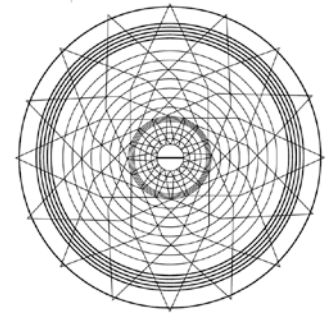


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History Of U.S. Communication Research*



WILBUR SCHRAMM AND THE “FOUR FOUNDERS” HISTORY OF U.S. COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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Abstract:

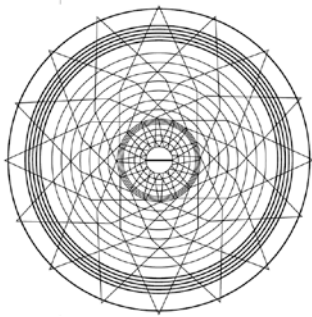
In its postwar institutional infancy, American mass communication research badly needed a history. Communication study in the United States, jerry-rigged from journalism schools and speech departments in the years following World War II, has from the beginning suffered from a legitimacy deficit. This talk traces Wilbur Schramm’s self-conscious and successful effort to supply such a history in the form of an origin myth, complete with four putative founders.

Keywords: history of communication studies, communication theory, communication practice, USA

In its postwar institutional infancy, American mass communication research badly needed a history. Communication study in the United States, jerry-rigged from journalism schools and speech departments in the years following World War II, has from the beginning suffered from a legitimacy deficit. This talk traces Wilbur Schramm’s self-conscious and successful effort to supply such a history in the form of an origin myth, complete with four putative founders. He was, I contend, a mnemonic entrepreneur who took scraps of memory lying about in the postwar social scientific landscape and assembled these into a coherent, and self-validating, narrative for the would-be discipline.

My argument is that the emerging field of “communication” was, by the early 1960s, flush with the resources that other, more established disciplines covet—research funds, students, and faculty jobs, all in abundance. But the field lacked legitimacy, and this deficit threatened all of its material riches. Communication studies scrambled to justify its very existence—faced, as it was, with a kind of cultural lag. Its institutional gains had far outpaced its status. In a series of nearly identical papers beginning in 1963, Schramm drafted four prominent (and unwitting) social scientists from existing disciplines—Paul Lazarsfeld (sociology), Kurt Lewin (psychology), Carl Hovland





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(psychology), and Harold Lasswell (political science)—and labeled them the field’s “founders.” This “four founders” storyline was adopted in most mass communication research textbooks soon after, and it remains today a widely repeated account of the field’s past. Schramm had, quite efficiently, used disciplinary history to help narrow the gap between communication’s institutional gains and its lowly status. This talk argues that Schramm’s entrepreneurial cunning, normally linked to his institution-building alone, in fact, helped shape the field’s memory of its self.

Disciplinary History

I want to, first, contrast Wilbur Schramm’s myth-building use of disciplinary history with three other typical uses of history. The first is to identify buried treasure—to recover a forgotten thinker or text in order to vivify or boost a contemporary approach with similar sympathies. Within U.S. communication research, the best example is the late James W. Carey’s decades-long campaign to recover the Chicago School of sociology from mnemonic oblivion (e.g., Carey 1996). He drafted, in effect, a usable past to justify his arguments with the mainstream “effects” tradition in the present.

The second use of disciplinary history is to set up a paradigmatic contrast—to glorify one’s own work as innovative and scientific by constructing a pre-scientific strawman predecessor. The best example was the history written by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. The Bureau researchers, as crystallized in the enormously influential account offered in the first chapter of Elihu Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) culminating work, *Personal Influence*, presented their prewar scholarly predecessors as naive, impressionistic, uninformed amateurs who mistakenly clung to a “hypodermic needle” or “magic bullet” theory of media influence—and who, what’s more, were under the spell of European “mass society theory,” itself an influential strawman construct (Pooley 2006). This remarkably resilient caricature of prewar influence was contrasted with the scientific, methodologically sophisticated (and reassuring) “limited effects” conclusions of the Bureau.

