

The Happiness Game

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**Mail and Females at the Bureau:
The Happiness Game in the Gendered Contexts of Early U.S.
Communications Research**

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Women wrote letters to Ted Malone, and other men noticed. This was a longer story when Elihu Katz, at the invitation of his professor, Leo Lowenthal, turned to analyze some of the thousands of letters written to the popular daytime radio host who spoke to American women with what *TIME* magazine had called "the coziest parlor voice in U.S. radio." Five days a week, Malone read poetry and chatted intimately with the daytime radio audience of America. "May I come in?" he would ask his listeners. "I see you are alone. . . . Now I'll just take this rocker here by the radio and chat a while. . . . What lovely new curtains." During its first year on national radio in 1935, his *Between the Bookends* generated between 4,000 and 20,000 fan letters a month, more than any other unsponsored program at the time. *TIME* reported a few of the effects Malone seemed to have on his listeners.

One woman has been wiring him daily and hopefully for six months, seeking a rendezvous. From Missouri, where Ted used to visit in the evening, a once-misunderstood wife confessed to curling up in her nightie in front of the radio, listening to Indian Love Lyrics, being then & there cured forever of the "coldness" of which her husband had complained. A one-armed girl once sent him a silk hanky with his name embroidered on it with her toes.

The writer called Malone "Shelley, Prince Charming, Don Juan, [and] Galahad in one . . ." (Radio: Pilgrim, *TIME*, 1939, para. 2).

Malone (1908–1989) had been born Frank Alden Russell, the son of an itinerant Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints preacher, who had raised the boy to appreciate the art of the spoken word. The younger Russell won speech and debate contests in high school and college, and he came under the mentorship of an English professor who drew out his talents and instilled a love of Robert Browning. In high school, he got his first on-the-air experience on KLDS, a station run by the Latter Day Saints church in Independence, Missouri, which in 1929 received a commercial license, moved to Kansas City, and became KMBC. Russell went to work for the station—announcing, singing, and then one day, when a regularly-scheduled act didn't appear, reading from a book of poetry for 15 minutes under the pseudonym "Ted Malone," because he was embarrassed to be caught doing so. Letters streamed in from listeners who wanted to hear more poetry reading from the "witty Irishman" (as one writer called him), Malone came to find deep enjoyment in the role, and *Between the Bookends* became a daily show. This was sincere middlebrow fare, not high culture, and Malone's success with it prompted the Columbia network to broadcast the show once a week in 1931. He continued with a blend of human interest story and poetry reading, the latter representing a genre known as "broadcast interpretation" that Malone helped initiate and master (Gibson, 1992). He had grown into what *The New York Times* would call "a genial and soft-spoken reader of homey and sentimental poems and philosophy" whose "programs of chitchat, which he called 'little visits,' had millions of fans, particularly housewives and schoolgirls" (Flint, 1989; see also Dunning, 1988; Spaulding, 1999). Katz (1950) would later observe that Malone spoke with a voice that was "soft-spoken, friendly, homespun, cheerful, [and] soothing," and reached out with "sincerity, friendliness, and a devotion to the idea of a visit with the listener." In 1935, Malone described himself to the *Los Angeles Times* by saying, "I'm not a poser, I'm not a professional philosopher. I merely try to bring some bit of encouragement, some cheer into homes where it is needed" (1989).



Ted Malone, aka "Don Juan"

This sincere and sentimental Ted Malone was evidenced in the letters written to him in February of 1948, which Katz would analyze for his thesis. The number of letters he received had fallen off from the 1930s levels, and the level of ardor in them may have dropped somewhat, but Malone still attracted some 7,000 pieces of mail in the first four months of 1948. By then, he was a nationally known broadcaster and editor of popular poetry compilations who had expanded his repertoire during the war, when he hosted a variety show and a quiz show in addition to taking *Between the Bookends* on the road for broadcasts from Europe. After the war ended in 1945, he traveled to and broadcast from Cairo, Karachi, Manila, Jerusalem, and Tokyo, among other cities. In the early 1950s, he would pioneer the sort of "media events" type of broadcasting that Katz and Daniel Dayan [1992] would later study, with reporting done from the 1952 Winter Olympics in Norway and the 1953 Coronation of Queen Elizabeth in London. His audience expanded, but the core remained women, particularly in the daytime show that, beginning in 1948, was simply called *A Broadcast*, sponsored by Westinghouse, and aired nationally on the ABC radio network

(Gibson, 1992). Thousands of these women would share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with him.

