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On the influence of '*Personal Influence*' on the study of audiences

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**Politics, Social Networks, and the History of Mass Communications Research:
Re-Reading Personal Influence (2006)**

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Abstract

This article looks back at the publication of Katz and Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence* in order to bring into focus the multi-stranded history of discussion and debate over the mass media audience during the twentieth century. By contrast with the heroic narrative, constructed retrospectively, that prioritises cultural studies' approaches to audiences, it is suggested that this rich and interdisciplinary history offers many fruitful ways forward as the agenda shifts from mass media to new media audiences. Although audience research has long been characterised by struggles between critical and administrative schools of communication, and between opposed perspectives on the relation of the individual to society, the work of Katz and Lazarsfeld and subsequent work by Katz and his collaborators, suggests possibilities for convergence, or at least productive dialogue, across hitherto polarised perspectives as researchers collectively seek to understand how, in their everyday lives, people can, and could, engage with media so as to further democratic participation in the public sphere.

Author bio

Sonia Livingstone is a Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has published widely on the subject of media audiences and, more recently, on children, young people and the internet. Her books include *Making Sense of Television* (Routledge, 1998, 2nd ed.), *Talk on Television* (with Peter Lunt; Routledge, 1994), *Young People and New Media* (Sage, 2002), *Audiences and Publics* (edited, Intellect, 2005), and *The Handbook of New Media* (edited, with Leah Lievrouw, Sage, 2006).

Keywords

Personal Influence, Elihu Katz, audience research, audiences and publics, new media users, critical and administrative communication research, individual and society

Introduction

When audience research took centre stage in media and communication theory in the 1980s, with the development of audience reception studies, there emerged two ways of constructing the back story. One located the origins in British cultural studies and tells a story of gradual recognition of the critical distance, even resistance, of a heterogeneous public to the ideological power of a hegemonic or culturally imperialist mass media (Morley, 1992: 208; Nightingale, 1996). The other tells of the gradual convergence of several theoretical traditions, critical and administrative, in a productive exploration of the diverse ways in which people respond actively, even creatively, to the mass media (K. J. Jensen & Rosengren, 1990; T. Lindlof, 1991; Livingstone, 1998c). Although the latter account encompasses the former, it is the former that has become canonical, telling a linear, heroic narrative of intellectual progress in freeing the audience from the tyranny of mass ideology and so relocating audiences, plural, in relation to the social and cultural contexts where meanings are, instead, primarily reproduced in daily life. As an account, it is effective, providing a rallying call for the study of audiences, a call whose energy is only now beginning to dissipate. But it is limited in crucial ways.

First, as a history it is misleading, for it writes out of the picture the other valuable strands of argument and empirical research that have, over the decades, illuminated our understanding of people as audiences. Particularly, as I shall argue here, it re-polarizes a debate which significant attempts have been made to transcend, that between critical and administrative approaches to the study of communication (Levy & Gurevitch, 1994). Second, it no longer works, for as we move from an era dominated by mass media, and hence a mass audience, to a newly diversified, individualized, and globalized media and information environment, it is the many other traditions of audience research that are proving more creative, constructive and, indeed, critical, in rethinking people's relation to media, while the cultural studies approach is struggling to find the path ahead, many even leaving the domain of audiences analysis (Livingstone, 2003).

Far from unique, this end-of-the-century struggle over how to conceptualize and study the extent to which people's relation to the media is primarily one of hegemonic influence, has strong echoes with an earlier struggle in the middle of the last century, one that was formative in framing the study of the television audience thereafter. By going back to the publication of *Personal Influence*, and even earlier, we can reconstruct a longer history of debate, discussion and disagreement between diverse approaches to the study of media and communication than is retold in the heroic narrative of cultural studies approaches to audiences, in which any attempt to look earlier than the Birmingham Centre of Cultural Studies tends to return simply to Frankfurt and the emergence of critical theory. Important as these bodies of work are, undoubtedly, they represent only one side of the debate over, broadly, liberal versus critical accounts of the autonomy of the individual (or, conversely, over the power of social institutions in influencing behavior). To progress the debate, both sides must be represented, and represented fairly. To see the study of audiences as simply pulled between cultural studies versus uses and gratifications, or media imperialism versus autonomous viewers, or even active versus passive viewers, is a simplification that, while it may do rhetorical work for some in establishing intellectual narratives of progress, writes out much of the richness, the complexity, and the insights of diverse audience researchers working over many decades in many countries around the world.

