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HSS 126

8 May 2019

The Modern President

We live in constant changing environment. Every single day, new emerging technologies are constructed, unveiled and introduced to our society, each one holding the possibility to change the world. In the past 15 years alone, we have seen an absolute explosion rock our society with consumer level technological advances. Today, every person is clicking, browsing, typing, chatting, tweeting and beeping as it is almost impossible to find someone without a smart device in their pocket. These devices that we have developed our entire way of life around are our own personal gateways to the outside world. We are always connected, through airwaves and internet social media. We can thank the late 2000s for this, especially 2007, with the release of the first iPhone and 2006 with the release of Twitter. This isn’t an uncommon theme in American history, however. We can see the same kind of technological explosion when the television became the primary source of communication in American homes in the 1950s (Baughman) or when radio took over American houses in the 1920s (Bryson). These advances reshape and rethink American life, industry, and politics and we can see this to extremely evident with two very notable American presidents. In the 1930s President Franklin Delano Roosevelt made use of the very common American household radio to broadcast important talks into American homes. In a very similar manner, current President Donald Trump uses internet social media, mainly Twitter, to reach Americans on a more personal level. FDR and Donald Trump both used modern everyday communication practices of their time to connect with American people on a personal level which was unprecedented by Presidents and politicians of their time, before them. These acts revolutionized the modern methods of political communication and helped create two extremely imminent presidents with huge and powerful presences.

First and foremost, history must be revisited to fully understand the bridge between Former President FDR and President Trump. FDR was elected in 1933, during the times of the Great Depression. Americans had lost faith in their failing banks and morale in the country was at an all-time low. FDR decided to talk with the American people in a level way and “took to the airwaves and explained to an anxious public exactly what he was going to do” (Giardina). This was the birth of the 31 separate radio broadcasts FDR would conduct to talk to the American people known as the Fireside Chats. Held at nighttime, these chats would become a revolutionary way for FDR to speak to Americans directly, not through the press or any other middle man medium, from directly within their homes. Americans did not have to rally at an FDR speech or read a paper or an interview with the President. FDR included details about the Great Depression, World War II, his plans for turning America around and other key issues as the chats continued from 1933 to 1944 throughout FDR’s time as president. (The Record).

FDR’s predecessor, President Herbert Hoover, could not incite the American people the same way that FDR was able to in order to make what needed to happen be done to fix the nation’s financial status. It seemed that he “did not appreciate the importance of the public’s faith, lacked the capacity to restore it, or both” (Giardina). Roosevelt understood public perception unlike Hoover and sought to fix the public faith in the country. To do this he issued the first Fireside Chat two weeks after taking office and “By entering their homes and speaking directly to them via the radio, Roosevelt made it clear to the average citizen that he not only understood their situation, but also that he cared about them” (Giardina). These chats helped Roosevelt to connect with each American citizen on a personal level in a method and way never seen before by a President and thus he was able to restore the average citizen’s faith in the country, its leaders, government and banks and help turn around the banking crisis and Great Depression.

In modern times, many Americans, although access has never been easier, do not rely on the radio for everyday communication and transmission. It is much simpler to pull out the small supercomputer that resides in most Americans’ pockets and open up a social media app. The radio also does not notify the user when a new story is released, or a celebrity figure pushes a new tweet. The smartphone does this, and it ensures that we are always certainly connected to the digital world. In mere seconds a person can open Twitter and bounce between tweets from several users as once and take in a plethora of communication and information. Celebrities and news outlets have taken this into account when evolving their public presence and take to Tweeting and pinging to get their news to millions of users instantaneously. Oddly enough, until the emergence of a presidential-hopeful Donald Trump in 2015, politicians used social media for a simple presence to spread their agendas. Twitter “offers something of an unmediated connection with politicians” (Foster) which allows politicians like Donald Trump to reach the American people in a more personal way. Donald Trump and his presidential campaign took to twitter to begin spreading his message to the American public. Receiving incredible amounts of critics from mass media, Twitter became a favorable, unmediated platform where Trump could convey his message to his supporters and other American people without contest. This is also evident in person as Trump favored holding large campaign rallies in key areas around the country. This, similar to Twitter, gave Trump a personal speaking platform where he could connect on a personal level with his supporters.

The use of Twitter as a presidential candidate drew much criticism as the manner that Trump used it in was thought to be “volatile” (Pearce) and it “breaks presidential norms” (Shear). However, it can be easily argued that this breaking of presidential norms is what made President Trump’s Twitter personality so popular with the average American citizen. According to the LA Times, a particular supporter of President Trump noted that “it seems that other politicians have ‘specialists’ managing their social media accounts” and also notes that “The things he tweets…. I think what he says is what a lot of people think but are afraid to say” (Pearce). These kinds of comments from supporters show that the way that President Trump’s unique Twitter use resonates with his supporters and connects with American citizens. Trump acknowledges his unique use of Twitter and social media as “not Presidential – its MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL.” (@readDonaldTrump) which couldn’t be truer when we openly compare his use of Twitter to FDR’s use of his Fireside chats.

Tweets are naturally short, the entire point of them is to be small quick messages for small, real time, blogging. Twitter’s character limit used to be 140 characters, but they have recently updated it to 280 characters (Twitter). This makes it simply, fast and efficient to communicate. FDR often kept his Fireside Chats “relatively short, ranging from 15 to 45 minutes” (The Record). These relatively short chats were short enough to tune into and yet long enough to deliver a message directly into the homes of American citizens, extremely similar to how Twitter operates today and how President Trump has used it throughout his political career. You can also measure the success of the FDR chats “in the millions of letters that Americans wrote to the president” (The Record). FDR resonated with the people and they let him know. Twitter has its own feedback system through likes and retweets that one could use to measure the success of a tweet. Trump’s tweets, even those dating back into his presidential campaign days, range from thousands of retweets and likes, to tens of thousands of retweets and likes and hundreds of thousands of retweets and likes. The feedback from Twitter users and the letters FDR received do show the appreciate of their supporters in their efforts to communicate and a home level with the American people. Trump and FDR also shared a promoted usage of words like “you” and “we” and “our” (The Record) (@readDonaldTrump) which helped to create a sense of national identity and unity between American people and their country when discussing national issues, statuses or general feelings. This kind of language is meant to communicate directly with the American people and put the president at the same personal level as the citizen. When the president communicates with a term such as “Do you believe this?” (@realDonaldTrump), it shows that the President is talking to the citizen as an equal and this resonates, as present times and history shows, with the American citizen.

The President of the United States must be able to connect and resonate with the people of the United States or they will never truly be successful. The modern president will be able to do this making use of everyday tools made available to the average citizen. Through the use of radio, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was able to enter every American home at the same time and resonate with his supporters, much in the same way current President Donald Trump is able to send out tweets to American phones and computers to directly communicate and resonate with his supporters. Both men revolutionized political communication and set precedents for the act and built a tremendous presence in American life with it. It would only be assumed that in the future, the political use of social media, Twitter especially, will be completely different and there will be many politicians attempting to do what President Trump has done with Twitter and President Roosevelt accomplished with radio. Technology changes our lives every single day and as we in our society evolve with it, our leadership must as well if we are to be a nation whose government is a government for the people, by the people.

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