

Remembering two friends, revisiting two books: *Personal influence and Media events*

Lembrando dois amigos, revisitando dois livros: *Personal influence & Media events*

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Abstract

This essay is about two close friends of mine, Elihu Katz and Todd Gitlin. It offers a re-exploration of two books: *Personal influence* and *Media events*. Starting with *Media events* (1992), I ask whether it extends the thrust of *Personal influence* or detracts from it to the point of sometimes contradicting it. Then I move to *Personal influence* (1955) and look at the circumstances of its writing and reception. Since I was a child when the book came out, I rely on the impressive volume that *The Annals of American Political and Social Science* devoted to its genesis. This volume includes strong critiques, and I discuss many of them, including the most radical ones. Yet there are many reasons why I believe the book to be no less important today than when it came out. I also suggest that, despite their famous feud, my two friends sometimes agreed.

Keywords

Personal influence, Media events, Elihu Katz, Todd Gitlin

Resumo

Este ensaio é sobre dois amigos próximos, Elihu Katz e Todd Gitlin, e consiste numa reexploração de dois livros: *Personal influence* e *Media events*. Começando com *Media events* (1992), questiono se este prolonga o impulso que esteve na base de *Personal influence* ou se, pelo contrário, o desvaloriza ao ponto de, por vezes, o contradizer. Passo depois para *Personal influence* (1955) e olho para as circunstâncias da sua escrita e receção. Como eu era criança quando o livro saiu, confio no impressionante volume que, em 2006, *The Annals of American Political and Social Science* dedicou à sua génese. Este volume inclui fortes críticas, e discuto muitas delas, incluindo as mais radicais. No entanto, há muitas razões pelas quais acredito que o livro *Personal influence* não é menos importante hoje do

que quando foi publicado. Também sugiro que, apesar da sua famosa contenda, os meus dois amigos por vezes concordaram entre si.

Palavras-chave

Personal influence, Media events, Elihu Katz, Todd Gitlin

This essay is dedicated to three friends I have lost in one year: Elihu Katz, Todd Gitlin, and Mário Mesquita. It would not have been conceived without Paddy Scannell and Philippe Raynaud, whose questions triggered a long process of remembering. It would not exist without Mário Mesquita, who invited me to write it but passed away while I was still writing. My thanks to all of them.

I. LOSING TWO FRIENDS

My friend Elihu Katz died of heart failure on December 31, 2021. My friend Todd Gitlin suffered a heart attack on the same day. He recovered but passed away from COVID-19 a few weeks later. I knew that Todd was Elihu's adversary: everybody in our field knows Todd's famous paper of 1978¹ on the "dominant paradigm." Elihu knew that Todd was my friend. Todd also knew that Elihu was my friend. Both Elihu and Todd were towering figures in our field, and I believe each was lucky to have the other as an adversary. That they left us almost simultaneously, almost together, almost hand in hand, makes me feel that I was right to have both as friends.

Todd knew that, in my opinion, the dominant paradigm was not the one that Elihu had illustrated in his work, but the paradigm that he had inherited from the Frankfurt school. The "two-step flow of communication" was a response to Adorno and Horkheimer, an attack on their view of US media as instruments for massive indoctrination; as softer replications of the role played by radio in the Nazification of Germany (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, 1947). Todd Gitlin's famous paper was a counterattack in which the "scientific" approach of *Personal influence* served as justification.

Todd and Elihu had very different life stories. Elihu, who saw himself as a social scientist, enjoyed a brilliant academic career, with frequent excursions outside academia. Todd, who saw himself as an activist, was a charismatic public figure, contenting himself with frequent incursions into the academic field. Todd did earn degrees in mathematics, political science, and sociology, but fundamentally he was a philosophically inspired poet with a Nietzschean view of scientists (people trained to get facts the way monkeys are trained to break nuts).

While Elihu Katz was the herald of the "two-step flow of communication"², he spent a large part of his career in the context of the first step, devoting considerable time to creating, managing, and working for media institutions (and being celebrated by them). He founded Israeli television and reorganized the BBC. No less paradoxically,

¹ Gitlin, T. (1978). Media sociology: The dominant paradigm. *Theory and Society*, 6(2), 205–253. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657009>

² Katz, E. (1957). The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on an hypothesis. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 21(1), 61–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2746790>

Todd Gitlin spent most of his life illustrating a social role that was best described by Elihu Katz. As an activist and a “public intellectual,” he was a living illustration of the second step: the influence leader *par excellence*.

What my friends taught me

Todd was exactly my age (only one week older). Elihu could have been my (young) father. Todd taught me not to avoid confrontation. He exemplified the type of courage you need to hold views that are unpopular. Elihu taught me, on the contrary, the art of adapting to the demands of institutions, of reconciling my needs and their exigencies. Elihu taught me the virtues of diplomacy.

When I started this paper, I meant to write about both my friends. Both were born in New York. Both went to Ivy league universities (Columbia, Harvard). Both had links with the Frankfurt School. Having each other as an adversary was an honor for each but almost the only thing their adult lives had in common: Todd and Elihu were separated by a huge historical gap. They belonged to two different eras. Elihu was a man of the fifties. Todd became a hero of the sixties (to which he devoted a number of books and documentaries). My two friends lived in different Americas. Offering a shared narrative would require a novelist of the caliber of Saul Bellow or Philip Roth. This is why this paper is mostly about my encounter with Elihu Katz.