With the benefit of hindsight, I will look back to the publication of *Personal Influence* in order to draw out these debates, some of which proved strongly influential in shaping the

subsequent study of audiences, in order to show that, far from being a marginal subfield, the study of audiences represents a crucial site in which to analyze critically how political and economic power is played out in people's everyday lives. As Martin Allor (1988: 217) observes, 'the concept of audience is ... the underpinning prop for the analysis of the social impact of mass communication in general'. For *Personal Influence* was not just about 'the part played by people in the flow of mass communications' but was also, more significantly, about the part played by people – acting as individuals, in peer or community groups, and through institutions - in the construction and reconstruction of meanings in society. This should raise critical questions about power, interest and inequalities, potentially integrating and so transcending rather than re-polarizing the many conceptual oppositions – theoretical versus empirical or critical versus administrative or cultural versus economic – that have, sometimes unhelpfully, framed the study of media and communication.

I shall take Elihu Katz' own career as my narrative device in this article, firstly because his career exactly spans the polarized story of audiences that I wish to trace here, with the publication of a series of influential books eloquently punctuating and so marking, the twists and turns in audience research. And secondly because he has been a vocal commentator on these twists and turns, consistently calling for the productive convergence of multiple traditions of study² and so, often implicitly, a quiet critic of attempts to construct linear histories that write out intellectual diversity and debate (Katz, Peters, Liebes, & Orloff, 2003).³

Personal Influence: setting a social and democratic framework for the study of audiences⁴

In *Personal Influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communication*, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) significantly amend Harold Lasswell's (1948) classic question for mass communication research, 'who says what to whom with what content on what channel?', by demonstrating that the supposedly direct flow of mass media influence is mediated by pre-existing patterns of interpersonal communication in local communities. The innovative concept of the two-step flow challenged the popularity of the direct effects model as well as the separate study of mass and interpersonal communication, and it undermined the image of the viewer and listener as part of a mindless, homogeneous mass. Since this was the heyday of the 'minimal effects' approach, *Personal Influence* is often regarded, simplistically, as yet another nail in the coffin of the 'hypodermic needle' model of media research (- a model often referred to but rarely referenced because it was rarely advocated in so naïve a formulation; cf. Pooley, this volume).

But the agenda for this book was broader and more subtle.⁵ It showed that opinion leaders (see Lazarsfeld & Gaudet, 1944) seek out mass media messages relevant to their expertise and disseminate these through vertical or horizontal flows in their local community, especially during periods of uncertainty, resulting in a selective transmission process (which resists or facilitates social change) mediated by interpersonal relations in primary groups (see also Katz, 1957). Much of the book is concerned with these group processes as they operate in local contexts.⁶ Hence, sidestepping the more usual production-text-audience framework of mass communication research, *Personal Influence*, like much of Katz's subsequent work, examines various permutations of the relations among three different domains: media (primarily institutional contexts, though also texts), public opinion (and its role in democratic processes), and conversation (as embedded in interpersonal or peer networks). So, *Personal Influence* conceives of the active audience as firmly located in local groups and communities;

in *The Uses of Mass Communications* (Blumler & Katz, 1974), an active viewer is conceptualized primarily in terms of the individual needs that motivate selective exposure; the viewers in *The Export of Meaning* (Liebes & Katz, 1990) are engaged in divergent reception according to their cultural backgrounds; and in *Media Events* (Dayan & Katz, 1992), the viewer is participating in domestic conversation as part of the new global cultural sphere.

To develop this broader focus, integrating media audiences into the democratic project of the public sphere, Katz, like his teachers Merton and Lazarsfeld before him, has followed the social theorist, Tarde, who argued for the rationality of public opinion and who opposed the claimed mindlessness of the masses, as 'the social theorist of diffusion *par excellence*' (Katz et al, 1966:156). Seeing Tarde as the originator of the active/passive voter/viewer debate, Katz identifies similarities between Lazarsfeld's proposal of the two-step flow (Lazarsfeld & Gaudet, 1944) and Tarde's social psychological essay of 1898, 'La conversation' (Katz, 1992). And he adds, with an eye to the revisions of the two-step flow developed in response to Todd Gitlin's well-known critique (1978) of the theory's functionalist approach: 'ironically, Tarde's hypothesis anticipates the *revision* that the two-step hypothesis has undergone (and is still undergoing), in its current emphasis on the flow of influence not the flow of information; on the group as a unit of analysis, not the individual; and on the mutuality of conversation, not the relay from leaders' (p.81).

