

Dissemination versus Dialogue: A False Dichotomy¹

by

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What is the role of information dissemination in social change? What is the role of dialogue in social change? Is dialogue holier than dissemination? Or is dissemination holier than dialogue? This either/or binary discussion of dissemination *versus* dialogue is neither useful, nor productive. The present piece argues that for social change to occur, both dissemination *and* dialogue need to dynamically co-exist, each shaping the other, and, in turn, being shaped by the other.

On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Some 300,000 people heard this speech in person. Tens of millions saw it live on television, and hundreds of millions have since seen it on television, heard it on radio, or read the speech in a book.

In describing his dream of a nation where a person “would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” Dr. King’s speech mobilized millions of supporters for desegregation in the United States, prompting the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The same year, at age 34, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

An examination of the “I Have a Dream” phenomenon shows the inter-relationships that exist between dissemination and dialogue. King’s speech represents an exemplar of mass dissemination; it spread the word on racial equality widely -- both in the U.S. and overseas. However, this speech was developed over years of intense dialogue -- with Southern church leaders, civil rights’ activists, and friends and family members. Through these conversations, Dr. King understood the nature, scope, and brutality of indignities suffered by blacks, and honed his strategy of non-violent civil disobedience. Portions of the “I Have a Dream” speech were presented in various other venues, sparking dialogue with audience members, who, in turn, further informed Dr. King’s ideas. In essence, dialogue was an integral component in the development of the speech that was finally delivered in Washington D.C. in 1963.

Once disseminated by the mass media, the speech inspired further dialogue. Dr. King’s words inspired dialogue among millions of people -- Blacks and Whites, Christians and non-Christians, and Americans and non-Americans. These dialogues shaped the public, mass media, and policy discourses on Civil Rights. Dialogue about freedom and equality, prejudice and discrimination, privilege and opportunity characterized conversations in families, schools, and in churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues. Many were inspired by Dr. King to personally practice racial tolerance.

Many others participated in, or helped organize, Civil Rights campaigns for racial equality.

The real power of this widely disseminated speech lies in the dialogue it has sparked over four decades across the world. “I Have a Dream” illustrates that dialogue shapes dissemination; and dissemination prompts dialogue.

Which Is Holier?

Dissemination is an intentional process of information transmission from a source to one or many individuals (Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). In this sense, dissemination involves telling: The message is usually invariant and there is limited, if any, role for feedback. Mass-media messages are thus mostly dissemination. Interpersonal messages also involve dissemination. A farmer who shares his experience with other farmers (about a certain weeding or tilling practice, for instance) engages in dissemination. While dissemination may mean uniformity of transmission, it does not imply uniformity in reception. In fact, there is usually quite a bit of diversity in reception. Interestingly, in the economics of communication, messages are worth more in dissemination than they are in reception (Peters, 1999). Teachers are paid to teach, students spend to learn. In essence, society places a high economic value on expert-centered transmission.

Dialogue involves mutuality and reciprocity in information exchange between two or more individuals. In this sense, dialogue involves not just a channel of information-exchange but is also embodied in the relationship between participants. Dialogue, by its very nature, is recurring and iterative. Through dialogue, human relationships are co-created, co-regulated, and co-modified; that is, something new is created in the interaction. Also, unlike mass-mediated dissemination messages, dialogue is oral, live, immediate, and spatially-bound to a physical context (Peters, 1999).

Peters (1999) distinguished between dissemination and dialogue by invoking Jesus and Socrates, two great teachers, both of whom questioned past practices and were martyrs as a result. While Jesus represented a case of dissemination, spreading his parables among his followers across geographically dispersed audiences, Socrates practiced dialogue – face-to-face, in the here and the now. Jesus disseminated his message to audiences ranging from a few people to a few thousand (e.g. Sermon on the Mount), while Socrates mostly dialogued one-on-one with his pupils and fellow Greek citizens.

