

The Making of Elihu Katz, 1926–1956: Generations and Ethnoreligious Identities in the Transnational Development of Communication Studies

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Elihu Katz (1926–2021) was among the leading media researchers of the 20th century, making major contributions to the fields of communication, sociology, and public opinion research over a 7-decade career. His life is both significant in its own right and a window into broader historical developments: He was a member of the first generation of Jewish-born scholars to enjoy relatively unconstrained career possibilities in the United States and among a group of American-educated scholars who helped develop the social sciences in Israel, where he established the field of communication. This article, guided by the concepts of generations and opportunity structures, provides a sociologically infused intellectual biography of the young Katz as shaped by historically specific patterns of social communication and ethnoreligious identity. It shows how his lifelong thought style came into place by the time he was 30 and throws new light on the transnational development of communication studies in its formative, mid-century period.

Keywords: Elihu Katz, history of communication studies, generations, Columbia University, Jewish academics, Israel, gendered opportunity structures

The year is 1949, and a 23-year-old master's student, Elihu Katz, has been assigned to give a report on Karl Marx in Robert K. Merton's graduate seminar, Analysis of Social Structures. American universities are flooded with veterans on G.I. Bill support, and cohorts in Columbia's graduate program in sociology are huge, with more than 100 students in basic methods courses. At 39, Merton has commanding knowledge of social theory back to classical antiquity and has recently published the first edition of his masterwork, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Merton, 1949b). Students are in awe of him. "The terror of that situation," Katz later told me (Katz, personal communication, October 10, 2003).

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Merton saved the page of notes he took on the presentation, which likely revealed his estimation of the young man. Katz began with an overview, announcing that he would “review in very large brush strokes the kinds of things Marx talks about. . . . so that we can get to a focus on unanticipated consequences” (Merton, 1949a). Impressed, Merton wrote, “excellent formulation,” and “E.K. will make an *excellent* teacher” underlining the adjective three times (Figure 1). Before turning to his main comments, Katz offered a quip: “Where is the set of interview questions put to Engels?” (as cited in Merton, 1949a). The brush strokes followed. Katz summarized Marx’s account of the historical succession of economic systems, his concept of surplus value and its link to new forms of exploitation, and the intertwined processes through which economic production is concentrated in a few hands while the masses are impoverished and become aware of their bonds. He probed the implicit bases on which Marxian social theory rested and raised a critical question: Why was Marx sure of the historical inevitability of the development process? He concluded by discussing how unanticipated consequences, a central focus for Mertonian sociology, operated in the Marxian system.

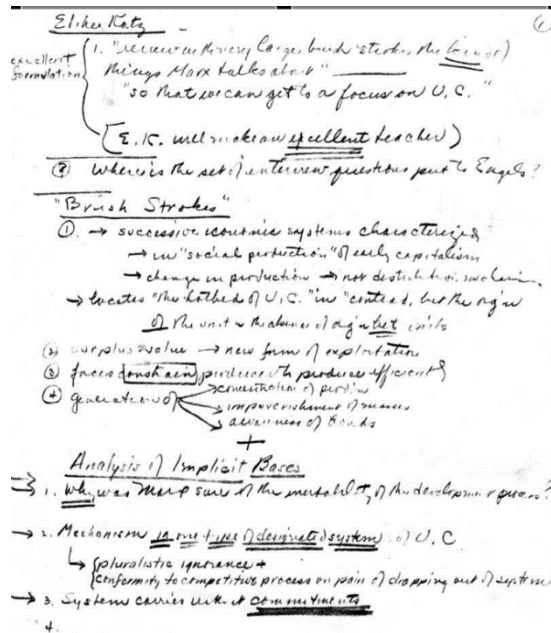


Figure 1. Robert K. Merton’s notes on Katz’s 1949 class presentation on Marx (Merton, 1949a).

I open with this micro-episode for two reasons. First, it is an illuminating window into the mind of a 23-year-old who would become one of the leading media researchers of the 20th century. Second, it opens out into generationally specific social worlds that shaped both Katz and the field of communication studies in one of its formative moments—as generationally specific dynamics continue to shape our academic fields. This article follows both tracks. It shows how the thought style and intellectual problematics of an influential scholar were established at a very young age, and it embeds that story within broader generational patterns of social communication, ethnoreligious identity, and political sensibility that helped structure the communication field in the United States and Israel. In so doing, it throws new light on both scholar and field.

As a window into Katz's mind, four things stand out to me in the notes from his presentation. First, when Merton (1949a), a master teacher in his own right, exclaims, "E.K. will make an *excellent* teacher," I think he is responding to young Katz's capacity to synthesize, emphasize essential points, and communicate complex ideas with clarity. Second, Katz's critical question—why was Marx so sure about history's inevitability? Here is evidence of what I would call Katz's dialectic style—not in the Hegelian-Marxian sense but the more ancient one of reasoning through critical questions, dialogue among opposing views, and scrutinizing the meanings of key concepts. Third, those capacities of teaching and reasoning are put in service of Columbia-style social scientific inquiry: Marx, as engaged from the horizons of functionalist sociology. Finally, despite the "terror" of the situation, Katz interjects the discourse with wit.

While it is impossible to neatly summarize a career that spanned more than 70 years, one can argue that these four dispositions lay at the core of an intellectual style that helped make Katz one of the leading media scholars of his generation. His work cut across the study of campaigns, the diffusion of innovations, audience gratifications and reception, Jewish communication and culture, and national media systems, sometimes with cross-national perspectives. Across them, however, as Sonia Livingstone (1997) has written, in what remains the best analysis of Katz's body of work, he was driven by questions of media effects and "the complex relations between public opinion, media and social interaction" (p. 19).

I will argue that Katz was living those complex relations before he formally studied them and that he established his core dispositions of thought and expression early on. Katz was already Katz at a young age. By 1956, when he was 30 years old, the main contours of his intellectual style were in place, he had adopted paradigms and structuring narratives that would fuel a lifetime of research, and he had gone through formative social experiences that foretold much that would come. To bend the words of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth, which Merton (1996) used to describe his own life of learning, for Katz too, *the child was father to the man*.