Within this framework, everyday talk is central – people talk about the media, their talk is mediated, and they talk in ordinary, social contexts. Processes of influence are multiple and intersecting, and questions of effect are repositioned, so that effects do not occur at the tail end of a linear process of media influence, but they fan outwards from the individual to society and vice versa.⁷ Instead of asking, what effect do the media have on the people, Katz surely posed the counter question – what do the people do with the media – for rhetorical purposes. His real intention was to clear a space to ask, instead, what is the effect (on individuals, on society, on democracy, and on the media) of people sharing, or diverging from, a common conversation? And, what does it matter if the terms or topics of the conversation come from the mediated or face-to-face experience, from local social groups or even other parts of the world?⁸

In *Media Events*, written with Daniel Dayan in 1990, Katz tried to show what a more contextualized notion of effects or media power would look like, using an anthropological perspective that emphasizes ceremony, ritual and community, integrated with an account of the social and institutional arrangements that link media and audience. Dayan and Katz (1992) use the phenomenon of media events – the live broadcasting of 'historic' events such as the Olympic Games, Kennedy's funeral, the British royal wedding - to demonstrate the inextricable interconnections between everyday conversations, media processes and public opinion. Without requiring citizens to leave their homes (i.e. while 'not being there'), the celebration of such 'media events' allows for national or even global participation in a potentially transformative ritual whose form and meanings must be negotiated among institutions, broadcasters, public relations experts, technicians, fans, and ordinary readers and viewers at home.

Media Events also illustrates the potential for convergence across disciplines, itself a key concern of *Personal Influence*, by locating questions of active viewing in both global and local (as well as national) contexts. As the primary group is, increasingly, constituted through an imagined rather than a face-to-face community, and as the media become inextricably embedded in everyday life, this kind of multifaceted analysis may be a more sophisticated way, if not the only way, of addressing the question of influence or effects. For Dayan and Katz, media events

illuminate both the opportunities and dangers of a media-dominated democracy. They can create a national or even international sense of occasion, providing liminal moments in which a society may reflect upon, idealize, and at the same time, authenticate a vision of itself for itself. Yet, if these liminal moments substitute for political participation and political change, then it is their potentially reactionary, manipulative or narcotizing effects, rather than their potentially progressive, educational or democratic effects, that should be at the forefront of our concern. Indeed, Dayan and Katz claim, though perhaps do not always demonstrate, a wide range of effects for media events, far wider than anticipated in *Personal Influence*, including effects on participants and on institutions, at the time of the event and subsequently, including the ways in which live broadcasting confers legitimacy and charisma on the 'celebrities' involved, the interruption of everyday routines which casts viewers into roles proposed by the script of the ceremony, effects on the climate of opinion by encouraging or inhibiting the expression of certain beliefs, changes to the organization of politics and political campaigning and instances of direct political or social change resulting from a media event.⁹

Exerting personal influence towards convergence

These complexities that we grapple with today, as society becomes more globalized, and as the media become more diversified, have long roots in the history of the field. To figure out how today's debates over audiences can move forward, it is worth recognizing how they emerged and developed, so as to identify the key arguments that continue to underlie our understanding of mediated power in everyday life. Two debates are central, and both can be traced back to *Personal Influence* and the intellectual climate of that period. They concern, essentially, the politics of research and the politics of the researched; or, as they have more usually been characterized, the debate between administrative and critical schools of communication, and the debate over the relation between the individual and society.

The politics of research – administrative and critical approaches to mass communication

Fifty years ago saw significant optimism about both social science and the mass media as two forces which, if used appropriately, could further the project of the enlightenment, educating the public as rational, informed citizens equipped to participate in a democratic society. For Paul Lazarsfeld, Director of the Princeton Office of Radio Research (later the Columbia Bureau of Applied Social Research), the task was to develop the study of mass communications in this direction, using empirical methods to combine social psychology and sociology in order to understand what broadcasting means (and could mean) in the lives of its listeners and viewers. But determining how to further the project of the enlightenment was, and is, no easy matter.

Max Horkheimer's (1972) essay on traditional and critical theory, published in 1937, set out the epistemological and political framework for the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. At the same time, Lazarsfeld (1941: 8) had specified the parameters of administrative (or positivist) research on mass communications as research which 'is carried through in the service of some kind of administrative agency of public or private character'.¹⁰ He also attempted 'to explain the "critical approach" sympathetically to an American audience' (p.325), arguing that critical research could contribute challenging problems, new concepts, useful interpretations and new data and suggesting that it is the task of administrative research to translate these into empirical studies - a task in which he later saw himself as having failed (Jay, 1973; Lazarsfeld,

1969).

Interestingly, Theodor Adorno (1969) had also advocated a link between critical ideas and empirical research, noting 'one of the most important justifications for empirical research - that virtually all findings can be explained theoretically once they are in hand, but not conversely' (p.364). Yet he clearly found Lazarsfeld's approach frustrating 'I considered it to be my fitting and objectively proffered assignment to *interpret* phenomena - not to ascertain, sift, and classify facts and make them available as information' (p.339), particularly as the Rockefeller Foundation had, as he saw it, ruled out the analysis of 'the system itself, its cultural and sociological consequences and its social and economic presuppositions' (p.343) when funding the Princeton radio project.

