

## *Freedom, Friction and the Future of Knowledge for Social Change*

The following is the text of a speech given by Michael Edwards on November 12 at a public lecture at the Coady International Institute. The speech was the keynote address at the Coady/IDRC *Research for Change* Learning Forum. Michael is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at Demos, and the editor of [Transformation, an online journal of Open Democracy](http://www.futurepositive.org). You can find more of his work at <http://www.futurepositive.org>.

Thanks to all of you for coming here this afternoon and everyone else who's watching via the webcast. I'm here, like most of you I suspect, because I believe passionately that - far from being an add-on to the "real" work or something that's reserved for leisurely endeavors in libraries - the pursuit of knowledge is centrally related to the transformation of society.

But exactly how central - how knowledge and social change are connected to each other in concrete terms - is a hugely challenging question that I've been struggling with the whole of my working life - and I mean struggling: I'm not speaking here tonight as some kind of magician who can pull rabbits out of hats in order to solve the dilemmas we're discussing. But I do have some experience which I hope can be useful, and in the next 35 minutes I want to share with you some of the lessons I've learned and some thoughts on the challenges that lie ahead.

There are lots of pathways we could use to explore these relationships, but I've chosen one that seems especially topical right now, and that's the struggle between "freedom and friction" as I put it in my title. Because it seems to me that we currently enjoy an unprecedented amount of freedom to create knowledge and share it with others, often in new and exciting ways that are much more open, egalitarian, empowering and democratic. But at the same time, freedom is not an unalloyed good in relation to social change, because it can overwhelm us with information, and because it provides more opportunities for knowledge to be captured and manipulated by vested interests. And that's why we need friction as I call it, applied in the form of both rigor and democracy.

How we manage the inevitable tensions that exist between freedom and friction will, I think, determine the extent to which knowledge is or is not a liberating force in the future, a central foundation for building democratic societies or simply another asset whose control and ownership is superimposed on pre-existing patterns of inequality and power. So that's my central thesis. But before I go any further let me be clear what I mean when I use the phrase "knowledge for social change."

How do we know what we know? It's an interesting question isn't it - because we found it in Wikipedia maybe, or because someone we trust told us it was true, from a recognized expert or professor, because "you can't argue with the numbers" as the saying goes, or maybe more from our own experience and intuition. Do we really look for knowledge, or just for opinions that confirm what we already believe? Outside the science laboratory there is no objectively-verifiable, universal or unambiguous truth, so knowledge for social change is always something that has to be negotiated and struggled over. And in this process of negotiation hierarchies of knowledge are created that rank different forms according to their supposed usefulness and legitimacy, but if we're honest with each other we probably don't agree on the results they produce.

The one I use is fairly simple, though it's a closer to an ecosystem of complementary approaches to knowledge and knowing rather than a hierarchy, and it consists of four things that nestle inside of each other like a stack of Russian dolls: data, information, knowledge and wisdom. Data equals numbers, which are usually essential but only form the basis for a conversation about their meaning; information is data plus other inputs that constitute the raw material for knowledge production; knowledge is information that has been analyzed, tested and processed in one way or another; and wisdom is the ability to utilize knowledge effectively in action.

It's difficult to develop a wise approach to social change without having at least some data that describe what is happening, but there are plenty of examples of data that aren't used very wisely – so in that sense wisdom is the highest form of knowledge because it contains all the others. Knowledge is a like a toolkit with lots of different tools that have to be used according to the circumstances. A hammer and a screwdriver are not in competition with each other, just as randomized control trials and story-telling can be equally valuable and legitimate. What matters is how these different forms of knowledge fit together to form a comprehensive picture.

So much for knowledge, but what about knowledge for social change – what does that mean? For me it doesn't mean knowledge that one particular group happens to agree with, whether defined by politics, issues or identities - that would be far too parochial. Instead I think it means knowledge that animates the generalized forces of public debate, collective action and governance that combine to foster social change over long periods of time. "In democratic countries" said Alexis de Toqueville in the 1840s, "the knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge." He was talking about the knowledge (both theoretical and practical) that is necessary for successful collective action, but I think the same observation applies to different forms of knowledge that are required to equip people to participate effectively in democracy, community-building, social accountability, public policy debates or simply understanding who they are and what is going on around them as a precondition for successful social action – what's been described as "civic" or "public" knowledge. Knowledge of this kind doesn't automatically shift power relations or produce social change, but without it no social change is possible because the processes that underlie it would be irremediably weakened.

