

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Editorial: A Special Issue Focused on Participatory Dissemination With the Interdisciplinary Research Leaders

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The intellectual lineage of this special issue traces back to JPRM's 2025 collaboration with us as representatives of the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Interdisciplinary Research Leaders \(IRL\)](#) program, which produced [JPRM's first IRL special issue](#) focused on community-centered research practice. Within that collection, *participatory dissemination* emerged as one of the most compelling and generative themes, present across projects, yet insufficiently examined on its own terms. What became increasingly clear was that the field lacked a dedicated scholarly space to interrogate and examine participatory dissemination on its own terms: its methods, tensions, forms, ethics, and politics.

To our knowledge, no peer-reviewed journal has dedicated a special issue exclusively to *participatory dissemination* as a subject of inquiry. While the term appears across the scholarly literature, a clear, citable, and stand-alone definition of “participatory dissemination” as a discrete conceptual and methodological domain remains notably absent. This special issue aims to address that gap. In doing so, it marks a potential field-defining moment, not merely by gathering exemplary work, but by asserting that participatory dissemination is a coherent, consequential, and undertheorized domain within participatory research methods that merits sustained scholarly attention.

We offer the following working definition to anchor this issue and invite continued refinement by the field: *Participatory dissemination refers to the intentional, collaborative process through which research knowledge is created, interpreted, shared, and mobilized **with** — rather than **for** — communities throughout the entire arc of community-engaged research.* Unlike conventional dissemination, which is typically treated as a terminal and concluding activity culminating in academic publication of the outcomes, *participatory dissemination* is embedded from the outset. It helps shape research questions, documents the evolving research process, informs ongoing interpretation, and develops alongside community relationships, priorities, and action. Its forms are diverse, adaptive, and community-responsive, extending well beyond peer-reviewed scholarship to include community forums, policy briefs, visual

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and performing arts, storytelling across physical and digital media, popular education, workshops, and other dissemination modalities defined by and accountable to the communities most affected by the research. Grounded in principles of equity, co-ownership, reciprocity, and epistemic justice, *participatory dissemination* treats knowledge not as a product to be delivered, but as a living process to be collectively shaped and shared.

Importantly, this framework also requires distinguishing between audience and community in research dissemination. An audience is approached through transactional, one-directional communication designed to maximize visibility and transmit information to relatively disconnected groups, such as policymakers, practitioners, or academic peers. The primary goal when addressing an audience is informing, raising awareness, or getting cited. Conversely, a community is approached through participatory, many-to-many, and relational engagement aimed at building trust, creating actionable change, and ensuring research equity. This approach relies on engaged dissemination methods, such as town halls and workshops, to empower local understanding and translate findings into community-led solutions for groups bound by shared interests or lived experiences.

To be truly effective, research strategies must integrate both approaches: delivering succinct statistical overviews to policymaking *audiences* while simultaneously involving the *community* at the heart of the study through dialogue sessions that explore how the findings affect their everyday experiences. This special issue serves as a strategic call to action to address the current absence of such community-focused engagement.

The significance of *participatory dissemination* lies not only in *what* is shared but in *how* the act of sharing itself becomes a mechanism for community engagement, relationship-building, and social change. When dissemination is understood and treated as a collaborative and ongoing process rather than a concluding act, it creates sustained opportunities for dialogue across constituencies rarely reached through traditional academic dissemination, engaging young people, community members, policymakers, practitioners, and advocates in ways that can produce meaningful societal impact (Evans, 2016). In this sense, *participatory dissemination* is not merely a method of communicating research; it is itself a tool for effective community engagement in its own right. Crucially, when communities share ownership over dissemination or lead it entirely, the resulting products are transformed. They become more accessible, more creative, more culturally resonant, and more likely to be trusted and used. Freed from the constraints of academic genre and language, they reach people in forms, spaces, and languages that reflect lived realities rather than institutional expectations. Their impact extends beyond publications and policy documents; they touch human lives directly. This is what makes *participatory dissemination* not only a methodological innovation, but also an ethical and political commitment.

