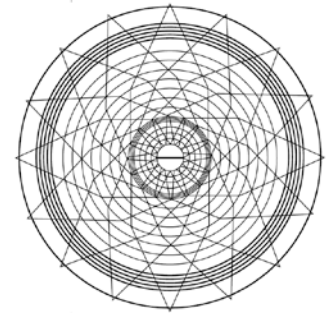


[Academic Life]

McAnany E.

Who was Wilbur Schramm?

Some Thoughts from a Former Student and Colleague



WHO WAS WILBUR SCHRAMM? SOME THOUGHTS FROM A FORMER STUDENT AND COLLEAGUE

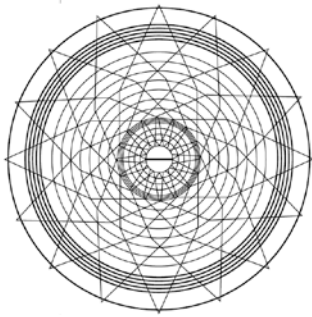
McAnany E.

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I am an emeritus professor at Santa Clara University in California. I have for the last four years been doing research on Wilbur Schramm and have a draft of a biography of him which I hope to finish in 2018. What I am presenting in a short form is not so much a brief biography of Schramm's accomplishments because I have published this in your Russian journal *Communication Media and Design* several months ago. Due to some health issues, I cannot attend this conference to which I was invited some time ago, but I wanted to provide a very brief contribution. I also wish to thank the committee for that kind invitation. What I am talking about in this brief video are some personal thoughts about my impressions of Wilbur Schramm as a person, his motivations, attitudes and behaviors. I knew him over the last twenty-two years of his life, first when I was a student and then as a research associate of his at Stanford University from 1965 to 1973 when he retired from teaching. I remained in contact with Schramm after he moved to Hawaii's East West Center as a researcher and scholar in residence until his death in 1987. These are personal memories and observations some of which will be in the biography, but most will not be included. I share these with you to provide a larger picture of someone who helped shape the world of communication studies at its earliest stages.

The Man behind the Early Communication Field

Wilbur Schramm started the first PhD program of Mass Communication at the University of Illinois in 1947. He was the first to use the title of "Communication" for an academic department. Today there are thousands of departments of communications in the United States as well as in almost every country in the world. Schramm was an innovative institution builder who saw the need to use the term "communication" to cover the broad range of studies devoted to the mass media of his time: print, radio, film and television as well all subsequent electronic and digital media that have followed. It is also important to remember that Schramm wanted to incorporate the basic communication practices of language that every human person learns from



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infancy. That meant, for the USA at least, communication studies in Schramm's vision for the new field included interpersonal communication as well as its media forms. His role in the founding of the department in Illinois also included an Institute of Communication Research whose purpose would be to make clear that research was an important part of graduate communication study. The basic academic structure of communication study was laid down by Schramm at Illinois from 1947 to 1955 and later at Stanford University from 1955 to 1973. In that latter year he retired from teaching but not from research. He continued publishing in Hawaii at the East West Center until his death in 1987.

There have been an increasing number of scholars writing about Schramm since his death but almost all of these researchers wrote about Schramm's accomplishments, his publications and his work of institutionalizing communication programs at Illinois and Stanford. These accounts were mostly positive but some were critical¹. What has been missing to a great degree is an understanding of the person behind the activity of institution building, scholarly publications and policy studies. Who was this man? What were his life experiences? His challenges and even his failures? I came to Stanford University to begin my doctoral studies in 1965, and I came because I wanted to study with Schramm. I had read one of his books, *Mass Media and National Development* (1964) and was inspired to pursue a career in seeing how applications of media and interpersonal communication could help the process of social change and development. I had no idea whether I would be accepted by Schramm as my mentor, but I was determined to try. Luckily I became his student and worked with him on a major research project over his last five years at Stanford from 1968 to his retirement in 1973. I was one of his last doctoral students, and I kept in touch with him until his death in 1987. What I would like to do briefly is to share a better understanding of the man as I knew him over twenty-two years of our friendship. The purpose of this approach is to let others see him as a human being who made great contributions to the field rather than simply to list these accomplishments or study his publications. The purpose is to ask who he was and not just what he did. We already know much of what he did, his accomplishments. For instance, he began as a professor of American Literature at the University of Iowa in 1935 and founded the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1940. It was the first and remains the premier university program for young professional writers in the US. In 1949 at Illinois he helped to publish an important book in the emerging field of cybernetics, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* by Shannon and Weaver. He also helped to establish the early beginning of what would become the Public Broadcasting System, the non-commercial television network in the US. These and other achievements call attention to someone who had special talents but also one who was driven by deep motivations that were often hidden behind the external works of institutional

