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Discovering a Purpose in a Listening Democracy: The People's Voice in 1930s/40s America

By Celeste Nunez

Abstract: From the 1930s through the mid-1940s, the people of America witnessed two of the most traumatic events in American history, the Great Depression and Second World War. During these two decades, the people turned to radio as their form of "escape" allowing them to forget about the events happening around them. Radio culture in America began to explode with nearly twenty-eight million households owning a radio by the end of 1939. Franklin Delano Roosevelt utilized this technology to reach out to the American people and discuss the events occurring not only around the world but also in their backyards.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt served as President of the United States from 1933 until his death in 1945. He created a relationship with the citizens of America that no other President could accomplish before all through the medium of radio. But how? My research analyzes FDR's Fireside Chats through the perception of the people by analyzing the letters that they sent to him immediately after each of his broadcasts. I look at not only the positive letters but also the negative in order to display how the Fireside Chats created a feeling of purpose and the idea of an active democracy for both political parties.

After careful examination of the letters, I concluded that the diction of FDR's broadcasts created a space that 'welcomed' the listener to participate in the conversation and that the structure and diction of the letters responded to him as if they were a part of the American political network.

At ten o'clock all playing ceased, while each and every one strained forward to catch the least inflection of your magnetic and inspiring voice...I can't help writing you to thank you. You said you couldn't perform miracles - but you have...¹

Letters containing statements like these were written by thousands of Americans and sent to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's office with at least eight thousand letters delivered daily.² In 1929, the Great Depression had begun the stock market crash and bank panics. By the time Roosevelt took office in March of 1933, the Great Depression was in full effect and Americans looked towards their new leader to relieve them of economic disaster after President Hoover had tried and failed to do just that. Americans felt powerless, with hundreds of thousands of workers being laid off daily.³ Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office during one of the most difficult times in American history but, with his experience in broadcast radio that he utilized in his governorship, he could communicate with the people and lift them out of social crisis.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt served as the thirty-second president of the United States and is often known as the president who led the country to victory both economically and militaristically because of the success he had after taking office during the great depression and into the second World War. Roosevelt's presidency lasted twelve years, starting in the middle of the Great Depression until his death in 1945. The world knew him as a leader who collaborated with Britain's Winston Churchill and the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin, making up the "The Big

¹ Marguerite Harper, New York (1933). Letter written in response to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's *Fireside Chat* on "The Currency Situation" delivered on October 10, 1933.

² "Letters to Franklin Delano Roosevelt." American RadioWorks. November 10, 2014. <http://www.americanradioworks.org/segments/letters-to-franklin-delano-roosevelt/>.

³ *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*. Netflix, PBS 2014. Ep. 5. The background information on the beginning of Franklin Roosevelt's life as President of the United States.

Three,” to create a post-war peace organization known as the United Nations.⁴ Scholars look at his political and economic accomplishments as his continuing legacy instead of focusing on the people who continue to carry his legacy. How the American people saw Roosevelt is different than how people around the world saw him. By looking into the letters sent to Roosevelt, we can receive a deeper understanding of the legacy Roosevelt leaves behind on American history.

The radio played an essential role in 1930s American culture with many Americans compiling what limited money they had in order to acquire a small radio. At the start of the 1930s, twelve million households owned at least one radio and by 1939 it more than doubled to twenty-eight million homes owning a radio.⁵ The radio provided a sense of ‘escape’ for the average citizen during this decade, allowing them to “transport to another dimension” when radio dramas broadcasted.⁶ These radio dramas often aired in the evenings and families would gather around the radio listening to the show. The sounds and the effects the shows created built a personalized experience, allowing the listener to imagine anything they desired. This radio culture in America gave Roosevelt a favorable medium to connect with the American people via radio broadcasting. He called his airtime: *Fireside Chats*.⁷

Roosevelt’s *Fireside Chats* called for active participation in government affairs by bringing the discussion of politics and policies to the American people. The idea of creating an active participation in conversation through radio transmission is just

⁴ Editors, History.com. “Franklin D. Roosevelt.” History.com. October 29, 2009. <https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/franklin-d-roosevelt>.

⁵ “Radio in the 1930s.” PBS.

