

Public Television: Beginnings and Endings. Elihu Katz in conversation with Doron Galili

Doron Galili

Elihu Katz (Distinguished Trustee Professor Emeritus of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication and Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) is not only a prominent television scholar whose work greatly contributed to the discipline, but also himself a television pioneer, having served as the founding director of Israeli television in the 1960s. On the occasion of the recent governmental decision to shut down the Israel Broadcasting Authority (the body that operates the Israeli public television channels) and replace it with the new Public Broadcast Corporation, the Journal of e-Media Studies conducted this interview with Professor Katz. This was an exciting opportunity to invite him to reflect on the early days of Israeli television and more broadly on his recent work regarding current changes in the institutions and culture of television.

Doron Galili: Let me begin with a moment in your personal biography, particularly with the intersection of making television and studying television. In 1967 you started as founding director of Israeli television. As a scholar who knew communication studies and also had access to over twenty years of television history, you started a television service from scratch. Sounds pretty ideal.

Elihu Katz: Ideal??

DG: In this day and age, that someone in charge of television would be a person with the understanding and integrity of someone who studies society sounds ideal.

EK: You see it too ideally. It was mostly coincidence, to which I could not say no. Israel, or [late Prime Minister]

Ben Gurion and company, resisted television for a couple of decades. And they had good reasons—they were afraid of the cost, at a moment when economy was zero, at the beginning of the state. They were afraid of the personalization of politics, religious people were afraid of the second commandment [ban on images]. There were a bunch of committees over the years who said no, until Ben Gurion stepped down and Levi Eshkol became prime minister. And then came the war of 1967, the so-called Six Day War. [During the war], the Arab countries used television for propaganda for their own population. These Arab broadcasts from other countries spilled over into Israel's space, at least that is what was thought. It is probably trivial, but what is also true is that people who understood Arabic at the time were weaker segments of the population—the Arab minority and Arabic-speaking Jews from North Africa and elsewhere who were newer in the society. So the big plans that began in the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA) before the Six Day War now erupted in consternation—"Why don't we have television when they all have television? Why can't we speak directly to the people?" And so Hanoach Givton, then director general of radio of the IBA, tried to establish national television using the equipment of the education broadcasting, which was the only television network in the country, operating on the channel allocated by the international telecommunications union [which was used only for broadcasting to schools]. But the war was so short, that it didn't happen. Nevertheless, the IBA continued to plan, especially because the government had dreamed up the idea that television could, somehow, promote a positive image of Israel in the territories occupied in the war. This exaggerated conception was to broadcast in two languages from the start, giving priority to programming in Arabic.

Then there was a sort of coup against Givton, for reasons I still don't understand. The government didn't want him to establish television as part of an empire with radio. Basically, they fired Givton and appointed Elad Peled, who was previously a general in the Israeli Army, to establish a temporary authority of television, which would be established initially outside of IBA. Then Peled resigned, and Israel Galili [No family relation to the interviewer], the minister who was fighting Givton, had to find somebody who looked expert and politically neutral. Galili was familiar with the sign on my office door: "Professor of Communication" because our communications institute at the university had

earlier combined with professor Louis Guttman's Institute of Applied Social Research to conduct a series of opinion surveys for his ministry in preparation for the possibility of war.

It was a total surprise when Galili came to me and proposed that I should be the founding director of Israel television, and I said "*ma pit'om*" [Hebrew for "no way"]. Then he came to our house and sat around for a while, and said again that I should do it. People thought I knew something not only about media research but also about broadcasting technology and about administration, which I didn't. But how could I say no? So I said yes, while also warning him that the government was unreasonably optimistic about the persuasive power of broadcasting in Arabic. Luckily for me, there was the CEO of the Israel Institute of Applied Social Research, whose name is Uzi Peled, who is a great administrator and he was willing to join as my partner. And we did it, in a record eighteen months! We mobilized a lot of volunteers from abroad, and gave priority to experienced professionals from the Israeli radio. We had a team of so-called experts; some of them were not such experts, some were. We also had an acceptance committee to choose people for jobs, and we had CBS as consultants, although we often ignored their advice because we felt they were trying to sell their reruns here and to introduce an American commercial television system.

