

Herbert I. Schiller

1919-2000

Professor Emeritus of Communication

San Diego

Herbert I. Schiller, Professor Emeritus of Communication at the University of California, San Diego, who documented key shortcomings in the new information economy before anyone called it that, died on January 29, 2000 in La Jolla, California.

Schiller warned of two major trends in his prolific writings and speeches: the private takeover of public space and public institutions at home, and U.S. corporate dominance of cultural life abroad, particularly in developing nations. His eight books and hundreds of articles made him a key figure in both communication research and in the public debate over the role of the media in modern society. He was a frequent and much sought-after contributor to leading journals of opinion, including *The Nation* and *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

The founding member of UCSD's Department of Communication, Schiller was an immensely popular teacher who brandished his characteristic New York Times before packed classrooms and was known for combining biting criticisms of the media with dry humor and an openness to students' ideas.

An economist by training, Schiller turned to the study of the media in the 1960s, publishing *Mass Communications and American Empire* in 1969 and *The Mind Managers* in 1973. The mass media, he argued, were closely tied to the centers of political and economic power. Because of these ties, they often fell short of their most crucial roles of providing a democratic forum and acting as a watchdog of powerful interests. This critique, which represented a dramatic break from the conventional wisdom in communication research at the time, permanently changed the agenda of communication scholarship by reintroducing issues of political and economic power, which had drawn little attention in the 1950s and '60s. With very few other scholars, Schiller's early work founded what came to be known as the critical political economy school of communication research.

Appearing at a time of political activism both at home and abroad, Schiller's work also had wide impact beyond the scholarly community inspiring media critics and activists. It was widely translated, and had perhaps its greatest impact in developing countries, where the subservience of media to ruling elites and the dominance of world media markets by U.S. companies became significant political issues. In the 1970s, when sharp debates arose in UNESCO and other forums over cultural imperialism, Schiller's work was important in defining the position of the critics of Western media industries.

In the 1980s and '90s, Schiller turned his attention to the rise of the "information society," publishing, among other works, *Who Knows: Information in the Age of the Fortune 500* and *Culture, Inc.; The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*. In these works, he argued that the new information technologies, rather than opening and democratizing communication, extended the power relations he identified in his earlier work into new parts of the world and new areas of life, including education.

Schiller continued writing to the end of his life, recently completing *Living in the Number One Country: Reflections from a Critic of American Empire*, which is in part an account of the development of his own political ideas.

Schiller was born in 1919 in New York City, the son of Benjamin Schiller and the former Gertrude Perner. His own life, he liked to say, paralleled in many ways that of the United States in the 20th century. His father, a jeweler, was thrown out of work early in the Great Depression, and only regained steady employment when the war economy revved up a decade later. Schiller himself was able to finish a Ph.D. at New York University because of the GI Bill, and became a professor at the University of Illinois soon after the buildup of higher education after the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite. As an occupation officer in Berlin after World War II, Schiller saw the recreation of West Germany as a business-dominated social order.

Schiller came to UCSD in 1970 to coordinate what was then the Communication Program. In the 1970s, Communication at UCSD was a fragile entity, popular among students but marginal within the academic structure of the university. On a number of occasions it was close to elimination. In 1982, it finally became a department, and two years later established a Ph.D. program, which came to be among the best known worldwide. Schiller's determination kept Communication alive through its most difficult times, and as it became successful he remained its conscience. His colleagues remember Herb Schiller as humane, generous, and authentic. He was a leader and guide without ever demanding deference. And he was always who he was, without pretense: always vividly himself.

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