II. BECOMING DAYAN & KATZ

My friendship with Elihu Katz started on a rainy summer day of August 1973. I was just out of Stanford and busy completing a PhD in Paris. I was visiting my relatives in Pennsylvania. My relatives told me they received a call from “a professor Elihu Katz who wants to see you.” I was startled. I believed Elihu Katz was not a person but a bibliographical item, or a statue at the entrance of a library. I wondered why such a monument would like to talk to me. The meeting took place at Penn. To my surprise, Elihu Katz was a rather young man with a duffel coat and a tongue-in-cheek sort of humor. To my second surprise, he was there to offer me a job. To my third surprise, I accepted the job without even knowing for sure where it would take place. California? East Coast? Jerusalem? I trusted the man in the duffel coat.

The man in the duffel coat was no sociological bulldozer, no lover of cumbersome systems. He was a charmer and a master of the witty comment; a light-weight boxer who dances around you, ready to deliver a smile and the joke that debunks. I found out later that he was also a talmudic scholar and a singer (whose beautiful tenor voice could have allowed him to earn his living). I also found out that as a child he had wished to run away with a circus and become its manager. I immediately liked Elihu because he was playful. To me, “the two-step flow of communication” sounded like a name for a dance³. I admired Elihu’s sharp, quick mind. Yet this paper is less about him as a person than about the intellectual history that brought us together.

³ It is in fact the name of a dance. In Spanish, it reads *el paso-doble de las comunicaciones*.

Sharing authorship

Personal influence was the result of the encounter between a graduate student named Elihu Katz and a senior social scientist named Paul Lazarsfeld. *Media events* was the result of a similar encounter between a PhD candidate and the same Elihu Katz, now about 50 and the undisputed star of media sociology. These two encounters ended in a similar way. Paul Lazarsfeld, who was the initiator of the research on *Personal influence*, acknowledged Elihu Katz' brilliant, synthetic formulation of the results and invited the young scholar to be the first author. Elihu Katz, who initiated *Media events*, also knew that writing a book with the most celebrated author in one's field was a difficult exercise. People would believe that the famous author had the book ready in his mind and that the junior partner was essentially in charge of adding footnotes. But it was not so. One day, Elihu asked me: "Are you ready to be first author?" I was ready, and I accepted. I thought it was fair and intend to explain why. It was fair but also generous. Elihu was doing for me with *Media events*⁴ what Paul Lazarsfeld had done for him with *Personal influence*. Both were willing to forget about their fame. Both ended up offering a world audience to their younger partner⁵.

A Frankfurt connection

My encounter with Elihu Katz was unexpected. Was it really astonishing? Elihu Katz' background and mine were quite different, yet not entirely so. Before starting a new cycle of studies in the USA, I had worked in the Center for Mass Communication Studies (CECMAS) in Paris, designed by the sociologist Georges Friedman to be the French equivalent of Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research. Of course I knew the famous story of Lazarsfeld threatening a young sociologist he found guilty of writing a film review. I did write film reviews, but this was no problem for Elihu. He had been a student of Löwenthal and had acquired the latter's interest in the sociology of fiction, an interest shared by my senior colleagues at CECMAS (Edgar Morin, Violette Morin) whose research on "Olympians" and stars was explicitly inspired by Löwenthal. The CECMAS was also the center where Roland Barthes (whose assistant I became in 1967) wrote his book on mythologies. Barthes was a disciple of Bertolt Brecht and intended to use semiotics the way Brecht used dramaturgy, as an instrument of dis-

⁴ Elihu offered a revisiting of particularly important events—such as Watergate, presidential debates, Kennedy's funeral, and the first man on the moon—and he provided a theoretical construct that connected our project to his earlier work. Following *Personal influence*, Elihu Katz wrote many books, but, like a red thread, the two-step flow was present in each. I did most of the ethnographic investigations (Korea, Sadat in Jerusalem, trips of the pope, royal events) and the analyses of all broadcasts. I also brought in perspectives that were typical of the French *zeitgeist*, which I discuss here. Until the book was finished and to Elihu's last days, we kept arguing with each other, challenging each other, provoking each other into exploring neglected avenues. Yet there came a moment when the book had to be finished, given a title, and signed.

⁵ Elihu initiated *Media events* by challenging me to comment on historical events for a group of journalists while these events were happening ("Could you show us what your 'semiotics' can do?"). Elihu was, I believe, impressed by my way of responding to the challenge, and we repeated this exercise a number of times about various events.

-alienation. Given Brecht's friendship with Walter Benjamin, Barthes was only one step removed from the Frankfurt school. Thus, seen in retrospect, my encounter with Elihu was predictable. We both were members of the Frankfurt School extended family.

The beginner and the star

For Robert Merton, the description of a scientific activity must account for five main features: (1) the individual motivation through which a scientist chooses a project; (2) the social setting in which the work is carried out; (3) the collective use made of findings; (4) the degree of autonomy that the scholar enjoys in his or her career; (5) the reference groups the work addresses (Robinson, 2006). When such a scientific activity involves collaborative work, I would suggest exploring an additional feature: the respective status of the involved partners.

