INTRODUCTION

COMMUNICATION AND MARTIAL LAW

Robert S. Anderson
Simon Fraser University

"Illusion is the Ultimate Weapon"
The Decepticons
[childrens TV 1986]

When military officers take control of governments they frequently seize and hold by force the key media installations. The complicated and unstable relation between communication and martial law that ensues is the subject of this collection of articles. Originally presented and discussed at the 1987 Canadian Communication Association meetings in Montreal, these papers present the dynamics of the unstable relationship between communication and martial law in four countries: Poland, India, Chile and Bangladesh. We have also invited commentary from a number of other scholars, who describe the experience of South Africa, Israel, Korea, and Sri Lanka.

The limits to the exercise of control over communication in the life of military governments are often confirmed by the emergence of alternate forms of communication which prove difficult, if not impossible, for military governments to control. Each case study examines these limits and how they must be understood in their historic contexts. There are pronounced differences in the way martial law is used, and therefore in the consequences. In some instances control proved so difficult that martial law or emergency measures were gradually withdrawn, as in Poland. Martial law governments were also compelled to conduct elections, as in the case of the Marcos regime in 1986 in the Philippines. Indira Gandhi was compelled to end the State of Emergency with an election in 1978 which she did not win. Promising elections, Taiwan withdrew martial law in 1987 after 38 years, having created a stunted political climate and extraordinary industrial growth. A democratic state like Israel has long operated martial law in the occupied territory of the West Bank. Since 1947, two-thirds of the life of Bangladesh has been lived under martial law. In Canada martial law was invoked in the form of the War Measures Act in 1970 because of a supposition about 'apprehended insurrection', for which there appears to have been little evidence. Although undemocratic objectives were pursued during the few weeks of this episode, the basic democratic structure of Canada was not surrendered, in the long-run, to the military. This shows the wide range of historic contexts for martial law.

First, a definition of terms. Martial law in this issue while including states of emergency or states of seige here implies a more prolonged attempt by governments
to administer a special emergency version of the existing legal/constitutional system. There are variants, of course; India (and Jamaica) had states of emergency which lasted almost two years, without martial law. In such emergency cases, although the military may not rule exclusively, consideration of military factors receives top priority. Thus, although there are some important differences between the types, the similarities do allow us to study them together. Obviously martial law governments are special forms of authoritarian regimes, but our discussion is restricted to conditions in which the military play a determining role, and in which their outlook is long-term, not short-term.

In addition, our focus here is on mass media communication and does not include telecommunication, satellites, or postal services, etc. Military governments, which definitely build-up their own communication facilities first, have often invested in capital-intensive public communication facilities (computer controlled identification systems, rural airports and night-navigation, telecommunication, etc.) that have little to do with the mass media. These other kinds of communication are worthy of a special issue but are not our subject here. Instead, the focus of these case studies is on the print and broadcast media, and on how they are sites of resistance to martial law. But these case studies are not simply about established modern media. They also raise questions about how alternate forms of communication about martial law emerge outside government control, and tend to support opposition to it. Thus we examine closely the idea of popular communication beyond government control.

A central claim of communication studies is that ownership of a medium constitutes a most important form of influence on content, meaning that owners will normally orient program content and the structures of media propagation to their interests. This claim further holds that even where owners' interests are not fully articulated or even grasped by owners, ownership will nevertheless profoundly influence media content. So powerful is this idea that even those who avoid materialist explanations concede that when a communication medium is someone's property or in their complete control, the influence of that fact is profound whether or not they fully understand it. Ownership thus almost constitutes a form of the appropriation of content.