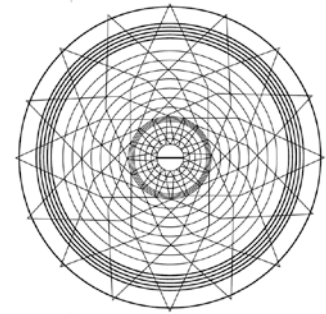
A third way that disciplinary history is used for present purposes is as a weapon in current turf battles between factions. The idea is to assign a disputant to a discredited past. Todd Gitlin’s famous 1978 article “Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm” is ostensibly centered on the mid-century Bureau and Paul Lazarsfeld. His argument is that the Columbia researchers provided academic cover for the media companies that funded their projects—by providing evidence that media influence is happily negligible. But Gitlin’s real target were his fellow, mainstream “effects” colleagues, not the mid-century sociologists.

Schramm’s history-writing, in contrast to those three uses of history, was in the service of disciplinary legitimacy. What he did was borrow the legitimacy of high-status, pre-disciplinary social scientists who dabbled in communication, by crafting a “four founders” origin story.

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Many young disciplines resort to story-telling like this. Here is Robert Alun Jones (1983) commenting on American sociology: “Sociology, like all emergent scientific disciplines, has generated a largely mythological past which performs the important functions of legitimating present practice and reinforcing the solidarity of its practitioners” (Jones 1983: 121). Indeed, sociology furnishes the best parallel example to Schramm’s case. As Charles Camic (1992) has shown, Talcott Parsons drafted four European thinkers in his iconic 1937 book *The Structure of Social Action*: Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Vinfredo Pareto, and Alfred Marshall. What Parsons was up to, according to Camic, was strategic predecessor selection: He borrowed their European, high-theory prestige to construct a charter for the young, would-be discipline of sociology.

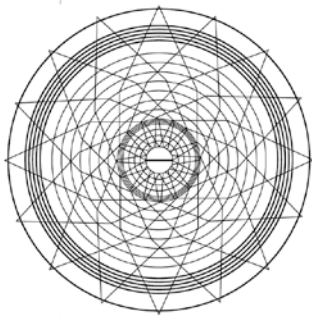
Schramm’s four founders story—his invention of tradition—relies heavily on what George Stocking (1965), the historian of anthropology, has called the “firsts” and “founders” approach to disciplinary history. It was a genuinely audacious act of mnemonic entrepreneurship. In effect, he drew upon the established social sciences in order to displace them. Schramm’s origin myth, I will argue, had some consequences, both good and bad.

U.S Field’s History

To get at Schramm’s core role in building the U.S. field, let me briefly recount its institutional history. The self-identified U.S. field of “communication” was born in the late 1930s, though, of course, a good deal of media scholarship was produced earlier. Communication had already been the primary topical focus of a new interdisciplinary field, public opinion research, which coalesced in the mid-1930s around sampling-based polling methods. The sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists who populated the public opinion field were not—most of them anyway—attracted to media questions per se. But the Rockefeller Foundation’s interest in educational broadcasting, along with media firms’ willingness to commission research on their audiences, meant that communication topics were prominent (Buxton 1994).

When German tanks rolled into Poland in 1939, a Rockefeller-sponsored “Communications Seminar” just underway, comprised of leading public opinion researchers, recast its mission to address the international emergency (Gary 1996). As J. Michael Sproule (1987) has shown, the “communication” label itself was settled on as a fresh alternative to “propaganda analysis,” which was identified with a blanket condemnation of propaganda at the moment when America needed to distinguish between the good and bad sort.

The Rockefeller Foundation soon established a network of communication research initiatives that, after Pearl Harbor, were incorporated into the federal government’s sprawling propaganda bureaucracy, which mobilized hundreds of social scientists across dozens of civilian and military agencies (Gary 1996). Public opinion researchers



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formed the nucleus of a wartime propaganda and morale research effort that drew dozens of other prominent scholars into its orbit (Converse 2009).

Communication topics and survey methods emerged from the war at the center of quantitative social science, especially within sociology, but also in essential strands of political science and psychology. There was palpable excitement about wartime methodological innovations, as well as about substantive findings, among the networks of newly connected scholars who returned to campus in 1945. Crucially, those methods and findings were identified with survey methods and what was increasingly referred to as “communication research.”

This was true even though there were few if any dedicated “communication researchers.” Instead, communication was an important topic of interdisciplinary study at Paul Lazarsfeld’s Bureau of Applied Social Research, at Michigan’s Survey Research Center, and at many other similar institutes that surfaced around the country (Converse 2009). Indeed, to a remarkable extent, “communication research” was coextensive with—the same thing as—elite social science writ large. The point could easily be exaggerated, but a significant number of the scholars who stood at the center of what soon became known as the “behavioral sciences” were identified with, and worked on, communication topics.