Beyond foretelling the intellectual career of a notable figure, the 1949 presentation also indexes three storylines in the history of communication studies and related academic fields after World War II. The first is an ethnoreligious story, reflected in the different paths of teacher and student. Merton, born to Russian Jewish immigrants in 1910, changed his name (from Meyer Schkolnick) and pursued a secularizing, assimilationist life in the context of the intense, officially sanctioned anti-Semitism in the decades when he came of age. Katz was also born to European Jewish immigrants (in 1926), but he found social space to successfully pursue an academic career while embracing his identity and actively participating in the Zionist movement of the 1940s and 1950s. In doing so, he was part of what historian David Hollinger (1996) calls "the ethnoreligious transformation of the academy by Jews" in the United States after World War II, when anti-Semitism as an official stance had been fully discredited (p. 7). The second storyline is institutional. While the importance of Columbia University scholars in the origins of U.S. communication studies has long been recognized, their transnational entanglements with Israeli social science are less well known (but see Arbel, 2016; First & Adoni, 2016). Katz was among the American and Columbia-trained figures who, in the contexts of postwar U.S. hegemony in the social sciences, helped shape Israeli social research in the 1950s. When he institutionalized communication studies there, it was on the American model. The third storyline is one of gender: Men like Katz seized opportunities that were not available to the women who had made

significant contributions to 1940s' media research but were largely shut out of the professoriate (Ashcraft & Simonson, 2016; Herrero, 2023; Hristova, 2022; Rowland & Simonson, 2014).

These storylines are threaded across the sociologically infused intellectual biography of the young Katz, which is the central focus of this article. Though primarily narrative in form, the article is undergirded by Karl Mannheim's idea of historical generations. Mannheim (1952) argued that generations endowed "the individuals sharing in them with a common location in the social and historical process," predisposing them to certain "modes of thought, experience, feeling . . . action, and . . . self-expression" (p. 291). He also recognized that generations are internally differentiated through specific geographical and cultural locations in which individuals are situated and through varying responses to major historical events and other defining collective experiences. Recent scholarship has argued that media landscapes are fundamental components of generational experiences, helping to shape characteristic structures of feeling and orientations to the world, particularly in one's formative years (Bolin, 2017). I expand that point by arguing that both mediated and face-to-face forms of communication are among the agencies that shape generations, and so we should consider individuals' participation in broader communication ecologies. I turn that insight toward the history of the field, where the generational frame has on occasion been productively used (e.g., Averbeck, 2001).

To Mannheim's concept I add Merton's idea of opportunity structures, which shifts attention from the social forces that shape generational dispositions to differential possibilities for acting within them. Opportunity structures reference the ways that specific institutional, social, and geographical locations provide "various probabilities for acting individuals and groups to achieve specifiable outcomes" (Merton, 1994, p. 25). Those outcomes can take many forms, but three of significance in academic lives are facilities with specific trained thought styles, access to institutionally recognized forms of success, and participation in social networks that further one's career. Members of the same generation find themselves with different, socially structured opportunities to develop and pursue their careers.

Katz's intellectual dispositions and career grew out of the Jewish and secular worlds of his native Brooklyn, his participation in the Zionist movement, and the opportunity structures provided by sociology at Columbia University. With an eye on the broader transnational history of the communication field, I make that case by drawing from multiple sources: Archival documents, census data, historical newspapers from Brooklyn, Katz's scattered autobiographical reflections, conversations with him and members of his family, his brother's book-length autobiography, remembrances by colleagues, accounts from others who attended his schools, his high-school yearbook, and historiographical literature on the contexts of his life.

The Making of Young Katz

The first of Rose and Maurice Katz's two sons was born on the last day of May in 1926. He would call his parents "influentials" in his dedication to *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Data from the 1930 Census tell us his father was born in Austria, his mother in Poland, and both counted Yiddish as their mother tongue (Figure 2). Both had immigrated to the United States with their families when they were about three, Maurice in 1895 and Rose a decade later. Maurice was a salesman, and the family lived in the new Midwood section of Brooklyn, largely populated by Jewish immigrants who had moved from old neighborhoods like the Lower East Side. Their house, a duplex at 1030 E. 22nd Street, had been built in 1925, and the family was well-

off enough to have a live-in Irish maid (and a young African American woman from Virginia as of the 1940 Census). Their second son, Karl, three years younger, would go on to a career as a museum director in New York and Israel, with his success warranting an obituary in the *New York Times*.

Margie L.	Head	R	95.	R	No	M	W	34	M	33	No	Yes	Austria	Austria	Austria	Yiddish
Rose	Wife	H			v	F	W	29	M	24	No	Yes	Poland	Poland	Poland	Yiddish
Elihu	Son				v	M	W	3 1/2	S		No		New York City	Austria	Poland	
Carl	Son				v	M	W	0 1/2	S		No		New York City	Austria	Poland	
Delia	Servant				v	F	W	19	S		No	Yes	Irish Free State	Irish Free State	Irish Free State	English

Figure 2. Lines from the 1930 Census for the Katz household (FamilySearch, n.d.).

One of Katz’s classmates, the future Nobel laureate Baruch Blumberg (n.d.) remembered Brooklyn at the time as “a small village like place” (00:00:37). For the children of Jewish immigrants who grew up there, neighborhoods like Midwood offered significant social capital, understood as groups, relationships, and local social structures that facilitated forms of communally oriented civil society and individual success. That civil society was supported by a local media ecology that also facilitated national and international awareness. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* was one of several newspapers serving the city, and it had a small-city feel, brimming with happenings in local civic organizations, schools, politics, and other stories of local human interest.

Radio broadcasting was at its high-water mark as Katz grew up. Fifty-seven percent of American homes in the urban Northeast had a radio in 1930, 96% a decade later (Craig, 2004). The lines between the news and local public opinion formation were both dense and evident as families listened together in living rooms and kitchens and talked about the affairs of the day. The Katz family would gather in their kitchen, where the radio sat on a Formica countertop. Radio networks brought a new kind of nationwide connectivity and shared focus, sometimes organized around live broadcast events. Beginning in the spring of 1933, when Elihu was almost seven, Franklin Roosevelt spoke to the nation in his famous Fireside Chats, and there would be nearly 30 of them by the time he graduated high school in 1944. As Dayan and Katz (1992) would later write, Roosevelt used radio to talk over the heads of Congress and directly to the American people in an early version of media events that Katz lived before he investigated.

