Media, Ritual and Identity

*Media, Ritual and Identity* examines the role of the media in society, its complex influence on democratic processes and its participation in the construction and affirmation of different social identities.

Inspired by the work of Elihu Katz, one of the founding fathers of communications research, *Media, Ritual and Identity* draws extensively upon cultural anthropology, combining a commanding overview of contemporary media debates with a series of fascinating case studies ranging from political ritual on television to broadcasting in the “Third World.”

The opening group of articles considers the impact of televised “media events”—such as the Watergate hearings or the beating of Rodney King—on viewing communities, and their potential both for affirming community identities and inciting violent factionalism. Other contributors address the ways in which minority groups forge a collective identity for themselves by resisting or transforming their media representation through reinterpretations such as “queering the straight text.” A final section turns to the fragmentation of public broadcasting as a forum for popular debate and the growth of media reform movements aiming to restore journalism’s function as an aid to democratic thought.


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Media, ritual and identity
Edited by Tamar Liebes and James Curran
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Tamar Liebes and James Curran
To Elihu Katz
## Contents

1. List of contributors ix

### Introduction

1. The intellectual legacy of Elihu Katz 3
   *James Curran and Tamar Liebes*

### Part I Media and ritual

2. Mass communication, ritual and civil society 23
   *Jeffrey C. Alexander and Ronald N. Jacobs*

3. Political ritual on television: episodes in the history of shame, degradation and excommunication 42
   *James W. Carey*

4. Television’s disaster marathons: a danger for democratic processes? 71
   *Tamar Liebes*

### Part II Media and identity

5. Minorities, majorities and the media 87
   *Larry Gross*

6. Particularistic media and diasporic communications 103
   *Daniel Dayan*

7. The dialogic community: “soul talks” among early Israeli communal groups 114
   *Tamar Katriel*

8. The dialectics of life, story and afterlife 136
   *Yoram Bilu*
Contents

Part III Media, public space and democracy

9 Broadcasting in the Third World: from national development to civil society 153
   Daniel C. Hallin

10 Public sphere or public sphericules? 168
   Todd Gitlin

11 Crisis of public communication: a reappraisal 175
   James Curran

12 Public journalism and the search for democratic ideals 203
   Theodore L. Glasser and Stephanie Craft

13 Promoting peace through the news media: some initial lessons from the Oslo peace process 219
   Gadi Wolfsfeld

Part IV Audience research: past and future

14 Relationships between media and audiences: prospects for audience reception studies 237
   Sonia Livingstone

Index 256
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Introduction
1 The intellectual legacy of Elihu Katz

James Curran and Tamar Liebes

In 1955, Elihu Katz published with Paul Lazarsfeld Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications, a historic book that is still being cited more than forty years later. In 1992, Katz published with Daniel Dayan another landmark volume, Media Events. Between these two Himalayan heights were ten further authored or edited books, and over one hundred essays and papers. And still the flow continues, with a key article published last year intimating the gestation of another major study, this time concerned with the fragmentation of public space (Katz 1996a).

Outside Israel, Elihu Katz is known as one of the founding fathers of mass communications research. Yet in Israel itself, he is perhaps better known as the founding Director General of Israel Television, the man who helped to stamp a clear public service imprint on Israeli television during its formative early days.

Katz crossed and later recrossed the frontier between media theory and practice. Indeed, the facility with which he has traversed boundaries of all sorts is a key characteristic of his life’s work. He drew upon the sociology of small groups to transform perceptions of media influence, and later imported insights from cultural anthropology to change our understanding of the ritual role of television. He took inspiration from academic research in shaping the template of Israeli television. Yet, this modified in turn his academic outlook, changing him from a social psychologist back to being a sociologist. It is because of his many facets that Katz has refracted light and illumination in different directions.

In editing this book, it was tempting therefore to seek to chronicle and analyze Katz’s remarkable career, and to capture the elusive essence of this witty, lovable man through a series of affectionate anecdotes.

There is a basic festschrift formula that we could have followed: a reverent portrait, followed by a miscellany of papers from colleagues and friends on whatever subject they elected to write about. The result is usually a high-priced and forgettable book, with a limited sale to university libraries.

Somehow, this did not seem appropriate for Elihu Katz. A book of restricted interest would not have done justice to his central importance as a pioneer researcher. An exclusive volume aimed only at other academics would not have been consistent with the time Katz has always lavished on his students and the
strays who have arrived at his door. Above all, a reverential work would have been totally out of keeping with Katz’s own love of argument. He is a man who has never brooked agreement.

For this reason, we hit upon a different kind of tribute: a book that seeks to be useful to students as well as interesting to academics; a text that stakes out particular areas of debate rather than being a conventional miscellany of essays; and above all something that would engage in an argumentative and critical way with the intellectual legacy of some of Katz’s most important research. Whether it succeeds, partially or wholly, in any of this remains to be seen. But this book most definitely is not a conventional coterie work of fealty.

