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The New Media Deal:
Obama, the Information Age, and the Shadow of FDR

by
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Abstract

This thesis project focuses on the ways in which American presidents use media to engage the public in political discourse and reassure the masses in times of economic crisis. In a comparative analysis of the different media and political rhetoric employed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the 1933 banking crisis and Barack Obama during the 2009 recession, I explore why Roosevelt's "fireside chats" proved more successful than Obama's imitations on YouTube and other media platforms in 2009. By engaging in media theory on how political discourse is shaped by the medium within which it is presented, as well as historical scholarship on the rhetoric of Roosevelt and Obama during their respective financial crises, I establish the reasons for Barack Obama's apparent failure to live up to the FDR model of "Comforter-in-Chief" in the information age. I propose that Obama's inability to connect with the American public to the extent that FDR did in the 1930s is the result of both his own rhetorical inadequacies when sympathizing with the common man and the mass media phenomena that has created increasingly impersonalized communication and news absorption.

In the weeks before his inauguration in January 2009, the president-elect, Barack Obama, was heralded as “the Next FDR” in *Newsweek* and appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in FDR dress. The popular press speculated that Obama would employ the same inspirational rhetoric that had won him the presidency to raise the hopes of the financially broke and spiritually broken American citizens in 2009 with the same success of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933. In August 2010, *Newsweek*, the same magazine that had been so optimistic about Obama’s chances for a “new, New deal” released an article entitled “Obama’s Old Deal.”¹ As little as a year after his election, the majority of major press outlets, regardless of their views on his actual policies, agreed that Obama had failed to communicate effectively and project a soothing and hopeful message to an economically insecure public.² The comparisons between the similarities of Roosevelt and Obama swiftly devolved into criticisms on why Obama could never compare to the “Great Communicator” of the 1930s. The following discussion analyzes the reasoning behind the critiques of President Obama through consultation of academic sources on presidential leadership and media theory, periodicals from respected news outlets, and the informal addresses of both men using the “new media” of their time. Within this framework, I present a comparative analysis of the different mediums and political rhetoric employed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the 1933 banking crisis and Barack Obama during the 2009 recession, which explores why Roosevelt’s fireside chats on the radio proved more successful than Obama’s imitations on YouTube and other media platforms in 2009. Unlike FDR in 1933, Obama failed to serve as “Comforter in

¹ Michael Hirsch, "Obama's Old Deal: Why the 44th president is no FDR—and the economy is still in the doldrums, *Newsweek*, August 29, 2010.

² See Alterman 2010, Judis 2010, Klein 2010, and Krugman 2010.

Chief’ in 2009 and was unable to connect with the increasingly disillusioned public in the manner that Roosevelt did with his fireside chats. I argue that Obama was less successful than Roosevelt at driving the economic narrative and comforting the masses in 2009 as the result of two factors: the mass media explosion of the information age and the lack of an inspirational component in Obama’s informal addresses to the American public regarding the recession.

The first section of this discussion presents the relevant scholarship surrounding presidential leadership, rhetoric, and the media. In this section, I note how media scholars focus primarily on the media employed by politicians, whereas presidential historians concentrate on the substance of speeches. I propose questions that bridge the gap between the historical and media approach of the study of how presidents communicate with the public during times of crisis: Why was Roosevelt more successful at soothing the American public with his informal “chats” over the radio than Obama through a combination of Internet, television, and radio? Was his success the result of the radio or his personal appeal to the people? Was Roosevelt more successful than Obama because at the time of his, “fireside chats,” the radio was the only outlet for news besides print media? Has Obama been less successful at comforting and inspiring the masses because the American public is too distracted in the new media environment? In the new mass media information age, is a “fireside chat” of the scale and influence of the 1930s feasible when the public has thousands of different options for their news? Would Roosevelt have been deemed “the Great Communicator” if he were governing in the media climate of 2009? And lastly, how do political context and media climate jointly influence presidential leadership?

The second section of my paper seeks to answer some of these questions by acknowledging the differences in the political and media environments in which Obama and Roosevelt governed. The third section analyzes Roosevelt's use of the radio and the rhetoric he employed during his fireside chats. The fourth and fifth sections explore Obama's use of the Internet before and after his 2008 campaign and how the information age has affected his leadership of public opinion. The sixth section provides an analysis of Obama's rhetoric and speechmaking style, with a short subsection that addresses the role that race plays in effective political leadership. I conclude with a comparison between Roosevelt and Obama's rhetoric and the messages they delivered to the public.

Relevant Scholarship on Presidential Leadership, Rhetoric, and the Media

While there exists a wide range of literature on presidential scholarship, historians of presidential rhetoric are a more recent phenomena. The study of the "rhetorical presidency" did not enter presidential scholarship until the advent of the "modern presidency," which is a term used to describe the presidencies of the 20th century, beginning with FDR, and identified with a higher degree of public visibility than their predecessors.³ It is a largely new concept because it was derived in relation to modern presidents who practiced popular rhetorical leadership that was considered beneath the dignity of the office for presidents prior to the 20th century.⁴ While debate lingers amongst historians of presidential rhetoric over the modern/traditional presidency demarcation paradigm, there is a consensus of agreement that, "the impact of the

³ Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

⁴ See also Storing and Caesar.

president is almost always invariably a function of the personal leadership qualities he brings to and displays in office, as well as the political context of his presidency.”⁵

I primarily engage with scholarship that identifies all presidential rhetoric, whether formal or informal, as an attempt to assert power either by swaying public opinion through direct appeals to the people or through policy proposal.⁶ Scholars that use this definition of rhetoric assume that, “persuasion depends as much or more on what people say than on how their words reach the eyes and ears of their audiences.”⁷ Many scholars agree that the primary goal of presidential rhetoric is agenda setting, asserting that, “as an agenda setter the president must articulate not only the principles of the Constitution but also a set of policies that respond to the problems of contemporary society.”⁸ There is a consensus among presidential historians that the president’s unique position requires rhetorical leadership because no other political figure is in the institutional position to “articulate the animating principles of American politics.”⁹ In light of this scholarship, this discussion delves into the different political contexts in which President Obama and President Roosevelt governed, explores how effective each leader has been at setting the agenda, and analyzes the substance of their respective informal addresses to the American public regarding the economy.