So we looked for help elsewhere, particularly from professionals in England. The BBC was always the model for the IBA, but there were many aberrations. For example in Israel, the CEO is appointed by the government, which would be unheard of in the BBC. In spite of such deviations and in spite of the occasional overtures of American broadcasters—not just CBS—offering to advise on the establishment of television in Israel, the BBC had always been Israel's ideal. It is, indeed, difficult to explain why the IBA and Givton had signed on with CBS. Broadcasting was first introduced in Palestine by the British mandatory authorities, at least partly to give voice to the national aspirations of both Arabs and Jews. When the British abandoned their mandate in 1948, radio remained a major player in national integration and in the diffusion of the Hebrew language, but it remained for long under direct control of government. Only later, in the 1960s, did the BBC model of an autonomous authority for broadcasting emerge explicitly, although it has never been fully emancipated from government, from political intrusion, or from advertising. In

spite of these deviations, it is a nice paradox that radio—and now television—as an institution was much influenced by the unwanted and unappreciated British mandate. This paradox applies no less to the structure of the legislative system, the judiciary and other institutions, and this is probably the case in most other territories that emerged from British rule.

DG: You still believe in the model of public broadcasting?

EK: Sure, and the BBC is doing well, and over the years, has itself introduced structural changes that deserve study. But change should come from within, not by government intervention. That's why I object to the way the Israeli government is disbanding the IBA and creating another public broadcasting instead. The changes might be desirable, but when the government intervenes so blatantly, people realize that their autonomous broadcaster is not so autonomous.

But let's go back to 1969. So, in a year and a half we bought the equipment—certainly with the help of CBS, including a secondhand outside broadcasting unit, which we imported. We refurbished an old factory building. We had twenty to thirty guest experts and 150 workers. We had fights between Arabic and Hebrew news teams about who would be first to broadcast the nightly news from overseas—which was taken off a plane and delivered by motorcycle daily. It was decided that the news in Arabic would be aired first, to which the Hebrew people said, "We are the flagship broadcast, you cannot scoop us." We were broadcasting three nights a week, trial broadcasts. As we approached seven days, two new fights erupted. One, which reached its crisis point after my time, had to do with whether Friday night broadcasting was inappropriate to the Jewish Sabbath; the other over how television should migrate from its relative independence into the IBA—whether the two media and the trade unions should be kept separate or be integrated. By that time, we of course had fallen in love with the idea of maintaining a separate television system. But we lost, rightfully I think. It makes more sense for television to be inside the Broadcasting Authority. And then there was another fight—a "fatal" one this time—with the IBA's board of directors. Since they were going to absorb television, they began to feel that they could vet the guests who were invited to interviews and talk shows. At that point there was a big storm, and we, Uzi Peled and I, basically quit. So there's the

story of Israel television and how Katz got into it, and out of it. But it was thrilling.¹

DG: Did you have a chance to bring into it your scholar's experience?

EK: That's an interesting question. Can Plato's philosopher kings run a country?

DG: Or not even the country—can the philosopher be the one to cast the shadows on the cave's wall?

EK: The answer is maybe, but not because they are Platonic geniuses, but because they could adapt to the basics. A scholar can say, as we did, "No we don't want *I Love Lucy*." In answer to your question, this reminds me that I later wrote a book on broadcasting in the third world and wanted to name it *Waiting for Kojak*. This seemed a good title, for we found in the dozen countries we looked at, that some minister promises to introduce a television system that will improve everything economically, politically, and culturally: that it will develop the economy, help agriculture, create a more democratic society, revive the national theater or whatever—and six months later, the main program is *Kojak*. Co-author Professor George Wedell and Harvard Press, which published the book, agreed on the title and then we got cold feet. We said *Kojak* will go away and nobody will buy the book. But that was a mistake. The book is now called, too primly, *Broadcasting in the Third World*.²

Now let me reverse your question. While I am unsure of how much scholarship made its way into the harried days of erecting a scaffold for a national television system, I am much more certain that the experience of doing so changed my life as a scholar. Upon returning to the university, I discovered that I had developed an interest in the institutional and supply side of television alongside my interest in the social psychology of television effects. And I think I became more global and less local, somehow. My next academic projects all reflected these new interests. Thus, as I mentioned, I co-authored *Broadcasting in the Third World*, the study of "Media Events," and a study of cross-cultural readings of *Dallas*, the soap opera.

DG: Did you take the position with ideas or ideals in mind that television could strengthen democracy, that it can do good?

EK: The moment after the Six Day War was so jubilant, and so hopeful, that the government, especially Minister Galili, thought that television could help make Israel look good to people in the occupied territories, and that was one of the main motives that the government had in giving such a big push and such a big chance to the rapid establishment of television broadcasting. But here is another place—not just *I Love Lucy* and *Kojak*—where the scholar says not so fast, it is not going to happen. It is too much to expect that people are going to love each other because *Sesame Street* is being broadcast in both Hebrew and Arabic. And in fact, the government originally thought there would be more hours of broadcasting in Arabic than in Hebrew, and that seemed wrong symbolically and realistically. So we quickly changed that. I think any professional would oppose heading a national broadcasting service so obviously bent on a being a propaganda machine. On the other hand, there were some glimmers of success in this approach. We created some excellent programs in Arabic, and, after all, the new medium itself was a kind of pleasant surprise to all.

