

Beyond *Marienthal*: The Relationship Between Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Paul F. Lazarsfeld

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In 1960, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and her husband published a new edition of the seminal *Marienthal Study* by Marie Jahoda, Hans Zeisel, and Paul F. Lazarsfeld that had first appeared in Germany in 1933 but had largely been forgotten ever since. In the wake of this publication, which sparked a discovery of Lazarsfeld's pioneering work in German-speaking countries, a mutually inspiring relationship developed between Lazarsfeld and Noelle-Neumann. On the basis of previously unpublished correspondence, the exchange of ideas between the two is retraced in this article. The topics of discussion included methodological issues, such as panel studies; theoretical issues, such as the function of opinion leaders; and institutional issues, such as the respective role of public and private opinion research. The two authors also reflected upon the complementarity of American and European traditions in social research that is exemplified in their collaboration. It may be gathered from the correspondence that Lazarsfeld's research program provided a blueprint for Noelle-Neumann's endeavor to transform German *Publizistikwissenschaft* [science of public communication] from a humanistic into an empirical social scientific discipline.

Keywords: empirical turn in Publizistikwissenschaft; history of communication research; media effects research; opinion leaders; public opinion; spiral of silence

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1916–2010) and Paul F. Lazarsfeld (1901–1976) had several features in common: Both were pioneers in empirical social sciences, conducted groundbreaking methodological work, and exerted a lasting influence in their field; both founded and directed research institutes where they combined commercial and fundamental research; and both were partly outsiders in the academic world.

Lazarsfeld, who had emigrated from Austria to the United States in the 1930s, strove all his life for recognition by the academic establishment. Upon arrival in the United States, he felt like a "marginal man who is part of two different cultures" (Lazarsfeld, 1968, p. 302). When compared to other immigrants, his situation was more difficult because he was neither individually known, like some of the physicists, nor connected with a network, like the psychoanalysts (Lazarsfeld, 1968, p. 302).

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Noelle-Neumann, who had completed her doctoral dissertation *Amerikanische Massenbefragungen über Politik und Presse* [*American Mass Polls about Politics and the Press*] in Berlin in 1940 under the supervision of Emil Dovifat (1890–1969), one of the “founding fathers” of German *Publizistikwissenschaft* [science of public communication], did not at first envision an academic career. Instead, she worked for several years as a journalist¹ until she founded the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach in 1947, one of the first survey institutes in Germany. It was only in 1961, at the age of 45, that she was nominated as lecturer in *Publizistik* at the Freie Universität Berlin, and three years later she was offered a chair at the University of Mainz (Noelle-Neumann, 2006, pp. 221–222). But even then, the Allensbach Institute remained the center of her research activities: She dubbed it her “laboratory” (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to P. F. Lazarsfeld, June 1, 1962, p. 2), where she obtained the empirical data that she presented in her university courses.

Despite sharing similarities, Noelle-Neumann’s and Lazarsfeld’s personalities and trajectories also differed in several respects. To start with, their most important contributions belonged to different periods of time: Lazarsfeld’s by-now-classic writings were published from the 1930s to the 1950s, whereas Noelle-Neumann’s most significant articles and books began to appear in the 1960s. The German edition of her most frequently cited book, *The Spiral of Silence*, came out in 1980, four years after Lazarsfeld passed away.

Moreover, Lazarsfeld was an academic through and through. By his view, universities were the place where fundamental research belonged, and commercial research was a necessary evil that had to be accepted for the sake of fostering academic advances. In contrast, Noelle-Neumann saw her private research institute as a “lab” that could provide services that universities were unable to offer (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to I. Seger, August 19, 1960, pp. 1–2).

In addition, Noelle-Neumann and Lazarsfeld differed significantly in terms of training and talents. Lazarsfeld had studied mathematics in Vienna and was strongly interested in developing sophisticated methods of statistical data analysis. Noelle-Neumann, in contrast, had a background in humanities, was interested in questionnaire formulation and construction, and became a well-connected scientific entrepreneur who was able to formulate research findings in ways that made them accessible to nonexpert audiences, including politicians.

In view of these differences, it is hardly surprising that Noelle-Neumann and Lazarsfeld have rarely been linked to each other in the literature on the history of communication science. However, the two entertained a close personal relationship since the beginning of the 1960s. The development of the relationship is reflected in their correspondence, which is held by the Paul F. Lazarsfeld Archives at the University of Vienna in Austria and the Private Archives of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in Piazzogna, Switzerland.

