Analysis of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s First “Fireside Chat”

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Franklin D. Roosevelt became the president of the United States in 1933. At this time, the U.S. was amid suffering from the Great Depression which began in 1929. Americans were in panic mode and everyone began withdrawing money from their bank accounts. To stop the disorder, Roosevelt closed all banks for a brief “holiday” while the government figured out what to do next (“FDR Biography” par. 7). To keep the public informed about what the next steps were, Roosevelt hosted a radio speech known as the “Fireside Chat.” He continued these chats throughout his term as president as the U.S. recovered from the Great Depression and then the U.S.’s involvement with World War II. The first one, however, focuses on the banking crisis. He gives listeners an update on the situation and outlines his plan to help the nation recover. In the first “Fireside Chat,” Roosevelt is successful in getting his message across by relying heavily on an emotional connection with the listeners while also using his strong credibility to map out the future of the country during the Great Depression.

To become the president of the United States, one needs to have a lot of education and experience. Roosevelt graduated from Harvard with a history degree in three years. He then went on to study law at Columbia University and worked at a law firm once he passed the bar exam. In 1910 he was elected to the New York Senate as a Democrat and then in 1928 he became the governor of New York before starting his presidential campaign. He won in 1932 and was president until his death on April 12, 1945 (“FDR Biography” par. 6). Although he was just inaugurated into office when he makes this speech, he has a lot of knowledge and previous experience which makes him a credible speaker.

Roosevelt does a good job of connecting to the audience through emotion. Since this was before television, one of the most effective ways to reach out to the public was through the radio. “In 1930, more than 40 percent of American households owned a radio. A decade later that number more than doubled, to 83 percent” (Smith par. 3). Roosevelt can reach the widest audience possible through radio for his fireside chats. He starts off his address by saying, “I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking—with the comparatively few who understand the mechanics of banking but more particularly with the overwhelming majority who use banks for the making of deposits and the drawings of checks” (Roosevelt 00:23). Starting the speech by acknowledging the listener’s role is important because it makes them feel heard. He also takes the time to explain exactly what the bank does with everyone’s money to make sure the audience understands the context of the bank (Roosevelt 1:26). He is showing that he recognizes the audience’s position and he wants to make sure everyone is on the same page. When everyone is on the same page it makes for a more comfortable and open conversation.

Throughout the address he also uses a lot of positive words to instill confidence and optimism back in the listeners, “No sound bank is a dollar worse off than it was when it closed its doors last Monday...I am confident that the state banking departments will be as careful as the national government in the policy relating to the opening of banks and will follow the same broad policy” (Roosevelt 4:43; 7:51). This is effective because citizens were under a lot of stress during this difficult time. Roosevelt is making the listeners feel welcomed and is giving them hope for the future. In times of crisis, like the Great Depression, it is easy for the country to lose hope and give up on its leader and government. Roosevelt recognizes that by saying, “I know that many people are worried about state banks not members of the Federal Reserve System” (7:10). After being honest with the listeners, he tries to build the confidence back up, “the phantom of fear will soon be laid...I can assure you that it is safer to keep your money in a reopened bank than under the mattress” (8:43; 8:55). The reassurance he gives the audience is effective because he is now getting everyone back on his side. As a new president, it is important to have the support of as many citizens as possible, especially during a hard time like the Great Depression.

In his appeal to logic, Roosevelt does make a lot of statements regarding the banks and the government. There are a few statements that could be considered general knowledge such as, “Because of undermined confidence on the part of the public, there was a general rush by a large portion of our population to turn bank deposits into currency or gold. A rush so great that the soundest banks could not get enough currency to meet the demand” (Roosevelt 2:38). This can be considered public knowledge because the citizens listening were the ones who were talked about. Still, in the speech Roosevelt does not include any statistics or say where any information is from. It is unlikely, however, that the lack of citations affects the audience because he is the president and he does have strong credibility. The listeners have reasons to trust his statements.

To fully understand how effective Roosevelt’s use of logos is, you must understand the medium in which he is addressing the country. While talking on the radio to millions of listeners, citing sources in the middle of a speech is not always a typical practice, unlike citing in a book or article. In some speeches there might be a citation page at the end; however, at the end of Roosevelt’s speech transcript there were no citations provided (Roosevelt). It is understandable if Roosevelt didn’t include sources while he was talking because he didn’t want to distract from his message, which relies heavily on emotional appeal, but there were no citations at the end to indicate where he got any outside information from. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the audience still has reason to believe what he is saying.

When analyzing logos, you also must look at the time period in which the source comes from. In the 1900s it was not as important to cite sources because it was much harder to find the information in the first place:

Access [to books and periodicals] was limited by the in-house collection and/or the luxury of time to order the title from Interlibrary Loan... Access [to historical information] usually meant a journey to the place that housed archives and special collections on a specific topic. Interlibrary Loan was usually not an option for items such as state documents or one-of-a-kind publications. (“Research Before the Internet and After the Internet”)

Access to information that Roosevelt discussed during the speech was very hard to come by at that time. As the president, Roosevelt got access to information that the everyday person would not because of his position of power. If someone wanted to check where he got his information from, it would take them a lot of work to do so due to the technology at the time. Because of the circumstances in that time period, citing sources was not the main priority. In the current time period, however, people have access to a lot more information than in 1933. These days it is crucial to cite information because reliability continues to get more and more important. Even though speakers do not usually cite sources in the middle of their speech, the current audience still can look up the information themselves because of the newest technology. Looking back on the information stated in the first “Fireside Chat,” everything is accurate, though at the time the audience would have had a hard time finding that out for themselves due to the fact that today there is a lot more emphasis on reliable sources and better technology than in 1933.

Although for most of the speech Roosevelt talks about the solution and the future of the United States, he also takes the time to recognize the problems with the U.S. banking system, “We had a bad banking situation. Some of our bankers had shown themselves either incompetent or dishonest in their handling of the people’s funds...It was the Government’s job to straighten out this situation and do it as quickly as possible—and the job is being performed” (Roosevelt 10:31; 11:11). Because the purpose of this speech is not meant to share an opinion on a topic but rather have a conversation and address an issue, there cannot be a counterclaim because there is no original claim. Although this is not a counterclaim, he still takes time to acknowledge and accept the faults of the government while also reassuring the audience that things will get better. Taking the time to address the faults of the government enhances Roosevelt’s pathos as well. It is much easier for the audience to listen to what he has to say after he acknowledges the issue rather than Roosevelt trying to deny the issue or sweep it under the rug.

The first “Fireside Chat” was the first of many radio talks Roosevelt gave during his 12-year presidential term (“FDR Biography”). The Great Depression was in full force and it was Roosevelt’s job to save the country. To keep citizens informed, he started the “Fireside Chats” so he could relay information to the public directly from the White House. Although the appeal to logic during the first “Fireside Chat” is complicated, Roosevelt is successful when he connects emotionally to the listener while also using his credibility to instill hope in the audience for the future.