Though Katz would write about a wide range of media, there is a way that he was a creature of print journalism and broadcasting, which provided his early and lasting orientation to public communication and local communities that talked about the news. This sensibility became particularly clear in the 1990s as broadcasting was buffeted by a “rapid multiplication of channels” that failed “to promote national political integration” in the way that the radio of his childhood had (Katz, 1996, p. 22). That was the same decade that he increasingly embraced Gabriel Tarde and his model of public opinion formation through flows of news put into live conversation. Katz came of age in a world of broadcast integration and Tardean communication flows, which I believe set a baseline for him, normatively and empirically.

While radio broadcasting was literally in the air, a medium that integrated domestic space with contemporary public culture, Katz’s family were also people of The Book, the core medium binding together the Jewish diaspora, and one that articulated itself with practices of Jewish orality, face-to-face ritual, and a wider world of religious print. Maurice and Rose Katz ensured that both of their sons were educated in the

glories of the Book and the cultures surrounding it by enrolling them at Yeshiva of Flatbush on East 10th Street, a 15-minute walk from their house.

Yeshiva of Flatbush was in the Modernized Wing of American Orthodoxy, part of a generational movement in Jewish education that emerged during the 1920s as an alternative to the traditional yeshiva. At the time, most New York City yeshivas taught in Yiddish and served working-class families in the Jewish "ghettoes" of the Lower East Side and the Bronx, but the newer schools offered instruction in Hebrew and catered to well-to-do Jewish families in new developments like Midwood (Gurock, 1989). While the novelist Chaim Potok, three years Katz's junior, could experience his orthodox yeshiva as drawing firm lines between religious and secular cultures, Katz had a very different experience. At Yeshiva of Flatbush, the first coeducational yeshiva in the United States, the day was divided between four hours of English instruction, when the boys did not have to wear their kippahs, and four hours of Hebrew, when the children studied the Bible and were brought into Jewish traditions of scriptural interpretation and disputation. As one historian writes, "The educators and parent body of the modernized day school, partners in its evolution, fully recognized the duality inherent in being both American and Jewish and sought to reconcile the two" (Joselit, 1990, p. 134). Katz's parents were active in leadership related to the school, serving on its board of directors and helping raise funds, as reported in the *Eagle*. His family's values aligned with the school's and together gave him the sense that, as he later wrote, "My Jewishness and my Americanism were clearly compatible" (Katz, 1961, p. 335).

While it opened to modern secular learning, "Israel loomed large" (Katz, 2016, p. 15) at Yeshiva of Flatbush, consistent with the Zionist sympathies of the new Jewish day schools. Katz's parents supported the Zionist movement, with his mother serving as vice president of the New York chapter of Mizrahi Women's Organization, which in 1939 was the largest religious Zionist organization in the United States. After morning prayers at what was then an elementary school, students offered pennies and nickels for the Jewish National Fund, which they knew would go to planting trees in Palestine. Overall, the school offered exceptionally high levels of both secular and religious learning and was an incubator for future success. In an era when less than 5% of the American population had a college degree, virtually 100% of the students in Katz's cohort went on to college (Blumberg, n.d.). At least two would win Nobel Prizes.

We can see several dimensions of Katz's later life in embryo at Yeshiva of Flatbush, which, as he wrote to Merton, "left a lasting, warm, and positive mark" on his life (Katz, 1949, p. 2). First was the socially structured trajectory to success that the school provided, seeds for which were planted very early for him. A family member told me that Elihu was the beloved oldest son, supported especially by his loving mother. Together with the success he experienced in school, beginning at his yeshiva, this laid a foundation of self-confidence evident to future colleagues and friends. Second, the school's blend of modernization and tradition, cutting across religious and secular worlds, would also shape Katz's trajectory as he moved between the United States and Israel from the 1950s until his death. Third, it was at his yeshiva that he began his formal education in what I will call Jewish arts of discourse—hermeneutics and argumentation, textual interpretation, and disputation. In the words of Katz's friend and colleague Joseph Turow (2022), who attended Yeshiva of Flatbush many years after Katz, "It seems quite clear to me that his engagement there and later with biblical, rabbinic, and, to a lesser extent, Talmudic studies enhanced his natural ability to connect the dots among issues and phenomena that stood out to him" (para. 16). In the words of another friend and colleague, Larry Gross, "It's impossible to understand Katz as an intellectual, as a person, without

understanding a way in which . . . a certain Jewish perspective on ideas and thinking and ethics was woven into his being” (as cited in Kornhauser, 2022, 00:09:57). Yeshiva of Flatbush was almost certainly a formative place in this regard.

Katz moved from his yeshiva to a public high school, which shifted the context of his learning from the People of the Book to pluralistic peoples and secular books. The setting was the brand-new Midwood High School, which opened its doors in early 1941 (Figure 3). Like Yeshiva of Flatbush, Midwood was a social incubator of high achievement. Among its graduates were future professors, doctors, artists, performers, and leaders of media industries (Woody Allen graduated there a decade after Katz). The U.S. philosopher Richard Bernstein (2007), who was a few years behind Katz at Midwood, said that he “experienced an intellectual awakening” (p. 107) at Midwood, whose faculty included PhDs who could not secure university jobs during the Depression for reasons of constrained economic opportunity, anti-Semitism, or both. Some published scholarly articles or were otherwise active in professional academic societies, further raising the level of discourse in the school.



Figure 3. Midwood High School in December 1940 (OldNYCPhotographs, n.d.).

Katz was editor of the school newspaper, the *Midwood Argus*. Lawrence K. Grossman, also a little behind Katz at Midwood, would go on to head NBC News and the Public Broadcasting System. Grossman attested that his journalism teacher, Dr. Fuchs, “changed his life” (*Pioneering Innovations in Broadcast Television*, 2001, 00:01:52). We do not know for certain that Fuchs, who had apparently earned his doctorate, was Katz’s journalism teacher too, but in 1949 Katz wrote to Merton that he

was much influenced by the faculty adviser assigned to the newspaper. He was convinced that a high school paper could do more for its readers—and writers—than cover the Senior Prom or the football team. He felt that the paper should explore the community and broad social issues for its readers. (Katz, 1949, p. 2)

Among the social issues he wrote about was a racial controversy between White and Black students in Hillburn, New York, a small town north of New York City, which had attracted front-page stories in the New York newspapers. The *Argus* was a small part of it, with Katz experiencing the agency of opinion formation in his role as writer and editor.