Communication research was arguably the main focus of the well-heeled, though short-lived Ford Foundation initiative that gave quantitative social science its postwar name—the Behavioral Sciences Program (1951–1957), directed by the Lazarsfeld collaborator Bernard Berelson. The behavioral sciences movement, such as it was, emerged in tandem with the Cold War national security state. With the fall of Czechoslovakia in 1948, the “loss” of China the next year, and the eruption of Korean hostilities soon after, the federal government—through the State Department, the Pentagon, and the recently chartered Central Intelligence Agency, and with the help of the major foundations—invested heavily in psychological warfare research (Simpson 1994).

From 1948 until the early 1950s, the government in effect remobilized the World War II propaganda and morale network. Another wave of sometimes clandestine federal sponsorship swept through the behavioral sciences in the mid-1950s onward as part of the new, post-colonial Cold War campaign for Third World hearts and minds.

Changes in the patronage

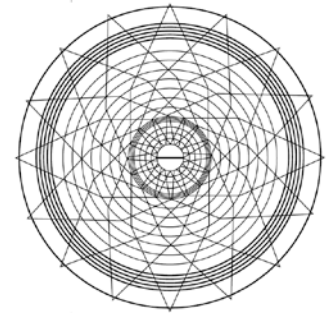
system for social science in the early to mid-1960s, among other factors, broke up this interdisciplinary nexus of Cold War communication research. As Hunter Crowther-Heyck (2006) has shown, the response to Sputnik in 1958 set in motion a new funding regime that, for a few years, overlapped with the mix of foundation, State Department, and military dollars that had been dominant.

Starting in the late 1950s, a new, far more prominent role was given to civilian federal agencies, including the National Science Foundation, and notably for psychologically

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inflected communication research, the National Institutes of Mental Health. In practice, these agencies emphasized disciplines and peer review; the old system had relied more on the informal advice of highly connected “brokers” like Lazarsfeld and Berelson.

There’s much more to say about this, but for our purposes, the crucial point is that interdisciplinary communication research gradually withered. The field, as a result, was delivered into the eager hands of Wilbur Schramm.

Schramm’s Field Building

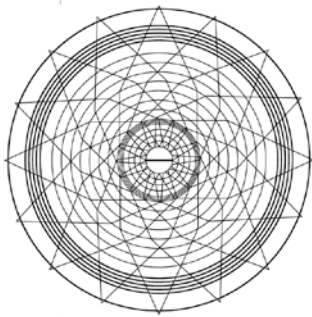
Schramm, a consummate academic entrepreneur originally trained in English, had conceived the idea of a journalism-based communication discipline while serving in the Office of War Information. In 1943, he left Washington to return to the University of Iowa after securing the deanship of its journalism school. Existing journalism programs already housed a narrow scholarly tradition that focused on the history of journalism, First Amendment analysis, and readership studies.

Schramm’s vision was far more ambitious, and he succeeded in establishing a Communication Ph.D. program at Iowa organized around quantitative social science. He left for the University of Illinois in 1947 at the invitation of the University’s president, a mentor who installed Schramm at the helm of a new and expansive Division of Communications. Schramm quickly established Illinois’ Institute of Communications Research, which was directly modeled on Lazarsfeld’s Bureau (Chaffee & Rogers 1997a). And he set out enthusiastically to erect the scaffolding that any new field needs, including conferences, readers, a usable past, and a network of tenure-track scholars.

Though a zealous Cold Warrior who had been showered with contracts from the State Department, military, and CIA, Schramm had all the while been building up an institutional home for an interdisciplinary field that, by the mid-1960s, had lost its other support. He had successfully relocated the field to journalism schools.

Schramm was joined in his takeover effort by the so-called “Bleyer children,” the name given to the students of the late journalism scholar Willard Bleyer, who in the interwar years had pushed to include social science in the journalism curriculum at the University of Wisconsin (Rogers & Chaffee 1994). In the 1950s, Bleyer children like Ralph Casey, Ralph Nafziger, Fred Siebert, and Chilton Bush established doctoral programs at Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan State, and Stanford, respectively. In the 1960s and after, an addendum—“and Mass Communication”—was affixed to the names of most journalism schools to recognize their scholarly makeovers.

Schramm and the Bleyer children had, in short, successfully colonized journalism education in the name of “communication research.” They succeeded, in part, because journalism schools were, to some extent at least, willing to be colonized; they faced their own legitimacy problems in the postwar American university. Still, the



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wholesale implanting of a scholarly field into a pre-existing model of professional education produced a great deal of pushback among the so-called “green eyeshades.”