Proactive, action-oriented dissemination planning is still too rare for community-engaged research teams (Gollust et al., 2025). Despite broad consensus that dissemination is a core principle of participatory research, community involvement in interpretation and dissemination of findings remains among the least practiced stages of the research process — a pattern documented across more than a decade of research (Chen et al., 2010; Vangeepuram et al., 2023). The gap between what *participatory dissemination* aspires to be and what it looks like in practice remains wide, shaped by structural constraints of time, resources, training, and an academic incentive system that continues to reward journal articles over community impact. This special issue is offered in response to that gap. We hope that the work gathered here — in its breadth of methods, populations, and forms — will inspire researchers, community partners, practitioners, and scholars to reimagine what dissemination can look like, and to claim it as a creative, political, and deeply human act. We hope it sparks conversation, provokes new approaches, and above all, emboldens teams to bring their communities into the full life of their research — not just as participants, but as co-authors of how knowledge moves in the world.

Mirroring the enthusiasm seen in our initial special topic, participatory dissemination also sparked a level of interest that was even more substantial. Moreover, many of the letters of intent were from community organizations and practitioners, not just from academicians. This special issue comprises 29 excellent articles from community-based practitioners and university or other institutional researchers, including eight articles from IRL fellows or program staff. The articles describe work done both in urban centers and in rural areas, in all regions of the US as well as in Canada, the U.K., South Africa, and Kenya. The articles address a wide range of issues that impact our health, including cancer disparities, HIV stigma, perinatal healthcare, mental health, housing, policing practices, environmental justice, and civic engagement; and focus on a wide variety of populations, from adolescent boys in South Africa to Latino and immigrant residents of Iowa, to Asian-American residents in the US South, to rural tribal communities in Montana, to child farmworkers, to residents of flood-prone areas in New York City. Five of the articles focus on youth-led participatory action research. The articles describe creative participatory dissemination tools such as town halls, music videos, art, infographics, games, open mic events, online interactive maps, and podcasts; they describe using these sometimes at the end of the research study but often woven throughout the research, using dissemination strategies to initially engage communities, involve them in designing studies or interventions, and pave the way for action.

Participatory dissemination, as reflected across this special issue, is no longer a peripheral consideration in community-engaged research; it is central to how knowledge is made meaningful, actionable, and just. The contributions gathered here demonstrate that when dissemination is approached as a shared, iterative, and relational process, it expands the reach,

relevance, and quality of research. It challenges longstanding hierarchies of knowledge production and invites a reorientation of power toward communities not only as partners in inquiry but as leaders in how knowledge is interpreted, expressed, and mobilized. *Participatory dissemination* is what makes research actionable.

What, then, are the next steps? First, there is a clear need for continued conceptual development. This issue offers a working definition, but the field must now test and refine the definition as well as expand it across contexts, disciplines, and communities. Second, *participatory dissemination* must be more intentionally integrated into research design from the outset, not as an afterthought, but as a core component of methodological rigor and ethical practice, resources, and infrastructure that support creative and community-driven dissemination strategies. Third, institutional and funding structures must evolve to recognize and reward *participatory dissemination* as legitimate and impactful scholarly work. Without shifts in academic incentives and evaluation metrics, the gap between aspiration and practice will persist. Journals, funders, and academic institutions and organizations/associations all have a role to play in legitimizing diverse dissemination products and valuing their contributions to public impact. Finally, this body of work reminds us that *participatory dissemination* is ultimately about relationships, trust, reciprocity, and accountability. Its success depends not only on methods but on a sustained commitment to equity and shared ownership. If taken seriously, *participatory dissemination* has the potential to transform not just how research findings are communicated but how research itself is understood as a collective endeavor that lives beyond publication and is accountable to the communities it seeks to serve. In this way, the next step is not simply to do dissemination differently; it is to rethink what counts as knowledge, who it is for, and how it moves in the world. In conclusion, the next step is clear: not to disseminate better, but to share power.

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