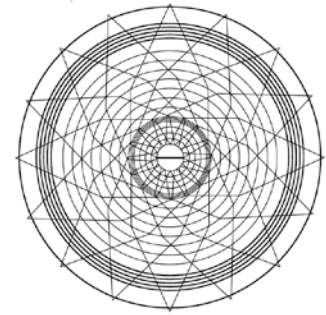
¹ See McAnany, Emile. "Wilbur Schramm." In *Oxford Bibliographies in Communication*. Ed. Patricia Moy, New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

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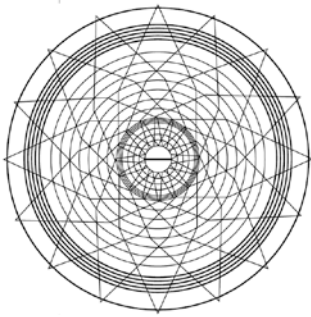
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structures and research publications. In short, who was the man behind the many successes? In fact, there were disappointments and challenges as well as successes.

Wilbur Schramm was marked from early in life with a major challenge. He had a severe stammer in speaking that began at age five and remained with him for the rest of his life. Although he eventually learned to control it, he never completely overcame it. The speech impediment was a major struggle for a young boy of five. It is this profound challenge of personal communication that is perhaps the key explanation of how Wilbur Schramm eventually came to the study of communication. It was not fascination with the mass media in his life like film and radio that were emerging in society but the ability to communicate and interact with people around him that was the key to who he would become. It could have been a permanent disaster that would ruin a sensitive boy's life, but his family helped him in this struggle. His parents took him out of school after several difficult years at about age eight and let him study at home for several years. In those years, he learned to love reading and this was the beginning of a lifetime of work as a teacher and a scholar. He returned to school and began to show his outstanding ability for academic study. But his academic success was only one way he emerged from his communication challenge. He also displayed the same superior ability to concentrate on high achievement in music with the flute and in sports in baseball and basketball. His ability to focus on a single purpose (studies, music, sports) and achieve distinction did not make him into a lonely young man. He also learned to control his stammer and communicate with classmates. He learned team work in sports and playing flute in an orchestra. He would later play as a substitute in the Boston Symphony while he was at Harvard. He also learned to write clearly and quickly by working on school newspapers and by age fifteen to write for local newspapers. He would graduate from high school and college at the top of his class and attend Harvard University for a MA degree in American Literature and then do a PhD at the University of Iowa. He chose Iowa partly because it had an outstanding program in American Literature, but perhaps most importantly, at the time the University of Iowa had the only clinical program in the US for people with speech problems. Schramm was determined to deal with his personal challenge in communication while he studied for his PhD in literature.

These remarks are about his success in study and other unrelated fields of sports, music and journalism. The point is not to focus on his successes but to emphasize how an early and even continuing challenge with communication was a key to understanding the person behind the external accomplishments. Wilbur Schramm was always dealing with this challenge through his achievements. When his stammer made him "different" at age five, he became an outsider, someone who was not a part of his social group. Added to this, at age ten when the US entered the First World War, there was a fierce anti-German propaganda campaign waged throughout the US for several years that made everything "German" unpatriotic. Schramm's family spoke



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German at home, and he was subjected to constant suspicion because of his ethnic identity. Both of these experiences contributed to his potential isolation but also furthered his need to achieve and deserve to be part of mainstream society.