When I met Elihu Katz, he was a master of the field, the celebrated co-author of *Personal influence*. I was still a student completing my PhD at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris. I had just written an essay in film theory that would later turn into an almost compulsory reading for film students. However, when I met Elihu Katz this essay was not yet published, and my dissertation was far from completed. Elihu was taking a bet⁶.

Because of our different statuses at the time, people often believe that Elihu was my teacher. He never was my teacher in any formal way, but I learned sociology with him the way one learns to speak a foreign language by listening to the locals in a foreign city. Elihu introduced me to some of his friends (Merton, Lazarsfeld, Shils, plus one who spoke French: Durkheim), and I entered conversations. To Elihu I was also a traveler from far away, a sort of Marco Polo returning from China with all sorts of stories to tell about the mores and fads of French intellectuals. Elihu was intrigued. What was I bringing?

Media events: a French book?

When he started looking at media events, Elihu Katz was certainly planning to look for yet another confirmation of the two-step model, but he remained open to all possibilities. I was completing a PhD focused on the construction of spectatorship in classical cinema. My work on spectatorship would help me conceptualize the collective role of the publics in media events. I had also been studying with Jean Rouch, who was a virtuoso at filming rituals while they were performed and, sometimes, at the very moment they were invented. My classes with Jean Rouch turned out to be an excellent initiation to the study of live broadcasting. But the essence of my inspiration came from debates in historiography⁷.

⁶ Elihu's invitation was not the only job offer I received. Erwin Goffman at Penn and René Girard at Buffalo also attempted to recruit me. Their offers were probably motivated by the fact I was a disciple of Roland Barthes.

⁷ I was reading essays such as Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the philosophy of history*, Hayden White's *Metahistory*, or Yosef Haim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor*.

I had been witness to the radical turn taken by the Annales School of History when some of its leaders decided to reconsider long years of hostility towards what had disdainfully been called “L’histoire événementielle.” The *Annals* pronounced the redemption of events. Of course the events now redeemed were not those that had been earlier ostracized. Events used to serve as historical explanations. They now were objects meant to be themselves explained; social constructions in need of being situated in history. Significantly, this renewed interest in events was not taking place in history alone. It was occurring in psychoanalysis, where it led to a renewed interest in trauma. It was also occurring in sociology, where Edgar Morin celebrated “the return of events” (Morin, 1972). The French *zeitgeist* was characterized by a convergent interest in events.

This interest extended to semiotics. Roland Barthes’ chair in semiotics at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) was defined as a chair in Sociology of Signs, Symbols, and Representations. At the time, Barthes took this sociological dimension quite seriously. Two of the classes I took with him were to be directly relevant to my work with Elihu. One—*Le discours de l’histoire*—dealt with the Semiotics of History. The other—*L’écriture de l’événement*—analyzed events in terms of an architecture of signs and gestures. Both were seminal essays. *Le discours de l’histoire* influenced Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (White, 1973). *L’écriture de l’événement* led to Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s *What is an event* (Wagner-Pacifici, 2017) and to my own work. Barthes’s “semiology” inspired a number of contemporary essays, dealing with the semiotics of classical painting (Marin, 1972); the semiotics of film (Metz, 1968; Dayan, 1977); the semiotics of architecture (Choay, 1965); and, last but not least, two of his major essays, *Le Système de la mode* (Barthes, 1967), on the semiotics of fashion, and *S/Z* (Barthes, 1970), on the semiotics of literature.

L’écriture de l’événement concerned a specific event—the urban riots of May ’68 in France—that had started as a student protest but kept escalating until President de Gaulle felt obliged to (briefly) exile himself from Paris. Beyond this specific situation, Barthes’ essay on May ’68 could be seen as the first draft of general semiotics of events. Barthes never completed this general theory. I was his assistant at the time and the idea of semiotics of events remained with me. I believed and still believe that such semiotics is crucial to the study of journalism. This idea accompanied me throughout the conception of *Media events* and later influenced my work on terrorism (Dayan, 2006).

The originality of *Media events*

Does all of this turn *Media events* into a French book? Not really. I would retrospectively summarize my and Elihu’s work by stressing four points. First comes the scope of the conducted study. At production level, we described not only the role of media in filming events and their unanimity in broadcasting them, but also the involvement of major societal institutions such as governments or national churches in conceiving events, organizing them, and negotiating their scripts. At the reception level, we tried to go beyond what the spectators of events thought or were capable of expressing and to focus on what these spectators actually did. Spectators of media events were participants in rituals of a new type: their attendance was also a *performance*.

Then comes the role of media events in redesigning the “center of societies.” Media events show societies that adapt themselves to changing circumstances by reformulating their “center.” Such reformulations could consist of replacing those individuals who, until then, had represented the center (Kennedy died, but the presidency survived). We were particularly interested in those events that were a matter of deliberate choice (like Sadat’s decision of going to Jerusalem). Such events involved a ritualized discarding of accepted dogmas (Poland is a communist country, Israel and the Arab world will forever be at war, or the two Koreas will never be reunited). In both cases what was being celebrated was the possibility of a change that could affect the heart of a society, without requiring violence. Democracy was proving its resilience by the smoothness of the transitions it allowed⁸.