MEDIA AND RITUAL

The first part is concerned with the ritual role of the media. This is one of the most interesting themes to have developed in media studies during the last fifteen years, and is powerfully expressed and developed in Dayan and Katz’s (1992) *Media Events*. They argue that special media events tend to fall into one of three broad categories: “contests” in sport or politics (such as the Olympic games or Senate Watergate hearings), “conquests” (such as Pope John Paul II’s triumphant return to Poland) or “coronations” (the rites of passage of the great). What gives them a generic character is that they are usually transmitted simultaneously or extensively by different TV channels. They are generally reported uncritically by broadcasters. And they reach a mass audience who interrupt their normal routines or attach a special significance to what is being broadcast. Media events are thus monopoly communications, uncritically reproduced, that function as collective rites of communion.

Dayan and Katz’s account emphasizes the role of media events in integrating society, affirming its common values, legitimating its institutions, and reconciling different sectional elements. Many of the special events they anatomize, such as Sadat’s peace mission to Israel or the marriage of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer, evoked a liminal sense of togetherness, the quickening of hope, the celebration of a shared sense of purpose or common values. Yet, these events were also scripted and choreographed in a pre-planned process that can be viewed as manipulative. In what way, then, are they different from the manufactured spectacles of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes? Dayan and Katz’s response is that in liberal democracies broadcasters are free to say “no” to proposers of media events, or to report these events critically. Central to the success of these events is the complicity of television viewers who are free, in liberal democracies, to withhold approval or express dissent. Furthermore, media events come in different forms and are not necessarily supportive of the status quo. On the contrary, they can affirm “what ought to be” in implicit contrast to what “is,” awaken suspended hopes or release submerged social forces in ways that act as catalysts for change. Also implicit in their answer, although not stated as such, is the belief that elites and public institutions have greater legitimacy in liberal democracies than in other political systems, and that therefore the values they extol and the collective identity that they celebrate
are more likely to be authentic and widely shared by other members of society. The implication of Katz’s later work (1996a) is also that by promoting social cohesion, media events have a positive influence in counteracting the pressures for atomization, privatization and heedless individualism.

Dayan and Katz’s ritual view of television is celebrated in the opening essay by Alexander and Jacobs as a way of revitalizing liberal theory. There is a long tradition within liberal thought which stresses the need for the separation of powers, the legal entrenchment of human rights, and the multiplication of voluntary associations in civil society, as a way of preventing state and factional oppression. Within a traditional version of this model, “independent” media provide allegedly an unpolluted source of information that enables citizens to exercise properly informed control over the state. A radical version of this model, advanced by Habermas, views the media as distorted by money and corporate power, and seeks a way of restoring communicative rationality. However, common to both versions of this tradition, according to Alexander and Jacobs, is a limited understanding of the public sphere as a domain of public power, deliberation and decision-making. What this tradition fails to appreciate, and what Dayan and Katz’s work helps to illuminate, is the way in which the public sphere is, in part, also a cultural space in which collective identities and solidarities essential for the functioning of differentiated societies are forged. Underpinning the working of civil society are shared beliefs, a feeling of mutuality and a common cultural framework that the ritual role of television helps to sustain.

However, Alexander and Jacobs also go on to argue that media events should not be understood simply as rituals through which the values and codes of society are expressed and reaffirmed. Meanings are forged through a process of interaction, not least through competition between groups and individuals in the symbolic public form of the media. Media events, they insist, embody a particular way of “narrating the social” that signifies and makes sense of society in a form that draws selectively from the available stock of explanatory frameworks and narratives. They represent a triumph of a particular definition, and one that may potentially support change rather than stasis. In particular, media events may invoke the ideals of society in a way that mobilizes protest against their violation.

Alexander and Jacobs give as one example the 1972 break-in into the Watergate headquarters of the Democratic party by employees of the Republican party. Initially, this was widely seen as another example of dirty “politics as usual.” It only took on a new significance as revealing corruption at the heart of government when it was cast in these terms by a media event, the televised Senate Watergate hearings in 1973. Similarly, the 1991 Rodney King beating by three white policemen, caught on amateur videotape and repeatedly transmitted on television, also acted, according to Alexander and Jacobs, as a ritualized spur to reform in that it came to be narrated as an example of arbitrary police violence and racial division. Both media events were in fact catalysts for change: President Nixon was forced to resign, as was the Los Angeles police chief Daryl Gates.

The authors are thus seeking to avoid an over-simple reading of media events as a ritual means by which members of society are connected to its sacred codes,
and integrated into its core values. By stressing normative competition, Alexander and Jacobs are refining the argument of *Media Events*. However, this still leaves unresolved questions about how media events are devised, with what consequences. Lang and Lang (1983), for example, argue that it was mainly “political insiders” who set the terms of reference of the Watergate hearings. Their narrow juridical definition limited the effectiveness of the reforms that followed in their wake. Because the Watergate media event was scripted from within the political establishment, it led to symbolic purification rather than real systemic change.