<https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/radio-in-the-1930s/>.

⁶ Neil Verma. *Theater of the Mind* (University of Chicago Press: IL, 2012).

⁷ Fireside Chats were Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s radio broadcasts that he would utilize in his presidency in order to discuss topics such as the Emergency Banking Act, the recession, New Deal initiatives, and WWII. Not only did Roosevelt talk about American policies, he would also use his airtime as a way to settle any rumors and explain, in great detail, his plans for the United States.

that, an idea. Roosevelt's phrasing throughout his broadcasts set the foundation for people to feel as if they could actively participate in government activities by "inviting them to a friendly fireside chat."⁸ By analyzing the letters written to Roosevelt in response to his *fireside chat* broadcasts, one can see the active participation that Roosevelt aimed to achieve: Americans joining the "conversation" in politics and policies.

To understand the effectiveness of creating an active democracy within the listening community, it is essential to understand radio culture in the 1930s, as well as how politics and economics were easily explained through the means of broadcast. Roosevelt had previous experience with broadcast radio during his governorship, so it made it easier to transition the use of radio from governorship to his presidency. Radio provided a connection between Roosevelt and the people and by presenting his policies understandably, the people could easily grasp why Roosevelt installed the programs he did and understand the actions of his administration. This new interpretation of politics allowed the people to actively participate and write letters displaying their newfound knowledge and voice to address the issues that Roosevelt brought up during his "conversations."

The American people often wrote letters to radio stations to voice their opinions, their concerns, and the opportunity to contribute to the radio station's next program.⁹ Letters are often studied as looking into the lives of people through their written thoughts. The letters written to radio stations in the 1930s provide evidence that people wrote to feel involved. Oftentimes these letters would be addressed to the station's manager instead of the

⁸ The introductions to the *Fireside Chats* started out with a narrator introducing Roosevelt to the public. It was during this time that the narrator of the chats would set the stage, stating that the President would like to welcome you [the listener] into his home for a friendly fireside chat.

⁹ Joseph Turow, "Another View of 'Citizen Feedback' to the Mass Media" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41 (4) (1978), 534-543. This article talks about the reasons why people would write to radio stations. By understanding why people wrote to radio stations I will be able to understand why people wrote to President Roosevelt.

station itself because, to the people, the manager *was* the station.¹⁰ This applied to President Roosevelt as well because the people believed him to be the manager of his *Fireside Chat* Broadcasts.¹¹ When reading the letters written to Roosevelt, one can recognize one or more of these three main themes within them: a feeling, a purpose, understanding, an approval or disapproval of Roosevelt and the political issues he addressed.

After Roosevelt's death in 1945, the people suddenly felt lost.¹² Roosevelt kept his illness and disability out of the public eye, leaving many shocked when he passed suddenly of a brain hemorrhage. Without their leader the people began to feel as if they had lost the voice that Roosevelt had allowed them to give. After twelve years of leadership from a man that made them feel heard, they could not imagine a President after him.

The Rise to Presidency and Political Broadcasting

The Great Depression in the United States began in 1929 when the stock market of Wall Street crashed, resulting in a damaged banking system and causing over fifteen-million people to be out of employment ready to withdraw their money from their accounts fearing they would lose their cash.¹³ In 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office and began to issue his world-famous *Fireside Chats* that would be broadcasted every few months to keep the citizens of the United States engaged and updated on government policies and affairs. The understanding of how the use of media in Roosevelt's political career is crucial to understand

¹⁰ Turow, "Another View of 'Citizen Feedback' to the Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41 (4) (1978), 534-543.

¹¹ This idea was generated from Joseph Turow's "Another View of 'Citizen Feedback' to the Mass Media" since he mentions the idea of people writing letters to the radio station managers since they are in charge of the programs that are produced by the station.

¹² *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*, Netflix, PBS 2014. Ep. 5.

¹³ "Great Depression History," History, <https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/great-depression-history>, (October, 2009). Information on the Great Depression in 1930s America.

how this form of communication affected the public and can be traced back to his college years when his mother, Sara Roosevelt, enrolled him in a private boarding school, Groton, in Massachusetts.¹⁴ This is also where his interest in politics began to develop.