Midwood was a communal nodal point within networks of mediated and face-to-face communication. The school's proximity to the heart of American broadcasting meant that representatives of media industries and those involved with wartime propaganda and morale efforts spoke to students during assemblies. Happenings at the school regularly made their way onto the pages of the *Eagle*, and its students entered current event competitions broadcast on New York's radio station WOR. The school participated in CBS Radio's nationwide *School of the Air of the Americas* program (National Education Association, 1940–1946), which covered current events and culture, with 10 minutes of the half-hour show devoted to students discussing a topic that had been introduced by experts in the first part of the show (Game, 1945). The *Eagle* reported that, under the direction of their social science teacher, Midwood students discussed the topic "Democracy Today" in a broadcast likely carried into the school's classrooms through the modern public address system that had been installed in it. The topic of democracy had local salience because Midwood was experimenting with its own self-governance as students took charge of what was renamed "the City of Midwood," styled after the governing structure of New York City.

In all these ways, Katz took an active part in ecologies where local and national media were intertwined with the formation of public opinion through journalism and face-to-face conversation. At Midwood, he transformed himself from being a reader of public communication to one who also addressed publics through his work on the newspaper. This gave him a different perspective on what Livingstone (1997) picked out as his lifelong focus on the relationships between public opinion, media, and social interaction. It also honed the clarity and force of his prose as it was subject to journalistic standards embodied in the judgments of an admired newspaper advisor. Young Katz was brought into a craft that favored a clear writing style, forceful narrative framing, a good sense of the headline, and turns of the phrase that would stick in readers' minds. All these things marked his work as a communication researcher.

Midwood High School also offered students a broad, tolerant, and multicultural environment marked by the hope of the era. It was a multiethnic, multireligious setting with a large group of middle-class Jewish students who could experience the social confidence that came without feeling particularly minoritized in their everyday lives. It organized tolerance programs and offered instruction in multiple foreign languages, including Hebrew and Japanese. Though situated within the local community in Brooklyn, it encouraged cosmopolitan and cross-cultural sensibilities. These were all recognizable parts of Katz's intellectual disposition, which was marked by listening to differing views and pluralistic engagement with them even as he could doggedly advocate for his own positions.

As Bernstein (2007) remembered, it was "an optimistic time—a time when many of us had a deep conviction that somehow we could make a significant difference in shaping a better America and a better world" (p. 107). I think that generational sensibility stuck with Katz and helps explain the distance he took up from Marxism in the 1949 seminar presentation—and for the rest of his life. An engaged distance, to be sure, but instead of systemic critique, he embraced centrist liberalism as the secular faith that accompanied

Judaism and the Zionist project. Mid-century American-style social science was a vehicle that could serve both kinds of faith.

After Midwood

Katz's trajectory toward language, culture, and communication continued after he graduated from Midwood in January 1944 and enrolled the next month at Columbia. He wrote "Journalist" in the space over "job-intention" on his application, as he would again several years later (Katz, 1949, p. 2). After two semesters, he was drafted and sent to the Army Specialized Training Program's Japanese Language and Area School at the University of Chicago. In basic training, outside his tolerant enclave in Brooklyn, he was the target of "some jeering in the barracks one day," which he later called the "only outright anti-Semitic episode" he could recall experiencing (Katz, 1961, p. 335). In contrast to the class mixing of basic training, the Japanese language program was populated by college or college-bound men, "fascinating and bright people from colleges all over the country" (Katz, 1949, pp. 3–4), largely elite institutions, which continued the pattern of being embedded in social vectors of achievement and success. During his time there, the head of the program, Leeds Gulick, a visiting professor of Japanese, was a discussant on the University of Chicago's *Round Table of the Air*, another small index of his proximity to processes of mass communication and opinion formation. Closer at hand, Katz served as managing editor of the group's newspaper, the unfortunately named *Geisha Gazette* (Figure 4). In its final issue, Katz was named by his compatriots as "the walking social issue" (*Geisha Gazette*, 1946, p. 5). Talking public affairs was his vocation and character.



Figure 4. The final issue of the *Geisha Gazette* (1946).

Trained as a Japanese-language interpreter, Katz was sent to Japan about six months after the war, first to Okinawa and later to Kumamoto. "The thrill of finding that Japanese was really a language after all—and that you could speak it!—was very great," he reminisced (Katz, 1949, p. 3). He worked with a kind of mobile field research team that set out each week, jeep and trailer, established informal headquarters in a local hotel, and turned to "asking mayors how health conditions were, how many demobilized soldiers had returned to town, whether Koreans were causing unrest, etc." (Katz, 1949, p. 3). Beyond that routine, he occasionally tracked down "some mysterious detail in a censored letter" or "chased a black marketeer down" (Katz, 1949, p. 3).

After he came back to Columbia in 1946, Katz resumed his secular and religious educations, both of which gave him additional exposure to the world of public communication and opinion formation. As an undergraduate, he would take courses in experimental psychology, philosophy, and Columbia's senior-level Colloquium on the Great Books. Though he had entered with designs of becoming a journalist, he became interested in sociology through three classes he took from the charismatic William C. Casey, who inspired others to graduate studies as well (Katz, 1949; Page, 1982; Wright, 2016). He also enrolled in Paul Lazarsfeld's two-semester course in public opinion and communications, Sociology 135-136, which the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset (1998) called the worst course he took at Columbia. Katz was primed by his own experiences with public communication to appreciate things Lipset apparently could not, and he became "very interested in Public Opinion and Communications" as fields of study (Katz, 1949, p. 4).

On the religious and political front, he and his brother joined the Intercollegiate Zionist Federation of America, with Elihu rising to president. In November 1947, his family listened in on what Daniel Dayan and Katz (1992) would call "the live broadcasting of history" when the United Nations voted on the partition of Palestine and the establishment of the new state of Israel (K. Katz, 2016).² The next year, Katz authored a 39-page pamphlet for the National Education Department of the Zionist Organization of America, *Source Book on Zionism and Israel* (Katz, 1948; Figure 5). It offered a synthesis of quotes and information about Israel that he called "a handy reference book . . . [that] should prove of particular help to Zionist speakers, District presidents and education chairmen" (Katz, 1948, p. 4). In other words, he was trying to provide an informational base for two-step flows of communication about Zionism and Israel. He did this in parallel to what he was beginning to learn from Lazarsfeld in his Public Opinion and Communication sequence.

