



1-1-1999

# Two Virtual Debates Between Lazarsfeld and McLuhan on Radio

Elihu Katz

University of Pennsylvania, [ekatz@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:ekatz@asc.upenn.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers](http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers)

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Katz, E. (1999). Two Virtual Debates Between Lazarsfeld and McLuhan on Radio. *Journal of Radio Studies*, 6 (2), 5-9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529909391721>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [http://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/287](http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/287)  
For more information, please contact [libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## Two Virtual Debates Between Lazarsfeld and McLuhan on Radio

### **Abstract**

The honor of this invitation to write an editorial foreword to this issue of the *Journal of Radio Studies* led me to invent two debates between Paul Lazarsfeld, the empiricist and functionalist, and Marshall McLuhan, the technological theorist. The first debate has to do with the beginnings of radio; the second with radio in an age dominated by television. Lazarsfeld and his troops at Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research did their work in the 1940s and 1950s. McLuhan erupted in the 1960s.

### **Disciplines**

Communication

# FOREWORD

## Two Virtual Debates Between Lazarsfeld and McLuhan On Radio

Elihu Katz

The honor of this invitation to write an editorial foreword to this issue of the *Journal of Radio Studies* led me to invent two debates between Paul Lazarsfeld, the empiricist and functionalist, and Marshall McLuhan, the technological theorist. The first debate has to do with the beginnings of radio; the second with radio in an age dominated by television. Lazarsfeld and his troops at Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research did their work in the 1940s and 1950s. McLuhan erupted in the 1960s.

**DEBATE ONE:** In *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan chided Paul Lazarsfeld for failing to grasp that the central role of radio in Nazi Germany had nothing to do with what Hitler had to say or with totalitarian control of the new medium. Rather, McLuhan argued, the power of radio was vested in its ability to inject archaic tribal voices into a society still largely untrained in the individualism of literacy. McLuhan goes on to make the outrageous announcement that Hitler would not have succeeded had he landed in the era of television. Along the same lines, he declared that Bible-thumping evangelism would not transfer from radio to television, and that those who *heard* the 1960 presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon preferred Nixon because of the compatibility of Nixon's car-salesman personality with the hotness of radio, compared with Kennedy's cool.

Lazarsfeld had earlier denied such omnipotence to radio's role in Nazi Germany—not only as technology but as monopoly. McLuhan (1964) quoted Lazarsfeld as saying:

*"If a government monopolizes the radio, then by mere repetition and by exclusion of conflicting points of view it can determine the opinions of the population. We do not know this monopolistic effect really works, but it is important to note its singularity. No inference should be drawn regarding the effects of radio as such. It is almost forgotten that Hitler did not achieve control through radio but almost despite it, because at the time of his rise to power radio was controlled by his enemies. The monopolistic effects have probably less social importance than is generally assumed."*

Undaunted by Lazarsfeld's "limited effects" and historical caution, McLuhan was undoubtedly pleased to accept the irony that the medium itself, even in the hands of the opposition, was doing the devil's work.

I was reminded of this debate recently, as I read the newly-translated diaries of Victor Klemperer (1998)—a German Jew (married to an "aryan"), literary scholar and astute observer—who survived the Nazi years in Germany, and chronicled them. Klemperer's entries are full of references to radio, and in an uncanny way, they prefigure the theories of both Lazarsfeld and McLuhan. Klemperer reported on the ceremonial use of radio during the crucial plebiscite ("During the thirteenth hour [i.e., between 1 and 2 p.m.—E.K.] Adolf Hitler will come to the workers," says the announcer. "The language of the Gospels exactly," notes Klemperer on November 11, 1933), "the Redeemer comes to the poor .... Then, more than forty minutes of Hitler. A mostly hoarse, strained, agitated voice, long passages in the whining tone of the sectarian preacher."

Anticipating Lazarsfeld, Klemperer (1998) adds, "If I have no choice but to read and hear something everywhere, it is forced upon me. And if *I* can hardly guard against believing it—how shall millions of naïve people guard against it? And if they believe, then they are indeed won by Hitler and the power and the glory are really his." Anticipating McLuhan, in turn, Klemperer's telling entry on September 14, 1934, calls "attention to the role of *radio*. Everything is aimed at deafening the individual in collectivism.... Not like other technical achievements: new contents, new philosophy. But new *style*. Printed matter suppressed. *Oratorical*, oral. Primitive—at a higher level."

