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WHO IS ELIHU KATZ?

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Who is Elihu Katz?

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While leafing through reference lists and surfing the internet trying to find an "angle" through which to introduce the next speaker I noticed two things:

First, there is only one Elihu Katz. I know there are a lot of philosophers in the audience today. Nevertheless, I am not referring to a metaphysical fact, but rather to a simple demographic one. Some scholars have very similar sounding names like Blumer and Blumler; others share the same family name. Ideal material for the kind of lecturer who enjoys tricking students during exams. When I was searching my mind wondering what I knew about Elihu Katz, I somehow subconsciously seem to have expected that there would be lots of scholars out there with that name or at least a very similar one - because so much has been published under that name.

Well, it's not true. Elihu Katz is one of a kind. Speaking of a distinguished career is therefore an understatement. An awful a lot of stuff has been written by Katz and it has all been written by just one man.

That in itself is remarkable enough in an era when people should count themselves lucky to have written one, possibly two articles or books that are universally quoted. Well, check it out, I'm sure that in most papers of most students in the field of media research you will find at least one reference to Elihu Katz. And I'm sure the same is true in a few other fields as well.

The second thing I noticed is that our next speaker has not just produced a lot - he has produced a lot of different things. That, too, is quite an achievement, because we all know other people who had one brilliant idea but spent the rest of their career repeating it over and over again. Once more, this is not true of Elihu Katz. Referring back to student papers the same scholar who would notice that so many of them quote Katz, would undoubtedly also notice that few if any quote the same materials, let alone the same theory. It is difficult enough to be the founding force behind a particular perspective or approach -it is harder still to find other examples of people who have played that role on several occasions.

The paper Elihu Katz is presenting today expresses several interesting and, I believe, provocative ideas. It would be both silly and presumptuous of me to summarise what you are about to hear. Instead, let me just indicate the interesting questions to which I think you will be getting some interesting and challenging answers.

Early on Katz will refer to New Labour and its attempts at direct democracy. Since we are in a country in which the federal government has a few ideas of its own on this subject and is planning a big referendum - I think members of that government would be well advised to listen to what our speaker has to say.

Second, and equally refreshing, he will ask you to reconsider the idea of public broadcasting. Are we all sure that the concept of a broadcasting corporation which tries to be independent of both the

government and commerce is as evident as we may think? And what happens to this institution in an age in which audiences become fragmented, other media become more attractive and commercial logic finds its way into every part of daily life - those of us who work at universities will surely recognise the issues from what we are experiencing in our own working environments.

The central issue in this paper, however, is the way in which new developments in the media have influenced what he refers to as the "bourgeois public sphere". Social theorists often have a tendency to treat people as "actors" in a "social world". Communication often seems either absent and of little importance or, as seems to be the case in much of what Habermas has written, so all-encompassing that it even includes transport - in which case it becomes very difficult to relate it to what happens in our daily lives.

Katz, as you will notice, follows the lines set out by Innis and Mcluhan . Quoting Mcluhan in particular appears to be the fashionable thing to do, particularly amongst those writing about the internet. Many enthusiastic supporters and users of the new media like to quote Mcluhan superficially to underline their limitless, but deterministic and naive beliefs in the positive effects of just about any new technology. The internet is then believed to guarantee total access to "the public sphere" for everybody, and it is assumed that such access will result in total, direct and perfect democracy. Katz takes one step back - or one step up if you like and looks at the basic argument behind this kind of thinking: that new developments in the media often alter the way in which societies are structured. He will let you discover, or for

some rediscover, the ideas of Gabriel Tarde, who was onto this more than sixty years before Innis and Mcluhan.
Interestingly, he will show that his questions do not lead to answers, but rather to even more complicated questions and riddles, or, as he calls them, puzzles.

Finally, I would invite you to pay attention to what he has to say about ordinary people, the audience, the voter or the public at large - in other words, those who have to live with all these developments in their daily lives and who do not have the luxury of light-hearted academic hypothesising, but who have to find a way to deal with all these changes. While it is easy to see how political and economic developments affect the media, we are often quick to blame the general public for being egotistic, without morals and lacking taste. Katz will paint a different picture about political participation. One in which those with the power or the influence to shape and change society will find it less easy to rid themselves of all responsibility.