The Opportunity of Knowing Wilbur Schramm

How would I describe the man who took me on as a mentor in 1965? I did not at first notice his stammer because by that time Schramm was a prominent figure and the stammer was mostly under control. What I did find was an affable, friendly person who would talk with all of his students (there were about a dozen in my doctoral cohort that year) to see what their interests were and where they might fit into the program. I came to Stanford with a specific interest in communication's role in developing countries and because Schramm had just published his book the year before on that topic, I had an opportunity for conversation with him. But the friendly manner was only part of the man. He also had high standards for himself and for his students so it was by no means automatic to become his student. His teaching method of our class consisted of assigning a series of short essays and small group sessions of three or four students where each student presented his essay and was questioned by Schramm and by the other students. This small group interaction allowed Schramm to see how each had understood the assigned readings for the day and how each performed in the small discussions. It was both intimate and challenging. Each student understood that the result would be part of the final grade for the course. It allowed each to be in close touch with Schramm and allowed Schramm to assess the strength and weakness of each student's contributions both in written and spoken communication. But I never had the impression that there was any threat in these encounters but rather a sincere interest in what each could bring in written and spoken form. The result was Schramm's continued contact and interest in individual students. When I came to Stanford in 1965, Schramm had become very interested in international communication. Since I had been studying in Europe in the previous year, I was fortunate to share some interests with him and to bring a somewhat more international experience that would help me to become his student.

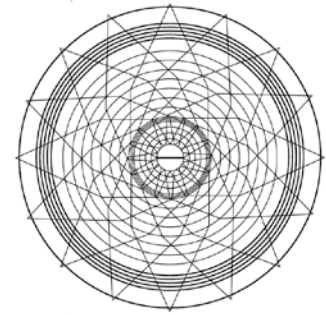
How I became Schramm's student was somewhat of an accident. I had taken a course as a non-engineer in a course in satellite design in my second year and had worked with engineers, business MBA students, education and communication graduate students in a joint project. The year-long course was for engineers to design a communication satellite that would provide educational applications in Brazil and India. The non-engineer students would help design the educational applications on the ground. This experience opened an unexpected opportunity for me in the following year. Schramm and about ten other experts were asked by the US government to visit the countries of Latin America to discover their interest in using the emerging communication satellite system of INTELSAT. The idea was to use an experimental satellite for educational purposes in the area, and Brazil and Mexico had

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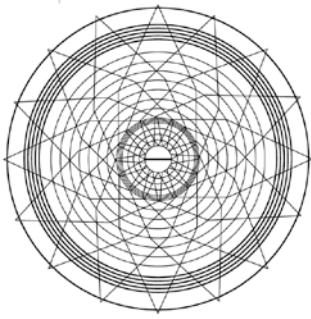
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already expressed interest. At some point in about March 1968. I was called into Schramm's office and told that he was not able to go on the trip but that he had suggested that I would be one of two graduate students who would act as translators for the expert group. I had the advantage of speaking Spanish but also of having taken the course on satellite design for education the year before. My role as one of the translators allowed me to interact not only with the US experts but with many high level communication and educational members of each country. This was an opportunity that Schramm provided me, but it also indicated that it meant that he would be my mentor for the next five years. I finished the month-long tour in May and within a month Schramm offered me a position as director of a large field project in Central America. Those years provided me the opportunity to interact with Schramm and to better understand him as a person.

Looking back now fifty years later, I think of Schramm as a man who had many positive qualities as a leader in the communication field: he was intelligent, innovative, open to new ideas, a very hard worker, a wonderful writer who could produce a thoughtful and clear article or chapter for a book in a week and someone who was generous and shared his ideas and opportunities with his colleagues and students. Regarding satellites, for example, he had recognized the importance of communication satellites in the early 1960s and had consulted with the engineers at Stanford who had begun to teach satellite design in 1963. He wrote some of the earliest papers on this technology outside of the field of engineering. He encouraged students to take the satellite design course in 1967-68, but I was the only communication student who did so. Thus, he provided me with the opportunity to go with the group of experts to Latin America the following year as a reward and a test to see how much I had learned and how well I could help the group interact with communication experts from the countries we visited. But as I said, he had very high standards for himself and anyone who worked with him, but he was always concerned about helping those he worked with to achieve more in their careers.