Several media theorists argue against scholars of presidential rhetoric for focusing too much on the substance of speeches and overlooking the medium through which the

⁵ Fred Greenstein, *Leadership in the Modern Presidency* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁶ Ryan L. Teten, *The Evolutionary Presidency: Tracing the Changes in Presidential Address and Power* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richard M. Ellis, *Speaking to the People: The Rhetorical Presidency in Historical Perspective* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1998).

⁹ Ibid.

speech is delivered.¹⁰ Although scholars of communications and media debate its validity, communication theorist Marshall McLuhan's assertion that "the medium is the message," is a highly respected theory that has been of particular interest with the advent of the Internet.¹¹ This theory is important to my analysis because I am focusing on completely different mediums: the radio and the Internet. In order to understand the implications that these mediums have for presidential communication, I have consulted research on how different media affect the way the public responds to messages. Observing the differences inherent in mediums used by Obama and Roosevelt and their respective media environments reveals much about the presidents' effectiveness in spreading mass messages to the American public.

Media studies scholars also note the media's role in setting the President's agenda, in contrast to historians that argue the importance of the President's agenda-setting role for the press. Media scholarship illustrates that the advent of new media like television and the Internet has focused less on policy and more on the personalities of politicians. Media coverage of the presidency has become more negative, coinciding with a substantial decline in audience interest for presidential news.¹² Media scholars argue that the president is highly responsive to the media's agenda, and note that the media holds power over the President through its role as a gatekeeper that can, "choose from among myriad events...which to describe, which to ignore."¹³ Because much of the

¹⁰ See Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake 2011 and Linsky 1986.

¹¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

¹² Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha and Jeffrey Peake, *Breaking Through the Noise: Presidential Leadership, Public Opinion, and the News Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

¹³ Douglass Cater, *The Fourth Branch of Government* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).

president's power to lead depends on his power to persuade, the president's relationship to the media is crucial to his ability to sway public opinion, given that media influence what issues are important to the public. Using this scholarship, I analyze the relationship that Obama and FDR had with the media and how that relationship helped them connect with the American public.

Political Context and Media Environment

Presidential scholars emphasize the importance of understanding a president's political context before judging his leadership capabilities, and thus, it is important to this discussion to establish the different political and media environments in which Roosevelt and Obama governed before making comparisons between their leadership qualities.

Although both Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Barack Obama were faced with economic crises upon coming into office, the severity, timing, and nature of the financial disasters explain critical differences between the two presidents and their relationship with the public.

When Roosevelt took office in 1933 the economy was in a much worse condition than when Obama became president in 2009. The financial depression that began in 1929 had reached its lowest point in 1933, with a 25% unemployment rate. There was a consensus throughout the nation that federal action was necessary, and citizens were open to the direct federal creation of jobs. Partisanship in Congress was not an issue for Roosevelt, as Congressional Republicans and Democrats were ready and very willing to vote on bills that he drafted.¹⁴ Coming into office at a moment of economic despair,

¹⁴ Theda Skocpol and Lawrence Jacobs, *Reaching for the New Deal: Ambitious Governance, Economic Meltdown, and Polarized Politics in Obama's First Two Years* (New York: Russell Sage, 2011).

following his predecessor's failed attempts to raise the economy out of the Depression, presented Roosevelt with a unique opportunity for leadership. Some presidential analysts note that an economic downturn presents a good situation for newly inaugurated, change-oriented presidents because such crises foster a desire amongst citizens and businesses for increased government action and help.¹⁵ The responsiveness of the public and Congress to proposals for job creation and federal interference in the economy, rooted in their exhaustion with failed attempts to counter the economic depression, resulted in the immediate passing of Roosevelt's emergency proposals by Congress, before they had even seen the written texts.¹⁶ This willingness for legislative action in 1933 sharply contrasts Obama's first attempts to spur economic recovery in 2009.

The press speculated that Obama would be the second coming of FDR because, like Roosevelt, he took office after winning a decisive election and boasted strong congressional majorities, as well as a public that was responsive to "the president's call for change."¹⁷ These factors did not change the fact that Obama's hopes at reaching a "New deal" were not as promising as Roosevelt's, given the nature of the economic crisis and the political environment in 2009. Entering office as the 2009 recession was just beginning put Barack Obama at a political disadvantage in comparison to Roosevelt who assumed office in the midst of the Depression when the economy was at its nadir. Because the economy had just begun its downturn and analysts could not predict the recession's course, Obama's ambitious agenda was not met with the same enthusiasm or

¹⁵ Robert Kuttner, "Obama's Economic Opportunity," *The American Prospect* 20, no. 1 (2009): 1-4.

¹⁶ James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967).

