

**The Happiness Game****IJoC**

## **The Pursuit of Happiness**

### **Introduction**

PADDY SCANNELL  
University of Michigan

In 1950, Elihu Katz submitted his MA thesis called “The Happiness Game—A Content Analysis of Radio Fan Mail” at Columbia University. It was supervised by Leo Lowenthal, and drew on recently published work by Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Merton, and Erich Fromm. The topic for the thesis came from Lowenthal, who, as Katz now recalls, was then preparing to become Director of Research for Voice of America. Somehow, he obtained from CBS, perhaps through Lazarsfeld, several thousand letters sent in to the network during the early months of 1948. He was interested in letters sent by listeners in anticipation of such mail landing on his desk in his new position. The letters were sorted into different bundles and assigned to various graduate students for analysis. It was a happy chance that the bundle assigned to Katz were letters sent in by listeners (overwhelmingly female) in response to a request from a popular radio broadcaster of the day, Ted Malone. Malone asked regular listeners to his daytime show to note whenever they felt happy across the whole of February 1948 (a leap-year) and, at the end of the month, to send him a letter telling of their happiest day. Over two thousand letters were received, and from this, a sample of 236 letters was selected and submitted to a careful content analysis which formed the substance of the thesis. Immediately following this, Katz entered the doctoral program in the Department of Sociology and began to work with Lazarsfeld, a collaboration which culminated in Katz’s work on the Decatur survey material that Lazarsfeld had commissioned in 1943. It became his doctoral thesis and was published as *Personal Influence* (1955), co-authored by Katz and Lazarsfeld—a landmark in American sociological literature.

*The Happiness Game* is historically significant in a number of ways. It tells us something of the inner workings of social science at Columbia in the aftermath of World War II, and in particular, of the part played by graduate students. It is Elihu Katz’s first research project—the start of a distinguished, still continuing career that now spans more than 60 years. And perhaps more than all this, there is the fascination of the topic itself—so unusual and so felicitous. What did happiness mean? What did it mean for the women who wrote to Malone? What did it mean in the context of the time? Was happiness something of special concern to Americans? The right to pursue it is, after all, asserted in the Declaration of Independence. In what follows, I will explore in a little detail the pursuit of happiness on air and its analysis by Katz in his Master’s thesis.

The study of radio was a foundational concern of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, attached to the Department of Sociology at Columbia. Katz did not choose his topic. It chose him—dealt out by his supervisor, Leo Lowenthal. Nor did Katz choose his PhD topic—which followed on from his MA. Lazarsfeld assigned him the task of making sense of the data from Decatur: a survey designed to test the two-step flow hypothesis uncovered in the ground-breaking study of voting behavior undertaken in Erie County, Ohio, in 1940 (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). *Personal Influence*, when it was published in 1955, had an immediate impact and established the young Katz, priming him for a long and distinguished academic career. Some of that career's distinctive features are already there in the MA thesis, which can, in part, be read for what it tells us about the genesis of *Personal Influence*. But that would be to underestimate the earlier study of radio, which already exhibits a distinctive voice with a distinctive take on the study of "mass" media. The young Katz takes a very different stance toward listeners and their relationship to what they hear on radio from the prevailing view of the senior faculty at Columbia.

The crux of the study is posed in two chapter headings: "Is everybody happy?" (ch. 3) and "Is everybody *really* happy?" (ch. 10). Happiness is pursued in America "because there is a cultural emphasis on being happy." Americans are constantly reminded that they are supposed to be happy; that they have every reason to be happy; and that, if they are not, perhaps it is their own fault (p. 15). It is an expectation, almost an entitlement, a right written into one of the country's founding documents. The letters are examined in order to establish what criteria Americans apply in deciding what makes them happy. But what "scientific" evaluational criteria can be applied to determine whether an individual (or a nation) is *really* happy? How do the criteria of the letter writers measure up against "scientific" criteria of happiness (p. 18)? It is a very deliberate narrative strategy (in fact, it is the key to the whole study) that the discussion of the scientific evaluations of happiness is long deferred—all the way to Appendix B, the very end of the thesis. There, at last, the strategy underpinning all that has gone before is finally revealed: "Intentionally we did not begin by discussing definitions of happiness in an attempt to specify, *a priori*, a scientific definition of happiness" (p. 136). Instead, quite deliberately, the study begins with an acknowledgement of the importance of the pursuit of happiness in American culture and proceeds immediately to the letters and what they disclosed about their writers' self-understanding of happiness—what it meant to them. It might be objected, Katz continues, that he has not spent enough time defining what happiness means. A social scientist, it may be said, "cannot accept a word that has been in constant use and has so many meanings, and unquestioningly make it the subject for a study. . . . Let it be repeated that this is precisely what we have done" (ibid.). Katz refuses to come up with a definition of happiness culled from the literature in order to apply it to the data "to see which letter writers were 'really' talking about happiness and which were 'mistaken'" (ibid.). Instead, the data are taken at face-value as disclosive of current understandings of the meaning of happiness and the kinds of things with which it was associated. Several kinds of happiness were discovered, and thus it was possible to specify, empirically, the popular usage of the word 'happiness' itself. The implication of this is that there is not one kind of happiness that precludes or contradicts the several other kinds (p. 137).