We argue that dissemination and dialogue are dialectically intertwined and the tension between them is a vital ingredient in organizing for social change efforts. Dissemination and dialogue are neither separable, nor is one holier than the other. Peters (1999) questions the “holy” status bestowed on dialogue, noting that uncritical celebration of dialogue is as naïve; as is the uncritical criticism of dissemination. Dialogue can be tyrannical and dissemination can be just, much like dialogue can be just and dissemination can be tyrannical. Peters finds dialogic reciprocity as a moral ideal to

be insufficient, asking why should there be implied indignity in information transmission. In social change processes, dissemination and dialogue must necessarily co-exist.

This dissemination-dialogue dialectic in a mass-mediated context is illustrated in the radio farm forum experiments. In 1956, India was the site of the famous Pune Radio Farm Forum Project, which was a field experiment to evaluate the effects of radio farm forums, each consisting of several dozen villagers who gathered weekly to listen to a half-hour radio program (broadcast by All India Radio) and then to discuss its contents (Kivlin, Roy, Fliegel, & Sen, 1968). The theme of the radio forums was “Listen, Discuss, Act!” One of the radio broadcasts might deal with rodents as a problem. Following discussion of this topic in a radio forum, villagers would mount a rat-control campaign in their community.

The research evaluation showed that the Pune radio farm forums helped to “unify villagers around common decisions and common actions,” widening “the influence of the *gram panchayat* [village government] and broadening the scope of its action” (Mathur & Neurath, 1959, p. 101). The farm forums spurred discussions among villagers, leading to decisions about digging wells, adopting purebred bulls and Leghorn chickens, and establishing *balwadis* (children’s enrichment centers) (Singhal & Rogers, 2001). At the village level, the radio forums acted like voluntary organizations “whose members were neither appointed by authority nor elected to represent specific group interests,” signifying an important experiment in village democracy (Mathur & Neurath, 1959, p. 101). Members voluntarily engaged in village clean-up drives, planting papaya trees, and building pit latrines.

The primary purpose of the radio farm forums was to disseminate information on new agricultural practices to rural farmers in India. Radio broadcasting allowed information to be disseminated widely to tens of millions of farmers, residing in tens of thousands of Indian villages. As dozens of farmers gathered around a radio set and heard these messages, simultaneous processes of both dissemination and dialogue unfolded on the ground. Farmers, who were opinion leaders, disseminated their ideas among fellow farmers on how to incorporate new agricultural practices. Concurrently, discussion and dialogue among participating farmers shaped the decisions and actions about agricultural and community organizing initiatives.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), a champion of dialogic action, acknowledges the role of dissemination in dialogue (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). The teacher, the facilitator, often an outsider, brought new skills and ideas to oppressed communities; even if it was the skill of facilitating a process of dialogue, self-reflection, and self-actualization on part the disempowered. In a similar vein, while being a strong proponent of dialogue (like Socrates), Friere’s ideas are still disseminated through his writing. And, his writings, in turn, stimulate dialogue among readers and practitioners. Similarly, the Bible disseminates Jesus’ parables far and wide. This dissemination of the parables stimulates dialogue in millions of churches, homes, and public forums. This dialogue, in turn, influences the Bible’s further dissemination.

In Closing

Too often, there is a tendency to dichotomize the dissemination and dialogic aspects of a social change phenomenon. Both dissemination and dialogue are vital ingredients in organizing for social change efforts.

Dissemination involves information transmission and is characterized by showing, telling, and even directing. Mass-media messages, by their very nature, are mostly dissemination. Dissemination also occurs in interpersonal or group situations in which a more knowledgeable source conveys information, or an opinion, to other(s). Dissemination is *necessary* in any organizing for social change effort.

Dialogue involves mutuality and reciprocity in information exchange. Through the iterative practice of dialogue, human relationships are co-created, co-regulated, and co-modified. Dialogue can be transformative as something new (empathy, trust, commonality) is created in the interaction for the co-participants. Dialogue is *necessary* in any organizing for social change effort.

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Endnotes

¹ The present piece draws upon ideas presented in Chapter 4 (titled “The dialectic of dissemination and dialogue in rural India) in Michael J. Papa, Arvind Singhal, and Wendy H. Papa’s newly-released (2006) book, *Organizing for Social Change: A Dialectic Journey of Theory and Praxis* (Sage Publications).

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