So, knowledge for social change consists of ecosystems of data, information, knowledge and wisdom that are used to animate the public sphere and support the agency of people who want to change the world for the better. Now that we've sorted that one out, let's move on to consider the struggle between freedom and friction that provides the context in which these processes are taking shape. For anyone who's involved in the world of knowledge these are exciting times, and that's principally because we have more freedom than ever before to create, share and communicate with one another. Obviously the impact of the worldwide web and social media has been tremendously important here, and although information technologies have some ambiguous social and political effects, it's indisputable that they lower the costs and increase the speed, ease and reach of information exchange, enabling an unprecedented level of access to knowledge, assuming of course that you have an internet connection.

It's also true that experimentation is growing, with lots of new or different ways of producing and communicating knowledge without having to be restricted by conventional boundaries. Co-creation is much more common nowadays, made easier by techniques like data visualization and storytelling which require fewer credentials and less research training. In fact the production of knowledge is

experiencing the same process of disintermediation that is common to other forms of production in the modern economy – meaning that large intermediary institutions like universities and think tanks are being challenged, and eventually may be replaced, by new kinds of knowledge organizations and brokers like distributed networks.

That’s especially important at a time when higher education is moving towards a more corporate model that delivers highly specialized and highly profitable knowledge to other academics or on contract to governments and businesses on the one hand, and much more basic knowledge or information to students at the lowest cost possible on the other. In many parts of the world, the social change role of the university is being eroded, but one could argue that this trend is counterbalanced by the explosion of knowledge communities outside of formal education, especially as those communities tend to be populated and animated by a different knowledge culture, particularly among younger people who are less comfortable with traditional hierarchies of knowledge production or fixed standards of legitimacy – and that’s great news for disadvantaged or marginalized communities.

Of course there are some threats to all this freedom and diversity and experimentation from some quarters – notably government censorship and surveillance, and because the infrastructure of communications (including social media and the web) is still owned by corporations - but it’s very difficult to block the emerging processes of knowledge production and sharing since they can simply move elsewhere.

So increasingly the message is clear: if you want to create knowledge then go ahead – you don’t need to play by someone else’s rules any longer. And believe me I know what an exciting prospect that is. I launched a new web magazine in July to tell the stories of people who are transforming their societies ([www.opendemocracy.net/transformation](http://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation)): it was started for peanuts, it runs on a shoestring, it’s totally open access and it’s already reached over a quarter of a million readers in 115 countries in its first four months. So if you are not making the absolute most of the freedom that’s now available to generate and communicate knowledge for social change, then it’s time to get moving.

But, and it’s a very significant “but,” freedom is not an unalloyed good, and it doesn’t by itself solve the problems of knowledge for social change, for two reasons. Firstly, it’s increasingly difficult to make sense of information and channel it in the right directions when there’s so much of it about. It’s like drinking from the proverbial fire hose, so why make the problem even worse by generating more “water?” On pretty much every issue that’s important (and here I’m being a bit provocative), it’s not that we lack information or even knowledge about what we have to do; the problem is that the knowledge we do have is ignored or disputed.

But maybe that’s inevitable: the more information we have and the lower the barriers to entry, the more accessible it is and the more filters we are going to need to check facts, scrutinize statements, make advocacy claims more transparent, balance different views, ensure that there are no missing voices or simply make more sense of all this stuff – to process and convert data and information into wisdom.

And because we have a volume problem we also have problems of speed and superficiality, because time is squeezed out, attention spans are shortening, and increasingly only short-form argumentation is prioritized. Welcome to the world of the ever-shorter executive summary, the mandatory op-ed as a substitute for the essay, and the front-loaded books that publishers now demand because they know that people will only read the first chapter, if they read anything at all. “Read less, know more” is the title of new series of short books from the Guardian. If you thought that getting your message across in 140 characters on twitter was tough, try the new generation of text apps like KakaoTalk and WeChat that are taking traffic away from Facebook – and if you don’t know what the hell I’m talking about then grab someone under the age of 25 at the reception afterwards and ask them! “Once I was scuba diver in a sea of words” writes one critic, “now I zip along the surface of knowledge like a guy on a jet ski.” Who will have the time, commitment and courage to delve deeply into the world of knowledge for social change under such conditions, and what might we lose as a result? Speed and convenience don’t lend themselves to the interrogation of assumed truths and uncontested facts.