A different argument is advanced by Hallin and Mancini, though from a similar reference point (Hallin and Mancini 1991; Hallin 1994). They argue that the Reagan-Gorbachev summit meetings were a ritual event that fostered harmony based on a global sense of community. But this evocation of mutual warmth and sense of togetherness was only temporary. It did not melt the structures of power polarized by the cold war, or dislodge the patterns of thought that informed this conflict. In other words, the focus on media ritual as a means of transcending social boundaries, and of reconciling differences, unrealistically downplays the persistence and importance of structures which divide and set people against each other.

Thus one criticism is that media events come from the heart of establishment, with the implication that they serve the interests of the establishment more than that of ordinary members of society. Another reservation is that even when media events are harnessed to progressive change, they can be confined or curtailed by the prevailing structure of power. James Carey carries this reappraisal one stage further by emphasizing that media events do not necessarily unify and integrate. There is, he argues, a whole genre of media events that are rituals of excommunication and status degradation. They do not bring people together and reconcile differences, but divide and reinforce antagonism. They are about distinguishing between good and bad, marking the boundaries of what is permissible, and punishing those who step outside.

This type of media event is typified by the televised Senate confirmation hearings of Robert Bork, nominated by President Reagan to a seat on the United States Supreme Court in 1987. Carey shows that the hearings turned on the issue of whether Bork was outside the “mainstream of constitutional jurisprudence,” whether in effect he stood outside acceptable limits of thought and should be counted (in a reverse of the ritualized McCarthyite investigations of the 1940s and 1950s) as being so right-wing as to be UnAmerican. Underlying this media event was an ideological struggle between the organized forces of the left and right about what should constitute the “American way.” Yet while the left notionally won, and Bork was rejected, this was not the prelude to consolidating a progressive coalition, promoting a radical agenda or winning the presidential election (which the Democrats lost in 1988). The left’s “victory” was shortlived and secured, in Carey’s view, at too high a price. An honorable and distinguished lawyer, with a record of public service, was pilloried and destroyed in an unacceptable way.
The theme that media events can be ugly rather than the generally healing, uplifting and unifying experiences extolled by Dayan and Katz is developed in another way by Tamar Liebes. She argues that “disaster marathons” in Israel (and elsewhere) broadly conform to Dayan and Katz’s definition of media events, yet promote a lynch mentality. She gives as an example the broadcast coverage of a series of bus bombings in Israel in February–March 1996. Normal schedules were interrupted to provide extended, “live” coverage of events that were viewed by a mass audience. But coverage of these events was governed by a show business logic of winning and keeping audience attention in an intensely competitive and increasingly commercialized industry. Broadcasters extracted the full melodrama of these events by dwelling on their random mayhem, filling in slack moments with a reiteration of their horror, and turning to marginalized extremists and the grieving families of victims to generate emotionally charged demands for vengeance and retribution. This had the effect of fueling anger and hatred, blocking out the past, and short-circuiting rational debate. It also undermined confidence in public authority, weakened the peace process and propelled the government into adopting a more belligerent stance than it wanted. In essence, an entertainment-oriented form of reporting elicited a populist political response.

In short the first part of this book challenges, refines or elaborates upon the central arguments advanced by Katz and Dayan. In the process, it highlights the richness of the seam they first mined.

**MEDIA AND IDENTITY**

The second part of this book arises from Elihu Katz’s research into cultural identity. The existence of this research may come as a surprise to people who have never associated Katz with “cultural studies.” The reason for this surprise may have something to do with the fact that most of Katz’s work in this area has been concerned with Israelis rather than Americans or Europeans. Within the prevailing paradigm, it belongs therefore to the slipstream rather than mainstream of human experience. Its place is, by implication, not in cultural studies but in that distancing category of “area studies.”

Yet, Katz’s cultural work is more than of merely local interest. It began in the 1960s with an examination of the role of socializing agencies in the absorption of new immigrants in Israel. Katz looked at the culture of immigrants partly through their rule-breaking behavior, as when for example they tried to bargain with the bus driver over the fare, or haggle with the customs officer over the payment of import duties (Katz and Danet 1973). In the latter case, they found that appeals were made to reciprocity (“I was a Zionist abroad”), altruism (“You are powerful, I am weak”) and accepted norms (“You should be a good and discriminating bureaucrat”). This led to an irreverent, general analysis of appeals to authority including those to God (Katz et al. 1969).