Arguably, then, these early attempts at convergence were not successful (although see Simonson & Weimann, 2003). Consequently, the same distinction was drawn and maintained in the study of audiences: critical researchers 'construe audience members as embodying larger social and political structures ... [while administrative researchers] embrace the liberal-pluralist ideal of democratic life ... [which regards individuals as] potential sites of creativity, novelty, independence, and autonomy' (Swanson, 1992, p.322). Although Katz was briefly connected to the Frankfurt School tradition, having written his master's thesis in 1950 supervised by Leo Lowenthal¹¹ at Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research, *Personal Influence* was the first in a series of broadly administrative books (for example, see Coleman, Katz, & Menzel, 1966; Crain, Katz, & Rosenthal, 1969). Yet, he inherited Lazarsfeld's interest in the idea of integrating critical and administrative schools of mass communication.

Katz wrote his first bridge-building article in 1959 when mass communications was just being formed as a discipline, and its arguments for convergence between social science and the humanities reads today with a strikingly modern feel (Katz, 1959).¹² Later, in exploring the idea of the active audience as an opportunity for integrating contrasting approaches, Katz argued that 'activity inheres in the creative translation of media messages by individuals in the process of perceiving and attributing meanings' (Katz, 1979: 75). Blumler, Katz and Gurevitch (1985) saw this creative process of meaning negotiation as a route 'to build the bridge we have been hoping might arise between gratifications studies and cultural studies' (Katz, 1979: 75). The attempt continued in *The Export of Meaning*, written with Tamar Liebes, for in studying audience reception of *Dallas* (Liebes & Katz, 1990), Katz took uses and gratifications in the direction of literary and humanistic approaches to texts (though he was less successful in taking uses and gratifications theory with him, Elliott, 1974).¹³

Although, as Hanno Hardt notes skeptically, 'there is no history of a systematic acknowledgement of Marxist scholarship by traditional communications research in the United States' (1992: 236), Katz adds hopefully, 'some of us are still trying' (1987: S30). Some may argue that the separation of administrative and critical mass communications research has been to the advantage of both schools, for each developed its own strengths. However, recently many in audience research have declared this a stale, even a false, dichotomy, to be transcended rather than perpetuated (Levy & Gurevitch, 1994; Schroder, Drotner, Kline, & Murray, 2003). Moreover, it is not in practice an easy distinction to sustain. Katz points out the contradiction in attacking 'the "administrative" orientation for providing powerful tools of persuasion to the marketers, politicians, etc. while arguing that the effects of such persuasive attempts are invisible in the short run' (Katz, 1987: S30). Kurt and Gladys Lang (1983) add that administrative research contains 'much that is critical of existing institutional arrangements and practices' (p.131-2) and that 'empirical research can be used by any group, including crusaders against the status quo' (p.132) – the work of George Gerbner (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986)

and that of the Glasgow University Media Group (Eldridge, 1993) come to mind here. Katz (1978: 135) notes further that contemporary critical media studies also 'betrays an interest in affecting policy': indeed, present political and economic conditions surely mean that policy-relevant research findings must be forthcoming from critical scholars.

The individual and society

The relation between the individual and society, a founding debate in social science, has been variously interpreted in the analysis of mass communication.¹⁴ The Columbia School was always more sociological than its rival, the Yale School which, following Lasswell's sender-message-receiver model, took a strongly psychological and experimental approach to analyzing media influence in terms of cognitive persuasion theory (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Robert Merton's (1955: 510) description of the emerging field of the sociology of knowledge, when applied to media research, characterizes the Columbia School thus:

'searching out such variations in effective audiences, exploring their distinctive criteria of significant and valid knowledge, relating these to their position within the society and examining the socio-psychological processes through which these operate to constrain certain modes of thought constitutes a procedure which promises to take research in the sociology of knowledge from the plane of general imputation to testable empirical inquiry'.

Hence Katz consistently locates cognitive and motivational accounts of audience activity in the context of the primary group and social networks (even in his uses and gratifications work, see Katz, Gurevitch, & Hass, 1973), though he also – as ever – seeks convergence between these traditions also (Katz, 1960). His subsequent sociological diffusion research (Katz et al, 1966) can be contrasted with the more social psychological uses and gratifications approach (see Blumler and Katz, 1974), in terms of their starting point (text/message versus audience need), context (social structure and culture versus individual habits), and effect (acceptance of intended message versus need gratifications). However, in both approaches the mass media are seen as plural, as are audiences; moreover, the sociocognitive processes of media influence are foregrounded. Thus throughout his work, Katz has argued against a view of mass society comprised of monolithic and homogeneous media and a mass audience of defenseless viewers (cf. Peters, this volume).