"On November 29, 1947, my mother, father, and I sat in silence in the kitchen; with somber faces we leaned forward, heads tilted toward the radio on the Formica tabletop. We were listening to a live broadcast of the United Nations vote on the partition of Palestine. One by one, each country's vote was announced: yes; abstention; no. My mother kept tally with pen and paper. Each time a Latin American country abstained, my father pounded his fist on the table in anguish. We needed every country we could get. At the count's conclusion, my mother looked at her tally card: thirty-three yeses, thirteen nos, and ten abstentions. We erupted in celebration; the State of Israel was born!" (K. Katz, 2016, n.p.).

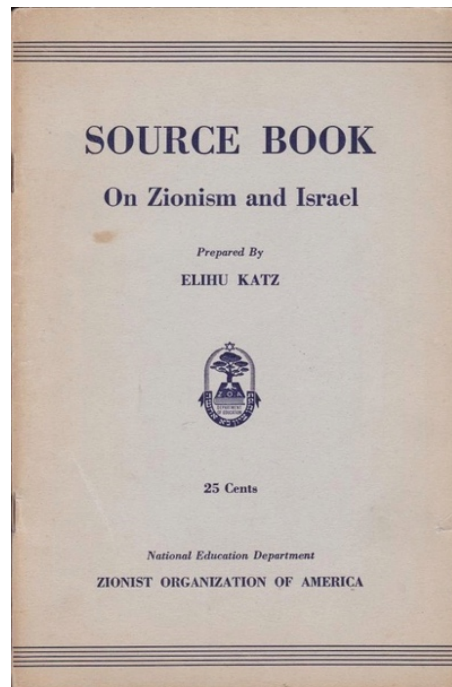


Figure 5. Katz's pamphlet for the Zionist Organization of America (Katz, 1948).

Katz would also continue his formal Hebraic studies, enrolling as a nondegree student in classes at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the educational center of conservative Judaism in the United States. He took "very diverse courses such as Talmud, Medieval Hebrew Poetry, Contemporary Literature, etc." (Katz, 1949, pp. 4–5). During the 1940s, under the directorship of Louis Finkelstein, the seminary engaged in energetic public outreach pursued in part through an active radio department that, like the seminary, emphasized Judaism's "compatibility with mainstream American values and principles" and "hailed broadcasting as a virtual locus of spiritual democracy," as Katz wrote in a later study of it (Shandler & Katz, 1997, pp. 388, 391). The seminary's ecumenical ethos also animated the interfaith dialogues it sponsored through its Institute for Religious and Social Studies (founded in 1938). In alignment with its broadcasting wing, in the winter of 1946–1947, the Institute organized a course on the topic "The Problems of the Communication of Ideas," with lectures given by, among others, Harold Lasswell, Margaret Mead, and Paul Lazarsfeld. A published volume of essays followed (Bryson, 1948). It included what became *the* classic statement of Columbia media research, Lazarsfeld and Merton's "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action" (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948). We do not know if Katz attended any of those lectures, but he was learning in a religious institution that embraced the broader idea of communication and held out the belief in commonality across lines of difference. Studies at the seminary not only deepened his knowledge of Hebrew but also gave him additional expertise in the Jewish traditions of interpretation and argumentation. These were discursive practices he later brought to bear in a text he considered his finest work, "The Voyage of the Bagel" (Katz & Feldman, 1999), delivered in 1959 at the University of Chicago's Hillel Faculty Symposium on "The Latke vs. The Hamantasch" (Scannell, 2014).

As he wrote to Merton in 1949, "I have been—and am—extremely active in the Zionist movement" (Katz, 1949, p. 6). The previous summer he had served as director of a 10-day Zionist camp institute. Looking forward, he said,

My intention is to go to Israel. I am not quite sure that I shall remain there permanently, but I am very anxious to get a research or administrative job there in a research set-up or preferably perhaps, in government . . . I plan to do my dissertation on some area connected with Israel or World Zionism and I hope to do the research and work for the dissertation in Israel. (Katz, 1949, p. 6)

Parts of that plan would come to fruition.

The Opportunity Structure of Columbia Sociology

We can think of postwar graduate study in sociology at Columbia (like graduate study anywhere) as a social and intellectual opportunity structure. It provided structured access to learning, people, and participation in research projects that some students could take advantage of and be set on the road to success. What Terry Nichols Clark (1998) calls "the Columbia sociology machine" was adept at placing its best students in excellent positions where they shaped a generation of sociology in the United States and beyond. A handful would enter the nascent communication field.

One important dimension of the Columbia opportunity structure, in relation to previous eras at the university and in U.S. higher education more generally, was the possibility for Jews to thrive. Before the 1940s, U.S. higher education was deeply anti-Semitic. Elite institutions like Harvard and Yale had strict Jewish quotas, and though Columbia was relatively more open, it also limited Jewish enrollment on its main campus (Gohn, 2019). Discrimination was even more widespread when it came to opportunities for Jewish scholars to enter the professoriate, which the PhDs who taught Katz at Midwood High School knew well. The Allied victory in World War II discredited anti-Semitism as an institutional stance, however, and Jewish students entered graduate programs in large numbers, many like Katz on the G. I. Bill. These two developments, as David Hollinger (1996) has shown, opened space for "the arrival of Jewish intellectuals within academic institutions long hostile to them" (p. 7).