This early work grew into an important and ambitious study of culture and leisure in Israel (Katz and Gurevitch 1976). Among other things, Katz and Gurevitch asked themselves why Jews had been able to survive as a nation for 2,000 years
without a country of their own. Their answer was that for “the people of the Book,” the “Bible” (i.e. the Pentateuch) was a substitute for a homeland in that it provided a language, a common collective memory, a shared cultural framework and weekly ritual meetings for folk history to be read aloud and listened to. “Here is the key,” write Katz and Gurevitch (1976:193), “to the feeling of collective national identity which permeated the dispersed Jewish communities and which connected the present with the generations of the past.” They went on to provide an absorbing account of how normative Judaism was modified and changed in the secularizing context of the early Israeli state. Twenty years later, Katz updated the study, pointing to the continued growth in Israel of individualism and hedonism, and the corresponding decline of collectivism and asceticism, but exempted television from primary responsibility for the change (Katz et al., in press).

Yet if Katz and Gurevitch’s original study broke new ground, it was also characteristic of its time in that it incorporated a uses and gratifications approach to media consumption. This model was later abandoned by Katz in favor of a model of reception (a less static model of studying the process of negotiating with medium and text). In the Export of Meaning, Liebes and Katz (1990) showed that responses to the American TV series Dallas were powerfully influenced by the divergent cultural frameworks and social experiences of different groups of viewers. For example, when asked to retell a particular episode, recent Israeli settlers from the Soviet Union concentrated on ideological themes and leitmotifs. Kibbutzniks responded, by contrast, primarily in psycho-analytical terms, emphasizing personality and motivation. Moroccan Jews and Arab Israelis were different again, tending to recount a linear narrative involving the overcoming of social obstacles, interpreted in a sociological way.

Differences of interpretation were constrained by the actual content of the program. Dallas may also have exerted a cognitive influence on some viewers, particularly those who thought that it was offering a window on the real world. Some respondents also viewed the characters in the soap opera as bearers of high status, as representing America, or the approaching modern or western world. But overall, audiences were revealed to exercise a high degree of control over the meanings that they derived from TV viewing. According to Liebes and Katz, this contradicted an oversimplistic and extreme view that TV globalization is inducing global uniformity and American cultural domination. However, they were also at pains to point out that their study was only of one point in the process of diffusion of American culture, and that it did not exclude the possibility of the cumulative erosion of cultural specificity.

Thus, what emerges from the body of this work—taken as a whole—is a relatively optimistic understanding of cultural dynamics. In particular, Katz’s first study of the secularization of leisure in Israel offers a positive view of the ability of social groups to sustain through mediated tradition a strong sense of collective identity, and to adapt and change, while retaining a strong, stabilizing sense of the past. And his later study of audience responses to Dallas focuses attention on the ability of social groups to call upon collective resources in order to resist cultural colonization through television.
This central theme of cultural resilience is explored further in the first two essays of this part of the book. Thus, the opening essay by Larry Gross considers the case of sexual minorities who differ from disadvantaged ethnic minorities in that they are not born into defensive social networks and do not acquire from early socialization strategies for dealing with social prejudice. This increases, according to Gross, their need for a publicly formed and visible community with whom they can identify, and from whom they can derive a greater sense of self-worth. This desire for positive group images is further reinforced by negative representations of sexual minorities in the mass media. However, these have been modified over time from near-erasure and invisibility, through to negative stereotyping as weak/silly or evil/corrupting, and finally to the less bleakly hostile and more heterogeneous pattern of representation that prevails today (see also Gross 1989). In this context, some gays and lesbians have fought back by developing their own specialist media, “queering the straight text” (selectively understanding mass mediated meanings), influencing portrayals of themselves in majority media, and engaging in a long running battle with opponents in relation to issues of censorship and morality.

Gross’s article is organized around an elegant schema for classifying majority/minority representations advanced by Katz. It fastens upon the issue of how minorities resist acceptance of negative perceptions of themselves in the majority culture which leads to self-hatred. Daniel Dayan also invokes the same Katz schema but his concern is the more fundamental one of what sustains minority communities and the sometimes fragile attachments on which they are based. His widescreen account takes note of the global and national contexts in which threatened communities are situated; the complex mechanisms by which a sense of collective membership is sustained; the ways in which these inevitably involve choosing between “identity proposals”; and the consequences of these subjective decisions, not least in terms of the minority community’s relationship to the majority.

Dayan’s essay is like an archeologist’s excavation, in which the secondary literature is carefully raked over for evidence of clues. Informing it is a questioning orientation which sees national communities as being no less “imagined” than that of other communities, merely better supported by social institutions. One key way in which national communities are imagined is through the organization of collective memory. This is the central theme of the following chapter by Tammar Katriel which considers the case of the Hashomer Hatzair settlements in pre-Israeli Palestine. She begins by evoking the experience of connectedness as mostly middle class, left-wing emigrants from Europe bared their souls in a half-lit communal room after a hard day’s labor in the fields. As one contemporary diarist records:

Some of us were blessed with the power of expression; others stuttered. Many kept silent...and in moments of silence—utter silence—it seemed to me that a ray of light springs out of every heart and the rays merge up high into one big flame that reaches into the heart of the sky.... I loved those nights more than any other night, our nights of sharing.
Institutionalized “soul talks” such as these constitute collective ritual events which encapsulate key attributes of Katz’s media events. They are liminal meetings, powerful enough to cause individuals to immerse their private lives in the collective. They are a means of integrating the community into what Katz calls a “subjunctive” mood. Unlike his understanding of events, however, the emotional unity created by these “soul talks” did not preclude critical discussion and oppositional decodings.

