WILBUR SCHRAMM: "EVANGELIST OF COMMUNICATION RESEARCH"[1]

Interview with Jefferson Pooley

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Abstract:
The following interview is dedicated to the 110th anniversary of Wilbur Schramm, one of the "Founding fathers" of communication research in the United States. Jefferson Pooley, the historian of communication as a field of research, shares his opinion on the role of Schramm in the process of institualisation of communication studies in the United States.
Keywords: history of communication research, Wilbur Schramm, Cold War, United States, communication theory

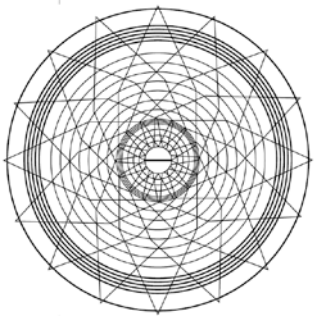
- Dr. Pooley, your academic interest is the history of mass communication research in the USA?

- Yes, since I was a graduate student I have been interested in the history of mass communication research, mostly in the United States and mostly in the period before, during and after World War II. So I would say in the interwar years, World War II and in the beginning of the Cold War.

- This was just the period when Wilbur Schramm also conducted his research.

- That is right. He was interested in, but not actually a part of, any field of communication yet, which after all in the interwar period didn't have meaning anyway in the US—until he joined the Office of War Information, which was part of war-time propaganda bureaucracy. There he became interested in these questions and in 1943, as you probably know, he got the offer to become the director of the University of Iowa journalism school and he had already, according to his biographer, in mind the

[1] The metaphor of W. Schramm as an evangelist was used by W. Eadie in his article "The communication discipline in the U.S.A. : history of development and current status", published at Vol. 1, N° 4 (2016) of our journal.

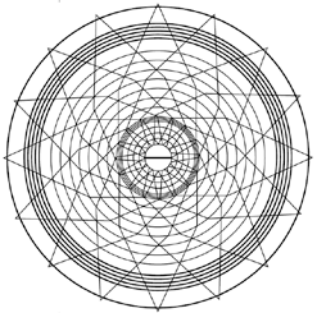


plan of cultivating a proper discipline of mass communication or communication. He then, of course, immediately after the war, set the foundation of the building and the infrastructure for the new field, including organising conferences, publishing readers, editing collections, and creating at least the second—some people say the first—doctoral program in communication at least in the United States. And soon he was moving to the University of Illinois, assembling a number of units under a new Division of Communication, and establishing another doctoral program. And after that, he moved to Stanford and then to Hawaii. All the way, he was building the infrastructure of what would become the communication field. And he was cheerleading and taking the lead of what you might call a "march through the journalism schools" with other figures in the 1950s. That is, taking the professional schools of journalism in the United States, which predated the field of communication, and establishing within Ph.D. programs in mass communication.

- Speaking about mass communication as the field of study, what do you think about the opinion that this field has developed from propaganda studies and that mass communication studies were just an applied field for the aims of propaganda during the Cold War, making propaganda more efficient. What is your point of view?

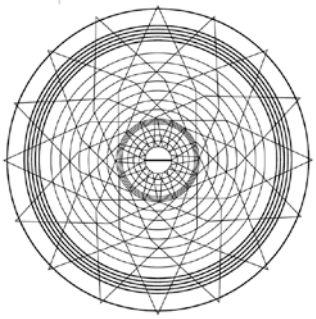
- I think that this is a way too simplistic idea. I mean, it is true that in the United States there were a number of people who started calling themselves "communication researchers" after World War II. Lots of them, including Schramm, were working for the United States' war-time bureaucracy, either on the civilian side or serving the war on the military side to help guide propaganda efforts against the Axis powers and to analyse those. And the same figures after the war continued to work on these topics. And, especially as the Cold War heated up, the same figures, including Schramm, became engaged in the U.S. government and military efforts to create and test and analyse propaganda. And this was the time when the Soviet Union and its allies in the Eastern bloc… But it was never enough to say that the discipline—in the U.S. at least—merely reflected its origins in propaganda work. First of all, there was before World War II, a great deal of mass communication research that didn't necessarily carry that label or consider itself a part of a self-conscious field, but which was concerned with a whole range of issues, including things like the effects of movies on kids or advertising's influence on democracy. And even after World War II, those figures—Wilbur Schramm included—were also writing about a range of topics that had nothing to do with the question of propaganda or international communication. Schramm himself was interested in a wide range of questions, including the fundamental theory of communication, the contribution of communication to development, the question of television effects on children and so on. That transcended the focus that he and others also had, especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s, on psychological warfare and propaganda.