My third point addresses the question of “imagination.” In his book *The twilight of common dreams*, Todd Gitlin analyzed convergent attempts at turning the United States into what I would call, paraphrasing Benedict Anderson’s phrase, a “des-imagined community” (Gitlin, 1995; Anderson, 1980). Media events were a matter of “reimagining communities.” Media events concerned societies that were capable of reimagining themselves.

My last point stresses the kinship between media events and the type of utterances that Austin defined as “performatives” (Austin, 1955). Based on the fact that any national narrative is an act of imagination sanctioned by a conventional decision, media events described re-imagining processes that were achieved through symbolic actions. Such actions were similar to Austin’s “speech acts.” Yet in the case of media events, they were not a matter of speech or statements. They took the form of political gestures. Our work on media events thus allowed us to extend Austin’s theory by highlighting the existence of gestural performatives.

We followed Austin’s warning that many attempts at performative action do fail, and not all statements that wish to be performative are “felicitous”. Thus, the gestures we called media events were “felicitous” only when they were validated by the public who collectively adopted the changes they introduced and endowed their authors with the right of pronouncing them. They were “infelicitous” when such adoption did not take place, condemning the event to remain an empty gesture, a sterile gesticulation⁹. Finally, media events allowed us to demonstrate the existence of a little-discussed sort of media effect: performative effects (Schudson, 1989).

Did *Media events* diverge from *Personal influence*?

Media events could be seen as a continuation of the many books Elihu Katz co-authored. Symbolic anthropology would play in it the role that social psychology played in *Personal influence* or the role that cultural semiotics played in *The export of meaning*. In my view, *Media events* often diverged from the paradigmatic thesis of *Personal influence*.

⁸ Media events used to be initiated by nation-states and by the center of societies. Today, they are rather initiated by activists, in the name of an ideology, and they have become mostly dis-sensual. These new media events nevertheless illustrate a “paradigm of imagination,” but what they help us imagine is the fragility, the vulnerability of democratic societies.

⁹ Bourdieu noted that Austin was not only a philosopher of language, but also a major anthropologist of ritual (Bourdieu, 1989).

The first divergence was also the most obvious. Media events had powerful effects. They had the power of activating, throughout their duration, an alternative model of society. The festive experience they offered to the public was in itself a major effect and one that could trigger further effects, such as transforming the way in which whole societies related to their past. Media events were simultaneously minimizing—if not altogether neutralizing—the role of influential leaders in the public. Their unavoidability precluded choice. (Think of the boat of British antiroyalists who sailed to France in order to escape the omnipresent royal wedding.) Should one then speak of a blatant contradiction between the thesis of *Personal influence* and the very powerful effects we were noticing in *Media events*? Not really¹⁰.

The notion that there existed a “subjunctive mode of culture” (Turner, 1969) offered a way of reconciling the thrust of *Personal influence* with what we were observing about certain events. Instead of contradicting each other, *Personal influence* and *Media events* were discussing different objects. One spoke of “structure.” The other spoke of “antistructure.” *Personal influence* characterized everyday-life media. The events we described had little to do with everyday life. They were invocations of the desirable or the possible. These events were thus exceptions that confirmed the rule.

Our reliance on “antistructure” could, of course, be denounced as a rhetorical device. It was not so. The existence of an anti-structural mode of media discourse ended up being one of our major findings, the one that allowed *Media events* to be read by Victor Turner as an essay in media anthropology. As I’ll show, Elihu Katz’ concern was not about strong or weak effects, but about the physiology of media influence. That media utterances could turn out to be either indicative or subjunctive was an essential contribution to such a physiology¹¹.

III. PERSONAL INFLUENCE IN HINDSIGHT

From the mechanics of domination to the physiology of influence

Since World War II, Media Studies have been dominated by two rival traditions. The Frankfurt School’s tradition was focused on the impact of messages produced

¹⁰ Such divergences might explain why a 45 minutes film on Elihu Katz produced by the Annenberg School and projected during the Elihu Katz’ memorial (ICA Paris Conference, 2022) never discussed *Media events*, hardly acknowledging its existence.

¹¹ Where did I go from there? My work on *Media events* triggered many changes in my concerns. Media events were extraordinarily powerful instruments of the display. They gave me the idea of systematically exploring other institutions of display, from journalism to festivals. I turned towards such authors as Erwin Goffman, who studies issues of “framing,” and Hannah Arendt, who explores the question of “appearing in public.” I also started to explore the notion of “visibility” and discuss phenomenological distinctions between the fact of “appearing” and the situation of being shown (J. L. Marion). Media events also took me from questions of textuality to questions of performance, from my earlier work on what Eco once described as the *Lector in fabula* to the study of actual publics. *Media events* fundamentally took me from issues of semantics to issues of pragmatics. My notion of “monstration acts” meant to discuss visibility in terms that were analogous to Austin’s speech acts.

by “cultural industries.” Such industries “enslaved people in more effective and subtle ways than earlier and cruder forms of domination” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). Enslavement was taken for granted. The empirical tradition challenged the Frankfurt School by proposing to measure what was meant by “domination.” But it did not simply amount to stating that media enjoy a limited power. It asked how power was exerted. *Personal influence* rejected the notion that what the media achieved was already a form of communication. It downgraded the powerful institutions that everybody had in mind when discussing the media to being simply a “first step.” The fact of broadcasting certain content was simply a preamble. The media were displaying a raw material destined to be used in the actual communication process. This process could be defined as the “second step”¹². Once broadcasted, that content would start a career through which individuals or informal groups would transmit the information they received to other individuals or groups (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Some members of the public would pick up significant bits of information and share them with other members who sought to be advised. By stressing the interaction between readers and potential readers, between spectators and potential spectators, this “second step” proposed a “physiology” of media influence. What came to the front was a neglected form of power: the power of small groups associating and collaboratively selecting the content of a mediatic offer¹³.

