Roosevelt, the Radio, and Fireside Chats

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The Great Depression was a time of considerable uncertainty for Americans. One out of every four workers were unemployed and the banks failed, leaving many Americans without an income or their life savings. During the Depression, the nation's leaders became more and more distant from the average citizen. Americans were wary, distraught, scared and "many found it hard to understand why the Depression had occurred and why it could not be resolved."[1] However, this uncertain sentiment of the American people changed when Franklin D. Roosevelt entered office in 1933, four years after the start of the Depression. President Roosevelt's use of the radio at the end of the Great Depression and the beginning of his time in office brought politics into the home on a personal level, where it would stay for years to come. Roosevelt used the radio in such a way that his talks made sense to listeners. He made politics accessible and understandable, allowing Americans to feel safe, confident and informed during a time of great uncertainty. Roosevelt regularly took to the radio to make comprehensive, informative speeches comfortingly named "Fireside Chats." The purpose of his Fireside Chats was to simply inform citizens of the current political and economic situation in the United States. Roosevelt's goal was to share what the government was doing to improve the situation and to reassure citizens that they were being taken care of. He wanted citizens to know that there was a plan of action during a time when people felt that they were starved of information and scared for their economic and personal well-being. Roosevelt's first Fireside Chat, broadcast across America on March 12, 1933, was centered around the banking crisis at the end of the Depression. Roosevelt took the time to explain in simple terms how banks work,

[1] Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/americans-react-to-great-depression/

something the average American was most likely not fully aware of. He spelled out what had gone wrong, why people couldn't withdraw all their money, why the government had imposed a multi-day national bank holiday, and what steps were being taken next. Throughout the talk, Roosevelt worked to rebuild the public's trust and confidence in the bank as well as in the government. In analyzing the first Fireside Chat, we can see how Roosevelt took a personal and comforting approach to inform his citizens as well as to make them feel confident in his leadership and personally close to him in a time when leaders had been distancing themselves from the public.

Roosevelt took advantage of the radio as a popular and accessible medium of communication to get his messages out to as many Americans as possible while also giving citizens easy access to politics. "For the first time in the 1930s, the majority of Americans had access to broadcasting" as "the price of radio receivers plummeted during the decade" (Lenthall 2007). Roosevelt was well aware of the growing popularity of the radio in the 1920s and '30s, even saying "to one radio executive that 'nothing since the creation of the newspaper has had so profound an effect on our civilization as radio'" (Kiewe 2007, 20). Whereas in the past and in other administrations, speeches were broadcast from a public venue, Roosevelt used the radio in a different way. He delivered his Fireside Chats from his home, the White House, and his chats "were uniquely designed to suit the formal and ideological requirements of network broadcasting" (Loviglio 2005,7). Instead of using the radio as a secondary tool to make events such as public speeches available to more people, Roosevelt recognized the power the radio had and developed speeches, or chats, specifically for the radio. He mirrored the easy-going, friendly, and conversational style of typical radio discourse, frequently using 'I', 'you,' and 'we' "to develop a special relationship between the people and [himself]" (Kiewe 2007, 21). For example,

at the beginning of his first Fireside Chat, Roosevelt says, “I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days…” (Fireside Chat 1). This immediately establishes a personal rapport between each individual listener and Roosevelt. This friendly style of broadcasting, combined with the fact that Roosevelt broadcast from his own home, created a feeling of comfort and personability for listeners that made Fireside Chats something people looked forward to listening to. Roosevelt also made politics more accessible and easier to listen to. Instead of simply relaying public political speeches that were tailored to a live audience over the radio, Roosevelt developed his own political speeches specifically for the radio that were comprehensive, personal, and easy to listen to. At the time of Roosevelt’s first broadcast, 19.3 million, or about 40%, of households in the United States owned a radio[2] but those who didn’t own a radio yet were still eager to listen to Roosevelt’s chats. Non-radio owners would find ways to listen, either with neighbors or by gathering in public places (Lenthall 2007). In this way, almost everyone could find a way to listen, regardless of class or income. And so, by using such an accessible mode of communication, and using it in such a way that people felt compelled to tune in, Roosevelt was able to reach almost every American with his Fireside Chats.

Roosevelt was also able to reach almost every American intellectually, making politics accessible and understandable for all, regardless of education. He did so by using common terms and words, and by making a point of explaining his policies and the current economic and political situation in a direct manner so that anyone could understand. The majority of Americans at the time were not familiar with the specific rhetoric and vocabulary that went along with politics and economics, so Roosevelt had to “find a language that appealed to many citizens and

[2] US Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage_archive/2015/march_2015.html#:~:text=At%2096.2%20percent%2C%20Massachusetts%20led,and%20a%20television%20in%201958

avoided alienating anyone. He thus used simple words, choosing from a limited number of some 1,000 most common words in the English language" (Kiewe 2007, 21). So, in addition to sharing information in a direct manner in a time when information was hard to come by, Roosevelt was making this information understandable and accessible for all listeners. In this excerpt from Roosevelt's first Fireside Chat on the banking crisis in March of 1933, it can clearly be seen that he directly explains how banks work and also uses simple and understandable language for the average citizen:

> First of all, let me state the simple fact that when you deposit money in a bank the bank does not put the money into a safe deposit vault. It invests your money in many different forms of credit-bonds, commercial paper, mortgages and many other kinds of loans. In other words, the bank puts your money to work to keep the wheels of industry and of agriculture turning around. A comparatively small part of the money you put into the bank is kept in currency—an amount which in normal times is wholly sufficient to cover the cash needs of the average citizen (Fireside Chat 1).