In 1948, 7,000 or so letters written to Malone came into the hands of Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research and would provide material for what *The Happiness Game* refers to as "The Fan Mail Projects," overseen by Leo Lowenthal and his graduate assistant Gordon Streib.¹ Katz had joined the project as a research component of the department's two-course core sequence, Sociology 195-196 (Katz, 1949), out of which were published Bureau training guides for administering questionnaires, controlled experiments, and qualitative interviews.² Fan mail studies fit none of these research paradigms, though they weren't as novel as Lowenthal seemed to believe. He enlisted the bright young Katz and helped get him going on a study of the letters Malone received during the dark winter month of February, when he challenged his listeners to look for "all the little things that add color, adventure, [and] happiness to their every day" (Katz, 1950, p. 8).

Bodies Behind the Texts: Females and Mail Studies in the Early Field

Analyzing Malone's fan mail placed Katz at a crossroads in the gendered dynamics of media research at Columbia in the 1940s. Malone's daytime audience was overwhelmingly female, and 257 of the 260 letters sampled for *The Happiness Game* were written by women. Katz engaged in a kind of research, mass mail analysis, which had been the near exclusive province of female researchers, going back to the late 1930s and the days of the Office of Radio Research. The thesis managed to textually marginalize these earlier researchers at a moment when material opportunities previously open to them were being given to men who flooded American universities after the war. It obliquely channeled a number of the fault lines of the field of mass communication as it organized itself intellectually and institutionally in the late 1940s and early 1950s. To understand the 1950 text better, we need to look toward some of its contexts—and what Carolyn Marvin (1994) has evocatively called the bodies behind the texts.

Female audiences were long the objects of analytical scrutiny in the research conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld and his associates. In the United States, this dated back at least to Lazarsfeld's work for the Pittsburgh-based Kaufman's department stores in the mid-1930s, when he began selling his expertise to organizations looking to capitalize on women's buying habits and attention. As the trade journal *Printers' Ink* had put matters in 1929, "the proper study of mankind is man . . . but the proper study of markets is women" (quoted in Glickman, 2006, p. 211). Marketing studies would be a staple of ORR and Bureau

¹ In working through the Bureau archives, I have not found other reference to these ca. 1948 Fan Mail Projects. In 1949, Lowenthal would leave to become research director at the Voice of America (a post he would hold until 1955), which might explain why nothing more would come of them. The VOA paid attention to its mail, and in fact, it enlisted Herta Herzog to perform a systematic study of them "as a supplement to the routine processing continually performed by Voice personnel" (Herzog, 1952, p. 608, fn. 1). For the relationship between Katz and Lowenthal, see Robinson (2006).

² "Constructing Questionnaires and Interview Schedules," "The Controlled Experiment in Social Research," and "Techniques in the Qualitative Interview" (all noted in Barton, 1984, p. 71).

work, helping to pay the bills and support the research associates and graduate students that Lazarsfeld employed (Morrison, 2006), a model he transferred from the first research institute he founded, the *Wirtschaftspsychologische Forschungsstelle* in Vienna (Jeřábek, 2001; see also Barton, 1982; Fleck, 2011; Sills, 1987). But female audiences also provided the empirical base for some of the institutes' most famous publications. Herta Herzog's (1941, 1944) soap opera studies were among the earliest (see also Kaufman, 1944), preserved in the classic "On Borrowed Experience," which placed her, in the words of Tamar Liebes, "first in a line of women scholars who study feminine genres from a feminist perspective" (2003, p. 44).

