Wilbur Schramm : Portrait of a Development Communication Pioneer

Arvind Singhal

Dr. Schramm headed a team of experts who were invited by the Government of India to advise on developing the infrastructure for mass communication in India. The establishment of Indian Institute of Mass Communication in 1965 was one of the team's recommendations.

THE FIELD OF communication research is indebted to several key intellectuals who came from such academic disciplines as political science and social psychology. They should be regarded as the founding fathers of communication. The four are Harold Lasswell (1902-1980), the political scientist; Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), the social psychologist ; Carl Hovland (1921-1961), the experimental psychologist; and Paul F. Lazarsfeld (1901-1976), the sociologist (Rogers, 1986:96). Without Wilbur Schramm, communication science could never have achieved its present status. Perhaps he should be considered a fifth founder of communication research.

Wilbur Schramm's contributions as a prolific scholar, writer, and teacher legitimized the field of communication science. The trail of knowledge and ideas that Schramm has left constitutes a comprehensive map of the expanding field of communication.

The objective of the present paper is to analyze Wilbur Schramm's contributions to the field of communication, especially in international communication, communication and national development, and the use of instructional media in the Third World countries. Schramm's influential role in institutionalizing communication research, and his scholarly and theoretical contributions in international communication and national development are discussed.

Schramm's Career

Schramm was born in 1907 in the historic town of Marietta, Ohio. After earning his Bachelor's degree in political science at Marietta College,

Schramm studied literature and philosophy for his Master's at Harvard University. He earned a doctorate in American literature at the University of Iowa, where he stayed to teach English and creative writing. In 1942, Schramm was awarded the O. Henry Prize for Fiction for his short story, "Windwagon Smith." At Iowa, Schramm undertook a two-year postdoctoral course in communication theory, psychology, and sociology, signalling his shift in attention from American literature to research on communication processes and effects. During World War II, Schramm served at the office of War Information (OWI), where he came in close contact with social science research through interaction with founding fathers, Lasswell, Hovland, and Lazarsfeld (Rowland, 1983).

Institutionalizing Communication Research

Schramm launched the first institutes of communication research at the University of Illinois in 1947, and at Stanford University in 1956. These institutes "conducted scholarly research, trained the new Ph.D's in communication science and helped found communication research journals and scientific associations" (Rogers : 1986, p. 108-9). At Illinois, Schramm

Lasswell, Lewin, Hovland and lazarsfeld have been called the fathers of communication research for legitimising the communication perspective in the study of human behaviours. No scholar did more to synthesize, explain, and disseminate communication research findings than Wilbur Schramm. The present paper analyses Schramm's contributions to the field of communication, communication and national development, and the use of instructional media in Third World countries.

published several textbooks which laid out the theoretical basis of communication inquiry. *Mass Communications* (1949) was a first-time collection of the seminal works of scholars such as Lazarsfeld, Lasswell, Hovland, Robert Park, Walter Lippman, Wendell Johnson, and Rudolf Flesch. Schramm

arranged the publication of Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's book, *The Mathematical Theory of Communications*, (1949), which provided a guiding paradigm to communication researchers. In 1954, at the request of the U.S. Information Agency, Schramm edited *Process and Effects of Mass Communications*, a textbook angled toward communication with psychological principles of persuasion.

Schramm's vision made the discipline of communication science a reality in the sense of its intellectual and institutional basis in American universities (Rogers, 1986). But Schramm's influence in the field of communication science went beyond the institutionalization of communication research in the United States. Under Schramm the field of communication inquiry went international, to the Third World countries in Asia, Africa, Middle-East, and Latin America.

International Odyssey

Wilbur Schramm flew somewhere once each week, it was claimed by his colleagues, ever since he flew from Illinois to Korea one Thursday morning in 1950. Hudson (1977, p. 316) said : "Illinois had launched Schramm on his international odyssey." Frequent requests were made for Schramm's consultation about the role of mass media in national development. Third World governments faced the problems of national development and thought that mass communication could speed this process of social change. Schramm's international work in the 1960's took him to Korea, India, Samoa, Indonesia, Colombia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, El Salvador, Niger, Pakistan, and Israel.