Roosevelt was not the most athletic of his peers, which drove him to take up extracurriculars in the school's newspaper, *The Crimson*.¹⁵ The newspaper began Roosevelt's career in the media and with his distant cousin in the White House, Theodore Roosevelt, his interests in political affairs grew.¹⁶ Roosevelt served on the New York State Senate in 1910 and was re-elected again in 1912. In 1913, he served under the Wilson Administration as assistant secretary of the Navy where he helped prepare the United States to head into The Great War. The Democratic Party acknowledged Roosevelt's hard work in both his efforts as the assistant secretary of the Navy and during his time in the Senate of New York, they put him on the ballot for Vice President of the United States with James Cox as their nominee for the Presidency.¹⁷ Although their ballot lost, Roosevelt still had high hopes to eventually reside in the White House as President of the United States. But in 1921, Roosevelt contracted an illness that would make it challenging for him to achieve his goal.

In 1921, Roosevelt contracted Polio which resulted in the loss of function from the waist down.¹⁸ This made it difficult for him to physically go to the people to establish a relationship with them. With radio beginning to make its grand debut, Roosevelt

¹⁴ H.W. Brands, *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (Anchor Books: New York, 2008), 24-25. The complete background of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's life spanning from childhood till his death in 1945.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ William E. Leuchtenburg, "Franklin D. Roosevelt: Life in Brief." Miller Center. 2019. <https://millercenter.org/president/fdroosevelt/life-in-brief>.

¹⁷ Leuchtenburg, "Franklin D. Roosevelt: Life in Brief."

¹⁸ Polio: a potentially deadly disease that is spread person to person which can invade a person's brain and spinal cord resulting in paralysis. <https://www.cdc.gov/polio/about/index.htm>.

utilized the technology as an “instrument of democracy” in order to talk to the people and communicate his government policies bi-monthly.¹⁹ This was his first step into using the radio broadcasting for his own political agenda which would continue to develop well into his Presidency.

When Roosevelt was elected President in the middle of the Great Depression in 1933, he used his broadcasting skills to go live from the white house to discuss the issue of banking during the time of economic collapse. Radio was vital in Roosevelt’s political career not only because of his disability but also because of the way he was able to employ and speak to Americans in a way of making them feel comfortable and secure. Roosevelt only produced about thirty speeches in his twelve years of Presidency because he believed if he were to broadcast more, then the interest of the people would be lost, and the broadcasts would have no effect.²⁰ The bulk of Roosevelt’s broadcasts would be produced in the 1930s because he felt it necessary to make the American people feel secure and open an opportunity for them to voice their thoughts during a time of economic uncertainty.

The Voices of Hope

Radio became a valued piece of technology and means of communication because there was one in nearly every American’s living room. During the Great Depression, many people looked forward to gathering around their radio with their families to listen to programs. With plenty of “leisure time,” people turned to the radio to fulfill the role of American culture and social life by providing a need of “escape” during this economic crisis. The radio supplied free entertainment and a feeling of escape to Americans during a tough economic situation, many families would often collect any money they had to get the smallest of radios in order to have this luxury. In 1939, *Fortune* took a poll

¹⁹ Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (McFarland & Company: NC, 1998), 28.

²⁰ *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*. Netflix. PBS 2014.

that revealed that listening to the radio was the most preferred method of inexpensive leisure-time, favored over reading and moviegoing.²¹ Radios were making connections with the people that books and films failed to do, because it gave them the ability to create a vision open to their own interpretation.

Historian Neil Verma refers to “The Listening Imagination” which is the idea that radio listeners pictured the speaker or the scene of the radio drama at hand and could create a personal connection with them due to the ability to generate personal interpretations. Space and time are important to analyze when it comes to deciphering how the radio was able to establish personal connections with its listener because it puts context to the broadcast.²² Techniques such as volume, acoustics, and sound effects helped the listener create an image in their head and responsible for establishing connections with a voice.²³ The voice coming from the other end, however, was also establishing connections to the audience, making it seem as if they were talking to one or a few, but in actuality their “performances generated a revenue” that was “aimed at populations, not individuals.” This idea suggests that multiple techniques were used to distinguish how the radio personality was able to establish a connection with their listeners. But this connection of personalization was completely determined by the listeners themselves and their ability to establish a para-social interaction, a term that was developed by two sociology professors at the University of Chicago.²⁴ Para-social is defined as a seemingly face to face interaction between a spectator and the personality on the opposite end and can have much to do with how the people of America viewed Franklin

²¹ Brown, *Manipulating the Ether*, 3.