What, then, does the analysis of the letters discover about the meaning of happiness? After a careful analysis of the contents of the two hundred plus letters, which are tabulated in various ways, Katz concludes that, overwhelmingly, the letter writers agree "on a definition of happiness in terms of self and family. Event for self, Events for others in Family, Visits, Phone calls, gifts, Health and Identification with

Happiness of Children are the playing field for the happiness game” (pp. 66–67). A four-fold table (The Happiness Quadrant: pp. 59–80) is then introduced to produce an overarching framework that simplifies and clarifies the key implications of the data. Two sets of opposing binaries are cross tabulated to produce a quadrant with four variables. The first binary is between active and passive forms of happiness: On the one hand, you make something happen—you *do* something. On the other hand, you do nothing, but something happens to you. Of all the letters, 65 can be read in terms of the writer doing something, and 148 in terms of something happening to the writer—the doing/happening axis of the quadrant. The second axis, which arises from the first, is the expected/unexpected binary: anticipated versus unanticipated happiness. When cross-tabulated, this produces four possible variants. There are actions (doings) with foreseen results versus actions (doings) with unforeseen results, and there are anticipated happenings versus unanticipated happenings. Of the sample, 48 letters (22%) fall in the first quadrant: actions whose consequences are expected to produce happiness. “Good deeds” and coming closer to a goal are the main examples of this kind of reported happiness. Only 18 letters (or 8% of the total) fall in the second quadrant—actions with unforeseen results. Typical of these letter writers is the young man who worked hard and saved to go to college, yet was very unsure he would get a place, and was delighted when he was accepted (p. 72). Forty-eight letters (23%) fall in the third quadrant (anticipated happenings). Katz calls it “Calendar happiness” because it is defined in terms of special days—a wedding, a birthday, or an anniversary. Unsurprisingly, given that the letters were written in February, St. Valentine’s Day gets a number of special mentions. These are days and dates to be looked forward to in anticipation that something nice will happen to you: Your family will be especially considerate on your birthday. You will receive cards and gifts from relatives and friends. You do not *do* anything on the special day to make yourself happy. Rather, it is others who do things that make you happy. The final quadrant (unanticipated happenings) is by far the largest, with 100 letters (47%) falling into this category, in which happiness comes as a surprise. Unexpected visits or good news are obvious examples.

Such are the results of the analysis of the contents of the letters. Happiness is not reducible to any single definition of what it means; it is a matrix or cluster of related, but distinct, characteristics with one strongly marked aspect—happiness often comes as a surprise. It is only once the results are in that Katz turns to the literature for scientific concepts of happiness. “Scientific” is perhaps overstating the views discussed, which exhibit that kind of punditry expected of *maître penseurs* of the professorial class. A number of views are canvassed from both sides of the Atlantic, including those of Erich Fromm, Robert Lynd, Bertrand Russell, and Hornell Hart. They mostly do not correspond with the views expressed by the letter writers, for the majority of whom happiness comes as a surprise. “For Russell or for Lynd the idea of happiness completely unrelated to any activity or to any purposefulness is unthinkable. For Fromm [it] would simply be confirmation of the illusory nature of the [letter writers’] reports” (p. 102). And what of the real or not question? For Russell, Lynd, and Fromm, the idea of happiness is inseparable from the notion of productive, creative activity leading to self-fulfillment whose reward is happiness. For Fromm, in particular, Katz’s main finding (surprise happiness) would simply confirm the letter writers’ reports as illusory because, for Fromm, “the pursuit of happiness is indeed nothing but the pursuit of significance” (p. 102).