Schramm's first major international work was *The Reds Take a City* (1951), a study during the Korean War, of the impact on Seoul of its capture by the North Korean army. Schramm compared mass

---

"It is tempting to refer to these past 40-odd years as the age of Schramm. Certainly no other individual has done nearly so much to generate, collate and synthesize knowledge in this new field of inquiry." Steven H. Chafee on Schramm's contribution to communication research (1974, p. 1)

---

media reporting of two major news events in 16 nations in the prize-winning *One Day in the World's Press* (1959). Schramm examined the treatment by newspapers of the events of November 2, 1956, when Egypt was attacked by British, French, and Israeli forces, and when Soviet tanks entered Budapest after the Hungarian uprising. In 1963, Schramm edited a series of lectures by leading communication scientists for the Voice of America, which were broadcast to Eastern Europe and then published as

The Science of Human Communication. Schramm was becoming more concerned with the problems of Third World countries.

Development Communication

Schramm was one of the first to recognize that communication could play an important role in the national development of Third World countries.[2] He believed that the mass media could better the lives of people by supplementing the information resources of local schools, multiplying the contacts of development agency field workers, and encouraging people to expose themselves and their children to learning opportunities (Lerner and Schramm, 1967).

Schramm's conceptualization of the interaction between mass communication and development became the heart of many national development programmes. Developments in communication were brought about by the economic, social and political evolution, and vice-versa (Schramm, 1963).

Schramm was occupied with the practical problem of using mass communication to promote economic growth and social development in Third World countries. He conceptualized a relationship between communication development and economic growth, which has been the main guiding paradigm for developmental programmes. Schramm suggested

> As economic activity spreads throughout the system, the act of balancing and sharing the strain becomes more delicate; it requires quicker reports from farther away and quicker orders to more scattered centres. Components must be in touch . . . .Knowledge must be gathered more broadly and shared more widely. Information must be transferred more swiftly . . . .The developing nations must be prepared to support an enormous increase in the day-to-day communication within the system. (Schramm cited in Chu, 1974 : 20).

Schramm appreciated the difficulties involved in evolving a system in a Third World nation where economic growth and communication development could complement each other. Without the material support of equipment and supplies, without the managerial support of qualified personnel, and without the financial support of advertising incomes and a sizable, literate readership, such communication development would be impossible (Schramm : 1964; Chu: 1974). In this sense, economic development, education, urbanization, and communication development all were closely intertwined.

---

2. Rogers (1976 : 133) defined development as "a widely participatory process of social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom and other valued qualities) for the majority of the people through their gaining control over their environment."

Schramm believed that planning for effective communication should consist of planning in the social psychological content of the messages to be communicated. He advocated the use of "Little Media" or "Big Media," or a combination of both, depending on the development task required the audience to be reached, and the resources available (Schramm believed that participative group processes were fundamental to any form of development or growth activity.

Schramm stressed political development as an integral aspect of national development. Economic development involves decision-making, Schramm argued, and by involving more people, more voices could be heard and more concerns addressed. The needling question was whether communication development *per se* sufficiently contributed to increased democratic control of a nation to allow a broader decision-making base. Schramm (1963, p. 55-56) said :

> "It is clearly possible to use a more efficient school system to indoctrinate a generation with a desired political viewpoint. Efficient communication works as well for a dictator as for a democrat—probably better, in fact, for the dictator because he is more likely to seize a monopoly over communication. But on the other hand, it is clear that communication development provides the conditions for wider participation if the political philosophy permits it."

Schramm looked for pragmatic approaches to address the political, social, and economic problems of developing societies. He made the Institute for Communication Research at Stanford University the focal point for those concerned with harnessing the power of communication to the service of national development. At Stanford Schramm wrote his landmark book *Mass Media and National Development* (1964). In a review in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Daniel Lerner said :

> "Wilbur Schramm has written a book that puts all students of communication and development in his debt....What Harold Lasswell did for the theory of communication and Paul Lazarsfeld for its research technique, what Lord Keynes did for the theory of development and Colin Clark for its research technique, this is what Schramm has opened the gates for all of us to try to do for communication-in-development."

Lerner, a development communication scholar who authored an influential book, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), co-edited two symposium books with Schramm : *Communication and Change in the Developing Countries* in 1967, and *Communication and Change in the Last Ten Years—And The Next* in 1976, Both symposia were held at the East-West Centre in Honolulu, the first in 1964 and the second in 1975. The 1975 symposium was to assess what had been learned in the past years concerning communication in development, the changing needs of Third World countries for communication support, and to set forth new priorities for communication expertise, communication research, and modern communication technology. The mood of the 1975 meeting was relatively more sober. in contrast to the optimistic outlook for development communication in 1964. The model of development that had proven itself in the Western countries and in Japan, had only a limited success in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The 1975 symposia participants agreed that Third World efforts to invest in industry had turned attention away from the problem of villagers, and stimulated runaway urbanization with its resulting social problems (Lerner and Schramm, 1976). Both of the Schramm/Lerner symposium books became popular texts and reference materials, had laid the foundation for courses at many universities on mass communication and national development.