DG: And in this respect, the Israeli television coincides with the occupation and with the goals of the occupation. In television studies, the national setting is so important—national audience, national broadcasting associations, and so on—but recently we see more studies of transnational television. Listening to you now, it seems that the history of Israeli television was so transnational to start with: it meant to compete with messages coming from other countries. It is a history that is framed not strictly within the nation, but in the context of transnational competition, and was shaped according to things that happen in broader frameworks.

EK: But this is true for radio as well. Israeli radio was much more a fighting medium, especially in Arabic. The Foreign Ministry had a big hand in radio broadcasting in Arabic, and it was fighting back and forth arguing with commentators from Arab countries. And it was thought, and I agree with this, that television was a more humane medium. Softer, more human.

DG: That's the most McLuhanesque I've ever heard you. Tell me more: What do you mean by that?

EK: Well, as I say, television shows people.

DG: So the visual dimension is more human?

EK: And also the people dimension. Radio is voices, and more abstract. Television is more concrete, so you can look softer. Although if you look at television now, all you see is people beheading each other. But, unfortunately, that's also very human. It's crazy. And evil. Long ago, I did some research with Hanna Adoni on what difference it makes to add pictures to radio news. One half, with their backs to the television set, heard only the audio, while the other half both listened and viewed. The study found no difference in information obtained and retained, but there was a big difference in emotional reactions. We also know that advertising is more effective when there are people pictured in the ad. But you remind me that I should have kept up with these issues, theoretically and methodologically.

DG: This brings to mind a passage you wrote in the introduction to a special volume of *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, titled "The End of Television?" You write there about changes in contemporary television, which you consider as "reflecting a public opinion that has turned against the professionals who claimed to know, better than we do, what's good for us."³ Dare I hope that after years of studying communication and knowing decades of television history, you did know what can be good in television?

EK: Yes—I am for professionalism, I am not against it. One of the secrets of the BBC is that it had such high prestige that the best people from Oxford and Cambridge got jobs in the BBC and were happy there. Well, they overdid it, and only after commercial broadcasting was established in England did they calm down a little, become less highbrow. But I do believe the public broadcasting needs real professionals, people who study what the audiences like, but also what they need. I have an idea now, but nobody is buying it—to teach Arabic by radio and television, especially now at the moment when some parts of the Likud party are trying to discard Arabic as an official language in Israel. And this is inspired by my occasional consulting work for the BBC. One of the programs during my time was to teach literacy. They asked who wants to study English and people signed up or telephoned, and then for each volunteer to learn English they found a volunteer to

teach English—usually a retired person, ideally somebody who lived next door. And they did a radio series and a pamphlet series to teach literacy. So I think it would be interesting to try to teach Arabic. First, as a statement that Arabic deserves to be—as it now is—an official language, even if you only learn a few words. But I want to do a study of whether this would work, whether there are enough people who would be willing to spend a couple of hours a week learning Arabic from television or radio, and get volunteers who know Arabic and match them with learners by demographics and geography. Now it is easy to match them given the technology. But I haven't done that.

DG: That sounds almost diametrically opposed to the initial idea of Israeli television. Instead of the Jewish establishment speaking in Arabic to the Arab population, you are talking about bringing Arabic to the Hebrew-speaking Jewish population.

EK: I was just talking to Lewis Bernstein, the first graduate of the Institute of Communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who became executive director of Children's Television Workshop in New York. And he still dreams that *Sesame Street* can teach kids to like each other. So there is nothing wrong with continuing to try.

DG: In this short and troubled time in Israeli television, what was your biggest achievement? What were you able to contribute?

EK: First I will tell you the opposite of what I should have done, which is the biggest achievement of Israeli television. Merely a year, or less than a year, after its establishment we did a live broadcast with ten cameras of the Independence Day parade, which was nothing other than marching through occupied East Jerusalem, which was against all of the "make love not war" ideal of television. Even the government should have been against it, but they loved it.

DG: And it was a media event almost per se.

EK: Yeah. And with secondhand equipment, a lot of good luck, and a few experts. It was great. But I am proud that the next night we did Leonard Bernstein and the Israel Philharmonic, which was the first time that most people heard a symphony orchestra.