- Thank You, Dr. Pooley. I would also ask your opinion about the other idea that was mentioned in your article [co-authored with Elihu Katz], "Further Notes on Why American Sociology Abandoned Mass Communication Research". There you said



that there were some disagreements among researchers, and that was mentioned by Emile McAnany in his article about Wilbur Schramm. Could you tell more about these disagreements between Berelson, Lazarsfeld and others and the whole situation itself?

- Yes, I think, that really is a fascinating moment in the history of social science in the United States, and not just communication research. The context was that Bernard Berelson, who was a library scientist/political scientist who had worked with Paul Lazarsfeld at the Office of Radio Research, which became the Bureau of Applied Social Science at Columbia. And soon after World War II he came to the Ford Foundation, to head its behavioural sciences program. Berelson was also—just before he took on that role—was helping to establish the Committee on Communication at the University of Chicago. And he was much involved in what, after the war, became the interdisciplinary field of communication research, occupied by sociologists, political scientists, and social psychologists—all of whom were excited about the new research methods such as sampling-based survey research and applying these questions to communication. The program in Chicago was one expression of this excitement, and Berelson also funded a great deal into communication research at Ford. By the late 1950s, after the Ford program was shuttered over in Congressional inquiries, Berelson had become discouraged. People like Paul Lazarsfeld had moved on to other questions, like mathematical sociology, for example. The other scholars Berelson mentioned as key figures in the history of the field, like Harold Lasswell, had stayed in the field, but weren`t working there so actively. The figure Carl Hovland, a psychologist, had died, and the fourth figure he mentioned, Kurt Lewin, had also died. As a result, Berelson claimed—and it was it the late 1950s, in his article in Public Opinion Quarterly, he said, as to the state of communication research, the field is "withering away". And what is fascinating is that Wilbur Schramm, in the same issue, replied to Berelson. He said that, for him, the field seemed to be quite alive. Schramm's argument was based on the fact that his day—just as an illustration—had been very busy: In the morning he had been meeting with the communication researchers, and in the afternoon he had classes with his Ph.D. students, and so on. And he claimed that communication research, to him, seemed very much alive. And one read on this exchange is that they were both right. Berelson, in his world of psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists, the field was disappearing. And what was happening was that there was a transition of that into Schramm's world of journalism school-based communication Ph.D. programs. And that explains in many ways why Berelson saw an ending, and Schramm saw a lot of frenetic activity. There is another reason why this exchange was really significant. And that is that Berelson laid out this four figure claim—I mentioned them already: Lazarsfeld, Lasswell, Hovland, and Lewin. And Schramm actually took these four figures and crafted a kind of origin story for the field of the U.S. communication research. He first elaborated it a few years later, in 1963 I would say, when he essentially described communication research in the United States as founded by these four figures. He described them as



the founders, and he repeated that narrative many times in additional publications so much, that now it is a kind of origin story that is repeated today, these four founders of communication research in the United States. Those four names, they were packaged together and came from Berelson, who declared in that essay I have mentioned, that the field was demised.

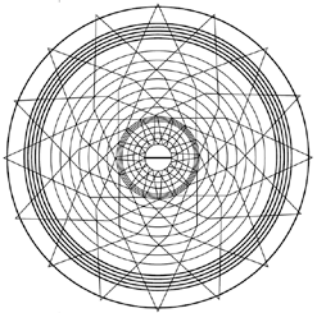
- Am I right to understand, this repeated story is meant, that it has won the story of Berelson – like the contested memories, the thing you are writing about in one of your publications?

- Yes, this is one of two stories about the origins of communication research that the United States' field has. I would call it "The Four Founders" story. And Wilbur Schramm was responsible for drafting this story, which has enlarged into the field's memory. I don't think it is incompatible with the second story, which Schramm was not responsible for, but which states that media researchers in the interwar period were convinced that media has powerful effects, that media are hypodermic and that they act like a magic bullet, which (according to this story) was shown to be exaggerated by empirical researchers such as Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia, who found in contrast after the war and during the war that media effects are limited. This "powerful-to-limited-effects" storyline, I would say, is the other major strand in the U.S. field's memory of itself that coexists with Wilbur Schramm's "Four Founder" story.