¹ Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s university studies and journalistic work during the Nazi era have repeatedly elicited controversial debates (e.g., Kepplinger, 1997; Simpson, 1996). The most recent controversy was provoked by Jörg Becker’s biography of Noelle-Neumann that included false allegations and was withdrawn by the publisher (Becker, 2013). A detailed discussion of the allegations, including previously unpublished historical sources, is provided in Schäfer and Schmidt (2021).

Mutual Perception in the Early Years

Noelle-Neumann and Lazarsfeld had taken notice of each other long before they first met in 1960. In her doctoral dissertation published in 1940, Noelle-Neumann cited the article by Lazarsfeld and Wyant (1937) on readership research and the article by Lazarsfeld and Fiske (1938) on the panel method (Noelle, 1940, pp. 160, 164). During the year Noelle-Neumann spent as an exchange student in 1937–1938 at the University of Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia, she conducted an extensive literature search on public opinion, and must have come across Lazarsfeld's articles when going through *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, the only scientific journal on survey methods at that time.

In the 1950s, Noelle-Neumann began to systematically refer to the work of Lazarsfeld and his group of collaborators at Columbia University. In the introductory texts to the yearbooks on public opinion 1947–1955 and 1957 (Noelle & Neumann, 1956, 1957), for instance, Noelle-Neumann referred to six publications by Lazarsfeld and colleagues, including *Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954) and *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

The fact that Noelle-Neumann repeatedly referred to Lazarsfeld at a time when he was still largely unknown in German-speaking countries (Langenbacher, 1990) had to do with her friend Imogen Seger (1915–1995), who played a pivotal role in the relationship between the two (Schäfer & Schmidt, 2021, pp. 917–918). Starting in 1953, Seger spent several years as a doctoral student with Robert K. Merton (1910–2002) at Columbia University—Noelle-Neumann supported her application with a recommendation letter (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to I. Seger, April 10, 1953). As reflected in numerous letters from Seger, she was in close contact with Lazarsfeld and the other members of the Columbia group, and Seger kept Noelle-Neumann updated on the most recent developments (e.g., Seger, I., 1915–1995, Seger to E. Noelle-Neumann, October 15, 1957).

Of note, the early flow of information between the Columbia Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) and the Allensbach Institute was reciprocal: Seger also provided Lazarsfeld and colleagues with publications of Noelle-Neumann and her collaborators. When Erich Peter Neumann, Noelle-Neumann's first husband and cofounder of the Allensbach Institute, first met Lazarsfeld in New York in 1956, Lazarsfeld asked him to forward "very hearty greetings" (Neumann, E. P., 1912–1973, Neumann to E. Noelle-Neumann, October 27, 1956, p. 3) to Noelle-Neumann, explaining that he had already heard a lot about her.

The first meeting between Erich Peter Neumann and Lazarsfeld, which took place in the presence of Seger, was the starting point of a more direct exchange between Noelle-Neumann and Lazarsfeld. One of the reasons Neumann had visited Lazarsfeld in 1956 in New York was that he intended to publish *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) in German. Lazarsfeld agreed and suggested also publishing the follow-up study, *Voting*, in German (Neumann, E. P., 1912–1973, Neumann to E. Noelle-Neumann, October 27, 1956). It is unclear why these two books were eventually not published by Neumann's Verlag für Demoskopie. Instead, he re-edited Lazarsfeld's now-classic study *Die Arbeitslosen von Marienthal* [*Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community*] that had first appeared in Germany in 1933 but had been largely forgotten ever since in the German-speaking countries (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1960).

Period of Personal Exchange

The first meeting between Noelle-Neumann and Lazarsfeld took place on August 18, 1960, near Lucerne, Switzerland, a two-hour drive from Allensbach. Lazarsfeld, who taught classes in a summer school, spontaneously called Noelle-Neumann at her institute, and invited her to come and see him (Noelle-Neumann, 2001). She accepted the surprise invitation and drove to Lucerne in the company of Gerhard Schmidtchen, her leading scientific collaborator. The following day, she sent a detailed report of the meeting to Seger (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to I. Seger, August 19, 1960, p. 1):

We talked for about two hours with Schmidtchen on the shore of Lake Lucerne while we ate and drank coffee, then we did the steep ascent to Mount Rigi. He [Lazarsfeld] imagined that we should easily be able to hike to his hotel that was situated at [an altitude of] a thousand meters, but halfway up rain set in. We took some refreshment at a hostel and made the second part of the stretch to the high plateau by cable railway.