Who needs an editor when everyone has a blog or can submit material to sites like Huffington Post that accept or reject it virtually unchanged? Who needs peer review when publishers and donors are more interested in controversy and KLOUT scores? Indeed, who needs a university, an institution that may end up as outmoded in the next century as the Encyclopedia Britannica is today? The second problem with the unprecedented freedom we enjoy is that it creates more opportunities for knowledge to be used or manipulated for political, ideological or commercial ends, and not for social change. Those who celebrate freedom see an emerging “knowledge commons,” but a “knowledge industry” might be more realistic. The playing field for knowledge production is never level, nor is it populated by people whose only goal is truth for its own sake - it’s a battlefield of different interests that all use knowledge to advance their objectives, and therefore adapt it, twist it, and filter it to support their goals. Of course this includes you and me (don’t tell me you’re immune to these tendencies since I’m certainly not). We all shy away from discordant information, especially when it contradicts our sacred cows about social change. But the art of thinking is supposed to be painful and difficult because our assumptions have to be exposed and tested.

Some of this manipulation is straightforwardly commercial – like paying to promote one of your posts on Facebook or what Wikipedia calls “non-neutral editing,” or the email I received last week from something called the Banner Alzheimer’s Institute that invited me to a briefing and promised to pay me \$100 if I wrote a short blog post afterwards. It was only when I read the small print that I found out the Institute was linked to a drug company called Genetech which is pursuing trials of a new drug to treat Alzheimer’s, and that my blog would be expected to extol its many virtues. That’s a small example of a much bigger problem that you’ll know well if you work in a university in which only certain kinds of research attract commercial sponsorship, or if you work in a think tank that’s funded by foundations or corporate donors who all have their own knowledge agendas. Increasingly we get the knowledge that someone, somewhere is willing to pay for.

But of course knowledge is also manipulated for political or ideological ends. Advocacy campaigns become obsessed with marketing a limited range of ideas instead of engaging with the public in a search for genuine understanding. Internet trolls and sock puppets (or users with assumed identities) post deliberately misleading commentary on articles. “Astro-turfing” is spreading – creating the false impression that your ideas have mass support. And of course many people who produce and disseminate knowledge are simply barefaced liars.

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These problems aren't always due to deliberate misbehavior. It may be that the same body of knowledge is simply read differently by different groups. That's what's happening in the USA around charter schools for example (private schools run on business lines in the public school system), where both pro- and anti-reform factions draw different conclusions from the same evidence base. Or take the example of so-called "golden rice" – genetically modified and vitamin enriched varieties that are seen as a savior or a Trojan horse by researchers and activists who are measuring and evaluating them against different criteria.

At its most developed, the goal of overtly-politicized knowledge production is to dominate the entire intellectual environment in which decisions are made, from academic journal articles to op-eds in major newspapers, since that's the best way to embed the dominance of your ideas in the body politic and the popular imagination. Ultimately, opinion and ideology become fact or common sense – something that's already happening around the role of markets and privatization in the provision of public services, for example.

So, as a result of these two developments - information overload and the ease of manipulation - knowledge is increasingly a sphere in which a certain amount of oversight and accountability are actually essential to the goals of social change. And that's why friction is so important. Friction slows things down, it gets in the way of easy decision making by promoting participation, and it gives more people a voice in the knowledge production process. Like rocks in a stream, friction helps us to surface, discuss and negotiate different views and interpretations. The absence of friction might seem attractive when we want to create knowledge for social change, but it can actually privilege powerful interests that lurk in the background. So - paradoxically perhaps - friction in the form of restraints, rules and standards is needed to preserve freedom and independence in knowledge production, and to avoid this process from being dominated by vested interests. So, how can friction be applied? I think there are two main ways – one is through the application of rigor, and the other is through the practice of democracy. These forces often pull in different directions, since rigor implies some degree of closure and hierarchy (or at least verticality), while democracy demands openness and equality (or at least horizontal connections), but both are important. You could say that these tensions are embedded in the nature of the work we are doing, especially if like me you are a social scientist. That phrase trips off the tongue, but remember that it's made up from two separate and different words - the social and the scientific - that are woven around contrasting strands of DNA.