According to Katriel, these pioneer experiences are also part of the “foundation mythology” of the state of Israel. They memorialize an idealistic tradition in which the individual is fused with the collective through the sharing of work, space and inner thought. Their significance was celebrated through the publication of diaries, memoirs and novels, and renewed through the prominence given to more contemporary manifestations of “soul-talk” collectivism. However, the communal intimacy of these utopian communities was experienced by some people at the time as a collectivist nightmare. It was also criticized by another pioneer tradition which argued that solidarity was best forged not through self-disclosure but more pragmatically through communal labor and political alliance. The “sacred” tradition of pioneer utopian socialism thus represents a powerful cultural symbol that is both resonant and controversial, one that represents to some a sense of loss in the context of a market-based, increasingly individualistic society and to others a misguided and impractical episode in the pre-history of Israel. It is through such engagements in what Raphael Samuel (1994) calls “theatres of memory” that a complex relationship to an imagined national community is formed.

The next chapter more pointedly underscores the constructed nature of collective memory by chronicling the fabrication of tradition. It revolves around the sanctification of Rabbi Ya’acov Wazana, a relatively obscure holy man living in a remote part of Morocco who died in 1952. He featured in Yoram Bilu’s anthropological research because he was a maverick who embraced Muslim practices, and due to this research he acquired fleeting prominence in Israel’s media. This seems to have triggered a series of dreams by Yoseph, in which he was called upon to establish a holy shrine in the Rabbi’s memory. The rest of the essay describes entertainingly how the author was used and then discarded by Yoseph in his successful attempt to establish Wazana as a conventional Moroccan Jewish saint, stripped of the deviancy that had made him an interesting subject of research in the first place.

These two chapters complement each other in a number of ways. They are similar in that they both reveal how memory of the past is “made” or at least edited rather than given. But they are different in that they chronicle images of the past that sustain different kinds of collective identity. The memory of pioneer settlements is about the “rebirth of a nation,” sustaining a national identification with the state of Israel. The beatification of Rabbi Wazana is a positive Diaspora memory that underwrites a sectional identity of Jewish Moroccan Israelis as a group bound by tradition, with close links to a time when things were simpler and even in certain respects better. The two sets of memories also carry different
political loads. The memorializing of socialist pioneers stands as an emotional monument to a specifically collectivist and utopian definition of Israeli society. By contrast the sanctification of Rabbi Wazana, sanitized and stripped of ethnic impurity, is emblematic of a more conservative, religious political tradition in Israel.4

MEDIA AND CONNEXITY

One portion of Katz’s work has been concerned with the ritual role of mass communication in binding society together (Part 1). Another portion has focused on how social groups have sustained a sense of their own identity (Part 2). A third portion of Katz’s work has concentrated on the problematic ways in which society and its constituent elements connect to each other through the media. This last concern sets the agenda of the third part of this book.

A recent interesting essay by Peter Simonson (1996) hails Katz’s first and last books as landmark volumes in a progressive tradition of thought, beginning with Cooley and Dewey, which has struggled to think through the relationship of community, communication and democracy. Personal Influence portrays society as a honeycomb of small groups able to resist through the power of interpersonal communication elite domination and media control. Media Events characterizes society as a community with shared values but pluralistic differences brought together in harmony through televised rites of communion. While both make important contributions to thought, they are based according to Simonson on a limited understanding of civil society. Thus, the pluralism celebrated in Personal Influence is largely conceived in terms of a multiplicity of lifestyle enclaves whose involvement in the democratic process is limited to holding opinions, mostly about consumption, and not in terms of a dense network of local neighbourhood groups, voluntary associations and coherent social groups. Equally limiting, according to Simonson, is the world conjured up by Media Events where collective involvement largely takes the form of viewing the same TV programmes. Missing from both are notions of activity, participation, group representation and collective negotiation. Informing this, although Simonson does not say this, is a significant absence of class conflict in Katz’s conception of community. This leads in turn to the relatively unproblematic understanding of social unity and the articulation of difference in Katz’s work.