²² In Neil Verma’s *Theater of the Mind*, Verma explains space and time as the technique of amplifying acoustics within a recording studio in order to create a space that takes the listener out of their time and instead “transports them” to a different dimension.

²³ Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 13.

²⁴ John Durham Peters, *Broadcasting and Schizophrenia*, (2010),124. The idea of how people can establish an emotional and relationship with a figure that is not physically in front of them.

Roosevelt on the air. Verma's idea of the listening imagination has roots in the idea of para-social interactions. By understanding how a listener establishes a connection with a radio personality through the notion of having a one-on-one conversation is key to what Verma categorizes as the listening imagination. This technique was something that Roosevelt utilized to allow him to reach the people of the United States as a "friend."

Radio culture in the 1930s tended to dismiss the "fusty old boundaries" of broadcast media and people began to enjoy absorbing the radio's feeling of comfort and gained a feeling of equality from it, as if Roosevelt had welcomed them [the people] to his home.²⁵ This welcoming invite to join the President in a friendly *Fireside Chat* encouraged the people of the United States to write the President to discuss the issues at hand. These "discussions" made it seem like the people were actively participating in a conversation because Roosevelt broadcasts catered to address the context of the letters written to him, which voiced varying opinions and concerns.

Writing letters was a crucial aspect of legitimizing public communications, making it vital to the democratic process.²⁶ Letters were a way for the people in order to put their input in the way a radio program is run or can even voice their opinions to figures in charge. The letters written by the people were a form of expression that allowed the American people to participate by creating a perceived interaction with the radio broadcast, even if the show does not necessarily allow for an opportunity for participation in real time.²⁷ This perception led people to write to the president because although his broadcasts were political, the president spoke to the public as though they understood what was

²⁵ Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 26.

²⁶ Turow, "Another View of 'Citizen Feedback' to the Mass Media." Helped form my idea of why the people decide to write to radio broadcasting shows and compare the writings from programs to political broadcasts.

²⁷ Charleen Simmons, "Dear Radio Broadcaster: Fan Mail as a Form of Perceived Interactivity," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53, no. 3 (September 2009) 446.

going on in that arena. Dr. Charleen Simmons, of University of Tennessee, mentions in her article that oftentimes broadcasting stations would not send a single letter in response to mail sent to them; however, the people would still send these letters to feel a part of something bigger than themselves. It is unclear if Roosevelt ever wrote back to the letters received, but the letters would keep coming in hopes of in some way interacting with the President and having their voices heard.

A Written Democracy

Franklin Roosevelt understood that to improve the economy of the United States, he needed to get the people involved. During his Presidency, he issued a total of thirty *Fireside Chats* that were broadcasted over the span of twelve years. These chats consisted of varying topics such as economics, federal policies and programs, national security, and the second world war. Each of his *Fireside Chats* were broadcasted from either the white house or Roosevelt's residence in Hyde Park.²⁸ By talking to the people as if they were his equals and explaining politics and economics on simpler terms, the audience would be able to understand the issues of politics more clearly and can actively participate within the discussion of American policies.

Fireside Chats allowed Roosevelt to explain his hopes and ideas to the country and allow them to respond with the mentality of "tell me your troubles."²⁹ More than not, these troubles would deal with the contents of the chat itself and ask questions or criticize the ideas being talked about. The letters were a way for a listener to have an input or express their opinions on a radio station or broadcasting network and allow them to feel like someone is listening.

²⁸ Brown, *Manipulating the Ether*, 59.

²⁹ "You have a marvelous radio voice, distinct and clear': The Public Responds to FDR's First Fireside Chat," *History Matters*.
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/8126>.