Critique of Schramm's Ideas Today

The models of development that Schramm proposed in the 1960s, met with only limited success in Third World countries. Studies proved that the bullet theory of communication, and the theory of trickle-down development did not work as effectively in Third World countries, as earlier thought. Development scholars in the 1970s and 1980s recognize that group activity at the village level is an important means to achieve village development. Bottom-up communication, and horizontal communication between villagers, are viewed to be as important as top-down communication from the central government to the villages. Mass media communication needs to mix with interpersonal channels, and with the organization of the village to foster development in Third World countries.

Even though Schramm's models of development communication may not be completely valid today, Schramm's (1964) basic thesis was sound : "we must share information, we must share it widely. . . .for development to occur." Schramm's models of development of the 1960s have helped get us to today.

Instructional media in El Salvador and American Samoa

Schramm recognized that the mass media are educational forces within society, and their day-to-day use produces learning. Mass media could be used to widen horizons, to focus attention. to create a climate for development, to feed interpersonal channels, and could be used as teachers to break the bonds of ignorance (Lyle, 1974). Schramm attributed the problems of Third World countries as not so much due to scarce material resources, as to manpower underdevelopment. He believed that mass

media could support, and even substitute for a teacher.

In the mid-1960s, Schramm was instrumental in developing a realistic appraisal of educational media programmes, working with scholars in the International Institute of Educational Planning, in Paris. The result was a world-wide survey of educational media programmes, which was published in 1967 as *The New Media : Memo to Educational.Planners*. This book provided educational planners with objective criteria for making decisions concerning the possible introduction of educational media (Lyle, 1974).

Schramm's primary interest was in promoting effective education, not media utilization *per se*. The El Salvador project was sponsored by a United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Schramm and his Stanford University colleagues and students provided R&D support to an otherwise indigenous effort in instructional television. Political tensions in the El Salvador project included school teachers going on strike against instructional television. The book documenting El Salvador's experience with the planning, development operation, results, and problems with Instructional television is titled *Educational Reform With Television* (Mayo and others, 1976). The El Salvador experience became a model for similar instructional television projects in other Third World nations.

One was a 15-year study of educational television that Schramm and his colleagues carried out in American Samoa. The findings were published in book form as *Bold Experiment* (1981), a comprehensive account of the impact of television on indigenous culture. Television was introduced as part of a crash programme aimed at rapidly modernizing the school system. Television ushered in a new era (in what had been an isolated part of the South Pacific) with both negative and positive effects (Schramm, Nelson and Betham, (1981).

The East-West years

His interest in international communication and in Third World development drew Wilbur Schramm to the East-West Centre in Hawaii. His specific goal as expressed to Steven Chaffee (1974, p. 8) was "to build one more institution," an institution where new ideas originated and circulated.

In the two years (1973-75) that Schramm was its Director, the East-West Communication Institute evolved as a significant force for understanding communication problems throughout the Pacific Basin. In particular, Schramm explored programmes of mutual undertakings between the East-West Centre

and the University of the South Pacific in Fiji (Kleinjans : 1977).

Schramm saw early that the new media do not transform society, as much as they provide modern society with different means for solving problems. In a traditional society, these functions were institutionalized in the roles of the tribal elders (Chaffee, 1974).

Schramm defined the field of international and development communication. Schramm's last major project (Chu, Alfian, and Schramm, 1985) was a 10-year study of the social and cultural impact of satellite television in rural Indonesia.

Intellectual Legacy

Schramm's legacy in communication research is manifold. Schramm institutionalized communication research by creating the institutes of communication research at the University of Illinois and at Stanford University, and by creating the communication programme at the East-West Centre in Hawaii. Schramm also published a series of mass communication anthologies and texts which have formed the early basis of the mass communication curriculum in many American universities. Third, Schramm effected a marriage of general learning theory models of behavioristic psychology, cybernetics, and information theory with those of the emerging information sciences (Rowland, 1983), thus performing a "sense-making function." Fourth, Schramm internationalized the field of communication research by pioneering the study of mass media and national development in Third World countries.