Roosevelt gets right to the point and directly "state[s] the simple fact" of what banks actually do with their client's money, and he does so using simple and literal terms. Although he goes on to use some more complicated banking terms such as "credit-bonds," "commercial paper" and "mortgages," Roosevelt sums it up once again using more common terms to explain that the bank invests clients' money in order to "keep the wheels of industry and of agriculture turning around." Whereas most people don't know the jargon that goes with banking, this common expression of keeping the wheels turning was widely understood. So by using it, Roosevelt was able to explain banking in a more comprehensible way. This excerpt is also another example of using personal dialect to make the listener feel as though they are being spoken to directly in a personal manner: "let *me* state," "invests *your* money," "puts *your* money to work," "the money

you put in." In all, by using direct and simple language, Roosevelt was able to make listeners feel more educated, informed and certain about their future.

By giving chats specifically formulated for the radio that used easy-to-understand language, Roosevelt created an enjoyable, reassuring listening experience for his audience. In addition to the content of his broadcasts, the idea of having Roosevelt's voice in one's own home—by the fire—made listeners feel as if they had a personal relationship with Roosevelt. In a letter from a listener in New York to the White House, this sentiment is clear: "you are more than just another President, in that your willingness to put plain facts in a plain way before the people brings you real close to their fireside, and creates a warmth in their hearts for you, such as they have for a real good friend" (Loviglio 2005, 2). Roosevelt was very good at making listeners feel close to him: "For Roosevelt, effective leadership meant the projection of emphatic and active leadership attributes. Roosevelt presented himself as a caring president who understood the people's apprehension" (Kiewe 2007, 75). In his chat on the banking crisis, Roosevelt "recognize[d] that the many proclamations from State Capitols and from Washington, the legislation, the Treasury regulations, etc., couched for the most part in banking and legal terms should be explained for the benefit of the average citizen" (Fireside Chat 1). Roosevelt understood that people were scared and uncertain and didn't understand what was happening to the banks. He recognized that previous statements given by the government did not alleviate that fear because they were too complex. So, he took it upon himself to be an active leader and explain in a way the "average citizen" would understand exactly what was happening. One way Roosevelt made sure he was understood was by using blunt and direct language. Although his chat on the banking crisis was meant to raise people's confidence in the government, he clarifies that what the government is doing will not be a simple fix for all economic problems: "I do not

promise you that every bank will be reopened or that individual losses will not be suffered" (Fireside Chat 1). Roosevelt also maintained an intimate mode of address that made listeners feel as if they were being spoken to directly. He ends his first chat saying that the banking crisis "is your problem no less than it is mine. Together we cannot fail" (Fireside Chat 1). By being both intimate and direct in his chats, Roosevelt created a comfortable listening experience that Americans loved. Multiple listener accounts describe listening to Roosevelt over the radio as chatting with a friend (Loviglio 2005, 1-3). Some listeners also wrote about how they enjoyed that Roosevelt took the time to explain his policies in simple terms and in a friendly and open way, and others enjoyed how he used "plain and forceful language" in explaining how he was "tackling the job [the listener and his] fellow citizens gave to him" (3). By making listeners feel both comfortable and informed, Roosevelt invited them to bring public issues into the domestic, private space: bring politics into the home and become part of an "intimate public."[3] And by using such an accessible medium of communication as the radio, Roosevelt was able to reach virtually every American and invite them into this new space that combined public and private life.

Because Roosevelt used the radio to enter into American homes and explain the political climate of America in a time of great uncertainty, he made politics accessible and understandable for all listeners. Roosevelt tailored his chats to the radio as a medium using a personal mode of address which encouraged people to listen to his broadcasts. He was direct in explaining his policies and actions as president so listeners could clearly see the change he was enacting in the leadership position they had given him, and he only used simple and clear language so that all

[3] Loviglio (2005) defines the "intimate public" as the site where public life and private life temporarily merge to form a national community. Listeners of the Fireside Chats are a part of an "intimate public" that merges private home life and the public, shared experience of listening to Roosevelt discuss public politics over the radio.

listeners could understand his policies and explanations and feel secure with him as their president. Through his Fireside Chats, Roosevelt also created a standard in politics that we still see today. Politicians use social media to explain their policies and the current situation in an accessible and intimate way every day, making politics available to almost all people, regardless of age, social status, or income, just like Roosevelt did with the radio.

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