Elihu Katz's Commitments, Disciplinarity, and Legacy:
Or, "Triangular Thinking"

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I would like to respond to Elihu Katz's speech in three linked ways, commenting on his commitments, disciplinarity, and legacy.

I came into Elihu's life, as it were, rather late in the day. In the mid-1980s, I gave my first international conference paper, based on a PhD that combined the German literary theory of reception aesthetics with multidimensional scaling techniques to understand the soap opera audience. Definitely an unusual approach! Fortunately for me, Elihu Katz was in the audience and he seemed intrigued. And he did what I think he did for a number of young scholars—he picked me up and drew me into his glittering international world. Before I knew it, I was at a conference in the deepest Black Forest, Germany, with everyone who was anyone in the world of soap opera research. It was like being at dinner with the reading list. Given this fantastically generous act, it's no wonder that when I got some postdoctoral funding I took it to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

That was in 1988. I'd been studying in Oxford—in Isaiah Berlin's college, Wolfson—and I was finding it a rather competitive, individualistic place. Too often, being clever meant pulling the rug from under somebody's feet, and it seemed no one listened much to the young. Coming to Jerusalem that summer was like coming into the sun—to a place that valued sharing and debating ideas in a collegial way. Ideas could be fun, but the demands were real: you'd better have read the latest books and have something interesting to say. In retrospect, I see that that was an extraordinary time for Elihu Katz, too. He was working with Tamar Liebes on the cross-national reception of the soap opera *Dallas* in a project that became *The Export of Meaning* (Liebes & Katz, 1990). He was working with Daniel Dayan on *Media Events* (Dayan & Katz, 1992). And the politics of the first Intifada made for hotly contested debates all around. The warmth of the welcome I received has stayed with me forever. Then, a year later, when I went to my first ICA, I suffered the then-common experience of many Europeans: ICA felt very American, a bit alienating, and definitely hard to find a foothold. Again, Elihu took me under his wing, took me to dinner with interesting folk and picked up the bill, generally acting according to the values that I now see mark his career: He listened—and listens—to young scholars, he transcends national borders of scholarship, and he prioritizes convivial, intellectual conversation about things that matter

I notice that many of us tell similar stories, perhaps because for many of us, Elihu Katz was the magical helper in our personal narratives.[1] While he never drops us, but keeps us in his "room" of people he wants to talk to, I think we have internalized him as an ever-present interlocutor. When developing an idea or piece of writing, I often imagine Elihu's furrowed brow in response to my excessive words and complicated jargon; in this way I have learned to distill my arguments and anticipate the objections.

That brings me to Elihu's commitments, as I see them. Elihu Katz notes that Dan Caspi has said that Katz knows when to leave a topic. I'm not sure that's right. I think the important thing is that he knows when to start. He's always attuned to where the action is, which arguments are starting, and when it's worth taking up a new topic or theory. He wants to join in, discuss, contribute, and make something happen—which he has done over and again during his extraordinarily varied career. In finding new topics, he acts like a kind of worried optimist—hoping for the best, but worried he won't find it.

This hope applies not only to the world of scholarship but, more importantly, to people. Pause on that word for a moment: Some of us worry: What shall we call those folk in front of the TV set or reading their newspapers? Shall we call them audiences or publics, citizens or consumers, viewers or masses or crowds? Actually, Elihu Katz generally calls them "people," illustrating his determination that intellectual commitments—in this case, the inseparability of individuality and collectivity—should be communicable in everyday language. In the tension between people's individuality and their collective power lies scope for Katz's normative commitment to discovering the conditions that enable people, and the media, to act their best.

If you read Katz's work, you'll find little about the horrors that preoccupy scholars in the field of media and communication—crisis, hate, strife, exploitation, domination, or misery. This is surely a meaningful absence, for in a fraught and painful world, his aim is to be constructive—building intellectual bridges, public institutions, knowledge about rational-critical spaces, even new generations of scholars. To achieve this, he has often asked what it is that brings people together. Is it social integration or belonging or sharing? In his presentation, he talked about reaching out—not to bring people to agreement or consensus—but, perhaps, to draw them into the discussion, into the same space where they may at least acknowledge or engage with each other.[2]

Now to say something about disciplinarity. Running through much of Elihu Katz's work is the question of whether he is a social psychologist or a sociologist. In itself, this is a more resonant theme for the U.S. field of communication than, say, in the UK where media studies emerged from the humanities,

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[1] The reference to the structural analysis of narrative is a tribute to my and Elihu's mutual friend and colleague Roger Silverstone (1981) and his brilliant first book, *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture*.