A criticized book

Todd Gitlin’s description of the “two-step flow” as the “dominant paradigm” (Gitlin, 1978) served as the climax of a long string of criticisms, some of which concerned the book itself, while many others saw *Personal influence* as an opportunity to discuss the emergence of media sociology and the very field of sociology. Were social sciences to be modelled on experimental sciences? Were they rather to be conceived as hermeneutical procedures? Were they compatible with the world of enterprise or meant to propose a critique of society? Were they to acknowledge their roots in political and moral philosophy or to repudiate these roots? Were media sociologists meant to be intellectuals? Were they rather to become specialized technicians?

¹² The two-step flow hypothesis was conceived by Paul Lazarsfeld. It was then commented upon by Robert Merton; C. Wright Mills conducted elaborate fieldwork in the small city of Decatur, Illinois, in order to confirm or infirm that hypothesis. The final results were offered to the public in the elegant synthesis written by Elihu Katz.

¹³ Elihu Katz spent his life exploring this physiology. While we were involved in the Media Events project, Elihu Katz was also working with Tamar Liebes on the international diffusion of American television serials. This allowed him to reappropriate from British cultural studies a theme he had himself initiated 30 years earlier. Cultural studies sociologists were discovering those readings inspired by the reception of television programs were not as docile—or, in their terms, as “dominant”—as expected. They were generally “negotiated,” that is, capable of partly resisting domination (Morley, 1980). British cultural studies were thus confirming what Katz had always claimed: there existed a relative autonomy of readers in constructing the meaning of texts. The *Export of meaning* (Katz & Liebes, 1990) gave a fuller meaning to the word “negotiated.” By describing an interactive construction of meaning, Elihu Katz was still exploring the physiology of influence.

Lazarsfeld was at the center of many of these questions. Beyond critiques directed at his imperious style, he was accused of introducing a type of research that was modelled on industrial entrepreneurship. *Personal influence* illustrated an almost “tailored” style of sociology. A large contingent of researchers was analyzing vast masses of data, and a systematic division of labor organized research into conception (Lazarsfeld), execution (C. Wright Mills), and synthesis (Elihu Katz). Lazarsfeld chose the population to be interviewed. C. Wright Mills supervised the beehive of associates conducting the interviews. Elihu Katz interpreted the results (after many other graduate students had failed to do so). All this was meant to produce large amounts of verifiable data. To deal with those masses of data, the use of statistics became a central asset, a centrality that was challenged by significant figures of the time. Pitirim Sorokin blamed Lazarsfeld for unleashing an “epidemic of quantophobia.” Hans Speier noted that, while “certain analytical methods were refined, the substantial questions that were being asked, became shallower” (Sorokin & Speier quoted in Summers, 2006). This feeling of “shallowness”¹⁴ was shared by Lazarsfeld’s former partner C. Wright Mills. For him, American sociology was in the grip of two evils. These evils were “grand theory” (illustrated in the work of Talcott Parsons) and “abstracted empiricism” (exemplified by the findings of Paul Lazarsfeld). No matter how different these two dangers, they ensure, wrote C. Wright Mills, that “we do not learn too much about man and society, the first by formal and cloudy obscurantism; the second by formal and empty ingenuity” (Wright Mills, 1959). The personal influence was a demonstration of “formal ingenuity.” But was it really empty? Mills’ elegant formula could have been applied as well to many major theories of the same period, all of which shared a belief in measurable results and aspired to an almost mathematical simplicity. Think, for example, of Festinger’s “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger, 1957)¹⁵.

Lazarsfeld, who had been trained as an applied mathematician, insisted on the importance of “scientific” methodologies. Gitlin, who had been admitted to Harvard as a mathematics prodigy, denounced this “scientificity” as a pretense. Criticisms that concerned the book itself included challenges to the nature of the offered data. Peter Simonson’s 2006 account of the dramatic episode in which C. Wright Mills was fired from the Decatur team after having been cajoled into joining suggests that Mills was fired when he insisted on reporting the fieldwork he had supervised in his style (Simonson, 2006). Expelling the most direct witness of the Decatur study amounted to a form of censorship. Were the investigation results indisputable? When Lazarsfeld asked specific questions, was he also requiring specific answers? Feminist critics noted that the

¹⁴ Elihu Katz’s style was probably responsible for some of these ambiguities. *Personal influence* made him famous for his talent at constructing syntheses that elegantly brought together heterogeneous facts or contradictory views. Elihu was not only an expert at conciliation but a master of “constructive ambiguity.” While such an ambiguity made it easier to reach broad conclusions, it often had to be paid in terms of precision. I remember that when we wrote *Media events* I kept objecting to using the word “events” to designate occasions that were anticipated and staged. To me, such occasions were ceremonial occasions, ritual dramaturgy, or “pseudo-events,” but not events. Yet I had to acknowledge the heuristic efficacy of Elihu’s “constructive ambiguity.” Pseudo-events could turn into actual events if collectively validated. Actual events could burst in the middle of ceremonies and absorb such ceremonies. These were fluctuating realities.