The context in which the history of the control of a specific medium is best understood is the British newspaper. Reviewing the period from 1800 to 1975, Curran says that "direct state censorship of the printed word in Britain was never fully effective" because the state lacked the sophisticated apparatus necessary to control production, monitor output, regulate distribution, stop the importation of prohibited material and neutralize or destroy dissident elements of society (Curran, 1979, p. 198). By the 1820's a 'radical press' had arisen which was not dependent on advertising because it was directly supported by working class or dissident groups. By the mid-nineteenth century, when at least two thirds of the urban working class were literate, Curran argues that state efforts to control gave way to market forces which by 1920 proved more effective. What were these market forces of control and how did they work? Huge
national papers were made technically possible and logistically feasible. These papers demanded greater and greater concentration of capital and expertise, and given higher costs, revenue from circulation did not meet their cost of production. Newspapers thus became more dependent on advertising than ever, and in this, says Curran, lay the key of social control. Government and commercial advertising, government licenses, and government taxes shaped the pattern of the established free press. Unless a paper had a valuable audience to be reached, it was in trouble: this forced the radical press to redefine their target audience, says Curran (1979, p. 219). A newspaper survived only if it had special institutional support or if it moved to address wealthier markets and could thus secure more advertisers. Curran concludes that these economic forces "could not be evaded or defied", unlike the law, (1979, p. 226) and thus constituted a form of class control and ideological discipline more effective than the previous efforts of the state. Martial law is nowhere mentioned in this context, but this account of history is presented to show that limitations were clearly recognized as the state's ability to control. Moreover this difficulty was specifically to do with printed media, a factor which shows up in all the case studies in this special issue. The historic interplay of the state and the market in the British case suggests a way in which scholars in other countries can examine the experience of communication in martial law or states of emergency.

The relation of communication and martial law takes these tenets of that central claim about ownership into unusual territory. When governments invoke martial law the appropriation of content is pushed to new levels. If private ownership continues to be recognized during martial law, as in Bangladesh (or the Philippines), a direct control is exerted which includes hands-on censorship but economic censorship can be applied at the same time. Typically any comment on the military government or martial law is banned. Where private ownership of media is not recognized but where normal operation is in civilian-bureaucratic hands as in Poland, even more direct control is exercised. The same strictures on content apply. Even when formal censorship practices are not applied, there is great scope for informal censorship, and self-censorship. For all intents and purposes in such cases media institutions are "owned" by the martial law administration, and their appointees are involved in the hiring and firing of staff, budget process, programming etc.

Military establishments of almost every country, striving as they do to resemble one another, have a striking investment in communication. Significant portions of their budget have gone into communication equipment and into training its operators in signal intelligence, telecommunication, codes, computerization etc. In fact every conceivable mode of communication is important to the military in peace and in conflict, regardless of the kind of society in which it operates. There is a greater concentration of technical communication expertise in the military than any other public or private institution and this greatly affects some martial law governments. Civilian governments using a state of emergency in order to rule also make expanded use of military communications. Control of telecommunication, transport, and the postal
system, when military officers take command, is immediate. But although the military have little direct experience with modern mass media, martial law requires them to assert control and then operate these media. They approach this requirement with unique militaristic forms of organization, most of which are ill-suited to the task. Swift assertion of control is one thing, but normal day-to-day operation is another.

Under these conditions, media content and propagation are oriented to the interests of martial law. Seldom do these interests include having anyone in the public more than minimally informed, at least initially. Entertainment is preferred to "news", but military personnel seldom have training in detection of innuendo and allusion, so there is often news concealed inside the entertainment. As time passes this restricted discourse is often found insufficient. Under martial law or states of emergency where coercive potential is vast, routine social objectives (such as fire protection or children's immunization) still require a form of public mobilization which has a strong voluntary component. Pursuit of such objectives is, in itself, like a declaration of normalcy by the regime. As Janeway points out, however, "When armed force and compulsion enter the political process they are not efficient"; in part because "...when rulers and ruled get to be seen as separate entities, the whole idea of common interest fades away" (Janeway 1980, p. 86 and p. 110, emphasis in original). This makes routine social objectives very difficult to achieve.

At the same time the government needs to explain and justify new, sometimes sweeping, economic or social changes such as administrative decentralization, pharmaceutical policy, bank nationalization, etc. At that moment it must counter the inevitable and often persuasive case made against these changes, so the very idea of opposition must be disqualified. Declarations of normalcy and efficiency, even decency, are seen to balance the swift assertion of total control. This is, in some instances, the seed of an illusion.

The motto quoted above, that 'illusion is the ultimate weapon', belonged to the Decepticons on children's television, a group who steal power by deception and force. But sustaining an illusion requires discipline, and the longer it is sustained the more likely the deceivers will also accept the illusion themselves. The Decepticons do not win in the end even though they come up with endless ideas for stealing power. In the case studies offered here we see how many military governments want their people to believe the illusions they are trying to sustain, and how they attempt to use the media to accomplish this. The people are, apparently, more readily disillusioned than most governments, so sometimes the gap between the two perspectives on the same events is astonishingly large.