Merton, Fiske, and Curtis' similarly classic *Mass Persuasion* (1946) was built largely on qualitative interviews with an overwhelmingly female sample of the listening audience for Kate Smith's 1943 radio marathon to sell war bonds (Simonson, 2004). And Katz and Lazarsfeld's field-defining *Personal Influence* (1955) was based on a 1945 study of 800 women in Decatur, Illinois (on which, see the chapters by Douglas, Glickman, McCormack, Morrison, Scannell, and Simonson in Simonson, 2006). The Decatur study was funded by McFadden Publications and the popular lowbrow women's magazine *True Story*, which wasn't alone in trying to build larger and more loyal audiences to sell to advertisers and commercial sponsors. Broadcasters helped fund not only soap opera studies, but also research on women's tastes in musical programs (e.g., Lazarsfeld, 1942). Much of the audience work that the ORR and Bureau would conduct served the dual purpose of satisfying the funder (typically commercial, philanthropic, civic, or governmental organizations) and advancing social scientific knowledge. This was true of a major, NBC-funded study in 1944, which had 2,650 women in four cities talking about their listening habits and attitudes. It issued in Bureau reports (Lazarsfeld & Schneider, 1945; Schneider, 1945); a published journal note framed for labor unions addressing women's voting patterns (Berelson & Lazarsfeld, 1945); and an excellent differentiation of the female audience that, among other things, distinguished those listeners who rejected soap operas on emotional or intellectual grounds—preferring more soothing or educationally uplifting sorts of programming (Lazarsfeld & Dinerman, 1949). The smooth-voiced, poetry-reading popular philosopher Ted Malone filled this latter niche. "I get too much worked up listening to those soap operas," a listener told a Bureau interviewer. "When Ted talks to you, it's peaceful" (BASR, 1948, quoted in Katz, 1950, pp. 17–18).

Bureau research on women audiences fell across a political, epistemological, and rhetorical range. Sometimes, as in the case of *Mass Persuasion* and *Personal Influence*, it hid their identities behind degendered language of "people." As Susan Douglas has put it, "one of the central contradictions of the Decatur Study is that it simultaneously disguises that only women are being studied and universalizes them as representative of the general population" (2006, p. 42). That naming was part of a politics of liberal universalism refracted through high-modernist epistemologies that muted women's voices in the name of accumulating generalizable knowledge about decision making and media influence—a sensibility that expressed itself in Lazarsfeld's apparent disinterest in the gender of his respondents in Decatur (Katz, 2006, p. 307). Conversely, studies of soap opera listeners and morning radio audiences explicitly called attention to the fact that they were conducting research into and making claims about women, as did voting-related research that drew attention to women's lower rates of political interest and participation (e.g., Berelson & Lazarsfeld, 1945). Such studies as these amplified less-valued social behaviors and attachments and named the gender that engaged in them, even as they also typically took up measured

tones of objectivist social science (even in the case of Herzog, who Douglas credits with “anticipating how poststructuralism, feminism, and postmodernism would inform media criticism and analysis by emphasizing people’s ambivalent relationship to media content that was itself filled with contradictions” [Douglas, 1999, p. 144]). *The Happiness Game* fell somewhere between these universalizing and particularizing impulses. It observes—though almost in passing—that 257 of the 260 letters analyzed were written by women, but it also calls that fact a “limitation” in need of “more generalized corroborative evidence” (Katz, 1950, pp. 23, 71, 73). Meanwhile, language standards naturalized the use of male pronouns even when referring to female audiences, helping to create a text that both calls attention to its gendered particularity and strikes some rhetorical distance from it.