In offering a formal analysis of the many possible relations between the individual and societal influence, Alexander and Giesen (1987: 14) outline five major accounts of the micro and macro link as follows:

(1) rational, purposeful individuals create society through contingent acts of freedom; (2) interpretive individuals create society through contingent acts of freedom; (3) socialized individuals re-create society as a collective force through contingent acts of freedom; (4) socialized individuals reproduce society by translating existing social environment into the microrealm; and (5) rational, purposeful individuals acquiesce to society because they are forced to by external, social control'.

I have previously mapped diverse approaches to audiences onto this scheme, albeit with some hesitation (Livingstone, 1998a). Option 1, I suggested, is adopted by those who conceptualize *the audience as a market* (or aggregate of individuals). In Option 2, those who draw on interpretative or phenomenological sociology also assert the agency of individuals in developing an idea of *active and creative audiences*, though the focus is switched from the individual as 'rational actor' to the individual as 'symbolic interpreter'. By contrast, Option 5, *the audience as duped mass*, represents – or is often represented as - the pessimistic starting point from

which critical theory, cultural studies and feminist approaches have been seeking escape routes. Option 4, *the audience as generally conformist but just occasionally resistant*, recognizes some exceptions to Option 5 – as in Hall's (1980, 1994) analysis of the mismatch between processes of encoding and decoding.

But audience reception studies have been greatly exercised over the question of how far to extend this argument, taking Option 4 further towards the social constructivist Option 3, or even Option 2. Empirical investigation seems to invite an ever more active audience, but then empirical investigation will always reveal diversity of response, depending on the specificities of context; hence the interpretation of such diversity – how much diversity makes a difference? - remains contentious. Undoubtedly, as Larry Grossberg (1993: 89-90) has observed, cultural studies is committed to 'the fact that reality is continually being made through human action', and this view has led many researchers to explore ways in which audiences 'devise inventive ways of resisting, subverting, or otherwise re-making messages or technologies' (T. R. Lindlof, 1987: 28). Yet when David Morley (1993: 17) argues that 'local meanings are so often made within and against the symbolic resources provided by global media networks', it is evident that much hangs on the balance between 'within' and 'against'. A similar uncertainty, between Options 2 and 4, is evident when John Thompson (1994: 44) shifts from the claim that 'the appropriation of this material by recipients is a process that always takes place in particular social-historical circumstances' to the claim that appropriation 'is an active, creative and selective process in which individuals draw on the resources available to them in order to receive and make sense of the symbolic material transmitted by the media'.

The synthetic middle option seems under-explored, though for Alexander and Giesen it is the most desirable, not least because it comes closest to *the audience as public*, recognizing that democracy rests on the informed consent of the thinking citizen who is in turn socialized within a liberal/pluralist framework (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, in press; Livingstone, 2005). While often read, in polarized fashion, as asserting Option 1 or 2 against some version of Option 5, I suggest that *Personal Influence* represented the first of several steps by which Lazarsfeld and Katz, and later Katz and his colleagues, sought to explore the possibilities of Option 3; hence the formative importance of Tarde's examination of the links between public opinion, everyday conversation and the media institutions. Indeed, John Durham Peters (1989) has argued that a strongly democratic or pluralist political agenda underpins *Personal Influence*, claiming that 'much of the history of American mass communication theory and research is an attempt to carry out a political project without being articulate about that project' (p.199), and that discussion of media effects is really a discussion of 'the perils and possibilities of democracy' (p.200), of 'how to conceive of the public sphere in an age of mass media' (p.212).

The underlying debate, therefore, concerns mass society, a debate 'which turns on the question of the viability of democracy in an age of media and bureaucracy' (p.216). Mendelsohn (1989) concurs: 'this limited effects paradigm is deeply embedded in the theory of action that was first promulgated as a rationale for basing new 18th- and 19th-century democratic governance on public opinion and popular will' (p.819; cf. Kadushin, this volume).¹⁵ Thus, Peters argues that 'the genius of *Personal Influence* was to rescue the public sphere from the media' (1989: 215) and thereby to permit an alternative approach to participatory democracy even in a media age. Yet he, like others, is skeptical of the argument that the mass media, far from undermining the public sphere are, instead, supporters of it through the medium of active debate within primary groups. Just as Herbert Schiller (1989), commenting on *The Export of Meaning*, questions whether divergent and resistant interpretations among audiences have any actual effect

on established power structures, Peters asks whether the interpersonal step of the two-step flow has any identifiable effect in shaping collective understandings or ordering social world, questions which the contributors to *Audiences and Publics* (Livingstone, 2005) have recently taken up (see also Couldry and Markham, this volume).

