

The Happiness of Katz

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Starting is always the hardest thing—and it's always about finding the right thing to say. I feel the right thing to say to begin is how personally glad and happy I am to be here speaking about this person whose work we are gathered here to celebrate. I shall refer to him in two ways: from time to time as "Elihu," my friend, and now and then as "Katz," the bibliographical reference that Daniel Dayan mentioned yesterday evening. This is the Katz who refers to himself in the third person when he's giving a lecture and wants to mention one of his own writings—by Katz, the distinguished author of many books and many articles. Elihu has just taken us through the CV of this Katz—and I'd like to go through it again briefly, picking out some of the highlights. I will start with what Elihu thinks of as his greatest achievement and end with my own personal favorite. This narrative will start somewhere in the middle, then move forward toward the present, and end up right back at the beginning.

If you were to ask Elihu to pick out the one thing by Katz that he was proudest of, he would say, unhesitatingly (I know because I've asked him), that it was a talk he gave many years ago on "The Voyage of the Bagel" (Katz & Feldman, 1999). This legendary talk (unpublished for many years) was his contribution to the great Latke-Hamantasch Debate, an annual event that began at the University of Chicago in 1946 and continues to this day there and in other leading American universities. It was inaugurated by Rabbi Maurice Pekarsky, and it quickly became an eagerly anticipated annual event. Participants are required to don full academic regalia, and they enter to the tune of Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance." The event pulls in an overflowing audience of at least 300 people—every time.

So what on earth is it about? Distinguished scholars are invited to argue the comparative merits and meaning of two Jewish delicacies in connection with the two holidays with which they are linked by custom and tradition: the latke (a little potato pancake) is associated with Hanukkah, and the hamantasch (a triangular pastry with a sweet filling) with Purim. They must make a case for and against them both—from their respective disciplinary perspectives. It is a signal honor in itself to be invited to take part in this debate, as Katz was on five occasions between 1955 and 1965. In his most celebrated contribution, he took a comparative evolutionary approach, comparing Darwin's famous voyage (on the *Beagle*) with Huck Finn's travels down the Mississippi on a latke and Noah's survival of the Flood in a hamantasch-shaped ark. So that's Elihu's personal pick from the Katz CV. And I think it tells us a great deal about the man and the person. It tells us, of course, about his irrepressible good humor, which is such a notable feature of him and which endears him to everybody who knows him. But it also tells us something of his Jewishness, and that is a very important part of the CV that Elihu has walked us through.

But it is not for his contributions to Jewish and Israeli life and culture—though these are considerable—that Elihu Katz is best known. He is an internationally renowned scholar of media and

communication with a career spanning eight decades, from the late 1940s to the present. He started out as a grad student at Columbia and then moved to Chicago. While at Columbia Katz was active in the student Zionist movement through which he met his wife, Ruth, sent over from Israel to recruit Jewish college students in America to the cause of the newborn State of Israel. For many years the Katz family commuted back and forth between Israel and the United States. In the fifties and sixties he worked in the Sociology Department at Chicago, while at the same time establishing Israel's first Department of Communication Studies at Jerusalem's Hebrew University. It was this that led to the defining moment in his working life—an invitation in 1967 from the Israeli government, in the immediate aftermath of the Six-Day War, to lead a taskforce charged with bringing television to (as Katz put it) the people of the book.

Elihu accepted, knowing nothing about television. But no one else did either, and he lasted nearly two years in an impossible job (it was fraught with political infighting) before returning to the calmer waters of academic life. He did, however, get a service up and running, launching with memorable live coverage of Independence Day celebrations in Jerusalem on the first anniversary of the end of the war. The experience profoundly changed his approach to the study of mass communication and pointed his career in new directions. Before he had been a social psychologist mainly interested in interpersonal social networks and the diffusion of innovation. Now he would become a leading sociologist of the impact of television.

Personal Influence (1955), his first book, launched him on a long and remarkable career. It was coauthored with Paul Lazarsfeld, a legendary figure in the American social sciences, who established the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia in the 1930s. It investigated the part played by other people in the formation of individual opinions, tastes, and consumer choices, and found that the media had only an indirect effect on such everyday decisions as what to buy in the supermarket or what movie to see. It famously appeared to disprove the "strong effects" hypothesis of a direct influence by powerful mass media on the behavior of vulnerable isolated individuals. It was a landmark study in the early sociology of mass communication.

Katz at this time was interested in the new field of sociometrics (early social network theory), which he applied in his next big project, the diffusion of innovation, based on a case study of the prescription of new drugs by physicians. He worked on this after his move to Chicago while commuting from there to his new home in Israel. There, while teaching at the Hebrew University, he became a researcher at the Guttman Institute (founded by Louis Guttman and modeled on Lazarsfeld's bureau at Columbia) which, for more than 50 years, did fundamental research into social, political, and religious attitudes in Israel. A key long-term study, led by Katz and Michael Gurevitch, investigated the impact of television on Israeli society and the Jewish religion from the early 1970s to the 1990s (Katz & Gurevitch, 1974).

