violence and nonviolence.

As synchronicity sometimes has it, the year 2000 was approaching, and I read that the United Nations was to declare the first 10 years of the millennium a "Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence." I started reading nonviolence literature, and that was when I realized that my violence work in the Women's Center, the ideas behind media anthropology, and also the goals of the nonviolence movement connected and shared an overarching mission: to share contextual, "anthropological" perspectives and to teach about holism so we could equip ourselves to assume more responsibility for ourselves and our world.

There are many excellent nonviolence movement writers beyond Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.: Gene Sharp, Howard Zinn, Coleman McCarthy, and Jonathan Schell are among them. I would like to quote from just one of the relevant nonviolence sources:

What has drawn me most strongly to nonviolence is its capacity for encompassing a complexity necessarily denied by violent strategies. By complexity I mean the sort faced by feminists who rage against the system of male supremacy but, at the same time, love their fathers, sons, husbands, brothers, and male friends.

I mean the complexity which requires us to name an underpaid working man who beats his wife both as someone who is oppressed and as an oppressor. Violent tactics and strategies rely on polarization and dualistic thinking and require us to divide ourselves into the good and bad, assume neat rigid little categories easily answered from the barrel of a gun.

Nonviolence allows for the complexity inherent in our struggles and requires a reasonable acceptance of diversity and an appreciation for our common ground. (McAllister, 1988)

As I began designing a campaign for nonviolence on my campus, as a way to place a campuswide, participatory, violence-prevention network beneath the radar of anyone opposed to changes in the status quo, and as I was gathering materials and ideas for a nonviolence studies course, I became for the first time a serious student of the history and methodologies of the "nonviolence movement."

When I did that, suddenly a whole world of ways to think about system imbalance brought about by dualistic thinking opened before me.

I clearly saw that all systems, all relationships, change. Life *moves*. Whether the movement is toward the positive or toward the negative depends on many factors, of course. Always, however, dynamic balance has to be maintained if the system is to survive. Using violence (meaning any abuse of power) as a means to control change sacrifices sustainability. Abuse of power (tilting the balance to the extreme) can “work” for awhile, sometimes a long while if you do not care if the relationship lasts—an abusive husband can overpower his wife, a country or culture can dominate or oppress another, humans can pollute the earth. Eventually, though, the dysfunction will cause system failure. Nonviolence methodology, on the other hand, recognizes the vast array of possibilities between “either” and “or” and works for organic balance—fair relationships, win-win solutions to conflict—precisely so the system can be maintained.

THE CHALLENGE OF TURNING ABSTRACT IDEAS INTO CONCRETE ACTIONS

Readers familiar with my 1994 media anthropology text may recall that I illustrated what media anthropology would look like when applied to journalism. I showed how journalism “reduced” the events of our lives (the stories of those lives) in a way that causes them to appear disconnected from the influences surrounding and connected to them. I tried to show how media anthropology would add a *w*, for whole system, to the traditional 5-w questioning framework used by journalists, the who, what, when, where, and why of news stories (Allen, 1987).

In the same era, I drew illustrations of balance in systems, for classes such as Women’s Mental Health and Comparative Spiritualities. I wanted to talk about internalized dysfunction caused by polarizing concepts such as right brain versus left brain, spirit versus matter, even male versus female (emphasis on the *versus*), and I needed to show a dynamic kind of balance to do it.

It is hard to share abstract ideas—such as nonviolence, for example—because they compete

with concrete, sexy ideas such as violence. Who wants to think about whole systems and prevention when daily drama is available?

I decided to use the ancient yin-yang symbol for many reasons but mostly because it contains wholeness and movement instead of the dualistic, mechanistic, “teeter-totter” model of balance more widely understood in our culture. Dynamic, asymmetrical balance is vital to all living systems; and it seemed reasonable to borrow this pattern that exists in the nature of everything from the DNA double helix to the simulation of star formation. With this symbol I could make more concrete the requirement of organic balance for system sustainability without using inflammatory or moralistic language.

To supplement the yin-yang, I used the mathematical Möbius strip to illustrate seamless wholeness; I used an old-fashioned, 1960s-style mobile to illustrate interconnectedness and interdependence; I used the gyroscope (a yin-yang symbol laid flat and given an axis) to show how imbalanced systems are guaranteed to fail. (I am adding illustrations for continuum and spectrum now, but the ones listed here have worked well.)

More recently, after meeting blank stares when I tried to talk about violence and nonviolence within the context of whole systems, I pulled out the old illustrations and updated them for a chapter in the book *Community and the World: Participating in Social Change*. The chapter, “Organic Balance as a Conceptual Framework for Social Change Movements” (Allen, 2003), can, I think, give us a new rationale for media anthropology and new options for applying holistic perspectives.