There were times in my work when I was under pressure from Schramm to get things right in my work in Central America with a national educational television project. My first report to the organization who funded the research was not something I considered important so I wrote a very brief report that was not accepted. Schramm intervened to explain that reports were not the same as research and that any government organization needed them to be done properly. Schramm not only explained the need for the report but helped me to write that first report. He supervised the work I did as far as research was concerned and the three other field directors who followed me. At the end of the five years of field research, he was largely responsible for writing the long final report, but what was important for those of us who did the field research was that he allowed three of us to publish the book that came out of the research. It was a generous gesture to his graduate students and made a huge difference in their subsequent careers.



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There were also some aspects of Schramm that others have highlighted that I will not go into in detail here, but that I want to at least recognize. Schramm was an institution builder and consequently he engendered some hostility. At the University of Illinois he was very close to the president, George Stoddard, who gave him the opportunity to begin his new program in communication and then made him a dean over many other programs. When Stoddard was fired in 1953, much of Schramm's influence was taken away and he left two years later after having many of his positions cancelled. One aspect of Schramm that was not widely recognized was that he was very uncomfortable in confronting people. When he was criticized or confronted, his stammer returned and it was very painful for him. This happened rarely, but it I witnessed it several times and I saw how vulnerable he was. But Schramm also had a temper and would express it occasionally. He would complain about something to colleagues and friends but not publically. Another trait that was both a blessing and a curse for Schramm was his work habits. He was a workaholic, sometimes working all weekend to finish a paper or book. He was frequently away for consultation in the US and abroad, sometimes for long periods. His family, wife and two children must have felt the absence because late in life when his son died suddenly he acknowledged this in a cryptic preface to a new book published just before his own death in December, 1987. He was a man of his times, the twentieth century in the US with its blind spots. For example, Schramm did not seem to understand the women's movement, not that he discriminated against women but that he did not recognize how women's attitudes had changed after the 1960s. I never heard him discuss politics although he was a Roosevelt democrat (and a speech writer briefly for Roosevelt in 1942-43), but the politics of race or other political movements did not seem to be part of his experience. His standing aside from these political experiences may have been his aversion to confrontation which was a central element of many of these political movements like Martin Luther King's civil rights, or the Vietnam War protests or even the women's movement.

What all of this says about Wilbur Schramm is that he was a human being and a man of his times with what that means about strengths and weaknesses. This admission that he had limitations as well as strong points is meant to balance the picture of Schramm as a man of great success—which he certainly was. He was the major impulse to begin the field of communication study and the first to create a graduate communication program and promote research through his institutes at Illinois and Stanford and any number of his other remarkable achievements. Yet, behind these achievements was a person who struggled with communicating his whole life. He conquered his stammer by controlling it, but it remained a part of who he was. But behind the documented history of Schramm's achievements stands the personality and the person. Understanding that personality helps us understand those achievements.

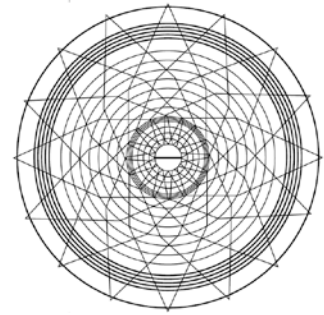
He was a generous man to those he mentored, and I am one of those. Despite profound changes in communication study in the years toward the end of his life, he

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never wavered in his belief that communication as a field of study and research was an important factor in better understanding and improving human society. Many scholars may have considered Schramm an idealist who was too optimistic and did not understand the darker side of the new communication technologies and their consequences. The legacy of Schramm was that he continued to push the field forward with his own vision and methods until the very day he died. He left in his computer a final draft of a book on how he saw the history of the field. Perhaps it is fitting that he died while he was watching television on the evening of December 27, 1987. He never stopped doing research and mentoring others and encouraging others to continue in their research and theories. In his famous response to Berelson about the future of the communication field in 1959, he said “In the study of man [sic], it is one of the great crossroads where many pass but few tarry.”² The field as he saw it was someplace where anyone could come and then move on, but some like Wilbur Schramm decided to stay and spend his life there.

² Wilbur Schramm, “Comment by Wilbur Schramm”, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 23,1, Spring 1959, 9.