¹⁷ Skocpol and Jacobs, 10.

compliance as Roosevelt's was in 1933. He lacked FDR's successful debut because the full effects of the financial crisis had not yet hit the supply of jobs to the extent that it would later on in his administration. Furthermore, during the transitional period before his inauguration, Obama cooperated with the outgoing Bush administration to mitigate the financial crisis by building congressional support for the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), a massive financial rescue plan aimed at saving Wall Street. His endorsement of this "Save-Wall-Street-First" approach was highly unpopular and contradictory to the bottom-up economic growth plan on which he had campaigned. This decision did not sit well with the citizens of Main Street and analysts who proposed that Obama was spending too much to accommodate banks and businesses and too little on infrastructure and the creation of jobs.¹⁸

The nature of the financial crisis demanded bold and swift action by Obama even before he was officially sworn in because steps needed to be taken to ensure that the initial Wall Street crisis did not spin out of control, "a catastrophe that would have taken down the world financial system and plunged the United States into a massive and prolonged depression."¹⁹ Before assuming the presidency, Roosevelt deliberately spurned former President Hoover's efforts to work together on the economic recovery plan, and Obama consciously chose a different course. He explained this decision in an interview with journalist Jonathan Alter in 2009:

I explicitly rejected FDR's strategy of not taking any ownership of what needed to be done during the transition, and I think that was the right decision. If we had played games – if, for example, I had refused to weigh in on TARP, which we knew was politically radioactive, prior to my being sworn in – we would not have

¹⁸ James A. Thurber, ed, *Obama in Office* (London: Paradigm, 2011).

¹⁹ Skocpol and Jacobs, 15.

hit the ground running. And I think the situation could have spiraled out of control much more severely.²⁰

This decision made sense in the political context of Obama's own financial crisis, which required the taking of measures to preclude the downturn before it reached the proportions of the Depression in 1933.

Unlike Roosevelt, Obama did not enjoy bipartisan support for his economic recovery efforts, even though he had cooperated with Republicans and the Bush administration to handle the 2008 financial crisis. Although Obama had a congressional majority, his Democratic margins in Congress never reached the level enjoyed by Roosevelt and he was also confronted by a growing sense of partisanship within the legislature. Obama reflected on the changes in the political climate in Washington since Roosevelt's time and the increasingly polarized state of Congress with the statement, "Congress is just much more complicated. There is much less party unity. There's much more freelancing. The filibuster creates a supermajority on every piece of legislation."²¹ When Obama said there is "much less party unity" he failed to clarify that although this lack of unity was definitive of Democratic Congress members, it did not apply to the Republican Party members. Republican congressional leaders came to a consensus from the beginning of the Obama presidency that they would obstruct every initiative he proposed. They strove to pin the blame of the unpopular Wall Street bailouts that were undertaken by the Bush administration on Obama, and often succeeded in convincing many voters that the bailout and Obama's stimulus plan were one and the same.²² The

²⁰ Jonathan Alter, *The Promise: President Obama, Year One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 78.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²² Skocpol and Jacobs, 19.

division of Democrats in Congress and the unified Republican congressional opposition to Obama's stimulus plan, titled the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, precluded him from passing the bill on his first day as president as he had intended. In addition to the obstruction of a polarized Congress, Obama also inherited a \$1.3 trillion dollar deficit from George W. Bush, as well as two wars with foreign powers. To quote journalist Jonathan Alter, "With all due respect to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, he didn't face crises both at home and abroad. If Obama's predicament was less desperate than FDR's, it was also a lot more complicated."²³

Just as the comparison between the political contexts of Obama and FDR across historical periods highlights major shifts in the U.S. political system, an analysis of the different media climates of both men demonstrates how advances in technology and communication have transformed political discourse and presidential leadership. Roosevelt's media environment in the 1930s was dramatically different than the information age in which Obama communicates in the 2000s. Although many established newspapers were openly hostile towards him, Roosevelt's revolutionary use of the new medium of his time, the radio, presented him with a relatively unfiltered media opportunity. His ability to reach millions of average American citizens with his fireside chats on the radio revealed, "both the scope of that broadly shared communication modality and the eagerness of all Americans to hear from the president in a time of national crisis."²⁴ The media climate in President Obama's first year differed greatly, with several different communication modalities available, but none with the same reach and unified audience that the radio offered in 1933. The media environment

²³ Alter, 98.

²⁴ Skocpol and Jacobs, 27.

of the 2000s is a highly competitive cacophony of news networks on television, their websites and blogs on the Internet, and new media websites like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Media scholars agree that Obama's White House faced an institutionally fragmented media environment in 2009 that segmented listening, viewing, and online audiences in ways that made attention fleeting.²⁵ The 24-hour news environment in which Obama governed made it increasingly difficult for him to impart a simultaneous message to the American public and impeded his ability to sway public opinion and fulfill his role as agenda-setter. Knowledge of the differences inherent in the mediums used by Obama and FDR, and the ways in which they used them for their informal addresses, is crucial to understanding how they succeeded, or failed, in their rhetorical leadership.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: The Radio President

Roosevelt recognized the radio's potential for mass communication and mass persuasion before he was even elected president in 1933. He used it to successfully mobilize public opinion through reports to the people through a citywide radio network channel while serving as governor of New York. While the medium was created in 1895, the radio boom did not begin until the end of 1921, with improved economic conditions and the appearance of complete radio sets requiring little assembly on the market. By 1930, 45.8 percent of American homes were equipped with radio, and by 1940 that number had increased to almost 80 percent. Even the poorest households had a radio

²⁵ See Prior 2007 and Shapiro and Jacobs 2011.

ownership of more than 50 percent in 1935. By 1940, radio broadcasting had established itself as the preeminent communication medium in the United States.²⁶