Through media anthropology, we can offer a cognitive framework, a filter, a frame of reference that can transcend dualities and reveal the folly of extremist thinking. If we join forces with the nonviolence movement, we can help to rebalance systems from a more personal approach.

PARTICIPATING IN SOCIAL CHANGE

If we want people to sense connectedness, to participate in community, to care about the world, and to assume some response-ability, then someone

needs to help empower citizens (inclusively, by the millions) with the ability to respond. That means making accessible the information and insights people need to participate.

If problems are set before us (if *life* is before us) only in the extremes (succeed or fail, right or wrong, peace or war) we are made to respond extremely, or we feel powerless to respond at all. We conclude that “someone” must know more than us; someone must be in charge. It must be the president or God or at least someone like Gandhi—but certainly not me!

If, on the other hand, we help people envision a holistic, cognitive blueprint and present problems and questions in their natural contexts and along a continuum of possibilities, people can begin to see ways in which they can participate and intervene in dysfunctional systems before the crisis point. People will learn how to “be the change they wish to see in the world,” as Gandhi said.

An anthropologist friend from my younger life worked in the peace movement, and she used to talk about starting an “Anthropologists for Social Justice” group. I thought it redundant at the time. However, like her, at some point I started to wish anthropologists would be more socially active—even if we risked losing some credibility among colleagues who disapproved of public education or frowned on participation in the anthropologist’s own culture.

If we anthropologists really believe our work is important and our ideas are sound—who are we saving them for?

One of my favorite ideas from the nonviolence movement is this:

Question: Why are we violent but not illiterate?

Answer: Because we are *taught* to read.
(McCarthy, 2002)

The point is, none of us have been taught how to practice nonviolence in our daily lives. In fact, the few people who think at all about the “nonviolence movement” associate it only with famous circumstances and not with something in which ordinary people can participate every day. This includes anthropologists who have the particular mission of bringing nonviolence concepts and anthropological perspectives to the global citizenry.

I use my anthropology daily, in participatory, as well as media, activities, and I strive to “be the change I wish to be in the world.” I insist to activist students that we focus on balance and perspective building rather than on polarizing, but I believe in the need for global-social rebalancing, and I think anthropologists can play a key role in keeping this movement smarter and less extreme.

EXAMPLES OF NONVIOLENCE AND ACTIVIST MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY

Nonviolence is another concept, like media anthropology, that seems bewildering to people who insist on absolutism and concreteness in their world. *Nonviolence* is especially difficult in the English language, where it seems to be negative or inactive rather than something one “does.” However, nonviolence is neither passive nor abstract. I’ve come to think about nonviolence in a very practical way. Nonviolence can be seen as learning to see our lives, along with their inevitable problems and conflicts, within the context of whole systems—and, then, taking action to bring dysfunctional systems, large and small, into better balance by imagining, creating, developing the ways and means to attend to imbalances (we hope) before a crisis occurs, and afterwards, too, through conflict resolution, mediation, and other nonviolent methods. In fact, I think human cultures only now have reached a point in personal and technological development at which a critical mass of citizens may be able to obtain and integrate the complexity necessary to apply nonviolent practices in relationships of all kinds. It is now time to begin teaching these practices in earnest.

Conflict occurs in specific contexts, with a finite number of possible outcomes. Unlike violent responses to conflict, in which ending relationship is considered acceptable, *nonviolence* means devising and moving toward outcomes that have the best chance of sustaining the long-term health of the system. After all, we are going to end up living in the world with the things we label negative, including our opponents, whether we like it or not.

After studying the nonviolence movement in this light, the concrete, real-world problem of addressing violence on a college campus came to look like a microcosm for the whole issue of rebalancing power (and other energies) in our culture and world. Eventually, trying to address local injustices, such as rape or discrimination or economic injustice, led me back to the philosophical and global problems and solutions I associated with media anthropology's *raison d'être*.

The following is the working definition of violence-nonviolence I use for my Introduction to Nonviolence Studies class and elsewhere (it came originally from the syllabus for the 2004 class):

We examine violence and nonviolence within a holistic, interlocking web of problems and outcomes, not as "black or white" polarities. Violence is individual and institutional, personal and political. It might be silence, bullying, harassment, physical assault, suicide, oppression, exploitation, war. . . . Violence is injustice that results in dysfunctional, imbalanced relationships—among people, groups, nations; [between] people and [the] environment, even within one body or mind. Nonviolence in this context means moving toward dynamic balance—justice, health, peace—by devising creative interventions into the dysfunctional systems—ideally, before a crisis occurs, but with conflict resolution, direct action, and other creative, nonviolent methods, afterwards. Nonviolent action generates win-win outcomes for inevitable conflict and change; it moves toward better balance in relationships with the goals of wholeness, fairness, and sustainability.