- Thank you for these details, Dr. Pooley. And what is your opinion, if this situation, when sociologists "abandoned" communication and mass communication research field, can be called "a new breath" for communication studies of that period or that just weakened it?

- That is a great question and I have wrestled with it myself. I think, first of all, that it is important to say that some sociologists did stay in the field—just that they were hired into communication programs and so, rather than reproducing PhD sociologists, they reproduced PhDs in communication studies. But the question is whether the abandonment of mass communication by sociologists was a bad thing. I do think there were some consequences that were harmful, in part because in that period, in the 1950s and 1960s, there remained by-and-large a more psychological orientation and more individualistic approach to media research. And that was certainly the approach which Wilbur Schramm adopted, but he was by no means the only major figure. There was a kind of focus on psychological social psychology as the background of the communication field. And funders helped reinforce it: the National Institute of Mental Health, for example, was a major funder of communication research in the 1960s. And that focus was distinctively psychological. And so I do think that there were intellectual consequences, namely a kind of focus on the individual to the exclusion of the social for a couple of decades at least, thanks to the sort of handoff to the journalism schools that I have mentioned earlier.

- Just one more question to continue this topic, Dr. Pooley. Could you tell more about the ideas of these further notes?



- Yes, that was the description of what I've been talking about. And, you know, it is really fascinating to write with Elihu Katz, as he was very active in this period. You know, he was working at the Bureau of Applied Social Research after World War II. And of course he wrote Personal Influence with Paul Lazarsfeld. And he has a kind of story about sociology and communication research. Actually we had disagreements about some of the explanations that the first footnote in the paper described. But one thing that was included in our paper is that even the sociology of the kind that he represented—his Personal Influence, public opinion survey research—often had an individualistic approach. Even if it wasn't always the case, or wasn't necessarily the case, the sociology that was abandoned already had some psychological assumptions in it. So the paper you are referring to was a more careful statement of this argument that I made earlier, which is that the sociology may have abandoned communication research in part due to some funding changes from the U.S. government, but also because journalism schools, which Wilbur Schramm and others had been successfully colonising, had taken some oxygen out of the room. There was a transfer of media research from this interdisciplinary post-war formation to professional schools of journalism.

- Thank You, Dr. Pooley. I also wanted to ask you about some details of Schramm's biography. Do you know that there was at least one student of Schramm who was from the Soviet Union?

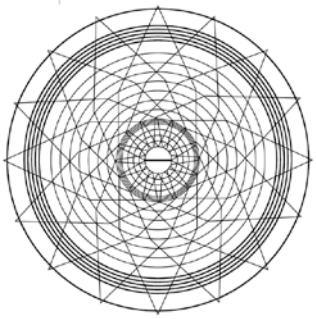
- No, I didn't know this, but now I'm very curious about it. Was it his doctoral student?

- Yes, as far as I know, he was writing his Ph.D. paper and Schramm was his supervisor in Stanford. Dr. McAnany remembered him after our question – our researcher and academic Yuri Sherkovin was his neighbour. In the USSR Yuri Sherkovin became one of the founding fathers of social psychology and has several followers that have become major academics in this field.

- That is really remarkable and fascinating. I don't know anything about the figure you are talking about, but it is a fact that Schramm—especially in the 1950s and 1960s—was in some ways the evangelist of communication research around the world and travelled to a number of places. There is some secondary research now about the influence of Schramm on China, for example. In a certain way he was an ambassador for U.S. communication research. And I wonder if this Russian student of Schramm you have mentioned, one of the founding fathers of social psychology in Russia, had research in the field of communication, if such a thing existed in this period in Russia?

- Actually, communication studies did not exist as a field of study in the Soviet Union, and I would also say, that it is a developing field of study in recent years – in modern Russia. And as we are just developing this field in Russia, this is really important for us to know about the founding father of communication studies in the United States. In Russia we have only one work of Schramm translated into Russian – The Four Theories of the Press.

- If there were a single work of Schramm that is worth translating into another language—partly because of its importance for the process of the institutionalisation of



the field—I would say, this is his writing of 1954, the first chapter of Process and Effects of Mass Communication, called "How Information Works". But I would say that the lessons from Schramm that were most important—probably these were not his intellectual contributions, although he made some, but his role as an institution builder, as a creator of infrastructure for the field of communication in its early state. He was a kind of salesmen and ambassador and program-establisher, and even a storyteller in the way when we are talking about the "Four Founders" story. And more than anything, he was a creator of the field, and less of an intellectual contributor.