Although it argued for a shift from direct to indirect effects, thereby opening the way for a more complex analysis of mediations and contextualizations, *Personal Influence* represents an imperfect exemplar of how to converge multiple perspectives (particularly by comparison with *The Export of Meaning* and *Media Events*). It is often cited – fairly - by its critics for endorsing the problematic (though still commonplace) transmission model of the media (Carey, 1989). Given the concurrent debates between Adorno and Lazarsfeld, its bibliography is striking for the absence of critical theory (indeed, of any European) works. And by prioritizing empirical social scientific methods over high theory, the effect was to lead mass communication research firmly in an administrative direction, divorcing it from the emerging school of critical mass communications (Lang & Lang 1983, and this volume).¹⁶ Gitlin claimed that '*Personal Influence* can be read as the founding document of an entire field of inquiry' (1978: 208) and criticized it precisely for its implicit attack on the analyses of power, influence and ideology advocated by critical mass communication research. And it was this critique that led Stuart Hall (1980), two decades later, to launch his critical encoding/decoding approach to audiences (which analyzed mass communication as a circuit of linked practices of production, circulation, consumption and reproduction¹⁷) through a direct attack on the work of James Halloran and the uses and gratifications approach.¹⁸ Thus, the debate continued in the next generation.

Influences on research in an age of media convergence

However, for the generation following, we must again rethink. In mass communication theory, audiences represented one of three central components in the analytic framework, together with production and texts. Encoding and decoding, uses and gratifications, models of media effects – each have been conceived for the age of mass media, and mass society, and each is now being rethought as the media and communication environment becomes increasingly diversified, globalized, individualized, privatized. The insight of *Personal Influence*, that processes of media influence are mediated by social contexts, including community and face-to-face interactions, is now a starting point rather than a discovery. The evocative image that captured, and worried, the public imagination is no longer that of the immobile viewer sitting on the sofa silently staring at the screen. Rather it is of multitasking in front of the computer, creating as well as receiving messages, networked online as well as embedded in a noisy world of interaction offline, distracted rather than focused, communicative rather than silent, perhaps even on the move rather than pinned to the domestic interior. Yet this figure too is the object of public anxieties, some familiar and some new.

Hence, as part of the development of new media theory, these three core components of mediation are being reconceived. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) offer a translation for the changing communication environment that seeks to avoid an over-focusing on technological change and that brackets assumptions about the 'mass' (- this is not to say the 'mass' is obsolete; rather that it should not simply be presumed). We argue that research must analyze the *artifacts or devices* used to communicate or convey information (raising questions of design and development), the *activities and practices* in which people engage to communicate or share information (raising questions of cultural and social context), and the

social arrangements or organizational forms that develop around those devices and practices (raising questions of institutional organization, power and governance). Significantly, we do not specify the relations among these components *a priori*. Where mass communication research spent decades struggling with and, latterly, unpicking, the assumption of linearity (that production produces texts which impact on audiences, following the sender-message-receiver model), new media research need make no such assumption.¹⁹

Through the activities and practices with which people engage with new forms of media, people are evidently diverse, motivated, resistant, literate, and so forth. Hence our dual stress on social shaping and social consequences in the *Handbook of New Media*, for it is precisely the dynamic links and interdependencies among these component processes that should guide the analytic focus. However, since these dynamic interrelations are not infinitely flexible, we also stress that these artifacts, activities and social arrangements (and the relations among them) become routine, established, institutionalized, and so taken for granted, together constituting the communications infrastructure of everyday life. How should this be researched? Of the multiple trajectories that recently converged on the study of audience interpretation or reception, revitalizing this area of mass communication theory, most can trace a history back to the early days, and early debates, that characterized the establishment of the field in the early to mid twentieth century. And, in sketching a way forward for the analysis of people's responses to, critical engagement with, and social positioning by, new forms of media and communication, we would surely wish to retain an equally broad agenda (Press & Livingstone, 2006).

Thus, in asking how people engage with new media, and how new media position and influence them, important questions can be drawn out of a cultural studies perspective about the institutional and cultural processes of encoding and decoding. However, equally valuable questions, from a critical communication perspective, will concern the power relations between producers, distributors and consumers. Globalization theory adds a crucial perspective, for the new media are – in a manner little anticipated by the largely national (or, sometimes, universalistic) focus of traditional mass communication research – also global (or glocal) media (Tomlinson, 1999). Poststructuralist theories of the textually inscribed role of the reader raise fascinating possibilities in relation to convergent, hypertextual multimedia (Burbules, 1998), such approaches interfacing with information science to reframe 'user' research in relation to new literacies (Kress, 2003) and the shifting politics of participation (K. B. Jensen, 2005). Feminist theory must and will continue to ask about new (and old) forms of exclusion or discrimination, as well as about alternative or subcultural readings, in the new media environment (Van Zoonen, 2002). Ethnographic studies of the consumption of new media similarly are extending lessons from the study of established media to pose new questions about mediated consumption and the diverse cultures of the everyday (Fomas, Klein, Ladendorf, Sunden, & Svenigsson, 2002; Miller & Slater, 2000). Lastly, people's engagement with media – old and new – is part of their activities as publics, as citizens, for better or for worse, and so is not to be hived off as just a matter of the domestic or private sphere (Livingstone, 2005).