Schramm had, in other words, managed to establish his social science discipline, by colonizing a series of professional schools that succumbed, in part, for the sake of their own legitimacy in the postwar university. For all of Schramm’s institutional successes through the 1950s, the field of “communication” had a little intellectual identity. The most significant postwar media research, moreover, had been conducted elsewhere, by scholars who did not use the “communication” label. In Richard Whitley’s (1974) terms, the field had achieved a measure of social institutionalization before ever establishing cognitive institutionalization—in reverse of the typical pattern. As a remedy, Schramm’s 1963 “four founders” account was a self-conscious attempt to supply the field with a shared past and the beginnings of disciplinary self-consciousness.

Before outlining that history, let me take a detour to 1959.

Schramm’s Busy Day

A major irony is that Schramm’s four-founders story was drawn from Bernard Berelson in a 1959 essay declaring that communication research is dead. Berelson, the student of library information turned Lazarsfeld associate turned Ford Foundation social science rainmaker, helped popularize and celebrate that label of its time, “behavioral science.” He was an ambitious operator who managed to transform a lowly post in the University of Chicago’s library school in the late 1930s into the directorship of the Ford Foundation’s Behavioral Sciences unit by the early 1950s. He had, in 1940, joined Lazarsfeld’s Office of Radio Research at Columbia, where he co-authored the landmark election studies *The People’s Choice* (1944) and *Voting* (1954).

Berelson’s 1959 eulogy for communication research is famous for its ill temper: “My theme is that, as for communication research, the state is withering away” (Berelson 1959: 1). In the article, Berelson outlines four major approaches to the field—the same four names that Schramm would enlist as the fields’ four founders: Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Kurt Lewin, and Carl Hovland.

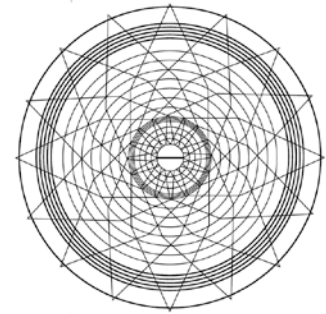
But Berelson declared that all four are “playing out.” Lewin is dead; Lazarsfeld, Hovland, and Lasswell have moved on to new interests. Not only are their innovations “wearing out” but also “no new ideas of comparable scope are appearing to take their place” (Berelson 1959: 4).

In his reply, published in the same issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, a wounded Schramm (1959) cites his own frenetic day as evidence for the field’s vitality. He writes that he had just returned from a doctoral exam, had lunch with a pair of professors, and was off to attend a seminar with “scholars from eight countries.” Adds Schramm: “On the way to my office, just now, I was waylaid by an eager young research man who wanted to tell me of a new finding he has made ...” (Schramm 1959: 6-7).

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In place of Berelson’s withering state, Schramm proposed a new metaphor—communication as a great crossroads where “many pass but few tarry” (Schramm 1959: 8). Berelson’s corpse, to Schramm’s eyes anyway, seemed full of life. Berelson’s death sentence struck Schramm as premature because his communication research—the sort establishing itself within professional schools of journalism across the U.S. Midwest and beyond—was just getting started.

By 1959, Schramm had labored for over 15 years to seed journalism schools with Ph.D. programs in “mass communication” and with gathering success. Conferences, institutes, book-length readers, doctoral tracks, symposia: all of it invested with the intent to institutionalize the young field. Schramm and his fellow “chi-squares,” as the social scientist colonizers of journalism schools were sometimes known, embraced the quantitative social psychology of the behavioral sciences, even as the interdisciplinary movement itself faded. Thanks to Schramm and his allies, journalism schools across the country adopted the Journalism & Mass Communication moniker and made room for the orphan science of communication. Hence Schramm’s busy day.

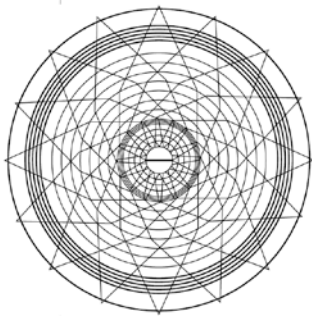
Four Founders

One irony of the exchange is that it was Schramm’s source for his history: He adapted Berelson’s four-fathers construct as an origin myth for his aspiring discipline, in a succession of “four founders” histories. In his reply, Schramm wrote: “If I read Dr. Berelson’s coroner’s report accurately, we are dead in comparison to Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, Lewin, and Hovland. That is a pretty rough test. These were (still are, in the case of three of them) truly remarkable men.” He then turned Berelson’s gloomy take on its head, suggesting that the four luminaries real bequest was what they started: “Not only were they great producers in their own right; they were also great ‘starters.’ ... In fact, I think the greater importance of these men may prove to be, not what they themselves did, but what they got started” (Schramm 1959: 7).