Is sharing that point of view "media anthropology"?

I think it probably is.

A series of public service announcements that the university's football coach has agreed to read on behalf of the local campaign for nonviolence provides, I think, another example of "socially active media anthropology" and "active nonviolence." The first announcement, for example, introduces the use of organic (win-win), instead of mechanistic (win-lose), methods of addressing problems and conflicts in the real world. It does that by talking about the difference between games and life.

Coach: I'm Bill Snyder, football coach at Kansas State University.

Student Athlete: I'm Marquis Clark, high jumper, KSU Track and Field.

Student Athlete: I'm Kendra Wecker, K-State women's basketball.

Snyder: [Over shots of coach on the sidelines, Kendra shooting a basket, Marquis jumping] In sports—we either win or we lose.

Wecker: But leave it on the court!

Clark: Leave it at the track!

Snyder: Leave it on the field!

Wecker: Learn the difference between games and life.

Snyder: Practice nonviolence in daily life.

Clark: Look for win-win solutions to problems and conflicts.

Wecker: In relationships and in community.

All: If we don't *all* win, we all lose.

Is this public service announcement a form of "media anthropology"? I think it is.

TEACHING THE TEACHERS

Most of us global citizens have internalized the same dualistic, cognitive worldview that has brought our world so perilously close to system failure. After all, it has been our sanctioned reality for generations. Following that, however, and this is important, most of the world's citizens—including most individuals in progressive social change movements—still need to become aware of the holistic perspectives that media anthropology can help provide. Unless most who are working for change incorporate a holistic organizing framework that helps us transcend the "given"

mechanistic worldview that leads to extremism and polarization, we, ironically, risk falling into the same dysfunctional cycle of attack and counterattack used by the fundamentalists who oppose any changes in the balance of power whatsoever.

Most progressives, including the intellectuals, environmentalists, anthropologists, and democrats among them, have done a lousy job of articulating the meaning and consequences of interconnectedness, having instead resorted to their own brand of reductionism and polemics. If this is because they have not yet embraced an organic conceptual model for analyzing their mission, they need to do it soon.

Media anthropologists have a big job to do, and we cannot limit ourselves to “either” using the established media “or” keeping our holistic perspectives to ourselves. We need to use alternative ways and means of getting our messages out. We can practice media anthropology by circumventing the controlled media and finding allies within them. We can make use of newer, smaller, and more independent electronic technologies.

We have to stick our objective little necks out there and say we believe in critical thinking and in holistic or anthropological perspective.— If we are willing to do that, we can get involved personally with movements of people struggling in diverse ways to reveal connections and create sustainable community. We can use our perspective-building form of activism to show people why such pronouncements as “you are either with us or against us” is suitable in sports but is not appropriate language for the leader of a just nation. We can learn to focus the gaze of the media, large and small, in ways that help the “whole world watch” and thus end the secrecy that feeds tyranny, oppression, exploitation, selective denial and other personal and institutional abuses of power.

We can help provide an intellectually sound, contextual cognitive framework that can help people make sense of a world that otherwise appears random and disconnected. We can help show that, surrounding any issue formerly framed as black or white, there is an entire color wheel of possibilities.

MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE NONVIOLENCE MOVEMENT?

I see a growing, global nonviolence movement as one (still loosely defined) organizational network of which media anthropologists could become a part. Certainly, an anthropological presence could provide cultural expertise and substance (not to mention perspective)—if anthropologists choose to participate.

I think the languages of anthropology and nonviolence can provide at least two powerful assets to those seeking a more just and peaceful world: a gender-neutral, nonthreatening, relatively baggage-free vocabulary based on critical thinking skills and holistic perspectives, and a whole world of alternative possibilities for direct participation by like-minded people working in diverse situations.

By going beyond the original conception of “media anthropology,” and by adding active nonviolence to our repertoire, we can tap into what the 1960s knew as “people power.” By doing this, we can use more personal and less controllable media, such as the Internet, cell phones, and other personal communications technologies to connect and organize people. (The Web-based organization MoveOn.org and Governor Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential primary organization are early examples of these methodologies.) Also, we can apply a whole gamut of nonviolent methods to “speak truth to power” when power would limit our freedom.

I do realize these suggestions seem improbable, but becoming a student of nonviolence has taught me not to dismiss as hopelessly naive the efficacy of individuals-together who make up their mind to create change for the better and who refuse to cooperate with injustice. People building better balance in the world by practicing nonviolence can, in fact, become a “force more powerful” than money, tyranny, and tanks, and media anthropology can participate by helping connect and inform the necessary critical mass of global citizens who are working for a more just, peaceful, and sustainable future.

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