DG: It sounds like you are happier with the second night.

EK: Well, I am happy with the first too, let's face it. I mean, just as a triumph of accomplishment; I am not happy about the idea of marching through, sending tanks through, East Jerusalem as a symbol of conquest. But for us it was a technological conquest. There were a lot of good things that we did, but they weren't brilliant. For example, we had an archaeology program that was inspired by a program broadcast from the famous ethnology museum at the University of Pennsylvania called "What in the World." It showed an object to a group of experts, archaeologists and historians, and they were asked where it comes from, what's the culture, what's the function, how much is it worth and all that. So we did this program. That's not only communications, but also fun. And it spoke directly to the many fans of biblical archeology in the viewing audience.

DG: Did you have the military parade of 1968 in mind when you wrote your *Media Events* book?⁴

EK: Well, it's hard to say. Maybe. What really triggered it was Sadat's visit. We looked at it at first as media diplomacy, not as a live broadcasting of ceremony. Only gradually did we realize that President Sadat's overture of peace, that the Pope's first pilgrimage to Poland, and the moon landing all had a syntagmatic thing in common.

DG: With this mention of your book *Media Events*, let me turn to some thoughts about the contemporary moment of television. In this book, you and co-writer Daniel Dayan state that, among other things, television programs of this particular kind "preview the future of television." Twenty years later, what do you think about this comment in light of the changes we saw in the media world?

EK: I would correct that. I don't know about "preview the future," but I think the genre which we named "Media Events," thereby saving it from the pejorative meaning often associated with that label, shows the moments that television truly lived up to its promise—the occasions of uniting a whole nation, allowing everybody to feel part of some great national event, burying differences for the moment, feeling a thrill of simultaneity—of actually being

there. On the whole, what was thrilling about television was the coronation of Elizabeth, the moon landing, the coming of Sadat to Jerusalem, the pilgrimage of the Polish Pope and the beginning of the downfall of communist Europe, and so on. That seemed, and still does, to be the high point of the potential of television where everybody is watching, not some self-selected audience, and everybody knows that everybody else is watching and people feel part of it, they feel transported, they feel thrilled. And that is a high moment. But the low moment of the genre comes with the realization that such events are hegemonic. So that's the plus and the minus of media events. And then we went on to sort of step back and discover disruptions as a kind of event that we had ignored purposefully [when writing the book], but we realized that disruptive events were overpowering ceremonial events. An idea of disruption—highlighted by the Twin Towers—now seems more important than the ceremonial events that are the focus of that book. Those were great integrative events, planned and rehearsed. Our focus nowadays on the live coverage of disruptive events also reflects the enhanced mobility of the camera, whereas at the time we wrote the book, from about 1970-something to 1990-something, the idea of a disruptive event broadcast live was pretty unthinkable—although there are exceptions.

DG: And such media events would last after television, as we know it, disappears?

EK: It is one of the few things that might be left of television. In "The End of Television?" volume we all have different meaning to this "end of" cliché, but I mean the end of shared viewing. So that people are no longer sure that the next person has seen the same news the night before. This "gathering" of a nation to view the nightly news, and all the more so to participate in a media event, provides a sense of belonging, and something to talk about with family, neighbors, and even political opponents on the morning after. And now, thanks to the social media, the networks of interpersonal communication can be activated simultaneously, even mobilized for collective action (which has its own problems). Ironically, I'll confuse you by saying that the hard news is almost all the same and there is no reason to have all those news programs. Political segmentation can then follow from an agenda that is shared. I am aware of the objections to this idea, but am willing to defend it.

DG: And from what we see today, more and more on an international scale, the grand media events are the moments that still outlive television.

EK: Yes, except the people are more cynical now. I mean, "Did Charles and Diana really marry on television?" People then were cynical too. "Did they really go to the moon or was it a simulation?" But on the whole, people were more believing in the days of these great media events. But now, after five live broadcasts of summits of Israel-Palestine peace, nobody believes it. So even if those events still reunite the nation or the world, they are somehow less holy, less thrilling.

DG: The "end of television" is something that many people have been writing about. I won't accuse all of them of technological determinism, but a lot of the claims today are based on changed technological capacities. I find comment on this in your writing as early as 1996, when you say, "from the point of participatory democracy, television is dead, almost everywhere" and that it is "like a middle sized video shop" (which are also dead by now!).⁵ I am curious about how you feel about the comment made a decade and a half before making the "End of Television?" volume: "There is nothing in sight to replace television, not even media events or the internet."