The conversation during this mountain hike must have been an unusually impressive and inspiring experience for both. In their later correspondence, they repeatedly recalled their first meeting on Mount Rigi (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to P. F. Lazarsfeld, October 15, 1960; Lazarsfeld, P. F., 1901–1976, Lazarsfeld to E. Noelle-Neumann, April 23, 1963). In her letter of August 19, 1960, to Seger, Noelle-Neumann related (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to I. Seger, August 19, 1960, p. 1):

You know anyway that Lazarsfeld seemed very charming to me, like a long-familiar conversation partner. I wasn't especially successful in moving him to narrate or discuss. He had a long series of questions I tried to answer. One of our main topics of conversation was the relation between university institute and private institute. Time and again, he was amazed that a private institute like ours was so much involved in methodological research, published so much, was concerned with training issues—all matters that, according to him, universities should really deal with.

Since the hike on Mount Rigi, Noelle-Neumann and Lazarsfeld remained in contact. They kept each other updated on their research activities and projects, sent each other publications, and commented on their manuscripts. They also met on a regular basis—for example, in Allensbach, Berlin, Salzburg, New York, and 1968 in Paris, at the height of the student protests (Noelle-Neumann, 2001). Soon, the tone of their letters became very personal, sometimes intimate. For instance, the closing passage of a handwritten 11-page letter Lazarsfeld composed in Jerusalem and in Windsor on April 5 and 23, 1963, reads as follows (Lazarsfeld, P. F., 1901–1976, Lazarsfeld to E. Noelle-Neumann, p. 11):

En attendant, ma chère collègue, veuillez accepter les expressions de mes sentiments les plus respectueux et amoureux. When I was 16 years old, I was very much impressed by a girl called Elisabeth. She was called Lise. Good night, Lise.

And in a letter Noelle-Neumann sent to Lazarsfeld from Allensbach on July 30, 1968, she wrote (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to P. F. Lazarsfeld, p. 1):

You asked me “Why?” Why the joy of reunion? Because genius enchants. It is incredible to witness time and again how it emerges from you. At one point I told you suddenly: One has to embrace you for what you just said.

In 1963, Noelle-Neumann sent him the manuscript *Meinung und Meinungsführer* [*Opinion and Opinion Leaders*], where she referred in detail to *The People’s Choice* (Noelle-Neumann, 1963, pp. 318–319). The manuscript was an extended version of a presentation she had given at the Faculty of Law and Economics of the University of Mainz, where she was later nominated as professor of *Publizistik* (Noelle-Neumann, 2006, pp. 217–219). Lazarsfeld replied with a long letter suggesting several modifications and additions (Lazarsfeld, P. F., 1901–1976, Lazarsfeld to E. Noelle-Neumann, April 23, 1963).

Noelle-Neumann also sent him the manuscript of her inaugural lecture, which was published in German in 1966. Lazarsfeld tried to have the manuscript published in *The Public Opinion Quarterly* but failed (Lazarsfeld, P. F., 1901–1976, Lazarsfeld to E. Noelle-Neumann, June 7, 1968). She later mailed him the paper she had presented at the 20th International Congress of Psychology in Tokyo in 1972, which was the very first publication on the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to P. F. Lazarsfeld, August 24, 1972).

Noelle-Neumann also commented on Lazarsfeld’s publications. In 1969, for instance, he sent her his autobiographical *Memoir* with a personal dedication (Lazarsfeld, 1968). She studied the text thoroughly and shared her impressions in a long and detailed letter (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to P. F. Lazarsfeld, April 9, 1969). In 1972, she related that she had discussed his contributions to media effects research, especially *The People’s Choice*, in several lectures of her course at the University of Mainz (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Noelle-Neumann to P. F. Lazarsfeld, August 24, 1972). The manuscripts of her university courses show that she dedicated three consecutive lectures on June 27, July 4 and 7, 1972, to Lazarsfeld’s research. She began her lecture of July 4 with the words (Noelle-Neumann, E., 1916–2010, Lecture manuscript, July 4, 1972): “The study *People’s Choice* shows how inspiring broadly based empirical research can be, it illustrates the alternating steps of empirical data and theory. Almost each of the eight key findings [. . .] sparked a scientific development” (p. 1). She then confronted the key findings with data from the Allensbach Institute, and it emerges from her notes that Lazarsfeld’s eight-point summary provided her with a grid that oriented her own research and theorizing in the 1960s and 1970s. In the commemorative talk she gave in Vienna in 1988, “*The People’s Choice—Revisited*,” the eight-point grid emerged again as the basic structure of her review of empirical research (Noelle-Neumann, 1990). She concluded with the words (Noelle-Neumann, 1990, p. 154):

Now at the end, you may understand my admiration for Lazarsfeld and *The People’s Choice*. We are far away from a feeling of know-it-all. [Rather we are] fulfilled with the experience of scientific inspiration in a cumulative research process, [in the] favorite words of Lazarsfeld: continuity in social research.