Schramm notes that three of what he calls, here for the first time, “‘founding fathers’ of communication research” are still alive, and admits that it’s “embarrassing” to talk about what has followed them. “But at least we can say that not all has been quiet in their footsteps,” referencing work of the four greats’ students: “From the founding father Lewin to his pupil [Leon] Festinger I observe no diminution of research insight and ingenuity” (Schramm 1959: 7).

He also observes—with no direct reference to his own role in this process—that communication research is having a “profound effect on the teaching of journalism and other mass communication subjects in our universities, because it has made a bridge between the professional or trade activities of these schools and the ancient and intellectual strengths of the university” (Schramm 1959: 9).

So Schramm was left with a problem: he had helped build an energetic field without much legitimacy. His ingenious solution was to take Berelson’s quartet but drop the gloomy talk about a withering field. A hint of this strategy came in the dedication page



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to the 1960 second edition of *Mass Communications*. “This volume is dedicated to three pioneers in the study of mass communications through the social sciences”: Lazarsfeld, Lasswell, and Hovland (p. v).

But the full-fledged narration of the history came four years after his exchange with Berelson.

In the lead essay to his 1963 collection *The Science of Human Communication*, Schramm credits the discipline’s plucky emergence to four pioneers—“founding fathers,” he labels. The text, though, renders the anointment in the passive voice (“Four men have usually been considered the ‘founding fathers’ ...”) an act of audacious creativity that comes off as mere reportage (Schramm 1963: 2).

Lazarsfeld, Lewin, Hovland and Lasswell are invoked as pre-disciplinary forerunners of communication studies. If these four giants left distinct lineages, then happily their boundaries have since become porous: “These four strands of influence are still visible in communication research in the United States, but increasingly they have tended to merge.” Current “practitioners,” for example, conduct “quantitative, rather than speculative” research—a legacy of the four founders. Continued Schramm: “Young researchers in the field now tend to be eclectic. They combine the interest of Hovland and Lewin, or the methods of Lazarsfeld with the interest of Lasswell, or form some other combination” (Schramm 1963: 5).

It was a brilliant move, to credit the forebears but insist that their successors’ work had just begun.

Conclusion

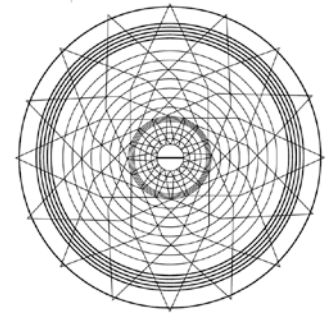
Schramm reprised the “four-founders” story in a series of follow up papers. In a 1980 essay on the “Beginnings of Communication Research in the United States,” for example, he named the four, but qualified the tribute in terms of the solidity of the field he had helped found: “These four great men represent the greatest chapter in the history of comm research in the US, but not the last chapter. Just as visitors were followed by settlers in the village of Bab elh-Dhra, so, beginning with the late 1940s and the 1950s, scholars began to create organizations where they could spend their careers in communication study, rather than dropping in to study briefly a communication problem and returning to their main interest” (Schramm 1980: 41).

In his 1983 contribution to the famous “Ferment in the Field” special issue of the *Journal of Communication*, Schramm employed the passive and third-person plural voices: the four “are generally regarded as the ‘Founding Fathers’ and when we recount the history of modern communication study we usually begin with them” (Schramm 1983: 8). They built the foundation, but the new discipline of communication—now well-established in schools of journalism—is here to stay, with dedicated researchers. “Even the Founding Four, though they had stayed longer and built more than most others of their time, remained identified with the cultures from which they had come and maintained the alliances and procedures of their academic

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lifestyles" (Schramm 1983: 9). In his posthumously published 1997 memoir, Schramm recounted the "four founders" once story again, with the same thematic emphasis on the hand-off to the journalism schools.

One can trace the propagation from Schramm's pen to the leading textbook, to competing textbooks, to later 'literature review' summaries, and so on, with modifications along the way. The "four founders" narrative is still very much alive, and to the extent that there's any training in the field's history, this narrative—of the four fathers paving the road to science—gets top billing.