For example, after the President's first *Fireside Chat* on the Banking Crisis in March of 1933, the people began their communication with him by expressing their understanding of the banking system and that his tone and empathetic voice gave them hope in their government to be able to work toward a solution. People ranging from high school students to Congressmen wrote to the President to express the regaining of their confidence.³⁰ Many of these letters expressed a straight forward faith in the early stages of his Presidency and some continued to write of the anticipation of their continuing faith more subtly with statements of how they will not withdraw money and they will take his word that their money would be safer in the bank.³¹ These letters not only expressed their faith and hope in the President to get the country back on their feet, some writers even complimented the President's diction and clarity throughout his speeches.

The tone, phrasing, and clarity Roosevelt possessed helped create the bond with the people that lasted from the broadcast of the first *Fireside Chat* until the end of his Presidency. The way in which someone begins communication with another can determine the outcome of the relationship between the two. In Roosevelt's case, his speeches tended to "hypnotize people" and his voice was referred to as "magnetic and inspiring."³² This idea of being hypnotized is similar to the feeling of being transported into the radio dramas during the same time period. Some people would often write to him as they would to the radio dramas, as if they

³⁰ "You have a marvelous radio voice, distinct and clear': The Public Responds to FDR's First Fireside Chat."

³¹ Frank J. Cregg (Justice of NY Supreme Court) Syracuse, NY (1933); Viola Hazelberger, Minneapolis, MI (1933); Virginia Miller, Sierra Madre, CA (1933). Letters that were written to Franklin Delano Roosevelt after the first *Fireside Chat* on the Banking Crisis. Delivered in March 1933. These particular letters display the idea of trust in the government and the banking system. Most explain that before they heard the broadcast, they were ready to withdraw their life savings, but FDR and the tone of his voice made them feel comfortable to leave their money in their accounts.

³² Frank J. Cregg (1933); Marguerite Harper, New York (1933).

considered him a performer.³³ Some listeners understood his broadcast as a performance and would often refer to his broadcasting personality having a “marvelous radio voice” and how “unusually fine” it sounded.³⁴ The fact that listeners mentioned his voice can be interpreted as a form of escapism because perhaps it made them feel as if they were in a trance. The same feeling is felt when listening to the radio dramas produced and created an atmosphere that could make the people feel a part of something more. Franklin Delano Roosevelt brought the people into a political and economic conversation that they were able to understand which allowed his listeners to participate in the crisis affecting the country. The way Roosevelt addressed political and economic events of the 1930s in his fireside chats allowed people to understand the situations on a deeper level and put in place. The radio made it much easier for Roosevelt to get the people’s support because the radio was readily available in their homes and he was able to broadcast from the White House directly to them.

Some of the letters would describe the environment around them as they listened to the radio broadcasts and then give thanks to the President for making the environment not seem so tense anymore. Most people often choose to listen to the speeches in a more public setting or surrounded by friends to feel a sense of unity. Words such as “everyone,” “everybody,” and “we” are all used in the context of a whole and when describing the room they were in. By listening to the radio broadcasts in a more public setting or around people who they feel most comfortable with, the people could feel more inclined and more comfortable to address Roosevelt directly by writing the letters and feeling a part of something bigger than themselves.

The tone of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s voice during his first initial speech is described as calm and patient as he explains

³³ David Michael Ryfe, “From Media Audience to Media Public: a study of letters written in response to FDR’s fireside chats,” *Media, Culture & Society*. 23(6).

³⁴ Virginia Miller, California (1933); James A. Green, n.a (1933). Letters that mention Roosevelt’s ‘radio voice’ directly.

the situation of the banking crisis to the people of America. To the people, his voice emulated the confidence they needed to hear in order to feel consoled during the traumatizing era.³⁵ The intimacy of the radio and the ability to listen to these speeches from the comfort of their home, or wherever they chose, provided a comfortable setting to discuss an uncomfortable topic.³⁶ The sense of calmness and patience in his voice allowed him to discuss topics that were difficult with the people and provided them the space to actively voice their opinions. As the years continued, Roosevelt received thousands of letters daily with many continuing to mention the smoothness of his voice or the knowledge that he passes on leaves them with high hopes and faith. One listener even wrote to Roosevelt displaying the faith he had in him, just by the way he spoke to the people over the radio, by saying “you know what your government is doing. You know how to explain it. You know where you are heading, and you are on your way.”³⁷ Though some letters did express a need of help in the economic crisis, asking him to send food and clothes, most of the letters came as a positive and hopeful response of the policies and acts put into place during Roosevelt’s presidency.