This gap is presumably there at the beginning for governments using martial law and states of emergency. They usually set out to instill a generalized fear in the population, and when that fear is prevalent they have what they want. They then use that generalized fear as if it were the bank of a river toward which they build and anchor
a bridge. Across this bridge they deliver illusions which resonate with the fear they instilled (and sustain); whether or not this succeeds depends on their skill and the fearful suggestibility of the population. The illusions are based on a set of propositions: that the government's discipline of the economy leads to growth out of chaos, that their law and order stops senseless conflicts between political factions, and that their love for technology and the country creates a modernity which should distract everyone long enough to stop envying other countries (and trying to move there). These illusions are such a government's ultimate weapons, and they are powerful.

Or are they? Sustaining illusions and anchoring them in fearful suggestibility takes continuous effort and energy. This drains a government's resolve and causes fatigue. Some governments get confused and believe these propositions through a process of auto-suggestion, even when the evidence is not there, even when this course of action is failing. Moreover there are those in the populace who are not charmed by the illusions, and who become gradually less fearful. These same people become a river bank on which other representations are anchored. These alternate representations are communicated through different channels, undermining the order (and violating the orders) of martial law. So the gap seen at the beginning appears at the end.

In some countries, and under some conditions, the spectacle emerges of martial law governments with great apparent power seeking to empower the media, to direct the media for the ends of promoting routine social objectives and sweeping changes, and to confer on the media the aura of independent credibility. In effect, they are seeking a legitimacy for their regime which has usually been withheld. The need for legitimation may have placed the country in a crisis (see Fiji in 1987, Panama in 1988). In some circumstances these governments are hated. In others they are tolerated as a lesser evil or even occasionally welcomed. Even if once popular, they are seen to outlive their welcome. There is little uniformity in the public evaluation of martial law or the military state and the examples offered here show that no single sequence or theory is explanatory. But while military governments begin on this strange path of disengagement by realizing that ownership or control of communication is insufficient for some objectives, they frequently discover later that legitimacy appears to be within their grasp, or just outside it. This must be truly tantalizing. "So let us ask again", says Janeway,

what the powerful want from the weak....what the powerful want is assurance that their power is held rightfully, within a relationship which sanctions its use and validates the rights of these rulers to rule. What the powerful need is the consent of the governed to their actions as proper, acceptable, free of blame; and this consent can be granted only by the governed, the other member of the power relationship. Force of arms and physical might cannot extract this grant (Janeway, 1980, p. 111 emphasis in original).
What follows is a contradictory rhetoric of exhortation about a freer future emerging from the rule of arms in the present. Sometimes promises are made about a timetable for the return to a pre-martial law political system, such as "democracy" or for something not yet tried. The image of a giant who cannot fit his key in the lock is appropriate.

How would the central claim of communication theory about ownership of media be applied to this situation in which so many countries find themselves? Despite the obvious power of modern mass media and despite martial law's control of them, groups and individuals do not all surrender their interests or identities. Recent work shows how widespread the attack on interests and human rights is (Donnelly, 1987). But people sometimes refuse to conform to martial law, and engage in a symbolized contest with it and even a practical resistance to it. Such resistance also occurs within the media community. There are important mediating institutions like the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and Chile which penetrate both the military and the popular opposition. Numerous influential families are divided in their loyalties, and this has a pronounced influence in the business community. The relations of military officers and their wives to their class of origin, and to the technocratic upper-middle class has been an important mediating influence. This holds equally for those non-military people governing in a state of emergency. What emerges is a competitive form of communication in which all sides more and more fiercely articulate their interests, of course with asymmetrical capabilities. Different representations of the conflict are in circulation, both through and beyond the media. This may be the prelude to the decline of martial law. During this contest the martial law government may attempt to enhance the media's credibility further by giving it a modicum of real autonomy—thus testing the loyalty of the media community and those who benefit from the state apparatus. How much polite self-censorship will they exercise? This also helps to test the government's other constituency in the military barracks.