This said, Simonson’s criticisms are both stimulating and unfair. In effect, he is taking Katz to task for failing to fulfill something that Katz did not set out to do—namely, to theorize the role of the media in the democratic system. Katz is criticized for not offering a comprehensive account when all he sought to do—and brilliantly succeeded—was to analyse two specific things: the social mediation of communications, and a particular genre of program. Simonson is also strangely silent about those publications where Katz does address more broadly the question of how a democratic society and its constituent parts should connect through the media. These have centered on two issues: globalization and the fragmentation of the public.
Katz’s initial concern was that the spread of subtitled films, exported TV programs, and translated books might undermine the ability of national communities to express their own cultural traditions, concerns and collective identities. This fear featured prominently in two of his books published during the 1970s (Katz and Gurevitch 1976; Katz and Wedell 1977), and was only later partly allayed, as we have seen, by evidence of viewers’ intransigence (Liebes and Katz 1990).

Katz revisited the issue of connexity (to use an ugly but useful word) in a new way during the 1990s. The central problem, he concluded, was not national cultural independence but how groups relate to each other within national societies. The combination of new technology, globalization and market values is undermining communication between social groups, and weakening integration into national political systems (Katz 1996a). Television no longer constitutes, according to Katz, the common meeting-place of society owing to the multiplication of TV channels. The eclipse of public service television, with its commitment to inform, is leading to a contraction of political communication in favor of entertainment. Furthermore, the mutual identification that underwrites civil society is being undermined by a growing disjunction between the communication system and the nation state. Viewers increasingly select on the basis of individual taste from global sources of supply rather than watch the same nationally determined schedule of programs. Where once they had talked to each other through a public service monopoly, national TV system and been integrated into a national political dialogue and democratic system, now they are sub-groups of a fragmented public viewing a plethora of entertainment channels linked to a global TV economy.

The opening essay by Daniel Hallin criticizes Katz’s first “take” on the subject. He argues that Katz and Wedell’s pioneer research (1977) on communications in the third world, like most work of that period, took a relatively unproblematic view of the nation as an entity for defining collective interests. This led Katz and Wedell to focus on the role of the media in promoting the national integration, economic development and cultural self-determination of third world countries without considering adequately how the media related to their structures of power. This blind spot, according to Hallin, led them to play down the way in which nation-building was used to stifle dissent in the media, and stunt the development of civil society.

This criticism in fact plugs into some of the themes of Katz’s more recent work, and to this extent it is knocking against an open door. Katz said as much in a generous response to Hallin’s analysis (Katz 1996b). One suspects, however, that there is still continuing grounds of disagreement between the two, rooted in their largely implicit but still significantly different attitudes towards the nation state.5 Informing these are seemingly different conceptions of how the nation state fits into the international order.

The next two essays can be read as a commentary on Katz’s more recent thesis on the decline of communication. That by Todd Gitlin implicitly endorses Katz’s misgivings, though in a qualified form. Gitlin begins his survey by
summarizing the classic democratic and republican conceptions of the public sphere as a forum of popular control and disinterested public deliberation. Critics, Gitlin notes, argue that the public sphere (in both senses) is in trouble because political participation is declining, public standards are falling, and the media are being debased by tabloidization. Others point optimistically to the proliferation of distinct communities of interest and participation, the growth in the number of sources of information, and the development of an international system of communication that may bring into being an international civil society. However the key point in this debate, according to Gitlin, is that the public sphere is subdividing into sphericules owing to the proliferation of media outlets, and the splintering of the mass audience. This is facilitating social secession and exclusion. It is idle to suppose, warns Gitlin, that the pluralization of the public produces a mosaic that reflects adequately the balance of social interests, or that public sphericules interconnect adequately with one another to constitute a properly functioning public sphere based on genuine dialogue. The social foundation of the democratic system is changing—for the worst.

This pessimism derives largely from observations based on the United States. James Curran, writing from a British perspective, argues in effect that the comparative picture is more complex than Katz’s broad brush strokes (and, by implication, Gitlin’s) allow. In Britain, for example, the multiplication of TV channels has not significantly fragmented the mass audience; the content of television continues to be mainly national rather than global; and broadcasting is still dominated by a public service system committed to inform as well as to entertain. While public service broadcasting is under attack and has been weakened, it can still be reinvigorated in Britain and elsewhere through reform. Katz’s requiem for a passing communications order invokes, according to Curran, a mythical view of the past: what is needed is practical measures for realizing his idyll in the future.

These include legislation to redefine broadcasting’s democratic purpose. In effect, the state is being invited to repair the public sphere—a position that appears oxymoronic to those liberals who hold that the public sphere must remain wholly separate if it is effectively to oversee the state. This principled position, well entrenched in the United States, has fuelled a voluntaristic tradition of media reform based on professionalization and persuasion. Theodore Glasser and Stephanie Craft chart the latest upsurge of this tradition in the United States, prompted by the growing culture clash between the ideals of professionalism and the reality of increased media marketization. The public or civic journalism movement’s most palpable hit has been its influential attack on conventional news reporting of elections as a horse race in which the stress is on strategy rather than substance, on who is going to win rather than on what society needs. Yet, this critique is only one item in the movement’s agenda for reform which includes enriching a public discourse in decline, developing a “journalism of conversation,” making a greater use of non-elite sources, and striking a proper balance between dialogue and deliberation. Some of these objectives are not without problems, as the authors note in their critical survey, not least of which
are the difficulties involved in persuading private media enterprises to give greater attention to their public purpose.