On September third of 1939, Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed on to his radio chat with the words “my fellow Americans and my friends” when addressing the topic of the European War (World War II).³⁸ Most of the broadcast he produced that dealt with difficult topics usually signed on in a similar format. By

³⁵ Ryfe, “From Media Audience to Media Public: a study of letters written in response to FDR’s fireside chats.”

³⁶ Pennee Bender, David Gerwin, Richard Miller, “FDR’s Fireside Chats: The Power of Words” *EDSITEment!* (Nov. 13, 2009). <https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/fdrs-fireside-chats-power-words>.

³⁷ Melvin J. Chisum, Pennsylvania (1934). In response to Roosevelt’s chat on a new legislation being presented to congress. This letter explains how the writer feels in regard to the President’s explaining of politics to the American people.

³⁸ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “The Fireside Chats of Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” *Arc Manor* (2009), 98. The Radio addresses to the American people broadcast between 1933 and 1944. A book with the written transcripts of FDR’s Fireside Chats.

addressing the people as “his fellow Americans” he was able to create a feeling of equality between him and the common person. By calling them friends he was able to build a bond which makes the people think that they were indeed friends with him so they wrote to him as such.

In many of Roosevelt’s speeches, he addresses the people as if he is having a face to face conversation with them making the feeling of personalization through the radio real for those on the receiving end. In this speech, however, the tone is different, and the speech addresses the entire United States as a whole, including the President himself. “We” is mentioned in the address often and sometimes Roosevelt says “you” in addressing the people.³⁹ But when it comes to making the difficult conversations and decisions, it is a matter of “we the people” and compared to Roosevelt as an individual. The feeling of personal acknowledgment could provoke the listener to put their own voice into the situation supplying them personal legitimization. The letters written to the President display the idea of participation and feeling a part of something bigger than they were. This broadcast brought up the topic of discussion and the letters written to this fireside chat provide a great deal of conversation and the demonstration of an active democracy is observed.

Many of the broadcasts concerning the second World War have a more of a pathos approach to their writing ethic and are strongly biased about either staying out of or heading into war with Germany. These letters often include phrasing such as “I feel...,” “I think...,” or “I believe...” to get their thoughts out.⁴⁰

³⁹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “The European War,” September 3, 1939.

⁴⁰ J. A. Ringis, Michigan (1939); Elaine Albred, Utah (1940); Frank A. Harden, New York (1942). Letters written to Franklin Delano Roosevelt expressing their opinions about going into war. Ringings believes that the United States should only go to war if deemed necessary and expresses her motherly concern for her boys who are of age to fight. Elaine Albred is in seventh grade but feels that if the United States needed him to go to war in about six years, he and his “gang” would be ready. Frank A. Harden is completely opposed to going to war and does not think that we should be enforcing our ideals [the United States] on others. He compares the forcing of ideals to Hitler in the Nazi Reich.

Mentioning the feelings, they are experiencing during the radio broadcasting and having a “one-on-one” conversation with the President explaining how they feel and what they think displays the democracy that Roosevelt wished to accomplish.

Roosevelt also received letters that did not agree with his ideas, but when analyzing these letters, we can still see the same form of democracy being established because of the phrasing of words and sentences. The letters that often criticized him claimed “a small time politician could do better” or “the country ran before your time and will after you’re gone” leaving the same idea of feeling or belief that the letters agreeing with Roosevelt created.⁴¹ Much of the letters that disagreed with Roosevelt did not seem to mention a setting they are in but in one particular letter, the person wrote that although Roosevelt’s speech was not the most notable, the feeling it created amongst the working class people in the downtown lunchroom is what gave it the recognition and his approval stating that “it is a proud thing to be living in America...during [Roosevelt’s] administration.”⁴² Another aspect the letters themselves display is the unity depicted when American’s would listen to Roosevelt’s broadcasts in public places, whether they agreed with him or not.