The last personal meeting between the two took place in Salzburg in 1974 at a roundtable discussion on *The Electronic Revolution* that the Austrian Public Radio ORF had organized (Noelle-Neumann, 2001). In this discussion, they defended two different views on media effects. Lazarsfeld voiced his support for “reinforcement theory,” which was very popular at that time. By his view, media could only reinforce preexisting attitudes but could not change them. He explained the reinforcement with selective perception: People preferentially perceive what is in accord with their existing attitudes; they cling to their opinions because changing them would cause them to lose their friends. Noelle-Neumann disagreed, as she recollected in an autobiographical text that was published 27 years later (Noelle-Neumann, 2001):

People don't live in isolation, they live in cliques. If the opinion leader of a clique changes his or her opinion—perhaps under the influence of the tenor of the mass media—he or she leads the other members of the clique over to the new attitude. No one need fear that changing their attitude will cause them to lose their most precious possession—their social bonds—since they and the other members of the clique change their opinion simultaneously (p. 320).

Lazarsfeld responded: “I hadn't thought of it that way before, but perhaps you're right” (Noelle-Neumann, 2001, p. 320). Noelle-Neumann retrospectively commented: “It sounded strangely sad, as if he had come to the end of his life as a scientist and sensed that I would now go on without him” (Noelle-Neumann, 2001, p. 320).

Lasting Legacies

In light of their correspondence, it becomes evident that Noelle-Neumann and Lazarsfeld played prominent roles in each other's lives, albeit in different ways. In the 1960s, Noelle-Neumann endeavored to transform German *Publizistikwissenschaft* from a humanistic into an empirical social scientific discipline (Löblich, 2007). In the debates surrounding this shift, she systematically relied on Lazarsfeld's studies and her own research to demonstrate how the field could be advanced through application of empirical methods (Noelle-Neumann, 1963).

The relationship with Lazarsfeld also left its traces in the applied research of the Allensbach Institute. At the end of the 1960s, the Institute began to systematically use panel surveys in market and voting research (e.g., Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 1969). In her book on survey research published in 1963, Noelle-Neumann had mentioned the panel method only tangentially (Noelle, 1963, pp. 149–151). It is therefore likely that Lazarsfeld's panel studies, *The People's Choice, Voting, and Personal Influence*, contributed to this development. His influence is even more obvious when it comes to research on opinion leaders: Noelle-Neumann's approach, which was explicitly based on his findings, ultimately led to the development of the Scale of Personality Strength that seeks to identify opinion leaders (Noelle-Neumann, 2002).

Without Noelle-Neumann's recurrent reference to his research, Lazarsfeld would probably not have gained the scientific status he enjoys to the present day in German communication science. As Löblich (2007) pointed out in a historical review, the “influence of US-American mass communication research on the development of the discipline in Germany since the 1960s can hardly be overestimated” (p. 83) and “Noelle-

Neumann paved the way for [. . .] having taken the US as an orientation”—and the single most influential scientific source of inspiration in her life and especially at that time was Lazarsfeld, as Noelle-Neumann (2001) emphasized herself (p. 317). His pioneering work provided her with a blueprint for a program to advance the field methodologically, theoretically, and institutionally, thereby contributing to the empirical turn of communication science in Germany in the 1960s.

Importantly, though, Lazarsfeld did not advocate a blind, antihumanistic, behavioristic empiricism (e.g., Lazarsfeld, 1968, pp. 319–320). Rather, he proposed a combination of humanistic and empirical traditions because he conceived of them as complementary. In his letter of April 5 and 23, 1963, to Noelle-Neumann, he expressed his ideal as follows (Lazarsfeld, P. F., 1901–1976, Lazarsfeld to E. Noelle-Neumann, pp. 9–10): “That raises the U.S.A.–Europe question. Of course, you first need to catch up where we are ahead. But maybe you can do in 3 years what took us 30 years—and then you can do what we neglected.”

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