The standard social-science graduate thesis consists of a preliminary review of the literature relevant to the chosen topic, which serves as the critical measure for the evaluation of the empirical data

that follows. Katz, as we have seen, reverses this. He quite deliberately begins with the letters and his analysis of them before turning to a consideration of “scientific” definitions of happiness. Why does he do this, and with what consequences? The overall effect, I suggest (and readers will, of course, judge for themselves), is to privilege the point of view of the letter writers over that of professional, academic sociologists. In the emerging sociology of mass communication, listeners were conceived of as a mass audience, and it is an unusual and distinctive feature of Katz’s thesis that this perspective is nowhere in sight. Furthermore, Katz takes a studiously non-judgmental view of his letter-writing listeners—and this, again, is in sharp contrast with the emerging body of literature on the radio audience. He quotes from academic sources on both sides of the Atlantic that view letter-writers to radio programs as evidently unrepresentative of the radio audience: in the words of Will Durant, invalids, lonely people, the very young, the very old, and mischievous children. Durant cites a leading British psychologist, Cyril Burt, who regards letter writers to the BBC as “evidently neurotic,” and Cantril and Allport say much the same about Americans who write to the networks.

Letter writers, perhaps, are not typical of the far vaster audience for radio. But it is not difficult to show that the whole of the mass radio audience, in the prevailing view from Columbia, is seen in pretty much the same way.

- It is a well known fact that people who suffer deeply or whose lot in life is generally miserable frequently compensate for their situations by seeking some temporary change or escape from their troubles. Dull lives may be cheered by bright clothing or gaudy furniture, harassed breadwinners may become fixtures at the local beer hall, worried housewives may zealously participate in religious orgies, repressed youths may identify themselves for a few hours with the great lovers or gangsters of the silver screen.
- Most frequently, however, the listeners enjoy the troubles of other people as a means to compensate for their own misery through aggressiveness against others. The [radio] stories provide listeners with subjects to be aggressive against. . . . Radio seems to have taken the place of the neighbor. The neighbor as a competitor has become the stranger, while the radio in its aloofness is the thing humanly near to the listener[s]. . . . They are enchanted by a one-sided relationship which fits into their isolationist desires.
- Drawn from a highly competitive, segmented urban society, our informants live in a climate of reciprocal distrust which, to say the least, is not conducive to stable human relationships. . . . Society is experienced as an arena for rival frauds. . . . The very same society that produces this sense of alienation and estrangement generates in many a craving for re-assurance, an acute need to believe, a flight into faith. For her adherents [Kate] Smith has become the object of this faith. She is seen as genuine by those who seek redemption from the spurious.

These quotations are taken from three of the major studies of the radio audience undertaken by associates of Paul Lazarsfeld and at his prompting. The first, and most egregious, is from Hadley Cantril’s study of the panic caused by Orson Welles’ notorious radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* by H. G.

Wells (Cantril et al., 1940). The second is from Herta Herzog's seminal study of female New Yorkers who listen regularly to daytime radio serials (Herzog, 1941/2004). The third is from *Mass Persuasion*, Robert Merton's classic study of Kate Smith (a famous radio singing star of the time) and her marathon day-long broadcast on September 21, 1943, to persuade listeners to purchase government war bonds (Merton, 1946/2004). All three authors were read and referenced by Katz, but he studiously avoids their judgmental views of the radio audience.

Such attitudes were not, in any way, peculiar to the sociology department at Columbia. They were representative of a far wider taken-for-granted and deeply entrenched view of the masses amongst the intellectual elites on both sides of the Atlantic. The emergence of an urban working class concentrated in cities in the course of the 19th century was a growing source of anxiety, fear, and loathing amongst many of the metropolitan intelligentsia. John Carey's excoriating account of *The Intellectuals and the Masses (1880-1939)* is based mainly on British literary authors (Carey, 1992). But he links British attitudes to the European intelligentsia, including the Frankfurt School, whose leading members had become attached to Columbia's Sociology Department in the mid-1930s through the good offices of Robert Lynd (Wiggershaus, 1994, pp. 144-145). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had left together, and Erich Fromm had gone off in a different direction by the time the young Elihu Katz returned from the war to resume his studies. His supervisor, Leo Lowenthal, was by then the last remaining member of the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt still attached to Columbia. All shared a view of the masses (in America and Europe) as seduced and duped by the false pleasures on offer from the then new radio, cinema, and record industries—a view most ruthlessly expressed in the celebrated chapter "The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1979).

