



UNIVERSITY
OF TAMPERE

Wilbur Schramm: A view from Finland

Kaarle Nordenstreng
Professor Emeritus, University of Tampere, Finland

Presentation at Symposium in memory of Wilbur Schramm
Higher School of Economics in Moscow
17 November 2017

In general

Finland was the first country in Scandinavia to begin journalism studies at the university level – in 1925 at the predecessor of the University of Tampere.

But modern communication research was really born here in the mid-1960s.

And Wilbur Schramm was the leading guru in the field, his bible(s) belonging to basic readings of all serious folks in journalism and mass communication.

Later in the 1970s his star declined while others like George Gerbner and Herbert Schiller occupied leading positions.

Yet he remains a classic and his legacy helps to reflect upon the larger picture – not only about *Four Theories* but regarding theory at large.

My encounters with Wilbur Schramm

Finland June 1965: WS as keynoter in a cultural festival and I was his local assistant appointed by the host Finnish Broadcasting Company (see newspaper coverage in next slide).

Stanford February 1967: after fall 1966 semester as visiting fellow at Southern Illinois University I was touring through US communication schools and WS in Palo Alto was a highlight. I visited his home, we took a swim in his pool and had a meal with his wife. I told him news about other U.S. schools and he called me “scientific troubadour”.

See my correspondence with WS in April 1967 (following slides).

My correspondence file with USA 1960-70s



My letter to WS in brief (April 1967)

I left my heart in California, but brought the rest of my body back to Finland...

Taken as a whole, my travelling was both stimulating (touching the tops) and frustrating (being compelled to coast back to into quiet valleys). I wish I can send to you some organized thinking about my experiences some of these weeks...

The importance and pleasantness of my Stanford memories are directly related to the great weight of my Stanford document box. Please, give my regards to your fine people. And above all, take my deepest thanks for your overwhelming hospitality, and forward my feelings of gratitude also to Mrs. Schramm.

I wish you continuously good health and abundant ideas!

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

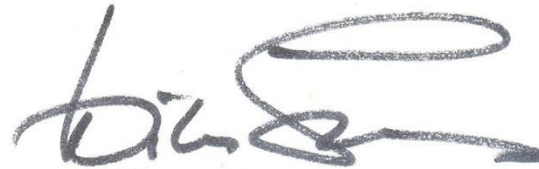
INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

April 20, 1967

Dear Mr. Nordenstreng:

Thank you for your kind note. We
remember you very pleasantly and will hope
some day to see you here again.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Wilbur Schramm', written in a cursive style.

Wilbur Schramm
Director

WS:lm

Mr. Koorle Nordenstreng
Oy. Yleisradio Ab.
Puhelin 630691 Sahkeet Yleisradio
Unioninkatu 16 Helsinki
Finland

The intellectual result of my touring in the USA

Based on my experience I wrote later in 1967 an article, submitting it to *Gazette* at the University of Amsterdam (editor Marten Rooy). It was swiftly published <https://sites.tuni.fi/uploads/2019/12/339a3cfd-gazette1968.pdf>

In this article WS is briefly quoted from his debate with Berelson's "obituary" in *POQ* 1959 (see next slides) and from my discussion with him where he said that "we are quite close to a unified theory of communication", confirming a long quote from Harold Lasswell. But WS is left in this article under the shadow of Berelson, Lasswell, Malcolm MacLean, et al.

He never commented the article to me and I suspect it was not only due marginal attention given to him but rather to my critical approach claiming that in the US "simple *thinking* is poorly represented in relation to all kinds of sophisticated *measurement*" and that the field "*lacks ethical and ideological considerations*".

The State of Communication Research

By BERNARD BERELSON

From time to time the Public Opinion Quarterly reviews the progress that has been made in one of the fields of research within its ken and surveys the current status of work in that field. Without waiting to publish a special issue, it presents in the following article and discussion a review of communication research which is of modest dimensions but unusual significance.