[2] Theorists of the public sphere will recognize this positioning as one response to the Habermasian account, as discussed in Lunt and Livingstone (2013).

especially the conjunction of literary and Marxist social theory.[3] Katz argues that he's become more and more a sociologist. I'd offer a different assessment and here's why. In his recent paper, "Back to the Street," he suggested (in the form of two tweets—he'd like Twitter!) that mass media sent politics into the living room; social media sent people to the streets (Katz, 2012). Shall we agree? Yes and no. Social psychologists like testable claims, often framed at the meso level and amenable to analysis using the general linear model. But sociologists would want to add a macro level (thinking, say, of the role of media in political uprisings). This might point to the economic austerity that makes people so anxious and volatile that they can be readily mobilized by social media; to the rampant commercialism that has put social media into the hands of people in countries even where they lack good sanitation; to the closed elite political systems that, locked together with the mass media, deny the people political efficacy.

In short, Katz is not a sociologist in the sense of advancing big theories of political economy, postcolonial culture, or postmodernity. He's not even very interested in institutions, except as places where people think and work and act. Of course nor is he the kind of psychologist who examines individual or personality differences. Rather, he charts the crucial spaces in between —of the group, network, social situation, social interaction—what some of us would call the spaces of mediation. Like many before and since, he sees these as mutually constitutive of self and society. That's why he keeps saying, in effect, that meaning is enacted through dialogue, dialogue is always located, locations are always differentiated yet also connected, and this is what we must try to understand.

Don't misunderstand me—this is not a worrying limitation on Katz's contribution, for Katz is not the only name on the reading list. He seeks a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary dialogue. He wants contestation and is bored when everyone around him agrees. Just to illustrate: I've always thought it extraordinary that the very book that presents the theory of uses and gratifications to the world is a collaborative edited volume that includes essays by the theory's critics (Blumler & Katz, 1974). This reminds me of something that my colleague Nick Couldry (2013) said recently, what holds us together as a field is not what we agree on but what we think is worth arguing about. As other disciplines increasingly recognize the importance of media and communications in a now thoroughly mediated world, making our field ever more multidisciplinary, this is a helpful thought. (And don't forget, what matters to Elihu Katz is the dialogue that brings people and ideas together.)

Now for legacy.[4] Paddy Scannell contrasts Elihu the man and Katz the scholar. The problem is while there is only one Elihu, there are many Katzes, leading some to ask where the true Katz theory lies. Remember, I met Elihu when he was writing about *Dallas* and, as the Ewings knew very well, managing one's legacy is a tricky business. How does the older generation decide what to pass on to the younger generation? And how does the next generation—and we're all both, of course—decide what to take? As *Dallas* again reminds us, the progenitor cannot control this process! Reception theorists know this too—audiences are selective and motivated. But like all good progenitors, Elihu Katz has written a will,

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[3] This theme has always resonated for me, however, since my first Head of Department at LSE liked to debate the relation between sociological and psychological forms of social psychology—see Farr (1978).

[4] Note that this is not the first time I have written about Elihu Katz's legacy—see Livingstone (1997).

and this includes just one word: "Tarde" (Katz, Ali, & Kim, 2014; see also Katz, 1992a). Taking this as my starting point, let me tell you how I, now speaking as the next generation, interpret this legacy. I see it as all about triangles, notwithstanding that Paddy Scannell rightly mentioned the importance of the two-by-two in Elihu's thinking: perhaps, then, the hamantasch wins over the latke?