Where Choices Converge

Schramm charted the course of communication science, and travelled on it for over 40 years. In 1977, he retired from the East-West Communication Institute and settled in Hawaii. Today, happily relieved of all administrative responsibilities, Schramm writes poetry and prose on a computer world-processor.

Schramm's is a fascinating career : A communication scholar and professor; researcher and philosopher; journalist; prize-winning author of social science and fiction; publisher and press director; administrator. For his ability, the field of communication sciences will long be indebted to Wilbur Schramm.

Arvind Singhal is a doctoral candidate at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California. The author acknowledges the help of Dr. Everett M. Rogers in providing useful insights about the present topic.

References

Steven H. Chaffee (1974), "The Pathways of Proteus," *Journalism Monographs*, 36 : pp. 1-8.

Godwin C. Chu (1947) "Communication and National Develoment : The Contributions of Wilbur Schramm," *Journalism Monographs*, 36 : pp. 17-23.

Godwin C. Chu, Alfian, and Wilbur Schramm (1985), *Satellite Television Comes to Indonesian Villages—A Study of Social Impact*, Honolulu, Hawaii : East-West Centre Press.

Robert B. Hudson (1977), "The Illinois Years," in Deniel Lerner and Lyle Nelson (eds.), *Communication Research—A Half-Century Appraisal*, Hawaii : The East-West Center Press, pp. 311-316.

Everett Kleinjans (1977), "The Hawaii Years," in Daniel Lerner and Lyle Nelson (eds.), *Communication Research—A Half-Century Appraisal*, Hawaii : The East-West Center Press, pp. 325-330.

Daniel Lerner (1958), *The Passing of Traditional Society : Modernizing the Middle East*, IL : Free Press.

Danial Lerner and Wilbur Schramm (ed.) (1967), *Communication and Change in Developing Countries*, Hawaii : The East-West Center Press.

Jack Lyle (1974), "Mass Media and Education : The Schramm Connection," *Journalism Monographs*, 36 : pp. 9-16.

John K. Mayo, Robert Hornik, and Emile McAnany (1976), *Educational Reform With Television : The El Salvadore Experience*, CA : Stanford Universty Press.

Lyle M. Nelson (1977), "The Stanford Years," in Daniel Lerner and Lyle Nelson (eds.), *Communication Research—A Half Century Appraisal*, Hawaii : The East-West Center Press, pp. 317-324.

Y.V. Lakshmana Rao (1966), *Communication and Development : A study of Two Indian Villages*, Minnesota : university of Minnesota Press.

Everett M. Rogers (1976), "Communication and Development : The Passing of the Dominant Paradigm," in Everett M. Rogers (ed.), *Communication and Development : Critical Perspectives*, Beverly Hills, CA : Sage, pp. 121-148.

Everett M. Rogers (1986), *Communication Technology*, New York; Free Press.

Willard Rowland Jr. (1983), *The Politics of TV Violence*, CA : Sage Publications.

Wilbur Schramm (ed.) (1949) *Mass Communications*, Urbana, IL : University of Illinois Press.

Wilbur Schramm and J.W. Riley, Jr. (1951), *The Reds Take a City : The Communist Occupation of Seoul*, NJ : Rutgers University Press.

Wilbur Schramm (ed.) (1954), *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* Urbana, IL : University of Illinois Press. Wilbur Schramm (ed.) (1959), *One Day in the World's Press : Fourteen Great Newspapers on a Day of Crisis*, CA : Stanford University Press.

Wilbur Schramm (1963), "Communication Development and the Development Process," in Lucian Pye (ed.) *Communications and Political Development*, NJ : Princeton University Press.

Wilbur Schramm (ed.) (1963), *The Science of Human Communication*, New York : Basic Books.

Wilbur Schramm (1964), *Mass Media and National Development*, Stanford, CA : Stanford University Press.

Wilbur Schramm, Philip Coombs, Freedrich Kahnert, and Jack Lyle (1967), *The New Media · Memo to Educational Planners*, Paris : UNESCO, International institute for Educational Planning.

Wilbur Schramm (1977), *Big Media Little Media*, CA : Sage.

Wilbur Schramm and Daniel Lerner (ed.) (1976), *Communication and Change The Last ten years—And the Next*, Hawaii : The East-West Center Press.

Wilbur Schramm, Lyle M. Nelson, and Mere Betham (1981), *Bold Experiment : The Story of Educational Television in American Samoa*, Stanford, CA : Stanford University Press.

Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949), *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Urbana, IL : University of Illinois Press.