These are all exciting developments, but the continuities are also important. Though the shift from mass communication theory to theorizing mediation in all its forms will occupy scholars for some time to come, the broader agenda that *Personal Influence* prioritized – the examination of the relations between mediation, conversation, and community, in order to understand the potential, positive and negative, of the media in democratic society – remains paramount. If Katz and Lazarsfeld were to review the emerging field of new media research, they might be concerned at the balance between theory and empirical research – much is still

sketchy, short on empirical support, tentative in its methodology. Still, for the study of people's engagement with the new media environment, i.e. for the study of audiences as publics and of publics as mediated, this is still early days. It is to be hoped that, in developing these initial steps into a sustained research program, scholars will continue to draw on the multiple intellectual traditions, convergent epistemologies and bold surmises that motivated earlier steps towards the same democratic project fifty years ago, as evidenced by *Personal Influence*.

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Endnotes

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² Sills (1981) identifies the three major features of Lazarsfeld's research style as being collaboration with others, creation of research institutes, and the search for a convergence between different intellectual traditions; all features that clearly influenced Katz's own approach to research. Indeed, the preface to his doctoral dissertation was headed 'an essay in convergence', and in this he points to the influence of Merton also (Katz, 1956).

³ Concerned with establishing a broad and multidisciplinary field of mass communications, Katz' emphasis on convergence reflects a conviction that ideas evolve best through responding to the challenge of alternative positions, that they become vulgar versions of themselves if they remain within hermetically sealed traditions (he has been critical of uses and gratifications research in this respect), and that ideas develop more productively if divergent tendencies and hostilities are countered.

⁴ A cautionary note - one of Katz' books was about the genre of soap opera, and so it is appropriate to begin this section by observing that the sequence of books discussed here is neither comprehensive nor finished, that multiple strands are discernable as one looks across them, and that they can be read in different ways. Nonetheless, I shall offer a particular reading, my own interpretive context being as a social psychologist, an end-of-the-century audience researcher, and an advocate of convergent approaches to diversity in theory and method.

⁵ Yet misreadings persist: for Sproule (1989), *Personal Influence* played a key role in (re)writing research history to create 'the magic bullet myth' of direct media effects in order to demonstrate the success of the Columbia School by putting media research on a scientific footing. Equally inappropriately, *Personal Influence* has been read as demonstrating null effects. It is important to recognize that Katz and Lazarsfeld felt themselves led by the *data* to emphasize the mediating, but not wholly undermining, role of the social and communicative context in processes of effect. And this in turn led Katz to argue against the kind of broad theorizing which results in what he sees as the untestable or at least typically untested theories of hegemony and ideology. Hence Boudon (1991) regards *Personal Influence* as an example of Merton's middle-range theory, where middle-range theories attempt to integrate relevant hypotheses (here, the idea of a two-step flow of influence) and empirical regularities but assume that 'it is hopeless and quixotic to try to determine the overarching independent variable that would operate in all social processes' (p.519).

⁶ Thus the social psychology of the group is used to account for the diffusion of media effects, thereby linking interpersonal and mass communications in a manner often neglected in subsequent research (although see Hawkins, Wiemann, & Pingree, 1988).

⁷ This is by contrast with the traditional model, which holds that the communication process is essentially linear, with the audience positioned as passive receiver at the end of an influential and unidirectional process of information transmission.

⁸ One cannot ask about influence without asking about effects and, at present, the reductive account of 'media effects' advocated by extreme advocates of both critical and administrative traditions has all but eliminated a subtle and fruitful discussion of media influence and effects from theoretical discussion in media and communications (Livingstone, 1996): we need to find a language with which to return to this important agenda.

⁹ Katz characterizes each decade in the history of mass communications as an oscillation between conceptions of active and passive viewers, and hence between minimal effects and powerful media (Katz, 1980), though, in a moment of disillusion, Katz concluded that 'we teeter back and forth between paradigms, without getting very far. We need to perform some crucial experiments and to agree on appropriate research methods rather than just storing a treasury of contradictory bibliographical references in our memory banks' (1992: 85). This oscillation can itself be seen as stemming from the contradictions within the liberal-pluralist approach to media research, an approach which sees the audience both as public and as mass (Livingstone, 2005). However, from the addition of interpersonal communication as a second step in the flow of media influence in the 1950s, to the selective and motivated viewer of *The Uses of Mass Communications* (1974) in the 1970s, the interpretive, culturally grounded viewer countering cultural imperialism in *The Export of Meaning* in the late 1980s, and the locally embedded but symbolically connected viewer of *Media Events* in the early 1990s, he has consistently argued for a socio-psychological, selective viewer (not, however, a wholly autonomous or 'sovereign' consumer). Hence, 'the effects of the media are mitigated by the processes of selectivity in attention, perception, and recall, and ...

these, in turn, are a function of predispositional and situational variables such as age, family history, political affiliation, and so on' (Katz, 1987: S26) – it is the task of research to map these processes of selectivity and their dependence on social context.