Beyond adding to a longer line of studies of female audiences, Katz’s thesis also provides a window into the complexly gendered structure of the production of knowledge about media in the 1940s. From the time Paul Lazarsfeld co-founded the Office of Radio Research in 1937 through the immediate postwar years at the Bureau, women found significant, if constrained, space to operate in the nascent field of communication (Simonson & Archer, 2008). By my count, at least 34 women authored or co-authored the reports and publications that poured out of the Bureau, while at least 20 others contributed sufficiently to the collective production of knowledge to be acknowledged in the books published by the Columbia group, operating as interviewers, research assistants, or secretaries. Before 1945, two of the three leading authors by page count were women (Fleck, 2011). Many more local women conducted on-the-ground interviews for major Bureau studies conducted from 1940–1948 in Erie County, Ohio; Decatur, Illinois; and Elmira, New York, helping to generate the empirical base for three of the most influential books to come out from Columbia—*The People’s Choice*, *Personal Influence*, and *Voting*, respectively.

In February of 1948, as Ted Malone was querying his listeners about their happiest day of the month, the collective situation for women at the Bureau was in the process of becoming decidedly less happy. Millions of veterans would enter college on the GI Bill, and dozens, if not scores, of them would find their way into graduate study in sociology at Columbia. Before that time, women at the Bureau had enjoyed a favorable opportunity structure that gave them the chance to oversee or assist with pioneering, cutting-edge methodological and empirical research. By 1947, when veterans accounted for almost 50% of all college admissions in the United States, that favorable structure began to contract, and women found far fewer opportunities in the emerging academic field of communication. In 1948, then, when Leo Lowenthal chose Elihu Katz and Paul Streib to take part in the Fan Mail Projects, they gained institutional toeholds at the Bureau increasingly unavailable to women.

Mail studies were, by then, a moderately well-established sub-species of communications research which, to that point, had been the near exclusive domain of women investigators. A methodologically innovative means of analyzing “communications from audiences directed to those who are dependent on having an audience,” as Merton (1963) would later describe them, mail studies dated back to the late 1930s and the original grant Lazarsfeld had secured from the Rockefeller Foundation (on Rockefeller funding, see Buxton, 2009). Radio broadcasting and the mail had been interacting as mass media since the 1920s, when listeners like those who heard Ted Malone’s first poetry readings in Kansas City wrote to express their feelings and opinions (Simmons, 2009). The mail attracted the attention of

broadcasters and others trying to understand and respond to audiences or gain commercial sponsorship for their programming.

In that context, Rockefeller underwrote a series of more civically oriented mail studies that would be led by Jeannette Sayre, Rowena Wyant, and Herzog. The first study sorted through more than 14,000 letters written in 1937–1938 to the important public affairs discussion show, *America's Town Meeting of the Air*. Sayre's 1939 "Progress in Radio Fan-Mail Analysis" formally advanced that project, summarizing data about who wrote letters to the show, categorizing content, and beginning to develop basic methods for analyzing mail as a medium of mass communication. A second Rockefeller-funded study then examined letters written to U.S. senators during controversial debates over instituting a military draft in the summer of 1940. Issuing in two *Public Opinion Quarterly* articles, "Voting Via the Senate Mailbag" sought to chart the dynamics of mass politics as registered through letter writing, casting themselves as an alternative to Gallup polls as a means of gauging public sentiment on an issue. Among other things, the articles asked what kinds of people wrote letters, and discussed letter writing by both organized groups and individuals (Wyant, 1941; Wyant & Herzog, 1941). Mapping points of contact among audiences, institutions, media technologies, and a range of social practices, the first wave of Columbia mail studies promised, in their grander moments, a "new way of writing history" that would cast light on how citizens positioned themselves in relation to leaders, and listeners in relation to broadcasters (Wyant & Herzog, 1941, p. 590).