The triangle in Figure 1 comes from Gabriel Tarde, but has been often discussed by Elihu Katz. It centers on a normative commitment to democracy (or, for Tarde, political action or participation). The elements of this triangle are foreshadowed in my account of Katz's scholarly character, commitments, and disciplinarity: conversation, public opinion, and the mass media.[5]
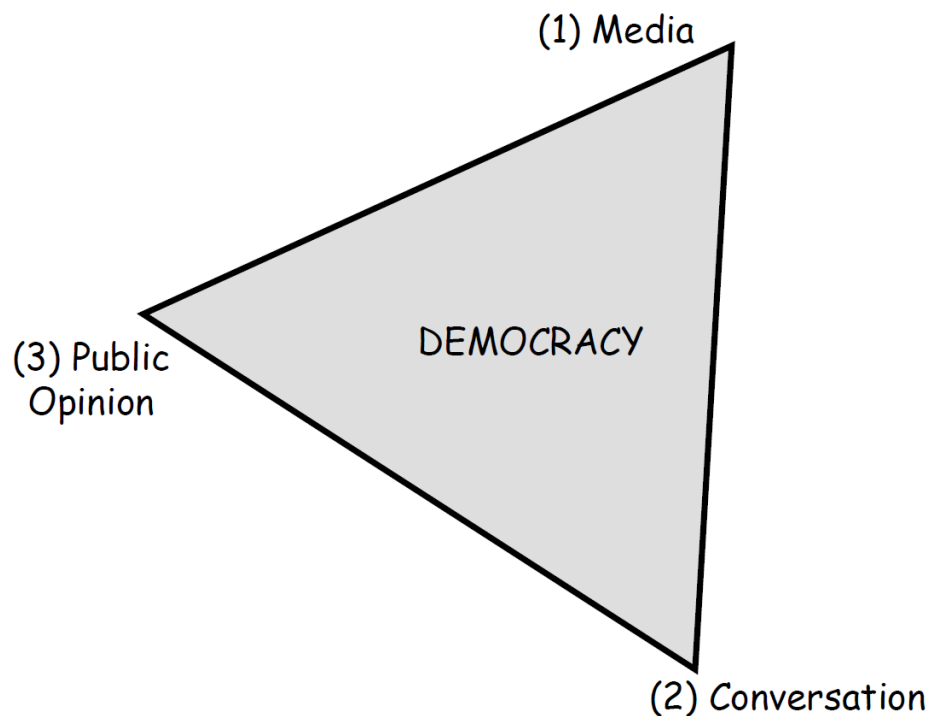

Figure 1. Triangular thinking.

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[5] In what follows, I stretch some of these concepts to fit the different approaches, but I suspect Elihu Katz likes concepts to be elastic. In listening to the spoken version of this talk, Carolyn Marvin astutely observed that Katz's use of Tarde assumes a more marked distinction between what is said in the mass media and what is said in conversation than really still works in the age of social media.

As a social psychologist (like certain kinds of sociologist), Elihu Katz favors clear, testable, linear propositions. The statistically -minded will recognize that to test the theory illustrated by this triangle, one must examine six paths (or hypotheses). My suggestion, therefore, is that Katz's legacy has been to explore all of the six paths, as a "critical friend" to democracy. (I offer the notion of the critical friend as Katz's resolution of Lazarsfeld's administrative/critical distinction that we have wrestled with over the decades; [Lazarsfeld, 1941].) Also typical of social psychologists, Katz has tested his six paths through a series of telling empirical cases. To make a long story short and a complex life simple, here's how I see it:

(a)   The first path starts with the media and passes through conversation and then to public opinion (see Figure 1, path 1→2→3). This is Katz's main concern: the path of Personal Influence (Katz, Lazarsfeld, & Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research, 1955). It is also the path of Gabriel Tarde. The media tells a story, but it only exists in societal terms if it enters conversation. People interpret the media through the talk—including with local opinion leaders—and the result is public opinion. Latterly, this was also the path of *Media Events*, with the conversation and public opinion now conceived on a global (or "glocal") scale.

(b)   The next path starts with public opinion and passes through media to conversation (3→1→2). This is the theory of uses and gratifications (published as "The Uses of Mass Communication") (Blumler & Katz, 1974). People have opinions, they go to the media to get what they think they want from it—in other words, what matters is less what the media do to people but what people do with the media—and then they talk about what they find.

(c)   Then comes the path from public opinion through conversation to the media (3→2→1). This, surely, is the premise of The Export of Meaning. People have their opinions, but they get together, and, sitting together in the living room, inevitably they argue with each other. Since there's often a TV in front of them, they interpret its meanings through that process of talk.

(d)   Path four goes from the media to public opinion to conversation (1→3→2). I see this as his strongest statement of media power. It begins with the media, which frames public opinion, but then, again, people talk about what they see. We can see this as Agenda Setting Theory, and here I'd point to Katz's many writings on the role of news, especially in relation to elections (Katz & Feldman, 1962; see also Katz & Levinsohn, 1989).

(e)   The contrary path (recall Katz's incisive article on "oscillating theories of media power" [Katz, 1988] and his commitment to debate) starts with conversation and moves through public opinion to the media (2→3→1). This is the Theory of Selective Exposure: People talk, they form their opinions, and then they go to the media, but the meanings they take from the media usually fit with what they already knew from their opinions (Katz, 1968). Hence, it's the theory of weak effects.

(f)   The last path goes from conversation, through the media, and then to public opinion (2→1→3). I see this as Elihu's normative vision. People talk, they realize what they need to know, they turn to a media that can provide what they need—which means good public service television and high quality journalism, both of which he has worked hard to establish—and this results in the informed public opinion that democracy demands (Katz, 1977; see also Katz, 1992b).

That, to me, is Elihu Katz's legacy. You're welcome to have your own opinions, as indeed you will. Thank you.

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