- Or, as you have said earlier, Dr. Pooley, that he was an evangelist? We have already heard this point of view from William Eadie, and it is notable that you have used the same word.

- I actually don't know if Dr. Eadie was speaking about the communication term itself or communication research, but I obviously would agree, that he was an evangelist, an ambassador, as I have said earlier, for communication research. And certainly, he had a number of general works, even in the 1980s, which concerned communication as the fundamental human activity, and he made claims that communication is a kind of fundamental activity and so that communication research is the queen of social sciences—although he didn't use this exact phrase. So if Eadie refers to Schramm's evangelism for the field of communication research, I obviously agree. I'm intrigued, if he suggests that Schramm was an evangelist of the communication as an idea, which he may have been intending.

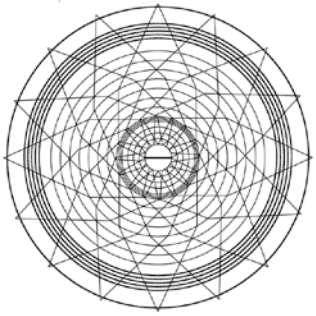
- Oh, I see, thank you for this point of view, Dr. Pooley. Before finishing the interview, I have a couple of questions about the memory of Schramm these days in the United States. What can you say about it?

- That is an excellent question. I get the sense that he is not so actively remembered, except when he is talked about as someone who established programs after World War II. He is occasionally referred to, and I'm trying to think of specific examples when he is fundamental to someone's intellectual worldview. There are figures like a Professor at the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania, Robert Hornik, who is a Wilbur Schramm Professor, a title that he chose to pay homage to Wilbur Schramm. McAnany's book is another register of continued interest. But I don't see a lot of active intellectual engagement with Schramm's actual works, especially the part of his writings about the media systems in 1940s, 1950s or even 1960s, since so much of that is distant from the media universe we are in now.

- Oh, so there is the second question on this topic – maybe you know any events in the United States that will be held this year, as this is the year of his jubilee – 110 from the year of his birth and 30 years from the year of his death. Maybe there are some anniversaries in the United States or not?

- I have not heard of anything that marked his anniversary at all.

- Thank You for these interesting points of view on Wilbur Schramm's heritage, Dr. Pooley. This was really important for us and we hope that the topic will be investigated further.



УИЛБУР ШРАММ: «ЕВАНГЕЛИСТ НАУКИ О КОММУНИКАЦИИ»[2]

Интервью с Джефферсоном Пули

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Аннотация:

В представленном интервью историк науки о коммуникации доктор Джефферсон Пули дает экспертный взгляд на моменты зарождения этого научного поля в Соединенных Штатах Америки, а также на роль Уилбура Шрамма как одного из активных деятелей в процессе институционализации науки. По мнению доктора Пули, хотя наука о коммуникациях действительно отчасти развивалась, в том числе, усилиями ученых, изучавших пропаганду и ее воздействие в период сразу после Второй Мировой войны, было бы неправильно сводить корни науки о коммуникации исключительно к исследованиям пропаганды, так как помимо этого в науке о коммуникации исследовалось много других, куда более фундаментальных тем, в том числе при участии самого Уилбура Шрамма.
Кроме того, доктор Пули рассказывает об уникальной ситуации, сложившейся вокруг поля науки о коммуникации – о конфликте между социологами, представителем которых стал исследователь Бернард Берельсон, и собственно исследователями коммуникации, представителем которых стал Уилбур Шрамм.
Доктор Пули также дает свою оценку текущей памяти Уилбура Шрамма, его интеллектуального и организационного вклада, подчеркивая, что если бы вставал выбор об одной работе Шрамма, переведенной на иностранный язык, он выбрал бы не «Четыре теории прессы» (единственная работа, одним из авторов которой был Уилбур Шрамм, переведенная на русский язык), а первую главу из учебника «Процесс и эффекты массовой коммуникации» под названием «Как работает информация».

Ключевые слова: наука о коммуникации, Уилбур Шрамм, история науки, Соединенные Штаты Америки, Холодная война, институализация науки

[2] Выражение «евангелист коммуникации» было употреблено по отношению к Уилбуру Шрамму У. Иди в статье «Наука о коммуникации в США: история развития и современное состояние», опубликованной в №4 нашего журнала за 2016 год.