Roosevelt capitalized on radio's growing popularity in his 1932 presidential campaign, and continued to use it as a way to communicate with the American public throughout his presidency. He called the radio, "an instrument of democracy," and he used it as a tool to appeal directly to the people in an attempt to overcome private lobbies and a reluctant legislature. Radio broadcasting played an important role in garnering support for the emergency economic measures that Roosevelt passed in his first months as president because it gave him a platform to explain what the government was doing and why it was doing it to a large audience of average Americans.²⁷ In his seminal work, *Presidential Power*, Richard Neustadt established that presidential leadership may involve, "the President-as-teacher" when applied to the public.²⁸ Roosevelt's own views reflect those of Neustadt as evident in his declaration that, "Leadership must educate the public, if it expects to get the public's response for effective action."²⁹

Assuming the role of "President-as-teacher," Roosevelt felt that it was his duty to explain to the American masses in common and simple terms how and why the banking crisis had occurred and what he planned to do to fix it. The radio presented him with the perfect medium with which to reach the ears of a large number of average Americans. When he said, "the medium is the message," Marshall McLuhan suggested that the

²⁶ Douglas B. Craig, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in the United States, 1920-1940* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000).

²⁷ Kenneth Yeilding and Paul Howard Carlson, *Ah That Voice: The Fireside Chats of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (Odessa, TX: John Ben Shepperd, Jr. Library of the Presidents, Presidential Museum, 1974).

²⁸ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power, the Politics of Leadership* (New York: Wiley, 1960).

²⁹ Yeilding and Carlson, xiv.

characteristics of the medium itself influence how a message reaches and affects the public. The radio is not visual meaning listeners only heard Roosevelt's words, in comparison to later media like television and the Internet. The lack of a visual component to the radio benefited Roosevelt because his voice was strong where his body, plagued by polio, was not. Listeners could not see or judge him for his handicap; all they could judge him on was his voice and his message. His voice and delivery were perfectly suited for the radio, and his lack of a sectional accent led journalist Orrin Dunlap, Jr. of *The New York Times*, to suggest that Roosevelt's voice was, "All-American," calling it the "brogue of Uncle Sam."³⁰ The radio was also not interactive in the way that the Internet is today. The masses could not respond immediately through "comments" to the speeches, or revise and replicate the speeches at their will. The replication of his speeches only appeared in newspapers, which printed his speeches in full without editing.³¹

The effectiveness with which Roosevelt used the radio can also be attributed to the radio broadcasting networks. Roosevelt would never have been able to address a large audience simultaneously without the existence and organization of broadcast networks. Radio broadcasting was the only news alternative to print media, and its popularity grew exponentially in the 1920s. When analyzing the numbers, the radio industry appears to have been Depression-proof; radio households grew by 14 percent between 1930 and 1933 while disposable personal income fell by 43 percent. Americans chose to spend their little disposable income on radio over other leisures. In 1932, for example, the number of radio homes grew by 10 percent, while car registrations dropped

³⁰ Yeilding and Carlson, xvii.

³¹ Ibid.

by 6.7 percent, movie attendance by 2 percent, and telephone sales by 5.7 percent.³² As a consequence of radio's growth and popularity, Roosevelt's first informal address to the public over a radio network of over 150 stations reached an estimated 20,000,000 homes with an approximate audience of 60,000,000 people.³³

In addition to the mass reach and scope of the radio broadcasting industry, Roosevelt also enjoyed the united support of radio networks for his New Deal during his first months as president. Competing stations like CBS and NBC offered the president their entire facilities, provided him with airtime on demand, and perhaps most importantly, silenced dissident voices. The vice president of CBS, Henry Bellows wrote to White House Secretary Stephen Early following Roosevelt's inauguration on March 6, 1933 ensuring him that "during this emergency...as a matter of public policy, we will limit broadcasts of...discussions of public questions by ascertaining that such programs are not contrary to the policies of the U.S. government."³⁴ The networks' favoring of Roosevelt was exemplified by the fact that NBC broadcast over twelve hours of speeches by administration figures during Roosevelt's first week as president, but gave the Republicans no airtime at all. NBC station manager of WBZ in Boston summarized the radio industry's position in 1933 in a letter to the Massachusetts branch of the American legion in a warning about radio speeches criticizing the Economy Act upon military pensions:

We believe that any utterance on the radio that tends to disturb the national confidence in its President is a disservice to the people themselves and is hence

³² Craig, 17.

³³ Yeilding and Carlson, xii.

³⁴ Craig, 20.

inimical to the national welfare...as a great and powerful agency for the service of the public these stations cannot become a party to attacks on national security.³⁵

Upon assuming office, Roosevelt quickly utilized this undivided support from the radio industry and delivered an informal address to win the confidence of the American public, the first of his now infamous fireside chats.

In his first informal appeal to the American public on March 12, 1933, Roosevelt's mission was to soothe the growing anxieties amounting amongst the public as a result of the banking holiday. Timing his speech right before the re-opening of the banks the next day, he sought to restore the people's confidence in the banks and encourage them to reinvest their money. He digressed upon his motivation for this speech in an interview:

It was my endeavor to explain these things in a non-political language so that the great mass of our citizens who had little or no experience with the technicalities of banking would be relieved of their anxiety as to whether they would ever see their money again.³⁶

The non-political language he mentioned in this interview was a defining characteristic of his fireside chats, a term coined by the press to distinguish Roosevelt's formal speeches from his informal reports on the state of the nation to the American public.

Non-political language was just one of the defining elements of Roosevelt's fireside chats. These addresses were distinguishable from his formal speeches in the different approach that Roosevelt applied when delivering them. Roosevelt pictured himself as talking frankly with a neighbor when engaging in a fireside chat.³⁷ This approach made listeners feel invited into his family circle and created what Benedict

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Yeilding and Carlson, xiv.

³⁷ Grace G. Tully, *F.D.R., My Boss* (Chicago: Peoples Book Club, 1949).