Bernard Berelson is Director-Designate of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. He is now Professor of the Behavioral Sciences at the University of Chicago and Director of the Study of Graduate Education. His article is based on a paper he presented at the 1958 Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. It is discussed by Wilbur Schramm, Director of the Institute for Communication Research at Stanford University, David Riesman, Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, and Raymond A. Bauer, Ford Foundation Visiting Professor at the Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University.

MY THEME is that, as for communication research, the state is withering away.

The modern version of communication research began about twenty-five years ago with the development of both academic and commercial interest—the former largely coordinated, if not stimulated, by the Rockefeller Foundation seminar of the late 1930's and the latter developed in response to radio's need to prove its audience. Since then there has been a great deal of research activity on both fronts, so much so that for a time the field exhibited many of the characteristics of a scientific fad. What has it all come to and where do we now stand?

THE PAST

In the past twenty-five years or so, there have been four major approaches to communication research, and perhaps six minor ones. The four major approaches are so well characterized by their leading proponents that it is convenient and revealing here to identify them by name, as in the chart below. In my view, the major lines of inquiry have been the political approach, represented by Lasswell; the sample survey approach, represented by Lazarsfeld; the small-groups approach, represented by Lewin; and the experimental approach, represented by Hovland. (Whether Lewin really should be counted as a student of "communication research" is a matter of definition with which I am not particularly concerned here.) Lasswell, with his interest in broad

out direct and immediate regard to the detailed, empirical underpinning. David Riesman and others have made important contributions along this line already, as a counterbalance to the minute and atomistic inquiry, and I look forward to more such studies in the future.

5. Popular culture. Some interests that earlier would have been called communication are now being followed up under this heading. With aesthetic aspects emphasized, the field has a chance to get some help from humanistic studies, and the cooperation ought to be stimulating. Communication problems have been reflected on a great deal in the past—by very good minds—and such reflection should have a good deal to say to the modern empirical researcher.

6. *Mass* communication. Such “new generation” sociologists as James Coleman and William McPhee tell me that the first word needs more emphasis relative to the second. Their position is that the field is better seen as one of a variety of *mass* activities and that headway will be made by stressing the similarities of such mass phenomena rather than the particularities attaching to a mass communication system. That is, the oblique attack may yield more than the frontal.

7. Practical affairs. One way an intellectual field can advance is by dealing directly with the theoretical problems of the discipline itself. Another is by dealing with practical problems to which the discipline can contribute answers. The former is the academic approach and the latter the professional. Of our four major figures, Lasswell, Lewin, and Hovland were primarily concerned with academic matters, and only Lazarsfeld was sometimes concerned with professional problems. A practical, or more professional, turn may now be indicated.

In sum, then, it seems to me that “the great ideas” that gave the field of communication research so much vitality ten and twenty years ago have to a substantial extent worn out. No new ideas of comparable magnitude have appeared to take their place. We are on a plateau of research development, and have been for some time. There are two ways to look at this phenomenon, assuming that it is correctly gauged. One is to regret that no new “breakthrough” has developed in recent years; the other is to be grateful that the field has a period of time to assimilate, incorporate, and exploit the imaginative innovations of the major figures. The reader reads the journals; he can take his choice.

COMMENTS BY WILBUR SCHRAMM

WHEN ONE has been pronounced dead, it is ungracious to rise and make comments. Indeed, it shows a certain lack of faith in the attending physician. Nothing is farther from my wishes than to show any lack of faith in my friend Bernard Berelson, and therefore if he pronounces us dead I am content to believe him.

But it is a somewhat livelier condition than I had anticipated. I have just come from the doctoral examination of a young man who demonstrated depth in psychology, sociology, mathematics, and research method, as well

My current position

Pretty much following the 1968 approach with antipositivism, leading later to other critical approaches. See for example

- Article in *Nordicom Review* (2007)

http://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/248_248_nordenstreng1.pdf

- Presentation in Westminster conference (2015)

<https://sites.tuni.fi/uploads/2020/08/40de07c1-london-20-06-15-updated.pdf>

- Article in Javnost (2016)

<https://sites.tuni.fi/uploads/2019/12/cdae285e-javnost-1-2016-nordenstreng.pdf>