¹⁵ Cognitive dissonance led to the “confirmation bias” (according to which we tend to dismiss any information that does not confirm what we already believe).

interviews conducted in Decatur and attributed to the “people” of Decatur were in fact interviews of the women of Decatur. Was this an irrelevant detail? Critics of consumerism stressed that the “choices” made by the “people” of Decatur consisted essentially in deciding what to buy. Was the rationale that governed shopping also relevant to political decisions? Yes, replied Michael Schudson, arguing that similar mechanisms could be at play in both cases (Schudson, 2006). No, said Todd Gitlin (Gitlin, 1978).

Todd Gitlin had little interest in the “abstracted empiricism” of a “science” of communications. Gitlin saw media sociology as a privileged point from which to observe the problems of society and to assess the actual visibility given to these problems: “In a specialized world, writing about the media and popular culture gave me a way of slicing into a whole tangle of political, cultural, social and intellectual questions.” As a disciple of Horkheimer (and Adorno), Todd Gitlin thought that media studies had the choice of being either “administrative” (serving the interests of major companies and their marketing departments) or “critical” (questioning the role of media and cultural industries in organizing new forms of alienation). The two-step flow was not only based on specialized research; it could also serve as a scientific alibi to the *status quo*. It implicitly claimed there was no need for a critical theory “since the media only had very limited effects, and since their power was the power of their audiences” (Gitlin, 1978). Gitlin’s critique was a direct continuation of the conflict between Lazarsfeld and the Frankfurt school exiles, of the war between social science and political philosophy. This war seems to have been won. The Lazarsfeld and Katz perspective is now central. But is this just an academic victory or is such a victory much more than institutional?

IV. VINDICATING PERSONAL INFLUENCE

When second step turns into a medium

In *Dialektik der aufklärung*, Adorno (1974) noted that: “The evolution from telephone to radio introduced a clear distinction between roles. Telephone owners were still free of playing the part of subjects. Radio users, on the contrary, were transformed into pure listeners and submitted to the authority of programs developed by interchangeable stations. No system of answering was available.” A system of answering was available. It was the system that Lazarsfeld and Katz had described as the second step of the communication flow. Listeners could regain the status of subjects by talking to each other about what they had heard. But they did so outside media. When the informal social networks through which such exchanges took place transferred themselves to the internet, a new medium was born.

For Eliseo Veron, a medium is born from the encounter between a given technology and communicative practices that shape the utilization of that technology. Sometimes these practices exist, but, lacking adequate technology, they never turn into media. Sometimes technologies exist, but, triggering no interest, they remain unused and dormant. Sometimes, however, the two meet. This is what happened with social media. In a way, they became a materialization of the second step. They were a second step equipped with their technical infrastructures.

Todd Gitlin wrote in 1978 that the dominant paradigm was able to make the media themselves look like “variables.” Meaning to be sarcastic, he turns out to have been prophetic. When *Personal Influence* was written, speaking of “the media” meant speaking of radio. For the 50 following years, speaking of the media essentially amounted to speaking of television. Today, speaking of media might become synonymous with speaking of “social media”. While dominant media (press, radio, television) kept replacing each other, the two-step theory maintained its relevance. But in the case of social media, it did much more: the second step determined their physiology as agents of interpersonal diffusion.

Cell phones function both as receivers of messages, emitters of messages, and relays of messages. Any audience member equipped with a cell phone can instantly turn himself or herself into a recording studio and a broadcasting agency, thus becoming an “influence leader” or, to use a constantly enlarged professional jargon, an “influencer.” Decades before the emergence of social media, one of the research traditions that extended the two-step flow was already mapping the process through which targets of influential messages were switching roles, becoming themselves transmitters of what had been transmitted to them. This tradition—“diffusion research”—was inspired by epidemiology, a model whose presence is blatant in social media, where the success of a message is measured by its capacity to “go viral.”

Social media & the danger of conviction ghettos

The emergence of social media was short-circuiting established centers and the control exerted by these centers, and social media was often hailed as a form of democratization (Dayan, 2009). Such short-circuiting was far from being only beneficial. By directly connecting the periphery it was the very notion of a “center” as formulated by Edward Shils that the social media were challenging. Skipping the “center” thus meant skipping all the forms of “otherness” to which this center gave access. It meant remaining in exclusive contact with those whose views one shared. As put by economist Daniel Cohen, “social media guide you towards communities that are modelled on sects, isolated from each other, and uninterested in each other; each of them unanimous in its detestation of different ideas” (Cohen, 2022). As a former Los Angeles resident, the avoidance of otherness by social media seems to me to replicate a momentous decision in the city’s history: the deliberate destruction of the street-car network of greater Los Angeles. Completed by 1961, this destruction made room for the present system of highways, a system that erases geographic continuities by allowing members of any given community to maintain selective contact with members of similar groups and to skip all exits that lead into areas populated by communities felt as “other.” The materialization of the second step seems to have followed the same principle by creating a juxtaposition of secessionist islands.