Anderson would call, “an imagined community.”³⁸ This sense of a national family over which Roosevelt presided was enhanced by the simultaneous reception of the broadcast across the country; listeners were aware that they were hearing the same message at the same time as their “brothers and sisters” throughout the United States. One radio critic of the time noted that the successful broadcaster, “be he speaker, singer, or clown, likes to envision his audience—a family to which he speaks and not a countless mob scattered far across the country.”³⁹ Roosevelt’s declaration of “My friends” at the beginning of each of the fireside chats contributed to the collective experience of listeners. He would further unite the listening audience by identifying some common enemy like “the few men who might thwart this common purpose by seeking selfish advantage” to which he alluded in his first chat. By naming the enemy he unified the public in opposition not only to that group of people, but also to behaviors that were associated with the enemy. He also nurtured the sense of imagined community between Americans through references to past American heroes and patriots. The playing of the national anthem after every fireside chat reinforced this sense of national identity.⁴⁰

In order to be understood by average Americans, Roosevelt employed the everyday vernacular of the people, using simple language and homely analogy. One analysis of his word choices showed that 70 to 80 percent of his Fireside Chat vocabulary was from one thousand of the most common words in the English language.⁴¹ In her book *This I Remember*, Eleanor Roosevelt said of her husband’s style, “he wanted to be

³⁸ Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

³⁹ Russell D. Buhite, ed., *FDR’s Fireside Chats* (London: University of Oklahoma, 1992).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Yeilding and Carlson, xiv.

clear enough for the layman to understand.”⁴² In his attempt to do so, Roosevelt incorporated many concrete examples and explanations, and organized the text of his speech in a simple manner. In an analysis of his language and style, communications scholar, Keiko Aiko, noted Roosevelt’s artful use of adverbs and adjectives, especially his persuasive use of the word “we” when making assertions. His impeccable delivery also contributed to the positive and attentive response of the public. According to Dr. Walter Damrosch, a well-known authority on radio speaking, the naturalness of Roosevelt’s delivery “allowed him to evade the appearance of mere speechmaking so much so that he painted word pictures.”⁴³ The timing of his speeches also factored into their popular reception; by rarely exceeding three fireside chats a year, he ensured that the speeches maintained their appeal and novelty. These combined aspects of Roosevelt’s speech set the stage for the public’s responsiveness to his fireside chats; presidential historians would argue however that the message he delivered was equally, if not more, significant.

Glen Thurow, a scholar of presidential leadership, claimed, “the access to presidential character is through presidential speech.”⁴⁴ The messages expressed in Roosevelt’s fireside chats not only informed and comforted the masses during the Depression, but also familiarized them with their commander-in-chief in an intimate manner. By projecting a message of hope, Roosevelt assured financially desperate Americans that their government was in tune with their needs and working towards the

⁴² Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), 73.

⁴³ Yeilding and Carlson, xviii.

⁴⁴ Glen E. Thurow, “Dimensions of Presidential Character,” in Martin J., Medhurst, ed., *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996).

betterment of their country. By taking the American people into his confidence and speaking to them as friends, Roosevelt made the public feel like they genuinely knew his character and could relate to him. The feelings of many Americans were summarized well in a poem written by writer and folklorist, Carl Lamson Carmer, in the days following Roosevelt's death:

...I never saw him/but I *knew* him. Can you have forgotten?/How, with his voice,
he came into our house,/The President of the United States,/
Calling us friends...⁴⁵

The effect that the speeches had on the American public, especially in regards to restoring confidence in the deteriorating economy, suggests that the substance of the speeches was just as important as the medium within which the informal addresses were presented. It is evident that Roosevelt's message was strong enough to raise the downtrodden public out of their misery, spiritually, if not, financially. However, even in this quote it is clear that that Roosevelt's effectiveness depended upon his ability to reach people with his voice in their homes over the radio.

Of the thirty-one fireside chats that Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered during his time in office, seven of them were primarily focused on the economy and the majority of these economy-based speeches were during the first years of his presidency.⁴⁶ His first talk on the economy on March 12, 1933 was perhaps his most significant fireside chat on domestic affairs, and is therefore the best example for substance analysis. The speech was delivered six days after Roosevelt was sworn into office, and four days after he called for the temporary closing of all banks, or a "bank holiday." The speech was

⁴⁵ Buhite, xx.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

delivered across radio networks at a time in American history when one out of every four Americans was unemployed. The banking system was on the brink of meltdown as a result of “bank runs,” when “panic-stricken depositors suddenly appeared [at banks] to demand their savings.”⁴⁷ This banking crisis was caused by the radical uncertainty on the part of thousands of Americans that their money was unsafe in the banks. Congress approved Roosevelt’s proclamation declaring a four-day banking holiday the day after his inauguration on March 9, 1933 with the unanimous approval of the House and a Senate vote of 77 to 7 in favor of the motion. This summary of the mood of the public and the compliance of Congress in the days following Roosevelt’s inauguration reveals how ready the nation was for change.