The common attitude toward the audience in early radio studies at Columbia was one that regarded them with anxiety and, at best, concern—a concern to educate the new mass public (Lazarsfeld, 1940) so that they would not succumb to panic (Cantril, 1940) or persuasion (Merton, 1946). For Herzog, radio was a substitute for real experience, an ersatz compensation for the lack of anything real happening in dull and lonely lives. Such views were, in the end, no more than the prejudices of an educated minority against an uneducated majority, and they reached their peak in the inter-war period in America and Europe. Cantril's "well known facts" about the wretched lives of the radio audience are no more than a tissue of phony clichés. Herzog's unforgiving view of radio as "borrowed experience" or escapist compensation is incapable of acknowledging the possibility of genuine enjoyment in listening. And Merton cannot understand how it is possible for Kate Smith's female listeners to hear her as sincere when her broadcast is so evidently, in his view, a stage-managed exercise in mass persuasion. For all of them, one way or another, ordinary radio listeners are, in Harold Garfinkel's phrase, "judgmental dopes" (1967, p. 66).

How, then, to account for young Katz's resistance to the prevailing view of his elders and professors in his Masters' study of radio listeners? Was it youthful innocence or lack of awareness? Hardly. Katz rejects the view of his letter writers as unrepresentative of the larger radio audience, and he insists on treating them (and Ted Malone) with respect. He regards the relationship between Malone and his audience as genuine—non-instrumental and real. In this regard, he was, at that time, unique to the best

of my knowledge. It remained a persistent view that the audience for radio and television could not possibly have a real social relationship with what they heard and saw—it could never be more than what Horton and Wohl were to call “a para-social relationship,” a relationship in which viewers imagined an intimate relationship between themselves and the TV “persona,” but which was, in fact, a one-sided fantasy (Horton & Wohl, 1956/2004). For Horton and Wohl, the imagined bond between the viewer and the television personality was a simulacrum of conversational sociability, not the real thing. It “can properly be called compensatory in as much as it provides the socially and psychologically isolated with a chance to enjoy the elixir of sociability” (ibid., p. 380)—precisely the same attitude as that of Herzog to the audience for daytime radio serials.

Katz’s take on the radio audience was remarkable for its time and place and an augury of things to come. To describe it as non-judgmental is not to say that it is uncritical. The implied critique is not of the audience, but of the scientific definitions of happiness. Scientific is usually put in scare quotes in the text as an indication of wariness as to whether the definitions are truly “scientific.” A moment’s consideration suggests that they are not—no more than the opinions of professional intellectuals whose entitlement to views on a range of worldly matters beyond their knowledge and expertise has always been taken as given, especially by the media. Fromm and Russell consult only their own good selves to know what happiness means. Politely but firmly, Katz asserts the definitions of the letter writers over those of the pundits. And these, he points out, are truer to the historic meaning of the word itself. The word “happiness,” he notes, is derived from the verb “to hap” (p. 101). He leaves it at that, but it is perhaps worth glossing, for it is a crucial point. The Old English noun “hap” and the Middle English verb “to hap” both have the same root meaning, in which the element of chance is key. Good or bad fortune, a fortuitous occurrence, a chance event—these are the core original meanings of the word. “Haply” and “happily” both mean “by chance.” “Happen” and “happening” both derive from “hap,” and likewise “happy” and “happiness,” whose early meanings cluster around the idea of being blessed by good fortune, a lucky or fortunate circumstance. Happiness as a state of mind (inner contentment), as self-fulfillment, or as social harmony and good will (happy families) are more recent, modern accretions to the earlier meanings of this cluster of related words (for all definitions, see Shorter OED, 2007). It is clear, though, that the letter writers’ association of happiness with the unexpected and surprising (with chance and good luck) is closer to the long-evolving meaning of the word than to the pundits’ glosses of the meaning of happiness.