The field's resolutely quantitative and present-minded orientation in these years—itsself a product, in part, of a history that so unblushingly chronicled the triumph of measured empiricism over adolescent conjecture—helped secure the uncritical diffusion of the story, until it had earned a self-validating ubiquity.

The "four fathers" storyline had fully hardened into standard textbook boilerplate—passed into authorless doxa. The conditions of its creation were long forgotten, and it became the foundation for the capsule history in nearly every mass communication textbook to be published—and there were many—in the decades to come.

The discipline's field-borrowing disconnect with its own remembered history contributed, ironically, to the narrative's widespread adoption: There were few remnants of contradictory memory to stir up questions about its validity. The storyline supplied glue to an emerging "communication" field with bricks but no mortar.

A fascinating postscript is that two significant figures in the field, Everett Rogers and Steven Chaffee, have argued that Schramm was too modest in constructing his four founders myth and that he, Schramm, is the real founder. Their histories relegate the four founders, Lewin, Hovland, Lazarsfeld, and Lasswell, to the "forerunner" category and reserve the founder label for Schramm himself.

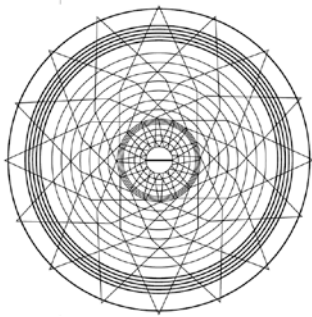
In their introduction to Schramm's memoir (Chaffee & Rogers 1997b), the pair wrote: "Communication scholars today may debate who their forefathers were, but no one disputes that Schramm was the founder." He was, they added, also "its finest storyteller" (Chaffee & Rogers 1997b: x-xi).

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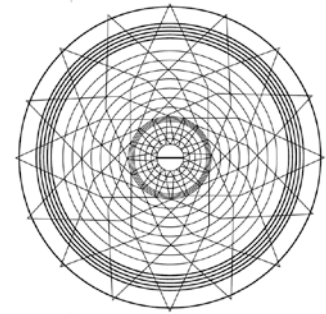
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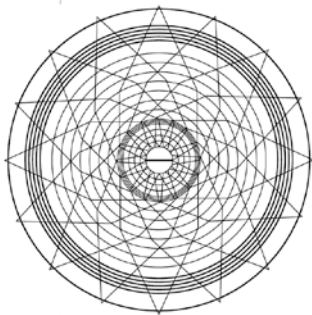
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УИЛБУР ШРАММ И ИСТОРИЯ «ЧЕТЫРЕХ ОТЦОВ-ОСНОВАТЕЛЕЙ» НАУЧНОГО ПОЛЯ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ КОММУНИКАЦИЙ В СОЕДИНЕННЫХ ШТАТАХ АМЕРИКИ

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Аннотация:

В послевоенной "юности" нового научного поля - науки о коммуникациях - оно как никогда нуждалось в своей собственной истории. Исследования коммуникации в Соединенных Штатах Америки, выросшее из школ журналистики и департаментов ораторского искусства американских университетов, со второй Мировой войны и после нее страдало от своего не до конца узаконенного статуса. Данная статья прослеживает путь успешных и упорных попыток американского идеолога науки о коммуникациях Уилбура Шрамма, рассматривая, как он выстроил миф о происхождении науки, основывая ее на достижениях "четырёх отцов" исследований коммуникации. Собрав воедино разрозненные истории и концепции, Шрам создал единый, самодостаточный нарратив, определяющий новое научное поле и позволивший коммуникации закрепить за собой статус самостоятельной науки.

Ключевые слова: исследования коммуникаций, история коммуникаций, теория коммуникации, практика коммуникации, США

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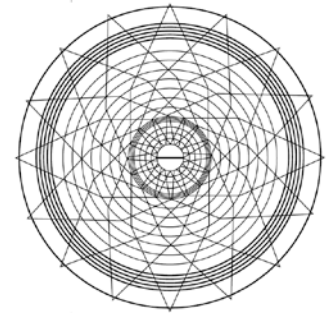
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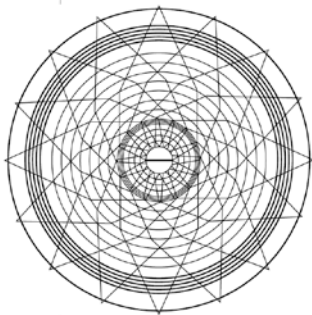
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