Klemperer (1998) was in awe of radio technology. He said (November 9, 1935): "It once again made an enormous impression on me when they (his friends) put on the radio and leaped from London to Rome, from Rome to Moscow, etc. The concepts of time and space are annihilated. One must become a mystic... because such a miracle exists (and) because the human intellect makes use of it. But this same human intellect puts up with Hitler's government." But Klemperer (1998) was also an empiricist, and noted two further aspects of radio that echoed Lazarsfeld's caution. One has to do with the role of foreign broadcasting in supporting opposition to Hitler—at the very outset, and, again, when rumors of Nazi failures began to mount. He reported repeatedly on the increasingly harsh penalties for listening to enemy broadcasts, "they are now threatening the death sentence for listening illegally."

The other aspect noted by Klemperer (1998) is that reception does not always match the producers' intentions. Thus, during the broadcast of a party rally, Klemperer found himself observing audience behavior at the Long Distance Lorry Drivers' Restaurant near Leipzig (September 11, 1938). He noted with surprise:

*The customers all came and went, taking their leave with "Heil Hitler." But no one was listening. I could barely understand the broadcast because a couple of people were playing cards, striking the table with loud thumps, talking very loudly. It was quieter at other tables. One man was writing a postcard, one was writing in his order book, one was reading the newspaper. And landlady and waitress are talking to each other or to the card players. Truly: not one of a dozen people paid attention to the radio for even a single second, it could just as well have been transmitting silence or a foxtrot from Leipzig.*

**DEBATE TWO:** The same characters—but in reversed roles—appear again in the debate over the future of radio in the era of television. Forgetting himself for a moment, McLuhan (1964) spoke as a true functionalist. The tribalism of radio suddenly disappears as it relinquishes its "burden of centralism" to television. "Radio was [now] free to diversify, and to begin a regional and local community service that it had not known .... Since TV, radio has turned to the individual needs of people at different times of the day, a fact that goes with the multiplicity of receiving sets in bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens, cars, and now in pockets.... Once a form of group listening that emptied churches, [radio] has reverted to private and individual uses." McLuhan, the functionalist, allowed himself to wonder how long it will be before a new medium will come along to liberate television from its "burden of centralism."

McLuhan was altogether unaware that these observations about the transformation of radio had been spelled out 10 years earlier by William N. McPhee and Rolf Meyersohn (1954), in a report to NBC entitled *Futures for Radio*, produced at Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. The importance of this study, however, is not only that it

anticipated radio's accommodation to the television era, but that it predicted that television would soon go the way of radio. They predicted, all too correctly, that television channels would multiply, that television cameras would miniaturize, that television sets would move out of the living room into the bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens, cars, etc.—just as radio did. They were suggesting, in other words, that television would, once again, displace radio—not radio in its heyday, but the companionate radio we have come to know. Unlike McLuhan, they did not look to a new centralizing medium to produce this change, but rather to the continuous development of television technology itself. Note the additional irony: Although McLuhan has here become a functionalist, these Lazarsfeldians have here become technological theorists!

Evidence that television *is*, in fact, becoming radio is implicit in a Lazarsfeld-like study of Israeli perceptions of five media in 1970, when television was first introduced into Israel, and again in 1990, when channels began to proliferate. Imagining television in 1970, Israelis said it was like (i.e., performed the same functions as) cinema, on the one hand, and radio, on the other. Twenty years later, they disconnect cinema from television, classifying cinema with books (as aesthetic media) and reconnecting television (politics and entertainment) only to radio.

So what will happen now that television is fast becoming like post-TV radio? Are there new futures for radio?

And what new technology is waiting in the wings to assume the "centralizing" role of television? The internet? It seems an unlikely candidate for a medium of national integration.

### **Bibliography**

- Klemperer, V. (1998). *I will bear witness: A diary of the Nazi years: 1933-1941* (Vol. I) (Martin Chalmers, Ed. & Trans.). New York: Random House.
- Lazarsfeld, P., & Merton, R. (1948). "Mass communication, popular culture, and organized social action." In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The communication of ideas*. New York: Institute for Social and Religious Studies.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). In *Understanding media*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McPhee, W.M., & Meyersohn, R. (1954). *Futures for radio*, New York: Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University.

**Elihu Katz** is Trustee Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School of the University of Pennsylvania as well as Professor Emeritus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he also directed the Guttman Institute of Applied Social Research. He holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University where he coauthored *Personal Influence* (1955) with his teacher, Paul Lazarsfeld. Among his recent books are *The Export of Meaning: Cross-cultural Readings of "Dallas"* (with Tamar Liebes, 1990) and *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (with Daniel Dayan, 1992).

Katz was founding director of Israel Television. He served as consultant on audience research to the SSC in the early 1970s. During this period, he published *Broadcasting in the Third World* (with E.G. Wedell) and *The Secularization of Leisure: Culture and Communication in Israel* (with Micheal Gurevitch).

Katz was awarded the Canada/UNESCO McLuhan Prize, the Burda Prize "in medias res," and the Israel Prize, as well as honorary degrees from the Universities of Ghent and Montreal.