Historians of Roosevelt argue that his first fireside chat entitled, “An Intimate Talk with the People of the United States on Banking” restored the public’s confidence in the banks and motivated people to put their money back into the re-opened banks the very next day.⁴⁸ Roosevelt began this first “intimate talk” with the words, “My friends, I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking...I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, and why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be.”⁴⁹ The clarity of his message was paramount to its effectiveness. At the introduction of the speech he explained his reasons for addressing the public and the intent of the talk. He continued on to explain the emergency actions he took and expressed his gratitude for the people’s patience and fortitude. After providing the background and the reasoning behind the measures that had been taken, he expressed

⁴⁷ Ibid., iv.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *Fireside Chats* (New York: Penguin, 1995).

his expectations for citizens: “The success of our whole national program depends, of course, on the cooperation of the public – on its intelligent support and its use of a reliable system.”⁵⁰ He deemed it “highly unfashionable” to hoard one’s money, and by saying so, in his elevated position, he made it so. Nearing the end of his speech he recognized America’s “bad banking situation” and he attributed it to “bankers [who] had shown themselves either incompetent or dishonest in their handling of people’s funds.”⁵¹ By naming the bankers the villains, Roosevelt allowed himself to paint the government as the hero exemplified in his statement, “and so it became the government’s job to straighten out this situation and to do it as quickly as possible. And the job is being performed.” In this speech, as in the majority of his fireside chats, Roosevelt weaves a narrative that is at once informative and inspirational. He inserts the public into the story, and makes them key figures in how it will end, illustrated in the way he closed his first informal speech:

After all there is an element in the readjustment of our financial system more important than currency...and that is the confidence of the people themselves. Confidence and courage are the essentials of success in carrying out our plan. You people must have faith...let us unite in banishing fear...it is your problem, my friends, your problem no less than it is mine. Together we cannot fail.⁵²

By making the American people the protagonists of the narrative he unified them with a common goal and placed his trust in their ability to give the story a “happy ending.” And, as history as shown, this method of rhetoric succeeded in persuading a substantial amount of Americans to deposit their money in the re-opened banks.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Barack Obama: The Internet President

Fast forward seventy-six years after Roosevelt delivered his first fireside chat to 2009 and the very different media climate faced by Barack Obama. Media theorist, Neil Postman, argued in an essay about the information environment that, “when there occurs a radical shift in the structure of that [information] environment this must be followed by changes in social organization, intellectual predispositions, and a sense of what is real and valuable.”⁵³ The information environment in the U.S. was drastically changed by the introduction, popularization, and enhancement of the Internet, and it has since propagated shifts in how Americans relate to one another, how they express their sense of what is valuable, and how they experience the news. The Internet launched a new media age defined by 24-hour access to information. In its current usage, “new media’ refers to Internet communications via the World Wide Web, which also entails the personal involvement of tens of millions of individuals in web-based “social networks” through LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.”⁵⁴ The Project for Excellence in Journalism reported in March 2010 that the proliferation of Internet offerings has put an end to the era in which news consumers relied on only one or two sources.

The simultaneous broadcast that aided Roosevelt in projecting the feeling of an “imagined community,” has been replaced by a fragmented media environment defined by its segmented, and often distracted, audience. Media scholar Marco Adria summed up the differences in audience attention span between the Internet and other mediums quite well:

⁵³ Neil Postman, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (Laurel: New York, 2011).

⁵⁴ Ron Elving, “Fall of the Favorite” in *Obama in Office: The First Two Years*, ed. James A. Thurber (Boulder: Paradigm, 2011), 145-66.

For a news item in the newspaper, on the radio or on television, the adjacent information and events competing for attention are similar in scale and scope, more news stories selected by editors. With the internet, what is competing for attention are the unending sales pitches, the unfinished four-hour link to the workplace...as well as the communities of affinity.⁵⁵

The distractive nature of the Internet has created a media audience with a short attention span and a problematic media climate for a president hoping to connect with the public through speeches.

Many historians argue that Roosevelt's chats were so successful because they fostered a sense of family between listeners. In his book *The New Imagined Community*, Uriya Shavit argued that in order for a medium to successfully project a sense of "imagined community," it must contain characteristics that ensure the message will be consumed primarily, simultaneously, and on an ongoing basis. While the radio and television allow for the consumption of messages and images primarily and simultaneously by a mass audience, the Internet provides users with choices other than primary options dictated by communities and administrators, and gives them the opportunity to access news at their own convenience at any hour of the day. Consequently, the Digital Age has made it impossible for Obama to recreate the sense of an "imagined family" that Roosevelt conveyed during the Radio Age.

Recent research on contemporary presidencies contains the consistent theme that the changing media environment of the Digital Age has challenged presidential leadership of public opinion.⁵⁶ Jeffrey Cohen asserted that, "presidents may face increasing difficulty...given the complexities that the age of the 24-hour news presents

⁵⁵ Marco Adria, *Technology and Nationalism* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

⁵⁶ Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake.

for leadership.”⁵⁷ The public has too many viewing and listening options to guarantee a large audience for presidential speech. The Internet has created an inherently fragmented media environment and the news broadcast networks on television have made modern media incredibly competitive. In this competitive environment, sensationalism often wins out over fact, and the personality of the president is reported on more than his policy initiatives. Ron Elving, the senior editor of NPR News, observed that “the effect of all the immediacy and competition [of the 24-hour news environment] is a dazzling array of options for the instant gratification of the news consumer...it is also a dizzying world of both factual and dubious reporting.” The news environment has also become increasingly biased and has seen the introduction of ideologically identified broadcast stations, blogs, and websites directed at philosophically segmented readership. The ability for presidential leadership is diminished in this new media environment in which people have the option to consume the version of the news that promotes an overt political agenda that supports their ideological view. Even the radio industry, which had willingly silenced opposition to Roosevelt during his first year in office, succumbed to the new wave of polarized news media, as evidenced in the relentless critiques of Obama emanated from conservative talk radio shows.