The evidence offered here shows that the objective of political control is, at first, well met by ownership and/or control of the media. Other objectives which emerge from a new articulation of interests during martial law are not met by control, and control may be counter-productive to their realization. The layered complexities of life in the modern state, its scope for indiscipline, and the ideological weakness of most military establishments (e.g., the vacuous "ideas" of General Pinochet) sooner or later has entrapped some military governments into the process of accommodation or withdrawal. This could be called "the military moment", a time which has a high degree of indeterminacy—where unexpected events, insufficient information, hurried choices, confused or confounded motives, and international economic pressures often influence the outcome (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). There are more promises of freedom in the future from people who do not recognize it in the present. Yet these are people also concerned about their own future reputations, people who have an eye on history. Many military officers envisage political or business careers for themselves after martial law is over. Along with several other factors, the need to confer slight
independence on some of the media can create the basis for expression of opposition to martial law both within the public and even the military. At some stages, it seems, martial law also loses credit in the military community. Of course the outcome of such opposition can be either greater degrees of democracy or reinforced authoritarianism, even dictatorship. Such openings and closings affect different media in complex ways, so we need to contemplate a wide range of illustrations, some of which are offered here, before we have a full critique of the relation between communication and martial law.

The central claim about ownership, being broad and flexible, could hold that as the interests of a martial law or state of emergency government become more clearly known and articulated, in the long-run sheer control becomes unsatisfactory. Thus media content and propagation structures are skewed toward a search for regime legitimacy which includes a measure of media autonomy. The retrieval of media autonomy, however, is not like changing a train schedule or revaluing a currency. Media credibility takes a long time to achieve with various publics, and within the media the fear of reprisal or habits of deference to military authority die slowly. The careers of competent professionals who might previously have been bought off, or who might have been punished for non-conformity are difficult to revive. And of course so much popular communication goes on in open irreverence, outside the formal organization of the mass media, away from telephones, beyond the postal system, that sheer control is not just unsatisfactory—it also demands limitless time and energy. While further penetration of this popular communication by martial law is very costly, modest autonomy for mass media in order to give them some legitimacy might cost less. Thus the appropriation of content which seemed so natural is checked by competing objectives.

This issue assembles a range of examples of the relation between communication and martial law, and discovers the extent to which ideas in communication studies can illuminate them. Curiously, two excellent recent studies of military government (Maniruzzaman, 1987; O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986) do not address the relation of communication or the media to the withdrawal of military or authoritarian rule. The subject is equally neglected among most scholars of communication, although a valuable exception is the work of Arno and Dissanayake (1984). In fact anonymous readers of these articles called for more analysis of informal and economic means of censorship. But these interesting questions are not open to research because such activities are screened off in a generally repressive environment; raising such questions would typically lead to intimidation and threat, expulsion, or arrest, and insiders seldom write or speak about them.

The four case studies included here illustrate the very wide range of situations in which martial law or states of emergency are invoked, and demonstrate a common principle that effective control of communication by authoritarian governments is exceedingly difficult: alternate and popular forms of communication eventually spring
up to confound a government's totalitarian approach, and each case study details how this occurred. Such alternate communication constituted the ground of resistance to the government, or at least pointed the way to its withdrawal. In three of the four cases withdrawal occurred and nominally less repressive conditions began to prevail (Poland, India, and Bangladesh). In Chile the military state has found effective insulation from such pressure to change, but although Pinochet's regime has now been in power longer than the Nazi party ruled Germany, the popular desire to communicate is still not completely silenced.

And there are striking differences between each medium. In the world of electronic surveillance and control of electronic means of communication, print has proved to be a remarkably resilient and adaptive mechanism under these conditions, even where paper is scarce. This is true in countries with higher literacy such as Poland and Chile, lower literacy such as India, and little literacy such as Bangladesh. Despite the persistent fact that information is difficult to control, these authoritarian governments have plunged ahead on this path, grasping (correctly) that alternate representations of a political conflict are based, in part, on alternative communication of relevant information. Widely separated by geopolitics, political history, and ethnic complexity, as well as by the structural organization of their media, the governments of Poland, India, Chile and Bangladesh all entered these extraordinary emergency phases from conditions of civilian control, and alternate communication was largely aimed at bringing about a return to civilian control.

Poland was industrialized, literate, relatively homogeneous ethnically, heavily in debt. It is a one-party state which is nevertheless strongly influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. Fedorowicz shows that the Church and unions, and dissatisfied media professionals, constituted a nucleus of the growing network of Solidarity's alternate communication beyond the official broadcast-media. This network sought to render the official media as objects of ridicule, and thus cartoons, posters and humorous aphorisms were all circulated in order to do so. In fact a new definition of what is "public" was created, and martial law was eventually withdrawn following widespread surveillance and imprisonment of activists. Nevertheless events in 1988 show again that the idea of Solidarity had not disappeared, and that the Gdansk shipyards are again the site of resistance to the government.