Listeners hung on to Roosevelt’s every word and people that wrote to him stated that “all playing ceased as people strained forward to listen” and “the room became quiet as [Roosevelt’s] voice came to them.”⁴³ Some describe the events after the broadcast as “a combustion of gaiety — taunt nerves let loose” or “heads nodding in approval and bronzed men smiled and nodded to

⁴¹ Hugh F. Colliton Jr, Massachusetts (1934); Harry Spencer, Georgia (1938). Letters written to Roosevelt disagreeing with the chat given at their perspective times.

⁴² E. E. McLeish, Virginia (1938). Letter written in response to Roosevelt’s chat on the Primary Parties on the upcoming Presidential Elections. This letter displays the reactions of those around the writer and explains how Roosevelt made the people feel after his speeches.

⁴³ C.H. Van Scoy, Washington (1934); Marguerite Harper, New York (1933). Letters written to the President talking about the atmosphere of the room they were listening in.

each other.”⁴⁴ These scenes depict the feelings and attitudes of the people of America and show the unity the speeches bring to them. Hope started to become more prevalent in the letters as time went on and the people began to speak on behalf of each other.

The letters often took the voice of the collective whole using words like “we” and “I and others.” This collective whole allowed the people to obtain a stance in a public deliberation often in putting their own voice and speaking on behalf of others. The idea of including others in their letters as well as their own opinions can also relate to the idea of their own self-importance and the need to speak on behalf of others. Roosevelt provided them a sense of importance and when speaking to the people, he gave them the opportunity to deliberate with him on the topics at hand. The people would often write that “we are for [Roosevelt] 100%” and became the voice of others by stating “all of our friends are for you.”⁴⁵

The collective whole defined by those who opposed Roosevelt’s plans and wrote to him to “remind him” that the country did well before he came into office and will continue to do so after he is gone.⁴⁶ Those who wrote the negative reviews had content that spoke poorly of not only the President but also poorly of his supporters and referred to them as a collective whole. Sometimes the letters would place the writer among *them* as an American but when referring to their opposition, the writer makes it clear that they are not a part of Roosevelt’s followers. “Prosperity? How you mock us...” wrote one of the opposers as he refers to America’s people as a whole and the “lies” that Roosevelt tells as he talks about the country beginning to prosper. “Why not be frank with *your* people just once” refers to the other as a collective while referring to himself as an individual.⁴⁷ These two types of sentence structures are seen together often in the

⁴⁴ Marguerite Harper, New York (1933); E.E McLeish, Virginia (1938). Description of the reactions of people around them.

⁴⁵ J.A. Ringis, Michigan (1939).

⁴⁶ Harry Spencer, Georgia (1938).

⁴⁷ Raymond Click, Ohio (1935).

opposition letters. The reasoning behind this is still unclear but deciphering each of these sentence structures separately we can make out both the feeling of purpose and their role in an active democracy. Although they do not identify as a follower of Roosevelt, they do consider themselves American and feel the need to speak out on what the president is imposing on their country. They feel the need to voice their concern and write a letter as a response to the chats joining the conversation, which Roosevelt welcomed.

The ending of the letters varied based on the author's writing style. Some chose to end their letters by saying "yours [very] truly," others as "your friend," and some, chose to end their letter by just their signature. The sign offs display the intimacy the president created with his broadcasts and how he affected his listeners. Most of Roosevelt's people saw him as a friend. By starting out some broadcasts saying "my friends" or referring to the listener as a "friend" within his speech, the listener began to feel a connection. When Roosevelt talked over the radio, he did so clearly and precisely, breaking down complicated terms and informally addressing the audience. The comfort of listening to the broadcasts made the audience think he was a friend and one letter stated "you DO seem like a friend to each of us..." and mentions wishing she could call the president over the phone and speak with him.⁴⁸ The *Fireside Chats* of Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave the people of America the hope and confidence they needed in order to get out of the Great Depression of 1929.