EK: I think it is a very nice statement, but the mistake of it is not to have anticipated the social media. It goes in the same direction. It is true that television has fragmented to the point, and I go back to my feeling about the end of television, that no two people are watching the same thing at the same time, that the choice is unlimited. So I think it is correct, I think that television's supply is endless, the timing is now altogether flexible, even if two people watch the same program they don't watch it at the same time, there is a television set in every room by now. Now everybody has a television set in their telephone. So the whole thing fragmented. But that doesn't mean that it is not a thriving industry, it is just that its outlets have changed, and its social significance has changed. The thing I didn't anticipate in that 1996 piece is the idea of inside and outside. In that piece I didn't give much attention to the idea that the effect of television was to move politics inside the home and thus to neutralize participatory politics. So that part of television is gone. I think now television is no longer limited to the home,

no longer limited to a few broadcasts, no longer limited to the family as a viewing unit, so all that has changed. The technology is the same—it is improved with high definition and this and that—but the reception is totally changed. That's what the main change is in my opinion.

DG: Are you interested in social media?

EK: I am interested but I haven't done much. I can't believe that it is relevant politically, but people tell me I am wrong. It happens that it can be used for that, but most everyday Facebook, Twitter, et cetera, seems to be about self, or social networking.

DG: But you do think that social media will find a place among what will concern communication scholars next?

EK: Oh yes. I think too much maybe at the moment; everybody is doing it, and it is very early. But it is interesting. Like the work of Keith Hampton, who's working for Pew. They do these experiments—if you use positive words, then people feel happier, so you can change their mood. That kind of experimentation is interesting. For me the idea of big data is very interesting. It is the latest of the studies of the Small-World type. If you have access to all the tweets of a given month or year, you can follow epidemiologically the spread of flu by what people are writing about themselves. So you can transform this very personal kind of data into bigger things, and that's interesting. There seems to be potential for the study of culture, of public opinion, of happiness, of all kinds of things. Big data is now a fashion in research on social media, and these companies are all participating.

DG: And much like the case of the effects of mass communication, it also has the flip side of exploitation—the power of access to information, either politically or economically, and the reducibility of our personal experiences and shopping habits into numbers.

EK: There is also this "leaks" business, which is interesting. In general the hacking is interesting. It is a form of criticism, which is apparently so out of control, the security part is so impossible. The governments have to worry—I think on the whole it is a positive thing.

DG: These recent changes in the institutions and

technology of television, which make us think of the different forms the medium can take, seem to resonate with what television was (or could be) in its early phases. In the case of Israeli television, as almost everywhere else, television did come into the world as a sister to radio, but at least potentially there were some other possible formats. One idea I particularly find fascinating, which you wrote about in a couple of places, is a television service that does not broadcast 24/7. So I wonder—was it ever possible to have a television service that follows such a different model? Speaking of "previewing the future of television," this idea of broadcasting only when something important occurs is at play in a lot of the new media. Bloggers, for instance, don't blog all the time, but more in the special editions format.

EK: But they are totally accessible all the time. That's a big difference. As is television—I mean time shifting. You can record or call up past broadcasts. Our grandchildren do that exclusively. But why does broadcast television have to be 24/7? What do you get? You are not watching. I know that Poland is supposed to have had a day off when screens were dark. I don't know which day, but that's an interesting idea. Other countries have had shared channels—education, schools, and then general [broadcasts]. And of course there's the question of should you have channels that specialize or generalist channels? So there is a little bit of flexibility, but in my radical idea, which nobody took seriously—including me, I guess—was to broadcast only when you had something to say. But that requires a different kind of behavior because television is based on habit, that at six o'clock I turn on a show, and if it only happens sometimes, I would have to have some other way of finding it out and some way to be sure I am available at that time. So broadcasting is based a lot on habit. Why do we need breakfast television? I still don't understand that.

About the Author

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of Television and the Modern Mediascape, 1878–1939," received an honorable mention for the SCMS dissertation award.

Endnotes

- ¹ On Katz's involvement with the beginnings of Israeli television, see also Elihu Katz, "And Deliver Us from Segmentation," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546 (July 1996): 22-33 [doi:10.1177/0002716296546001003](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716296546001003); and "Television Comes to the People of the Book," in *The Use and Abuse of Social Science*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1971), 249-71.
- ² Elihu Katz and E. G. Wedell, *Broadcasting in the Third World: Promise and Performance* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977).
- ³ Elihu Katz, "The End of Television?" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625 (Sept. 2009): 7. [doi:10.1177/0002716209337796](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209337796)
- ⁴ Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992).
- ⁵ Katz, "And Deliver Us from Segmentation," 24.

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