CHAPTER 3
DISSEMINATION AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW IN MODERN SOCIAL CONFLICT

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A. INTRODUCTION

The widespread, public dissemination of the principles of international humanitarian law (IHL) by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a relatively new concept, dating back only as far as the late 1960s and the Nigeria-Biafra war. Until that time, the ICRC had been content to make its outstanding humanitarian efforts known to governments and to direct its lobbying efforts at them. By 1970, however, the development of mass communications had brought the horrors of war into the home, and it became clear that the nature of that war had changed. No longer was organized combat between trained armies the norm; now the struggles focused not on politics or territory but on community identity and survival, with no clear distinction between soldier and civilian, attacker and victim. With this, and the extensive violations of humanitarian law in the Nigerian Civil War in mind, the ICRC added two dimensions to its already extensive diplomatic dissemination activities: operational information, to publicize and enhance its activities in areas of conflict, and the public dissemination of the principles of the Red Cross and IHL as part of a longer-term peace-building process.¹ This Chapter offers a very brief overview of the ICRC’s three dissemination functions and how they have been shaped by the changing face of violent social conflict.²


² This Chapter makes no effort to describe the ICRC’s organizational structure or budgetary commitment to dissemination, and it barely touches upon the respective roles of the various components of the Red Cross Movement. It purports to do no more than identify a few recent developments of interest regarding the role of dissemination in modern conflict.
B. DISSEMINATION DEFINED

Dissemination, as it is generally called today, has been known by a variety of names over the decades: education, teaching, even propaganda. It has had even more definitions than titles, but no matter how it is defined, the emphasis seems to be on its purposes and objectives.

The Red Cross itself has defined dissemination as

spreading knowledge of international humanitarian law, of the Movement in general and the ICRC in particular, of the Fundamental Principles which guide the activities of the components of the Movement, and of those activities themselves. Its main objectives are to limit violations of the law and human suffering on the one hand, and to facilitate humanitarian action on the other.3

Two ICRC delegates in describing a dissemination operation in Africa defined dissemination in terms of its goals:

activities which seek to promote rules of behavior intended to mitigate certain consequences of violence and conflict which are held to be unacceptable by the community of States party to the humanitarian law treaties.4

So viewed, dissemination

refers to the very large number and wide range of activities designed to promote the Red Cross spirit and institutions, together with instruction on proper behavior in the event of conflict, which the Movement has been conducting since its inception.5

In addition to providing humanitarian aid, ICRC delegates are there primarily to . . . call upon all the combatants to comply with humanitarian law. For the ICRC, endeavouring to send that message in the very midst of war (or to “disseminate,” to use the organization’s own terminology) is the result of a twofold objective: firstly, promote acceptance of humanitarian aid and the way it is implemented; secondly, promote acceptance of the humanitarian law on which the protection of victims is based.6

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3 Answers to your questions (ICRC, Geneva, Switzerland), Dec. 1995 (illustrated brochure, question nine).


5 Édith Baeriswyl, Teaching young people to respect human dignity, 37 INTL REV. OF THE RED CROSS 357, 368 (1997).