The nation sent a massive number of letters to Roosevelt regarding their input on the way politics were being run and some letters sometimes criticizing the deliverance of the speeches that were given. However, upon examination of the letters, I have discovered that those letters in support of the President often displayed the support of others towards the President as compared to the negative letters who provided a single opinion on the topic at hand. The sources used throughout the entirety of this essay not

⁴⁸ J.A. Ringis, Michigan (1939).

only display how Roosevelt was able to include the Americans in a political discussion, but also how the people viewed him as a friend.

The End of an Era

Franklin Roosevelt can be considered a man of journalism by the common people. He was one of the first presidents to happily invite the media into his home and share his political progress as well as being one of the first presidents to bring politics and economics directly to the people via the use of radio broadcasting. Roosevelt left a standing impression on not only the people of the nation but the people of the world by making the United States clear in the war effort and establishing political organizations that would prevent the event of future wars. In April of 1945, Roosevelt passed very suddenly in his cottage in Warm Springs, Georgia of a cerebral hemorrhage.⁴⁹

Roosevelt's death came as a shock to everyone worldwide, especially America, where the country was left to mourn the death of their beloved friend. Roosevelt did not just make the common man feel as if they mattered in the world of politics, but he also provided them with the comfort they had established in the government. The United States became a collective whole with him as President and rediscovered unity and prosperity within their country. Because Roosevelt served as the President for twelve years, most people could not imagine the United States with a President who was not Roosevelt.⁵⁰

Roosevelt's secretary, Grace Tully, took account of the day the President died and recounts the feeling of not only the people who were close to Roosevelt, but also the people of the country as his funeral procession led him from Warm Springs, Georgia to his final resting place in Hyde Park, New York.⁵¹ Tully recalls the

⁴⁹ *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*. Netflix. PBS, 2014. Ep. 6.

⁵⁰ *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*. Ep. 6.

⁵¹ "The Death of President Franklin Roosevelt, 1945" *EyeWitness to History*, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2008). This particular account is from

chills she felt in her heart and the emotions of Roosevelt's cousins and his wife Eleanor Roosevelt. Eleanor was described with a "grave face" and her "grief so contained" that it helped hold the country together.⁵² As Roosevelt made his final departure from his cottage in Warm Springs, the people of the town gathered to say their good-byes for the last time. "On this day, the sadness was understandably deeper; the farewell was final, the loss permanent."⁵³ The people sobbed and grown men cried Tully recalled. The people had lost their leader and a sense of confusion lay before the people as they tried to imagine a United States without Franklin Roosevelt. A feeling of hopelessness had again plagued Americans and they would have to learn how to establish a new trust in the government that Harry S. Truman would take over. A government that would not be able to provide that same connection with the people of America.

Conclusion

The people of the 1930s and 1940s looked to their President as a savior who guided the country out of the Great Depression and led them to victory in the second World War. The letters written to Franklin Delano Roosevelt provide a great foundation for examining the contribution the people had to American politics and an insight on Franklin Roosevelt without having to study the President himself. Upon further examination of the letters one can see the actual message the people were trying to convey to the President, if he were to read these letters, was in fact that the country is reunited after a time of crisis regardless of their individual beliefs.

The radio provided the people the opportunity not only to hear about the policies Roosevelt was putting into place, but also

Roosevelt's secretary witnessing the people standing in the streets saying 'goodbye' to their president and looking like they were lost and did not know what was going to happen next.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

allowing them to respond to Roosevelt because he presented his talks as a discussion. Letters from the people came in daily but many of the letters came after a chat was broadcasted and these letters came to participate in the discussion. The people who did not agree with Roosevelt's politics also took part in this discussion in order to voice their opinion and again became a part of the conversation. But again, the idea of being a part of a discussion over radio waves was just an idea that the technology sought to accomplish and create an escape by allowing people to imagine the voice and sounds behind the radio.

This similar form of discussion can be seen today when we try to understand President Donald Trump and his form of communication to the public via social media, more specifically Twitter. Trump's use of Twitter can relate back to Roosevelt's radio talks because just like Roosevelt, Trump is able to directly communicate with the people of America just like Roosevelt did with the radio, but with a different context and form of diction and tone. Today people can reply within seconds of a new tweet being sent out by the President which can later be used to study how Trump managed to either gain supporters or establish a group of people who disagreed with all his policies and posts about politics.

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History in the Making