For reasons beyond the scope of this article, sociology was a relatively welcoming home. Columbia's two most important faculty members, Lazarsfeld and Merton, were both Jewish born, though, as I mentioned, Merton changed his birth name and did not identify publicly as ethnically Jewish until very late in his life. Katz's master's advisor, Leo Lowenthal, was also Jewish-born and had in his youth participated in the Zionist student movement and embraced Orthodoxy, though he had left both behind by the time he worked with Katz in the late 1940s (Jacobs, 2015). Four of the five members of his dissertation committee were ethnically Jewish. (Lazarsfeld, Merton, and Herbert Hyman from sociology as well as the social psychologist Otto Klineberg; the political scientist Robert D. Leigh, who had chaired the Commission on Freedom of the Press, rounded it out.) In different ways, these figures who shaped Katz drew on culturally Jewish traditions of learning in developing a kind of skeptical faith in social scientific inquiry with universalist epistemological aspirations (Hollinger, 1996; Simonson, 2022; see also Peters, 2006). At the same time, in

contrast with Merton, who essentially “passed” in Gentile culture, and Lazarsfeld, who used his foreignness to downplay his Jewishness—both of which were strategies for finding success in an anti-Semitic world—Katz could operate in a more tolerant professional space. As he wrote in a 1961 symposium for younger Jewish intellectuals, “In academia, Jews feel at least as much at home as anybody else” (Katz, 1961, p. 334). And, in a generationally revealing comment a decade later, he confessed, “I have never worried seriously about the prospect of anti-Semitism in America” (Katz, 1974, p. 435).

During the 1940s and early 1950s, the structured opportunities associated with Columbia sociology, for Jews and Gentiles alike, included empirical mass communication research. The bulk was funneled through the Bureau for Applied Social Research (BASR), a quasi-independent organization largely funded by work contracted with commercial, governmental, and nonprofit agencies and done in hierarchical research teams that included graduate students and affiliated research associates, many of them women. This clientelist funding structure later led Columbia to be associated with so-called administrative research that was primarily concerned with investigating the short-term effects of media campaigns. However, through the 1940s, communication research at Columbia took multiple forms: Positivistic studies of the effects of campaigns on individual decision making; qualitative investigations of audience gratifications with a phenomenological dimension that was informed by Viennese psychology; Durkheimian-infused cultural analysis of shared symbols and broadcast public images; and even critical, Marxian-inflected accounts of the capacity of mass media to narcotize audiences and enforce conformity within the status quo. Media effects were one of several operative theoretical vocabularies, albeit a central one.

Columbia produced dozens of highly influential sociologists during its heyday from about 1945 through 1968, but only a few went on to work in communications research. Katz was easily the most prominent. Late in his life, Katz reflected on why sociology had given up the study of communication (Katz, 2009; Pooley & Katz, 2008), but it was never firmly established in the field, even at Columbia. Graduate students were enlisted to do work in media- and communication-related bureau projects, but most did it for financial support.

While the postwar opportunity structure at Columbia was hospitable for Jews, it was severely constrained for women. There were more than 50 women researchers who made important contributions to Columbia media research in the 1940s, but patriarchy in the educational system and society meant that relatively few were given a clear route to earn a PhD, and those who did often struggled to find tenure track jobs (Ashcraft & Simonson, 2016; Hristova, 2022; Rowland & Simonson, 2014; Simonson, 2012). There was a broader, gendered status hierarchy at the bureau, which men like Katz benefited from while many women dealt with sexual harassment and discrimination. I am not aware of any Black graduate students at Columbia in the era who would go on to successful careers. In short, in the immediate postwar period, Columbia offered differential opportunity structures to members of differently minoritized groups: The prospects for Jewish men were opening just as those for women were closing, and African Americans were still far from having their chance.

A Prepared Young Man Seizes Opportunities

From the time Merton recognized his talent in 1949 until he defended his dissertation in 1956, Katz—an intellectually well-prepared, hardworking, and ambitious young man favored by the powerful

figures in the department—took full advantage of what Merton (1994) later called “an evocative socio-cognitive micro-environment” at Columbia (p. 19). If a sociological understanding of serendipity means that a prepared mind makes unanticipated discoveries that prove consequential (Merton & Barber, 2004), then Columbia was surely serendipitous for Katz, whose gender allowed him to take full advantage.

First, his talent for synthesizing and identifying the most cogent points came out when Lowenthal assigned him the task of summarizing statistical data on media use in four Arab countries for a Voice of America-funded study that would feed into the classic book on modernization and media, Daniel Lerner’s (1958) *The Passing of Traditional Society*. That exercise, which issued in the BASR report “Communications Behavior and Political Attitudes in Four Arabic Countries” (Katz, 1952), also advanced Katz’s personal and intellectual trajectory into cross-cultural and comparative communication studies—a quotidian dimension of his Brooklyn village and education at the yeshiva and Midwood, deepened by his experience in Japan. Katz’s experiences before the age of 20 had made him a cultural and communicative border crosser, and the Bureau gave those social dispositions an empirical, research-oriented form. This had also marked the *Source Book on Zionism and Israel* (Katz, 1948), which likewise involved synthesis and presentation of empirical research for administrative ends, while also yoking tradition with modernity.

Seeing Katz’s talent, Lazarsfeld offered him a second synthesizing assignment as part of a large study sponsored by the Ford Foundation on the introduction of television in the United States. The Television Implementation Committee was one of the Bureau’s extensive series of collaborations with broadcasting industries. It can be read as an early episode of a story that leads to Katz serving as the founding director of Israeli television from 1967 to 1969 (Katz, 1971) and conducting an important study of TV for the British Broadcasting Company (Katz, 1977). In 1952, Lazarsfeld assigned his student to immerse himself in small group research, which Katz in turn linked to the two-step flow concept born in the Columbia voting study of 1940 but given little public air since, though a number of Columbia women had made contributions to the idea (Herrero, 2023). Katz (1953) titled his 76-page report “The Part Played by People: A New Focus for the Study of Mass Media Effects.” It provided the basis for the hugely influential Part I of Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) *Personal Influence*.

As has been widely discussed, the empirical base for *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) was a 1944 study of women’s decision-making practices in Decatur, Illinois, originally overseen by C. Wright Mills, and it went through many hands before Lazarsfeld offered it to Katz (see Simonson, 2006). Katz himself did not do any of the empirical work (nor would he for his dissertation). His contribution, which was significant, was to bring the study together into publishable form, to situate it within a framework that linked mass media and small group research, and to frame it all within a compelling narrative about the essence of media research and its intellectual history. In my view, Katz the yeshiva- and Jewish Theological Seminary-trained critical thinker and Katz the skilled journalist deserve as much credit for that work as does Katz the sociologist. Or better, Katz the sociologist was formed by those younger versions of himself.