In other terms, instead of freeing peripheries from the control exerted by “centers,” the new media might have been transforming a common public sphere into a galaxy of homogeneous conviction ghettos, ghettos whose members are blind and deaf to each other. Speaking of such a rampant dismemberment, Daniel Cohen reminds us that “the right” and “the left” used to be aggregations of heterogeneous political op-

tions. But the conceptual instruments that are used to aggregate political opinions and interests, including not only the “right” and the “left” but also parties and unions, have been destroyed (Cohen, 2022). Jeopardizing the unity of a society, this crisis of aggregation feels like an invitation to anomy.

Such an evolution was predicted by Todd Gitlin in his beautiful *Twilight of common dreams* (1995). But it was similarly anticipated and feared by Elihu Katz, who put it at the heart of the special issue of the *Annals* he edited with Paddy Scannell (*The end of television*, 2009). For once, my two friends agreed with each other. They also agreed with me when I expressed a similar fear by pointing out that social media were dissociating two practices that had until then been complementary of each other: showing something was no longer meant to be a way of sharing, except with other members of the same “conviction ghetto” (Dayan, 2009). Showing as information had turned into showing as confirmation.

V. PERSONAL INFLUENCE: A JEWISH STORY?

As a conclusion, I would like to discuss a disconcerting reading of *Personal influence*. In an essay published in 2006, John Durham Peters, a communications scholar who is also a philosopher and theologian, suggests that the very principle of the two-step flow comes from the tradition of rabbinical Judaism, a tradition in which the meaning of sacred texts is constructed by the commentaries they have provoked. The two-step flow in a way illustrates the rabbinic principle that a text without a commentary is meaningless (Peters, 2006). But John Peters also suggests that *Personal influence* might have bent facts to make them compatible with the two-step flow hypothesis. According to this reading, Katz and Lazarsfeld’s book would almost be a work of imagination. Was social psychology a midwife for fiction¹⁶?

We know that Decatur, Illinois, had been selected with pedantic care as one of the most typical small towns in America. If it functioned like a beehive of communicative activities, the importance of the second step in the flow of communications would be demonstrated. But, according to Peters, the interactions described in *Personal influence* did not match their Midwestern context. Rather than a literal account, *Personal influence* offered a retouched portrait of Decatur (Peters, 2006). The lively, disorderly small town that emerged from reading *Personal influence* was rather emblematic of the Jewish villages portrayed by Shalom Aleikhem or Isaac Bashevis Singer. The forms of sociability the book displayed were typical of Jews and, besides Jews, of all those dispersed groups that historian Yuri Slezkine described as “Mercurian” (Slezkine, 2004). *Personal Influence* was therefore an ethnographic utopia, an assimilationist fable. Katz and Lazarsfeld were the academic equivalents of those Jewish moguls who turned Hollywood into an “empire of their own” (Gabler, 1988). Like such moguls, they

¹⁶ This “scientific version” of “social psychology” was quite distinct from the one offered by Freud’s writings on society. Serge Moscovici tried to reconcile the two. Interestingly the same Serge Moscovici was submitted by Bourdieu to an attack that replicated about thirty years later Wright Mills’ attack on Lazarsfeld. For Bourdieu, social psychology was neither a science nor a “bona fide” form of sociology.

were in the business of carving a place for Jews in American society by redesigning this society. And like these moguls, they produced fiction that enjoyed a performative dimension. To the rest of the world, and Americans themselves, such fiction became America—a carnival, a replica of the first American talking movie in which the heir of a “Rabinowitz” family (Al Jolson) became a famous jazz singer by pretending to be a black man (*The jazz singer*, 1927). In this case, the fiction became social science. The protestants of Decatur, Illinois, were in fact Jews in disguise. Their impersonating act no longer concerned a black minority, but the white majority. “Vanilla-town” Decatur became a Polish “shtetl.”

One could denounce this metamorphosis as a forgery or commend it as a well-meaning utopia. Peters chose the second option. But he kept playing with the first. He discussed at length the “bowdlerization” of the quote that served as an *incipit* to *Personal influence*, a sentence in which John Stuart Mill spoke of the influence exerted by spontaneous everyday conversations: “Masses do not derive their opinions from state or church dignitaries, from official leaders, or books; their thoughts are provided to them by people who are very much like them; people who talk to them or in their name in the instant.” This sentence sounded like an anticipation of the two-step flow, but Peters noted that two words were missing. Stuart Mill spoke of the influence exerted by “people who talk to them or in their name in the instant”—and he added, “*through newspapers* [emphasis added].” Lifting these two words allowed the quote to signify almost the contrary of what John Stuart Mill meant. Was such a misquoting of Mill’s sentence to serve as an emblem of an equally “bowdlerized” Decatur?

This would be a serious accusation. But Peters’ paper is not simply denunciatory. Through a mix of essentialization (the “Mercurians”) and folklore (Sholem Aleikhem) this paper feels like the polite denunciation of a fraud; a form of retrospective whistleblowing. Yet there is a second dimension, an ion. The second dimension is an intellectual exploration aimed at reconstituting the genealogy of an idea. Such an exploration is not only legitimate but fascinating. I reject the first dimension and endorse the second, seeing no reason why the cultural background of the authors should be absent from their work.