India was agrarian, with a huge industrial establishment and a large urban literate elite. Although in debt, it was moving toward establishing large reserves of foreign exchange. Pendakur shows that some repressive instruments had already been used selectively by Indira Gandhi under earlier (non-emergency) democratic conditions. Unlike the relative homogeneity of the three other cases, India was extremely pluralistic by every conceivable social criterion—linguistic, ethnic, religious, political. Even the huge military establishment was pluralistic in composition. Pendakur shows that some private newspapers were slow to comply with the ideology of the Emergency, and sometimes defied attempts to intimidate them. And the printing press itself,
thought obsolete by high-tech-minded governments, reclaimed the revolutionary role which it demonstrated in Europe since the 16th century. Mrs. Gandhi's approach to communication proved not viable, and the Emergency collapsed in exhaustion two years later. She, of course, returned, was re-elected in 1981, and reigned triumphant until her assassination in 1984.

The democratic foundations of Chile were overthrown by a military coup in 1971 and controlled by a junta which has not, according to Gilbert, felt any need to establish legitimacy through the media—it simply caters to its allied groups through entertainment. Unlike the 'hartal' in Bangladesh, where the public withdraws from the street leaving the government trying to assert 'business as usual', in Chile alternative communication reclaims the street or the football stadium. In Bangladesh it is silence and in Chile it is noise which constitute the alternative statement: in Elizabeth Janeway's terms these are "the powers of the weak".

Anderson's article shows how two-thirds of Bangladesh's post-colonial life has passed under martial law, and thus a historic pattern of control and censorship co-exists with old methods to counteract it, like the national strike (hartal). These tendencies oscillate back and forth, and in his analysis of one four-year sequence (1982-1986) it becomes clear that the ridicule reserved for officially-controlled electronic media was contradicting the military government's attempt to use the same media for its narrower purposes which included the legitimization of the coup leader through an 'election'. Although martial law was withdrawn, a kind of 'martial democracy' emerged in 1987. In a nation with a large population where literacy is low, newspapers nevertheless play a striking role in legitimizing opposition. And the influence in both the city and the village of international short wave radio broadcasts should not be underestimated. But why were so many people laughing at the Bangladesh Television evening news?

In all these examples governments sought to create and sustain grand illusions, which they could not do without the modern mass media. However, they had other objectives too, and the same media were needed to achieve them. The rise of unofficial means of communicating and the influence of unauthorized sources of information show that total control is seldom sustained for long. But it must be remembered that along with the persistence of popular communication there is the reciprocal ingenuity of repressive techniques of control. And these techniques can be extended, because once established they can be sustained long after martial law or states of emergency have ended.

Much of the analysis offered here speaks to people afraid of the power of the media; it shows the limits on media influence even when the media are seized and directed by the most powerful agency in the state—the military. It shows that in the modern state, particularly under extreme conditions, there is life beyond the media, and this life has a much greater political and cultural significance than is
conventionally believed. An alternate fund of meaning, communication, and action exists which, under extreme conditions like states of emergency, can be retrieved and revitalized by very large segments of the population. These are the very segments who, under different conditions, appear quite receptive to the same mass media. This alternate fund of meaning, communication, and action is thus crucial to the strategy of opposition to martial law governments which have outlived their welcome. DeNardo (1985) offers a compelling analysis of how recruitment and mobilization works in the political strategy of protest and rebellion. He contrasts the logic of peaceful protest with the strategy of violent disruption, noting how political escalation under repression affects the recruitment of large numbers of people. As in the case in Bangladesh where the hartal presented the regime with a choice—to ignore, to counter, or to overreact—DeNardo shows that demonstrating in the streets or withdrawing from them (and for what cause), is one of the few avenues open in situations where military regimes hold all the guns. This is a demonstration that the powers of the weak lie in their numbers. What effect, he asks, does a strategy of violent disruption have upon recruitment and mobilization?

Taken together these essays substantiate Elizabeth Janeway's brilliant work, *The Powers of The Weak*, in which she examines two fundamentally different conceptions of ruling; one in which power is taken from the populace and held without licence and the other in which rulers rely on a legitimacy granted to them in exchange for acknowledgement of the weak and their powers (Janeway, 1980). This collection of essays examines the great difficulties in effecting a transition between one conception of power and another. It also shows that though the mass media are very important in the transition, alternate and sometimes archaic forms of communication outside the organized media network are often decisive.

**REFERENCES**


"And now repeat after me:
'I am free', 'I am happy'. 