In contrast to Roosevelt, who enjoyed a relatively pleasant relationship with the media during his first two years as president, Obama faced a hostile press from the day he took office. The constant, 24-hour presence of opposition to Obama from news networks, websites, and talk radio has been led by the full-force attack of Fox News, a network unabashedly aligned with the GOP. Obama alluded to Fox’s bias in a CNBC

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Cohen, *The Presidency in an Era of 24-Hour News* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

interview with John Harwood saying, “I’ve got one television station entirely devoted to attacking my administration. That’s a pretty big mega-phone. And you’d be hard-pressed, if you watched the entire day, to find a positive story about me.”⁵⁸ The sensationalist, and often non-factual, reports on Obama and his administration on Fox News contaminate the media chain and dictate the discussions on other popular broadcast networks and blogs, regardless of the validity of the claim. The messages about Obama and his policies projected by Fox and conservative websites, blogs, and talk radio shows, contradicted those that Obama delivered to the press in 2009. The same new media tools that Obama so effectively utilized in his 2008 campaign were used against him by his opposition in 2009, most notably by the Tea Party, a radical conservative movement that emerged in 2009 and communicated with constituents largely through websites and e-mail. This overtaking of Obama’s political control over new media and public opinion was expressed well in a recent *New York Times* editorial: “Barack Obama blazed like Luke Skywalker in 2008, but he never learned to channel the force. And now the Tea Party has run off with his light saber.”⁵⁹ Obama’s communications team found their hopes at emulating their mastery of new media during the 2008 campaign in the White House dashed, and found themselves relying on a media environment which they could not control. The optimism espoused from Obama’s 2008 campaign “new media revolution,” was quickly doused after his first few months in office, leaving the press guessing why President Obama was not as strong a communicator as candidate Obama.

Candidate v. President Obama

⁵⁸ Skocpol & Jacobs, 35.

⁵⁹ Maureen Dowd, "Downgrade Blues," *New York Times*, August 6, 2011.

After the Obama team's successful mobilization of new media during the 2008 campaign, press and White House analysts were optimistic about the continuation of his seemingly flawless communications strategy once he took office. Part of Obama's appeal both to the Democratic Party and the voting public was his outstanding communications ability, which manifested itself consistently throughout the campaign. Presidential and media scholars agree that Barack Obama's presidential campaign revolutionized political use of the Internet and far surpassed his predecessors' attempts at utilizing the medium during campaigns.⁶⁰ Obama was the first presidential candidate to connect with a substantial amount of voters through online media. The Obama campaign team launched a website called mybarackobama.com that hosted a record 150 million unique visitors by the end of the campaign. Personalized e-mail and text messages were sent to subscribers to the Democratic Party. Obama campaign videos garnered 100 million views on YouTube and his campaign page on Facebook made 2.4 million "friends."⁶¹ His outstanding use of web media during the campaign to inspire and reach voters seemed to guarantee that his communications success would continue after he took office. Press speculated that Barack Obama and his communications strategists had come up with the perfect formula to "break through the noise" of the 24/7/365 news environment.

After winning the election, Barack Obama and his communications team tried to maintain their online presence through a website called change.gov, initiated to keep the public informed and involved on policy initiatives during the transition. The interactive

⁶⁰ Kate Kenski, Bruce W. Hardy, and Kathleen Jamieson, *The Obama Victory: How Media, Money, and Message Shaped by the 2008 Election* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010).

⁶¹Elving, "Fall of the Favorite."

website featured a “Citizen’s Briefing Book,” which encouraged visitors to share their ideas, with a promise that the team would share them with the president. The website also presented a link to “Your Weekly Address,” which featured a short and informal address to Americans about the policy changes he planned to enact after his inauguration. The website was successful at providing the bridge to the White House that the Obama transition team hoped for, but it failed to retain its popularity after it subsumed to whitehouse.gov when Obama officially took office. Dan Siroker worked on the 2008 web campaign and later on change.gov, but left quickly after failed attempts to continue its success with whitehouse.gov. He compared the campaign to a “sports-like function” during which it’s easy to get people “gung-ho” about voting for Barack Obama, but noted that after the excitement of the campaign and election diminished, people lost interest and felt too saturated with policy initiatives on the official White House website.⁶² The beauty of the 2008 campaign was that it had the sole purpose and message of getting Barack Obama elected. The difficulty of Obama’s first one hundred days was getting people to rally around a plethora of messages, policies, and goals.

There was a significant decrease in the amount of people tuning in to Obama’s new media efforts after he was elected. After his inauguration his campaign site “Obama for America” was changed to “Organizing for America,” and by May 2009 its number of page views had gone down 64 percent from October 2008. The traffic on the Obama YouTube channel fell from one million daily viewers at the start of his term to 42,000 daily viewers eight months later.⁶³ This decline in the responsiveness of the public to new media communications was not for lack of effort from Obama or his team. During

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

2009 Obama was omnipresent on the web, and he and his communications strategists flooded the niche Internet markets via Twitter feeds, Flickr photo streams, and Facebook pages. In March 2009, Obama became the first president to host a live Internet video chat, which received 100,000 question submissions on whitehouse.gov. The most popular question asked was about the legalization of marijuana, and Obama joked, “what does this say about our online audience?”⁶⁴ Although the president meant the question as a joke, it is a legitimate concern, and reveals the priorities of online users, who are ten times more likely to watch a comedy sketch on YouTube than tune in to one of Obama’s weekly YouTube webcasts.

Just as FDR used a new medium to regularly connect with average Americans in an informal way, Obama recorded weekly YouTube addresses in 2009 that could be accessed by millions of Americans in the comfort of their own homes at the click of a button. In these speeches he talked about the economy in a reassuring way, emphasizing togetherness and collectivity in the same way that FDR did in his fireside chats. In adherence with the small attention span of new media users, the addresses rarely exceeded six minutes, in comparison to Roosevelt’s twenty to thirty minute chats. The message of hope that he is often criticized for not delivering is noticeably present in these speeches. In his speeches on the economy he clearly outlined his recovery plan in an organized fashion.