I do not agree with the examples John Peters picked to illustrate the Jewishness of *Personal influence*. My first objection is: why Jewish shtetls? Why assume that showing the inhabitants of Decatur debating and arguing should be at best a fiction, and at worst a lie? And why should the process depicted in *Personal influence* occur in certain groups only? Many small communities around the world display similarly interactive styles. I do not see why animated, bustling small towns should not be found in African villages, in the Italy of neo-realism; in the Ireland of John Ford or in the French cafés where the early newspapers were read and discussed at the time of the emergence of Habermas’ “bourgeois public sphere”. Why should American protestants of the forties remain aloof and silent? When John Peters sees *Personal influence* as a reimagining of Decatur, isn’t he unfolding another imaginary landscape? Isn’t he imagining a Decatur of John Waynes and Clint Eastwoods? A Decatur of silent types? Is there a point in replacing Decatur, the shtetl, with Decatur, the frontier town?

My second objection concerns the affinities suggested between the two-step flow and the centrality of the rabbinical tradition in Judaism. Peters stresses the role

of talmudic discussion in establishing the meaning of sacred texts. These sacred texts, as he correctly notes, are only the first step in a flow in which the rabbinical tradition of exegesis, discussion, and debate, represents the second and indispensable step (Peters, 2006). I would note, however, that rabbinical discussions have little in common with the exchanges that constitute the second and decisive step of media influence. On the media side, we find spontaneous interactions and conversations. On the rabbinic side, we find erudite commentaries obeying strict criteria of compatibility with canonic interpretations. In other words, while the second step in the media flow is characterized by spontaneity, rabbinic commentaries are exercises in obedience. They may be clever, but they certainly are not free. Comparison with rabbinical Judaism further overlooks the discrepancy between this tradition and the effervescent model of the shtetl. How could these two antithetic models both serve as an inspiration to the same book?

I would suggest other genealogic routes. These routes would take us to certain contingent, yet significant, situations that shaped the experience of both authors. Among these situations are the transformations that induced the Jews of Eastern Europe, and particularly those who lived in Poland, to progressively adopt, throughout the 19th century, perspectives that were common among Jews of Germany and Western Europe. Paul Lazarsfeld came from a Viennese family. Elihu Katz came from a Polish family. Neither could ignore the influence exerted by certain individuals who were familiar with both versions of European Judaism and the process through which a large proportion of East European Jewry came to endorse an “enlightenment” worldview. Those who incited these transformations were blueprints for opinion leaders.

A second potential subtext concerns those inherited practices which led Bourdieu to adopt the notion of “habitus”. Among such practices was the Jewish ownership of retail stores, so common in mid-century America. David Riesman (1950) refers to these practices when he offers the gist of the two-step flow in a lapidary formulation: “Mass media were the wholesalers. The peer groups were the retailers of communication industries.” Riesman meant to offer a summary of *Personal influence*. He also offered a glimpse at the book’s genealogy.

In his famous book *Portrait of the Jew*, Albert Memmi (1962) noted that the global notion of Jewishness encompassed very different realities. Among such realities were “Judaism” as a scholarly, authoritarian doctrine and “Judeity” as the contingent, historically bound, lived-in world of Jews. While some of the examples offered by John Peters pointed to Judaism, those I have just proposed exclusively deal with Judeity. The picture I offered is therefore incomplete. I should correct it. For example, both aspects of Jewishness were present throughout the career of Elihu Katz, from the facetious *Voyage of the Bagel* (in which he parodied Charles Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle*), until his last (and unpublished) book, written with Menahem Blondheim, on the Jewish Carnival of Purim and Communication in the *Book of Esther*.

Elihu was particularly proud of his *Voyage of the Bagel*, a spoof which perfectly illustrated the carnival dimension that John Peters attributed to *Personal influence*. Rather than American movie moguls, Elihu consciously mimicked Groucho Marx as an example of Judeity. On the other hand, he made no mystery of his knowledge of Judaism. Peters’ notion of *Personal influence* as a Jewish story would have been much less arbitrary if, instead of *Personal influence*, he had discussed *Media events*,

which Katz repeatedly described as the “high holidays of mass communications.” This formulation referred to the universal theme of antistructure. Yet the phrase “high holidays” is the name of a sequence of Jewish festivals (Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur) during which normal time is suspended to allow for another temporality to emerge, connecting life on Earth to an evocation of the last judgment. “High holidays” spoke of antistructure but with a Jewish accent.

Let me conclude this exploration by stressing that *Media events* was more than a book about democratic resilience. We all know of Pandora’s box and the evils it contained, evils that were ready to flow over the Earth, as soon as one opened the box. The Lurianic Kabbalah offers an interesting inversion of this myth. It speaks of vases filled with the light of divine presence. When such vases are broken, and unless one manages to repair them, this light is lost. Repairing the broken vases thus means “repairing the world.”

I retrospectively note that practically all the events Elihu and I ended up studying were attempts at putting together societies at risk of dismemberment; attempts at “repairing the vases”; attempts at repairing the world. I was not aware of this subtext when working on *Media events*. I discovered it by responding to John Peters. The idea of a television that, once in a while, repairs might explain the success of our book.

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