Consider the power of Katz’s framings in the Television Implementation Committee report. First, what we might call the headline: “The Part Played by People.” A resonant alliteration, it captures the hopeful, liberal democratic ethos of the two-step flow theory at mid-century—an ethos that Katz himself shared. The former newspaper editor was always strong with titles and key phrases that did significant rhetorical work,

and this was perhaps his most consequential example. Second, consider two confident claims, first expressed in this report: “Fundamentally, all of communications research aims at the study of mass media *effects*” (Katz, 1953, p. 3) and, “Until very recently, it was widely assumed that the media were all-powerful, capable of reaching out, and influencing nearly every eye and ear,” a model of media that “resembled nothing so much as it resembled a giant hypodermic needle” (Katz, 1953, p. 6). Both claims, as advanced through *Personal Influence*, were hugely influential (Pooley, 2006). Both would become set pieces in Katz’s writing and talk for the rest of his career. And both had the effect of amplifying the importance of Lazarsfeld’s work (and by extension Katz’s) at the expense of other ways of thinking at the time.

As mentioned earlier, 1940s’ Columbia media research took multiple forms, and there was something rhetorically powerful but deeply reductive about Katz’s framing, even from the perspective of the local scene. To be sure, there was a strong discourse of effects within the Columbia group, but Katz’s powerful storyline marginalized other operative paradigms and research at the bureau—by Merton, Herta Herzog, and dozens of women associates who were conducting focused interviews or looking at the meanings of media figures for people who wrote them fan letters. This was a pattern that had begun with Katz’s master’s thesis, which all but erased the work of the Bureau’s women associates (Simonson, 2012). The trope of the hypodermic needle, as Deborah Lubken (2008) has shown, was a straw person that Katzian eloquence helped lodge in what became the (deeply mistaken) collective memory of the field. The heroic tale of the rediscovery of the primary group—the part played by people—had come into the Columbia milieu from Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, as Pooley (2006) has demonstrated. Katz’s genius lay in the clarification of the issues and the creation of a compelling storyline. His yeshiva training and journalistic writing lay behind this work.

To Israel via Chicago

The opportunity structure of Columbia sociology meant jobs for those who finished the program, and Katz was among its top students. In 1955, before he had defended his dissertation, he had a tenure track position at the University of Chicago, one of the best sociology departments in the world, and lived at 5741 Kenwood, a 10-minute walk to work. Into the early 1960s, he participated in Chicago’s interdisciplinary Committee on Communication (about which, see Pooley, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). He absorbed its emphases on popular culture and leisure studies, areas he would make significant contributions to in the decades that followed, most notably by investigating leisure pursuits in Israel with Michael Gurevitch (Katz & Gurevitch, 1976) and cross-cultural readings of the popular TV drama *Dallas* (Capice & Katzman, 1978–1991) with Tamar Liebes (Liebes & Katz, 1990). He would remain a faculty member at the University of Chicago until 1969, a chapter in his career that has received relatively little attention and which space limits me from pursuing further here.

In 1951, Katz married Ruth Torgownik. Her family had emigrated from Germany to Israel in 1934, when Ruth was about seven. She had graduated in 1946 from the Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv, the first secondary school to use Hebrew as a language of instruction and a hotbed of cultural and political Zionism. In the 1930s and 1940s, its graduating classes were drafted directly into the Haganah, the underground military organization (Reichel, 2011). After her service in the army, she traveled by ship to New York as an emissary to the Intercollegiate Zionist Federation of America, where she met Elihu, its president. A great

intellect who, like her husband, would be awarded the prestigious Israel Prize for lifetime scholarly achievement, Ruth earned two master's degrees at Columbia while Elihu was working on his dissertation, and then a doctorate in musicology (1963), with a dissertation on the social and cultural factors that underwrote the establishment of opera as an institution.

There is a long and rich story, which I am in no position to tell, about Ruth's intellectual influence on Elihu. If communication helps to constitute us, then Elihu's seven-plus-decade relationship with Ruth was central for him (Figure 6). "We married young, and we constituted for each other a significant audience," she observed. "I mean we weren't bidding only to impress our colleagues, but to impress each other" (as cited in Kornhauser, 2022, 00:01:41). In the gendered economy of labor Elihu benefitted from, Ruth would also be the primary caretaker for their two sons (born in 1960 and 1961), giving him time to write, which she did not have. This dimension of his life was also in place by the early 1950s.



Figure 6. Ruth and Elihu Katz (Kornhauser, 2022, 00:07:22).

Just a year after he was appointed at Chicago, Katz began a two-year position in the Department of Sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as a visiting instructor (1956–1958). The way had been prepared through his family's Zionism, his participation in the student movement, and what he described as "the redemptive joy in the triumphant emergence of Israel" after the "agony, and the guilt, of bearing witness to the destruction of European Jewry" (Katz, 1961, p. 334). Ruth gave the move an additional push, and they would eventually make Jerusalem their primary home because she wanted to raise their children in Israel. On the professional front, Katz's training made him an ideal fit for a university whose social scientists were orienting toward American models of research. The department, and Israeli sociology more broadly, was led by S. M. Eisenstadt, who in 1950 took over its chairmanship from Martin Buber (the original head of the department when it was established at Hebrew University in

1948). As Uri Ram (2018) has shown, Eisenstadt reoriented the department to U.S.-style structural-functional research put in the service of the Israeli state and society—entwined missions Katz identified with. There was homophily too between Katz and Louis Guttman, head of the Israel Institute of Applied Social Research (IIASR), which was established in 1950 on the model of the BASR. Guttman had also grown up in a Zionist family in the United States, learned Hebrew, and studied Talmud Torah on his way to graduate education in the social sciences. In what Tal Arbel (2016) calls “an emerging transatlantic scientific network which extended behavioral science to include the postcolonial frontier” (p. 5), Guttman brought survey research to the new nation and founded his institute. Katz was part of the same transatlantic network, which by the mid-1960s led to the founding of the communication field in Israel on the U.S. model (First & Adoni, 2016).