After a brief hiatus during the war, mail studies returned in 1948—again, as a potentially richer and more naturalistic alternative to polling as a medium through which to study the expression of public opinion. Women continued to play a role in some of these studies, but the ground under their feet was shifting. The Bureau hatched two potentially major mail projects, neither of which bore full fruit. One was Lowenthal's Fan Mail Project, which I will return to in a moment. The other was the so-called Eisenhower Mail Project, built upon some 5,000 letters written to General Dwight Eisenhower urging him to run for president in 1948. He would wait until 1952 to run, instead taking over the presidency of Columbia University, where a staff was assembled to answer the letters. Joan Doris (later Joan Doris Goldhamer), a Bureau researcher who had conducted interviews for the Kate Smith study, joined the effort. "Motivated in equal parts by economic necessity and intellectual curiosity, I applied and was hired to help in this effort," she later recalled (Goldhamer, 1997, pp. 241–242). Her decision was indicative of the decreasing opportunities for women at the Bureau, but it also gave rise to a research project headed by Merton and involving Doris, Marie Jahoda, and Leila Sussmann. Issuing in a never-published book manuscript (Eisenhower grew nervous about the spectacle of social scientists dissecting the heartfelt appeals of ordinary citizens), *Mass Pressure* went further than any mail study to date in analyzing the public images and motivations of letter writers to individuals made famous through mass media (Goldhamer, 1997; Simonson, 2010). Building on the research experience, however, Leila Sussmann would go on to analyze letters written to President Roosevelt, a dissertation project that led to an article and a book-length study of her own (Sussmann, 1956, 1963).

The Happiness Game in These Contexts

Lowenthal's Fan Mail Project was an entertainment-based corollary to what the Eisenhower study was doing in the realm of political popular expression, and *The Happiness Game* was apparently its only scholarly fruit. Katz's text is historically important, in part because it bears traces of the symbolic and material exclusion of women from the field in its earliest years. It shows us something about the climate of reputation and intellectual status in the immediate postwar era, when scores of graduate students flooded Columbia's sociology program, then vying with the University of Chicago as the leading department in the country. Columbia would win that battle, with Lazarsfeld and Merton anchoring a program that set the tone for the mainstream of American sociology for the next two decades. In February of 1948, Columbia was in the middle of its roughly 15-year run as arguably the most important center for media and communications research in the country, if not the world. What happened there mattered—not just locally, but in the nascent field nationally, and even internationally.

The opening chapter of *The Happiness Game* frames the overall project and indexes the symbolic place of women in the microenvironments of Columbia and the Bureau. The story is nuanced and somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the thesis opens by referencing one of Herta Herzog's soap opera studies, calling it "one of the most notable contributions to 'Why Listen' research" and audience gratification studies. Though she hadn't been a full-time member of the Bureau since 1943, Herzog and her work commanded respect and could serve as an argumentative starting point to illustrate the state of current knowledge. The next paragraph quickly pivots away, however, asserting that "the common basis of Dr. Herzog's study and of almost all communications research (except for the analysis of the communication itself) is the interview" (Katz, 1950, p. 2, emphasis in original). The graduate student follows that assertion with an observation that reveals a good deal about the local environment. "It occurred to Dr. Lowenthal of Columbia that almost no serious work had been done on one of the most widely known, and frequently mentioned, by-products of the communications industry: Fan Mail." Two paragraphs later, we get the claim, "Fan mail hasn't been given a chance by researchers."

By the late 1940s, the methodological and conceptual work done by women on the mail was well on the way to being symbolically eliminated from the collective memory of the young field. Lowenthal could tell his young charge that mail hadn't been given a chance, and a Masters thesis devoted to it could all but ignore the earlier research, mentioning only the Wyant-Herzog Senate study, once and in passing (Ch. 4, fn. 4). The thesis cites studies on mail conducted by higher prestige men of the era (Frederick Lumley, Hadley Cantril, Gordon Allport, and Leo Bogart), but ignores those done by lower-prestige women, which went further than the other studies, both empirically and methodologically. Jeannette Sayre (1939) had already questioned the adequacy of the public image of fan mail writers as neurotics, but *The Happiness Game* advanced the writer-as-neurotic image as the problematic received wisdom that it set out to correct (Ch. 1). I make these points not to cast blame on the young Elihu Katz, and certainly not to suggest that his Master's thesis bears responsibility for the growing marginalization of women in the field in the postwar era. Rather, I'm arguing that the text was partly a product of its immediate context, and that it ritually reconfirmed the symbolic and material marginalization of early women researchers that was accelerating by 1948—and which, ironically, Herta Herzog (1952) would contribute to in her own mail study a few years later.