The last essay in this section reverses the conventional vantage point of media analysis. Instead of asking what kind of reporting makes for good journalism, it asks instead what kinds of reporting make for good government. Even to pose this question is anathema in some quarters where it is assumed that journalism and government are separate activities, never to be considered in the same breath without loss of media independence and ministerial statesmanship. But Gadi Wolfsfeld points to certain problems highlighted by media reporting of the Oslo peace process: the media’s love of conflict, its stress on events rather than process, its need for melodrama, and the pressures for short-termism generated by the media spotlight. He also considers briefly how politicians have responded, and should respond, to these problems. This chapter thus continues the discussion raised by Tamar Liebes’ attack on “disaster marathons” in the first part.

**KATZ AND AUDIENCE RESEARCH**

Several references have been made already to Elihu Katz’s audience research, and many more are distributed in the main body of the book. Originally, we had hoped to include a whole section on audience research arising from this work, but were prevented from doing so owing to limitations of space. This especially extended segment of our introduction, and Sonia Livingstone’s overview chapter at the end of this book, stand in its place.

Livingstone’s central argument is that audience research has come to be viewed in terms of a small number of canonical texts in a way that fails to do justice to the diversity of audience work. This discourages new developments that could spring from an understanding of the diversity of past research. It is also forcing audience research into a rut, endlessly repeating the same insights into divergent readings, resistant voices and contextually embedded viewers in opposition to “straw men” traditions of naive ideologists, administrative positivists and crass psychologists. The way forward, she suggests, is to develop a fuller sense of the existing range of audience research, to confront a number of still unanswered questions, to build up generalizations on the basis of systematic analysis and above all to engage in comparative (including historical) research.

Since Katz is sometimes assigned to the “straw men” traditions to which reception analysis stands opposed, or is simply written out of its accounts of the development of audience research, it is important to register here his originality. Katz is a pioneer of some of the insights to which reception studies later laid claim. In particular, Katz has argued for over forty years that media audiences are active and critical; that they respond to communications in divergent ways; and that audience autonomy is rooted in people’s prior beliefs and attitudes supported by the social networks to which they belong. From this, Katz concluded as early as the mid-1950s that the critical tradition had overstated the power of the media (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) just as analysts in the reception tradition were to do some thirty years later.
Perhaps the simplest way to log Katz’s central contribution to audience research is first to summarize the main conclusions of his work and then to highlight the extraordinarily indefatigable, ingenious and flexible ways in which he has sought an answer to an intellectual puzzle that has perplexed him for forty years. His first audience study (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) synthesized extensive research which showed that most people were members of small groups—families, friends and work colleagues—that influenced their beliefs, behavior and responses to the media. This general argument was exemplified by a series of case studies which indicated that media influence was regulated by interpersonal processes. In so far as the media influence people, suggested Katz and Lazarsfeld, it is through a two-step flow in which influentials, distributed across the social spectrum, absorb and pass on media influence to others. While this argument has since been refined and complexified, its core insight into the socially mediated nature of communication remains central.

This insight led Katz away from media-centered research to the study of the spread of innovation, in what was to become the second phase of his audience work. The best known study of this phase examined the adoption of a “miracle drug” (Katz 1961; Coleman et al. 1966). It showed that salesmen and promotional literature were sources of information rather than of persuasion. What crucially influenced the first group of doctors to prescribe this drug was peer opinion, resulting in what was almost a group decision to share moral responsibility if things went wrong. These pioneers were especially well integrated into the wider medical profession through active reading of medical journals and attendance of meetings, as well as being active in their local professional networks, and influenced in turn other doctors to prescribe the drug.

The implication of this research was that the media should be seen as merely one of a number of inputs (and not necessarily a very important one) in a patterned flow of influence. Katz also synthesized other peoples’ research which indicated that audiences were highly selective in what they derived from the media. This skepticism was deployed with considerable finesse in a re-analysis of numerous studies into the 1960 televised Nixon-Kennedy debates (Katz and Feldman 1962). This showed that Republicans had been deeply impressed by Nixon, while Democrats had been greatly impressed by Kennedy. The TV debates “accelerated” electoral support in line with prior political inclination but otherwise changed very little.