Television was now the focal concern of Katz's research and writings, and not just in Israel, but worldwide. As a direct result of his brief but foundational work in Israeli television, he was invited in 1973 by senior management in the BBC to produce a report for them on the state of current academic work on television. There was some anxiety about its impact on British society at the time, and the BBC (then under review by Parliament) wanted to be able to show it was abreast of research into that question. Why

did they pick Katz rather than a British academic? First of all, the top brass in the BBC didn't think there were any decent sociologists in Britain. And to make matters worse, British sociologists were all Marxists. Both these prejudices had a grain of truth to them. British universities at the time, in the humanities and social sciences, were very much in the grip of continental Marxism. And sociology as a discipline only really took off in England in the 1970s. It was not yet recognized as a fully legitimate academic discipline, as it had been in the United States for many years.

Katz produced an authoritative review of the state of current research into television, on both sides of the Atlantic, for the BBC (Katz, 1977). And from then on, over a couple of decades, he became an internationally renowned scholar of television. His object of study, from the beginning, was global television—not television in this or that country (almost all research was on national broadcasting at the time), but television everywhere. While preparing his report for the BBC, Katz met up with George Wedell, who worked for the Independent Broadcasting Authority, the body with oversight of commercial television in Britain. Together they worked on a pioneering survey of the spread of television throughout the world (the diffusion of innovation again). Katz wanted to call it "Waiting for *Kojak*" because in country after country television started up with promises of local content that represented national life and culture only to end up, within a year, showing *Kojak*, a popular American police drama series (Katz & Wedell, 1977).

But it was the most famous of all American prime time shows that next drew Katz's attention. By now, in the 1980s, he was commuting between the University of Southern California (having severed connections with Chicago) and Jerusalem. In Los Angeles, he embarked on an ambitious comparative study of the overseas impact of *Dallas*, which, at the height of its fame, was airing in over 150 countries around the world. The original plan involved a number of countries, but in the end (due to lack of funding) it mostly became a study of the impact in Israel. Research on its impact there was undertaken by Tamar Liebes, who became the coauthor with Katz of *The Export of Meaning* (Katz & Liebes, 1990)—a detailed study of responses to American popular culture in very different sectors of Israeli society. Meanwhile, with Daniel Dayan, Katz was working on his capstone study of television, *Media Events* (Katz & Dayan, 1992). It was inspired by television coverage of the visits to Israel of Anwar Sadat and the pope. Certain kinds of events covered by television draw enormous global audiences. Why? What compels people from around the world to watch, for instance, the Olympics, the moon landings, or royal weddings and funerals on television? It was a brilliant question that opened up research into the global impact of television; to this day it continues to be discussed and re-examined by media scholars in all parts of the world.

So these are some of the highlights of a CV spanning 60 years. The two standout works are *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and *Media Events* (Katz & Dayan, 1992). What different works they are, and what different worlds they address! Television had scarcely begun to be an object of academic enquiry in the mid-fifties. It was only established as a very new everyday medium of mass entertainment in the United States and Britain. In Northern Europe, it was just getting started, while in large parts of the rest of the world it simply did not exist. By the start of the 1990s, the kinds of media events analyzed by Dayan and Katz were being covered by television the world over and watched, live and as they happened, by global audiences of billions. By the start of this century, Katz was beginning to worry that the kind of television he had established in Israel in the late sixties, and whose development

over the next three decades he had tracked and analyzed, was disintegrating. A few years ago, I found myself drawn into his latest project—an international forum on “The End of Television?—and Its Impact on the World (So Far),” published in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in 2009.

But it is time to draw to a close, so I’ll end with my choice of what I like the most of all the things that Elihu has written. A few years ago I tried to persuade him that I might write an intellectual biography of his working life. He hummed and hawed about this for quite a while, but eventually he reluctantly agreed. And then he thought that, as his now official biographer, I should maybe read the first thing he ever wrote—his MA thesis that he did at Columbia in 1950. And I said, “Yeah, sure. What’s it about?” He said, “It’s about happiness.” I couldn’t believe it—such a wonderful and completely unexpected topic. It was a study of a popular radio program of that time in which listeners were asked by Ted Malone, a well-known broadcaster, to keep a little diary, over a whole month, in which they noted down whenever they felt happy. At the end of the month, they were to write to Ted and tell him about their happiest moment in the month of February 1948. The supervisor of his thesis, Leo Lowenthal, had gotten hold of all the letters sent in by listeners to CBS (about 2,500 in all), and a 10% sample of them was carefully analyzed by Elihu. He came up with an analytic quadrant consisting of two binaries. The first binary distinguished between the things that you make happen, as distinct from the things that happen to you. The second binary distinguished the things that are expected from the things that are unexpected. Almost all the letters could be allocated to one or more of these four analytic categories.

As I read this little study of what happiness meant to ordinary Americans nearly 70 years ago, I found myself reflecting how, in a strangely wonderful way, it anticipated by 50 years some of the basic concerns of *Media Events*. Many of Ted Malone’s listeners reported small events that made them happy. There were anticipated days of celebration—a birthday, an anniversary, St. Valentine’s day (February was the month of the survey). And there were unexpected joys that came as a surprise—a phone call or visit from a friend or family member, good news in a letter, and so on. The small celebratory events of everyday life become media events writ large as national and international occasions of celebration and remembrance. And that binary distinction between the expected and unexpected things is the simplest taxonomy of global media events: the utterly unexpected disaster (September 9/11), the eagerly anticipated great occasion (the World Cup, the Super Bowl). So I find myself, in the end, in the right place, reflecting on the happiness of Katz—his very first study—with all of us happily gathered here today in a fitting occasion to celebrate the life and work of our friend, Elihu, and colleague, Katz.

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