¹⁰ Katz (personal communication) suggests that for Lazarsfeld administrative research takes the client's problem as given while critical research asks whether the client may be part of the problem.

¹¹ In his memoirs, Lowenthal, a founder member of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, discusses how he found it easier than Adorno 'to combine the theoretical and historical outlook with the empirical requisites of sociological research' (Jay, 1987: 140), although he also gives examples of how Lazarsfeld 'failed to see the political and analytical meaning of my study [of biographies]' (p. 132). He adds, 'finally I also learned - it wasn't particularly difficult - to assert my own individuality as a sociologist, while at the same time familiarizing myself with what seemed to be significant and important in American social research. Later I attempted to convey this synthesis to my students' (p. 141) - of whom Katz was one.

¹² In this article, Katz argued that, while the study of short-term media effects is 'dead', research should now address not what the media do to people but what people do with the media (i.e. uses and gratifications) and thereby aim for a more complex link to effects by building a bridge to the humanist tradition of studying popular culture.

¹³ Symptomatic of contemporary uses and gratifications, the typology of the active viewer proposed by Levy and Windahl (1985) misunderstands the hermeneutic nature of meaning creation, seeing it as gaining 'a more or less clear understanding of the structure of the message' (p. 115); other contributors to that volume also regard the text as a source of given and obvious messages (Livingstone, 1998b).

¹⁴ The roots of the disputes in media theory over social psychology – i.e. about the autonomy and rationality of individuals subject to media influence - can be traced back to the 1920s and 30s. Adorno's (1969) understanding of social psychology drew more on psychoanalysis, influenced by Fromm's work at the (Frankfurt) Institute of Social Research, than on the embryonic tradition of positivist social psychology. For researchers at the Institute before the Second World War, it was their explicit aim to develop a critical social psychology 'to explain the processes through which individual consciousness was adjusted to the functional requirements of the system, in which a monopolistic economy and an authoritarian state had coalesced' (Habermas, 1989: 293). This approach contrasts with the largely individualistic social psychology which developed in America, though Smith (1983) identifies Katz as part of this latter tradition, thus neglecting his more sociological concerns.

¹⁵ Katz's subsequent work typifies this broadly normative tradition, examining issues of media effects, bureaucracy, voters, public opinion, and so forth, in order to emphasize (and protect) the self-determining potential of the individual against the power of the mass media and to promote a professional-client model of producer-audience relations (e.g. Katz, 1978a, 1992a & b). Yet Katz rarely presents an explicitly political agenda beyond expressing his broad interest in the relation between media, public opinion, citizenship and conversation.

¹⁶ Yet ironically, Lazarsfeld and others were originally motivated to conduct propaganda research because, as members of the Socialist Student Movement, they were concerned that their propaganda was unsuccessful in the face of that of the growing nationalist movement of Vienna in the 1920s. Indeed, when discussing the influential Marienthal study in Vienna, which linked social stratification and social psychology, Lazarsfeld (1969: 278) claimed that his work 'had a visible Marxist tinge' and he recalled the almost accidental way in which he happened upon market research methods (and funding) when empirical research techniques were otherwise lacking to pursue these ends.

¹⁷ Hall draws directly on Marx's political economy which emphasizes cycles of production/consumption but he emphasizes that the media operate through symbolic exchange. Thus relations between the practices linked by this circuit are understood discursively as 'articulation' by analogy with exchange in the economic sphere (Pillai, 1992).

¹⁸ See also the opening pages of Morley's *Nationwide Audience* (1980) and Hall's later reflections on the debate (Hall, 1994).

¹⁹ Indeed, the challenge for research is, in many ways, the opposite, for we have yet to identify the ways in which people are also normative, unoriginal, mindless, influenced through new media. There is a terminological switch in the foregoing sentences that marks the shift from old to new media well. The term *audience* works

poorly in this changed environment, and *users* does not work either, being a term that has little to do with information and communication (people are also users of pens, batteries, washing powder) and that lacks reference to any collective status: precisely unlike the mass audience of mass society, users are an aggregate of individuals with no collective status or power. In subtitled *Personal Influence*, 'the part played by the people...', Katz and Lazarsfeld offer a fair alternative - *people* encompasses a focus on both individuality and collectivity, it permits investigation of both common knowledge and differentiated experience and, unlike *audience* or *user*, makes no misleading assumptions about the relations between media and the public sphere (Livingstone, 2004).