From this conception of the wileful audience emerged the third phase of Katz’s audience research, concerned with media uses and gratifications. The thinking behind this was that, since audiences seemed to dominate the media rather than the other way round, it was time that researchers found out more about the nature of the audience experience. The media, Katz concluded in effect, offer a cafeteria service of uses and pleasures that audiences select on the basis of motivation and need (Katz et al. 1974). In 1970s Israel, for example, some people read books to know themselves, watched television to feel connected to their families, and took in newspapers to feel pride in their country and its leadership (Katz and Gurevitch 1976).
However, by the early 1980s, Katz became unhappy with the limitations of uses and gratifications research. In a key collective essay (Blumler et al. 1985), he and close associates argued that this approach often paid too little attention to the actual content of the media, which tended to be viewed merely as a blank on which audiences’ needs were projected. “Perhaps the New York Times can be read as pornography,” they wrote acidly, “but it is unlikely to be its statistically dominant use” (Blumler et al. 1985:260). Second, it encouraged “audience imperialism” in which evidence of audience activity was mistakenly equated with audience control. Third, this approach was set within an inadequate framework that paid too little regard to the way in which individual choices and roles were circumscribed, and too little attention to the wider context of media production and power.

This watershed essay marked the beginning of the latest phase of Katz’s audience research. First, Katz incorporated semiology to obtain a better understanding of the way in which meanings are created through the interaction of viewers and programs (Liebes and Katz 1990). In this perspective, television no longer transmitted “messages” that were accepted or rejected, but structured symbols that were potentially accessible to plural interpretations.

This was followed by the study of media events (Dayan and Katz 1992) which again offered a semiological analysis of media content. The study was supported by detailed references to effects literature but not by a specific audience study. It also analyzed the media within a significantly different framework of analysis than in Katz’s earlier audience work. Since this is the latest major destination of Katz’s life-long odyssey, it is worth stopping to consider analytically where the journey began and where it has so far ended.

NEGOTIATING A TRADITION

Katz has been pursuing the elusive grail of understanding the nature of media power for over forty years. His first tactic was to formulate and reformulate with ever greater ingenuity questions about the nature of media effects. He began with the obvious question: do the media influence what people think and do (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955)? This shifted, in his diffusion of innovation research, to the question of do the media influence when people think (Katz 1961)? It then took in, in overviews of research, the question of whether the media influence what people think about or what people know (Katz and Feldman 1962; Katz 1980). The pivotal concern remained what the media do to people, until Katz simply reversed this—in uses and gratifications research—by asking what people do to the media.

Yet behind this apparent reversal lay in fact a continuing concern with media influence, now reconceived as a “consequence.” Thus social integration was seen as the wider societal outcome of the media satisfying the desire of large numbers of people to feel “connected” to society through the media (Katz and Gurevitch 1976). Slipped inside this functionalist argument were new effects questions: in particular, do the media effect whom we identify with, and where we feel we belong?
The intellectual legacy of Elihu Katz

The revival of uses and gratifications in the 1970s represented a crisis in the effects tradition. Katz responded to this crisis by eventually abandoning the framework of analysis in which effects research had been conventionally conducted. This revolved—and, indeed, still revolves—around a transportation model of influence in which the media are the starting point, and the audience is the terminus. This model is rooted in a conception of the media as an independent institution that is central to the liberal tradition. From this is derived a view of the media as an autonomous source of influence transmitted to the audience that can be identified, tracked and measured.

The uses and gratifications approach stayed uncomfortably within this analytical framework, but modified it. The linear link between media and audience was given two tracks rather than one, and the spotlight was shone on freight moving from the audience to the media rather than, as before, the other way. The other change was that freight was also viewed as moving from audience to society, which became the last “station” on the line. The argument was made, as noted earlier, that the sum of individual audience gratifications could be equated with the media’s functioning for society as a whole.

In fact, Katz had always been a less than fully paid up subscriber to the transportation model (like other thoughtful colleagues in the effects tradition). He had always argued that audiences are not just aggregations of individuals, and that this point is central to any intelligent understanding of the role of the media. Audiences are members of interpersonal networks which influence responses to the media (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). The media’s influence is merely one tributary joining a complex confluence of influences within these social networks (Katz 1961; Coleman et al. 1966). What uses and pleasures people derive from the media are also patterned by social roles (Katz et al. 1974). People are situated within subcultures that shape their understandings of TV programs (Liebes and Katz 1990). In short, the terminus of media influence—the audience—has always been visualized by Katz in terms of a formative social context.

Katz finally burst out of the “media effects” straitjacket in the late 1980s by contextualizing both the media and the audience. His study with Liebes of Dallas was not simply about the interaction between audience and program as a self-contained study of audience reception (Liebes and Katz 1990). It was situated within a framework of unequal economic and cultural power within the global community, and the implication of audience responses was discussed in relation to this. Katz’s next major collaborative project, concerned with media events, went even further in filling out a wider understanding of society (Dayan and Katz 1992). In particular, attention was given to the political and cultural context of program making, while some attention (though less than in the preceding study) was given also to the context of reception.

This wide-frame approach involved a change of perspective. Instead of asking what the media do to audiences and vice versa, Dayan and Katz asked in what ways the media act as channels of connection between different parts of society. Their answer was that the media articulate (in the sense of “join together”) and mediate elites and the mass audience, center and periphery, antagonistic groups,