Katz has, from time to time in his long career, been taken to task for being uncritical. His two most famous works have both been attacked on such grounds. Todd Gitlin laid into *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) as “failing to put the critical questions” (Gitlin, 1978), and later scholars were ticked off for granting it paradigm-founding status, perpetuating its misleading theses and failing to examine it critically (ibid., p. 222). More recently, *Media Events* (Dayan & Katz, 1992) has been subjected to Nick Couldry’s “critical approach” and accused of reproducing the “myth of the mediated center” (Couldry, 2003). What these authors decry as a defect in Katz’s work, I read as a virtue. Katz’s work is not critical, but that does not mean it is uncritical. It is, more exactly, non-judgmental. As such, it is not thoughtless, but rather thoughtful in ways that forever elude critical thinking. It is thoughtful on behalf of its subjects and its readers. It treats its subjects with respect. To accept what the letter writers say without de-constructing their accounts or explaining them away by reducing them to something else—this is not uncritical thoughtlessness, but thoughtful in a way that is simply not there in the mass society

critique that underpinned the study of radio at Columbia in the 1930s and 1940s. In foregrounding the letter writers' definitions of happiness, in taking them at face value, in refusing to take academic definitions of happiness as the measure of whether the letter writers were right or not in their understandings of its meaning—through these deliberate, thoughtful stratagems, Katz allows readers to form their own views rather than have them preempted by those of the scientific voices in the text.

And from this, something begins to emerge that is simply beyond recognition in the sociology of mass communication; namely, that the new mass audience is made up of people who are persons in their own right, with their own real lives which they live and share with others. I have argued that, by the mid-1950s, the time of the masses had begun to fade in North America and Northern Europe, as the time of everyday life had begun to appear (Scannell, 2007). The two key texts that signal this historic transformation are from both sides of the Atlantic: *Culture and Society* by Raymond Williams, and *Personal Influence* by Katz and Lazarsfeld. Williams proclaimed the end of the masses: there are no masses, there are only ways of seeing other people as "the masses" (1958/1983, p. 300). And Katz and Lazarsfeld proclaim "the discovery of 'people'" (1955, p. 25). There are no people in the sociology of mass communication, because from that perspective, the masses have no differentiated individual existence. Their voices are there, to be sure, in the texts, as qualitative data, and we do hear them speak. But what they say is not attended to, and who they are remains unacknowledged by the authors of the texts. The recognition of people as people, as individuals with the attributes of persons awaited the emergence in the 1950s of a new domain in the field: the sociology of interaction, which took the category of the person and interpersonal life as its topic. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by Erving Goffman (1959/1980) was the defining work that made explicit the discovery of everyday existence as an object for sociological investigation. That discovery is already anticipated in *The Happiness Game*, which has remained unpublished until now. It is its author's earliest academic work, and yet it exhibits a cast of mind, an attitude, a tone of voice, and an emphasis that is already distinctive and which appears, with admirable consistency, in the life-work that follows it.

### References

- Adorno, T., & Horkheimer, M. (1944/1979). *Dialectic of enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Cantril, H., Gaudet, H., & Herzog, H. (1940). *The Invasion from Mars: A study in the psychology of panic*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Carey, J. (1992). *The Intellectuals and the masses*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Couldry, N. (2003). *Media rituals*. London: Routledge.
- Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). *Media events*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Gitlin, T. (1978). Media sociology: The dominant paradigm. *Theory and Society*, 6(2), 205–253.
- Goffman, E. (1959/1980). *The presentation of self in everyday Life*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books.
- Herzog, H. (1941/2004). On borrowed experience. An analysis of listening to daytime sketches. In J. D. Peters & P. Simonson (Eds.), *Mass communication and American social thought* (pp. 139–156). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlejohn.
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (1956/2004). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. In J. D. Peters & P. Simonson (Eds.), *Mass communication and American social thought* (pp. 373–386). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlejohn.
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. (1955). *Personal influence*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Lazarsfeld, P. (1940). *Radio and the printed page*. New York: Duell, Sloane and Pearce.
- Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1948). *The people's choice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Merton, R. (1946/2004). *Mass persuasion*. New York: Howard Fertig.
- Scannell, P. (2007). *Media and communication*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Wiggershaus, R. (1994). *The Frankfurt School*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Williams, R. (1958/1983). *Culture and society*. New York: Columbia University Press.