It may sound anachronistic to defend ideas about academic rigor in a conversation about knowledge for social change, but that's what I'm going to do, because rigor is crucial in unmasking ideology and self-interest in knowledge production: the painstaking parsing out of problems and solutions; the interrogation of costs and benefits as objectively as possible; the ability to identify the individual pieces of a puzzle and put them together in patterns that can inform decision-making; the skills of presenting different theories of change so that evidence can be re-evaluated from different perspectives; the depth of understanding that's built up by studying similar phenomena or regions over long periods of time; the potential for accountability that results from the deliberate distancing of oneself from a predetermined position; and the freedom, independence and sheer bloody-mindedness to stand apart from the crowd and shout out "no, this emperor has no clothes." All these facets of rigor are vital to knowledge for social change, and they are one big reason why the involvement of academics and other trained researchers can be so important in research

partnerships with communities and civil society organizations. Rigor isn't the exclusive property of the university of course, but it may well be easier to practice and protect there despite the trend towards corporatization I highlighted earlier. Of course this kind of friction can also work against social change – I mentioned censorship earlier but we should also recognize trends in philanthropy and foreign aid towards a more technocratic approach to knowledge production, even what one writer calls “quantiphilia” – the privileging of numbers as indicators of rigorous research. As donors and governments move more and more towards payment by results and value for money, how these concepts are measured and interpreted become crucial questions for the politics of knowledge, and that's one reason why we need another kind of friction that is rooted in democracy and participation, so that the definition and application of rigor itself can be contested.

Any definition of what is valuable or good or meaningful in knowledge for social change has to be democratically negotiated, since there are no universally accepted reference points or measurements. Such judgments always depend on context, position and culture, and they are based on the biased and partial perspectives and priorities of different individuals. “Research excellence,” which is the title of the IDRC-funded Forum that is going on at the Coady Institute this week – could mean something quite narrow if defined in terms of traditional standards of academic rigor, or something very broad if defined to include other criteria including relevance to policy and action, participation and empowerment of those who are involved in the research process, and capacity development in the communities or NGOs concerned.

Structuring the coproduction of knowledge in more democratic or participatory terms is itself a useful form of friction, as anyone who has been involved in partnerships between researchers and communities or civil society groups will attest. Such relationships are rarely easy or comfortable because of differences in cultures, timescales, priorities, language, education and technical expertise. But that's a good thing, because friction of this kind generates innovation and added value for both sides.

My experience suggests that whenever you encounter such tensions then it's best to acknowledge them so that they can be addressed, not to ignore them or pretend they don't exist. In some situations they may be unbridgeable, so you go your separate ways. But more often than not (as the case studies from the IDRC forum suggest), such differences are manageable if you have good human relationships, flexibility on all sides, and a supportive context so that the sponsors of research and others are not breathing down your neck. When researchers and activists agree to accompany each-other over a substantial number of years so that trust and mutual understanding can develop, collaborative skills can be strengthened, and areas of common ground and disagreement discovered, aired and resolved (or not), most of these problems seem to drift away. But maintaining this kind of continuity is important because the links between research and action or research and influence are usually non-linear and unpredictable. It may not be that final, official report that makes the difference, but an unplanned conversation that you had in the corridor of a government department, for example. So you have to be prepared to give things time and to go with the flow, and be willing to be uncomfortable in the gray zones, the ambiguous, neither one-thing-nor-another spaces in which knowledge for social change is co-created.

In conclusion, we have to make the best of both freedom and friction in order to make knowledge a more powerful force for social change. And that means three things. First, stretching our imaginations about the nature of knowledge production to take advantage of the freedom we have

to invent new modalities and methods. Second, developing better ways of imposing friction around these efforts to safeguard knowledge for social change, rooted in both rigor and democracy. And third, forging new communities of practice, partnerships and knowledge networks that provide the infrastructure for these other two tasks.

The upshot is that those of us who are committed to this path face a never-ending balancing act between different demands and priorities – the equivalent of keeping lots of spinning plates in the air simultaneously and hoping that none of them crash to the ground. There is no perfect way of doing this - no text book or model project, no training course or magic bullet. To inhere within yourself all of the worlds of knowledge and action, freedom and friction, rigor and democracy, is immensely demanding at both the human and the methodological levels - which is why knowledge for social change requires continuous personal and political commitment. This is what lies ahead for those of us who seek to contribute to the transformation of society with our hands, our hearts and our heads conjoined. I wish you the best of luck in that endeavor, and thank you for listening.