Katz was one of several figures with ties to Columbia University who helped bring U.S.-style social research to Israel. Perhaps the most important was George Schneiweis Wise, a Russian-born Jewish immigrant to the United States, who took a master’s degree in sociology from Columbia in 1930 before setting off on a highly successful business career manufacturing newsprint and leading literacy efforts in Mexico (Ne’eman, 1981). In the mid-1940s, he donated money to the BASR and was brought on as an associate director (1948–1952), with the hope that he could help raise funds (Sheridan, 1979). Wise also took his doctorate at Columbia in 1950, specializing in the political sociology of Latin America, but his heart lay with Zionism and Israel. As Arbel (2016) has detailed, in the late 1940s, he became involved with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, first as a highly influential donor and then, beginning in 1953, as head of its board of governors. He played an active role in academic decision making and brought a new vision for the university as “a prime instrument of national purpose . . . aiming at establishing an American style modernity” and applying scientific research to meet pressing social needs (Arbel, 2016, pp. 153–154). It was a vision very much in line with the BASR’s Middle East Study that Katz participated in. Wise was a graduate student and associate director of the BASR during Katz’s years of involvement there and then head of Hebrew University when Katz was hired. He was the most powerful of a group of U.S.-trained social scientists who worked at the university or the affiliated IIASR, which also included Judith Tannenbaum Shuval, Simon N. Herman, and Henry Rosenfeld, along with Guttman and Katz.

A final point: Though Ruth and Elihu Katz would travel by boat when they first came to Israel, the pattern of commuting that followed when he took a permanent position at Hebrew University was underwritten by one last form of communication that helped make Katz. The long-distance airplane was a space-binding medium of great significance—to Katz, and also to the global field of communication research, from the 1950s forward. Trans World Airlines was the major carrier in the 1950s and marketed a long-range Jetstream aircraft that could fly smoothly in the upper air. Their flight map (Figure 7) shows routes from Chicago to Tel Aviv, which provided the affordances for a six-decade pattern of commuting that, in Katz’s words, allowed him to be “in more than one place at the same time” (Katz, 2014, p. 2165). This remained true as he moved his U.S. affiliations from Chicago to the University of Southern California and the University of Pennsylvania, all while remaining a professor in Jerusalem.

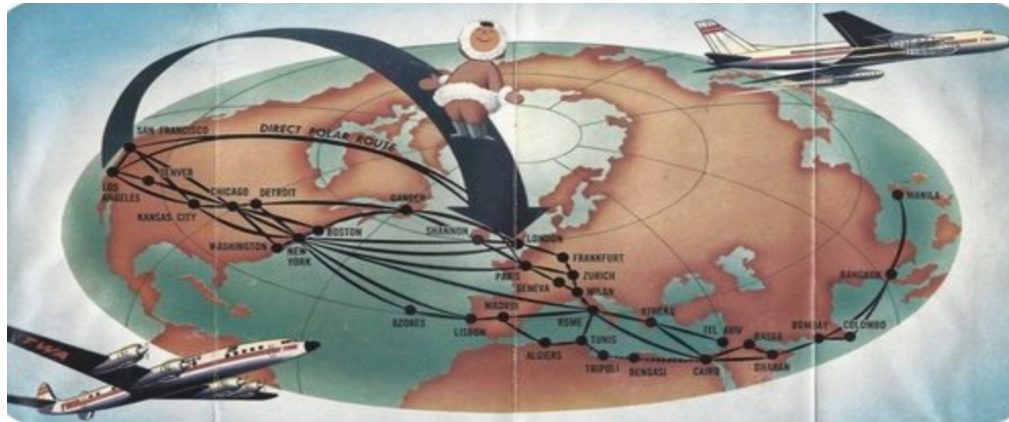


Figure 7. Trans World Airlines flight map, 1950 (Pinterest, n.d.).

In Closing: Echoes of a Dissertation Defense

I close the article as I opened it, with a micro-episode at Columbia. The scene is Katz's dissertation defense, in May 1956, as he winds down his first year on the faculty at Chicago. He has every reason to feel confident. *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) has been published, and Lazarsfeld has given his advisee first authorship. But there is a hitch. Merton asks a question about a theorist he probably saw lurking unnamed in the dissertation. He hints that it was Durkheim's rival. Katz blanks. The answer was Gabriel Tarde, who would become something of an obsession for Katz in the last three decades of his life. He would call it a penance for his earlier forgetting, and along with several essays, he wrote a book about him with former students, *Echoes of Gabriel Tarde* (Katz, Ali, & Kim, 2014). In a way, it was an echo of the 1956 moment, just as Merton's question was a kind of bellwether, as one can read much of Katz's most notable work as reflections of his Durkheimian and his Tardean sides. On the one hand, there are his lifelong concerns with the collective, group integration, the nation-state, ritual solidarity, and the institutions of modern society (Durkheim). On the other, his studies of diffusion, social networks, interpersonal influence, flows of communication, and the formation of publics through news and conversation (Tarde). It is also true that there is a kind of vintage, generational quality to organizing a discourse, or a corpus of work, around two "classic" European social theorists—one that marked Merton's question in 1956 and my own echo of it here. Younger generations do not tend to be animated by that kind of thinking, nor should they be, just as they are not animated by Elihu Katz in the way that members of earlier generations were, particularly those who knew him. And while I am not the one to press this case, it is also worth adding that the Zionism that animated young Katz in the 1940s is not the Zionism that animates large swaths of contemporary Israel, just as the civic ecology of his Brooklyn youth is well different than today's.

There is a specificity too in the way that Katz the child was father to Katz the man. The continuity in his intellectual biography was supported by gendered, racially, and culturally particular milieus of achievement that he moved through successfully from a young age. There was surely a personal dimension to this, a reflection on Katz as an individual person, but there was also a social one. Katz was remarkable, *and* he was also fortunate. The women of his generation at Columbia were not fortunate like he was nor were the Jewish men of earlier generations—nor those who came of age in other world regions or in

neoliberal times with less gilded job possibilities than those available to promising, elite-trained young men in the postwar American university. People in these groups did not—or do not—have the same kinds of structured opportunities to parent the adult versions of themselves, forging intellectual products out of their own generational dispositions, problematics, and structures of feeling. There is surely always some through line that we can recognize, in ourselves and in others, that links young minds to mature creative work, but the opportunities to develop those minds and produce creative work are not equally distributed. Without our active efforts, favor disproportionately falls to those with the privilege of being favored.

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