The marginalization of early female researchers is only one part of the broader story, though. Like other qualitative studies of female audiences produced by Columbia, *The Happiness Game* is a valuable and interesting historical document, in part for the glimpses that it gives us of a popular media audience of the era, the everyday lives of women radio listeners, and the ways they might have been moved through the medium ("On Borrowed Experience" and *Mass Persuasion* are also noteworthy in this regard). In *The Happiness Game*, dimensions of those lives come out most poignantly in moments when young Elihu Katz quotes directly from the women's letters, allowing their words to stand in as testimony to the lives that Ted Malone spoke into and touched sufficiently to move them to take up pen and paper to respond:

My happiest day in February was Sunday when my husband agreed to offer suggestions instead of criticisms. (7173)³

But the greatest happiness of all was to know suddenly, awestruck, that after years of plain, awkward, intensely good-hearted sacrifices, that I personally was not the ugly duckling of a clever family that I thought I was. (7100)

I began to feel like a dowdy, useless old lady . . . Suddenly the telephone rang . . . "If I come over will you fix a ribbon on my year's hat?" . . . Late in the afternoon I received another call. It was from another friend who lived in town. "I'm making a gingham dress and I just can't get the sleeves right. If I drive out this afternoon would you have time to sew them for me?" . . . Then in the evening there was another ring. "Could you please hem a communion cloth for me?" . . . Does all this sound trivial to you? All I can say is that I felt good inside of me at the end of the day. Perhaps I'm not so useless after all, nor dowdy either! And 57 isn't so awfully old, is it Ted? (6048; Katz, 1950, pp. 67-68)

Katz tells us of a listener whose happiest day involved giving "postage stamps to 'a boy who was born out of wedlock' (6022)," another that came "when she dug parsnips in the garden for a sick friend (7196)," and a third whose happiest day came as she listened to a homeless newlywed couple appear on the radio program *Bride and Groom*, where they had "as a surprise a furnished modern trailer house . . . I was so HAPPY! I started to cry (7066)" (ibid., p. 53).

In these moments, we get a sense of embodied women leading emplaced lives in often humble circumstances. Part of the considerable beauty of Katz's Master's thesis resides in the way that it gives these ordinary women some voice, offers fragments of their own accounts of everyday happiness, and counterpoises them with the words of well-known philosophers, social scientists, writers, and of course the cozy-voiced radio Galahad, Ted Malone. These were women writing in the darkest month of the year, February, from positions of people who were socially expected to put the happiness of others before their own.

³ The quotes were identified by the number assigned to each letter in the study. I follow that practice in the following excerpts.

Katz concludes his thesis by reflecting on the possibility that Malone reflects a “new cultural emphasis—on ‘inner’ things, on ‘little’ things, on good deeds, on discovery of the inner, little, good things that are all about” (ibid., p. 94). He reaches that conclusion through an array of pathways that include Lowenthal’s critical theory, Herzog’s gratifications paradigm, Lazarsfeld and Merton’s four-fold analytic tables, and his own talents in reading and interpreting written texts. Throughout the project, we can hear early versions of his clear and eloquent prose style, theoretical and methodological eclecticism, and powerful analytical insight. These would all help make him the leading media researcher of his generation. But if we listen carefully, we can also hear the voices of scores of forgotten women, many of whom were structurally prevented from finding happiness in anything but “the little things” and the inner satisfactions of good deeds joyfully done. They documented these moments through writing letters to Ted Malone that other men would also read.

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