Although his weekly addresses in 2009 contained many of the same elements of Roosevelt’s fireside chats, they did not reach the same mass audience. His first weekly address on January 24, 2009 had just over one million hits on YouTube and by March of

⁶⁴ Alter, 278.

that same year the amount of views had decreased to 106, 729.⁶⁵ It is arguable that Obama's "Your Weekly Address," did not attract many viewers because it was not advertised properly. Even more likely is the possibility that in this media age, the majority of the public chooses to hear and read information about the economy from their preferred news outlet. Some critics argue that this choice on the part of the public to get their news on the economy from a secondary source rather than the president himself is indicative that the president has failed to set the agenda on his own economic policies and views. They criticize Obama for not delivering a nationally broadcast speech that focused solely on the economy that would have inspired people to tune in to Obama's webcasts and other social media efforts for economic news. The critics hold that the American people would have been more receptive and understanding of Obama if he employed rhetoric that conveyed a more hopeful and reassuring message, even if an economic turn-around did not happen overnight.⁶⁶

Obama's Rhetorical Style and Message

Sound bites have historically been used by presidents to imprint a message on the public consciousness, with some famous examples being Lincoln's, "a house divided against itself cannot stand" and Roosevelt's, "we have nothing to fear but fear itself." Candidate Obama and his speechwriting staff were very successful with the catchphrase, "Yes we can!" in the 2008 campaign, but have since deliberately avoided including sound bites in speeches. Ben Rhodes, a member of Obama's speechwriting team, believes that Obama's rhetorical gift lies in "distilling complexity, explaining complexity, and

⁶⁵ This number has continued to steadily decline. On November 19, 2011 Obama's weekly webcast titled, "Creating an Economy to Last" only received 13, 618 hits on YouTube.

⁶⁶ Skocpol and Jacobs, 31.

respecting the complexity of the world.”⁶⁷ Obama himself has expressed his dislike for the “talking points” of politics and prides himself on respecting the intelligence of voters. Unlike Roosevelt’s simple style of speech, Obama uses measured, complex, and wordy sentences that have earned him the nickname, “Professor-in-chief.”⁶⁸ Throughout 2009, he avoided making untrue statements just to make Americans feel better. In response to criticisms that he did not talk enough jobs, he said that he thought it was unfair to promote lower unemployment when the economy was still shedding 400,000 to 500,000 jobs a month. He said that doing so would have “been building whatever house we built on sand.”⁶⁹ This refusal to talk about jobs until after the economy had stabilized is evident in his “Your Weekly Addresses” that dealt with the economy in 2009. He rarely mentioned job creation, choosing instead to talk about how investments in education, health care, and energy were going to stimulate the economy. These webcasts also including another definitive characteristic of Obama’s speechmaking, which analysts of his style term “naming.” “Naming” can mean naming actual names, but it most often involves identifying particular problems, challenges, and counterarguments. For example, in his first weekly YouTube address as president on January 24, 2009, Obama said, “I know that some of you are skeptical about the size and scope of this recovery plan...I understand that skepticism.” In acknowledging such skepticism, he allowed for the charge that it was validated and that skeptics were correct. This point is made by critics of Obama’s technique of “naming” who argue that by giving airtime to the other side’s perspective he makes himself more susceptible to criticism.

⁶⁷ Alter, 272.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Alter, 273.

President Obama's honest rhetoric is one of his greatest attributes but it is also arguably one of his greatest flaws. By not wanting to give Americans false hope, he risks not giving them any hope at all. It is this lack of a hopeful component in his speechmaking that has led the largely liberal popular press to criticize his ability to connect with the public. Editorial columnists for newspapers like *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, and magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*, have written articles that suggest President Obama has not appeared sympathetic enough to the plights of the unemployed and has not projected a strong enough message. They often compare candidate Obama with President Obama and lament the disappearance of candidate Obama's inspirational rhetoric, as exemplified in a Maureen Dowd op-ed wherein she wrote, "Yes we can!" turned into "Hey, we might..."⁷⁰ Many of the press's complaints about Obama's message mirror those of scholars. Like the scholars who wonder why Obama has yet to deliver a nationally televised speech solely on the economy, journalist Michael Hirsch noted Obama's seeming indifference with it in an article when he wrote "he[Obama] spoke of financial reform, but he often seemed to address it on the fly, as he was touching on other priorities."⁷¹ These critics argue that Obama's rhetoric has not been "FDR-inspiring" to a "deflated and desperate nation," reversing the comparisons that were made between the two politicians prior to Obama's inauguration.⁷²

Other critics both in and outside of the press charged that Obama failed at communicating and driving a cohesive, thematic economic narrative to the American public. Drew Westen of *The New York Times* wrote in an article that, "the stories our

⁷⁰ Maureen Dowd, "Of Dystopias and Alphas," *New York Times*, August 20, 2011.

⁷¹ Michael Hirsch, "Obama's Old Deal."

⁷² Dowd, "Of Dystopias and Alphas."

leaders tell us matter because they orient us to what is, what could be, and what should be.” Without clearly dictated stories, the American masses become disorientated, especially amidst an information environment in which it is difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. While President Obama has arguably done all he can to reach the masses given the media climate, he still has been unable to restore public confidence in the economy and the government. One possible explanation is that the White House assumed that successful policy would automatically translate into successful governance. What the administration failed to realize, however, is that while good governance requires good policy, it also depends upon an ongoing dialogue between policymakers and the governed.⁷³ President Obama admitted this oversight in an interview with journalist George Stephanopoulos of ABC News at the end of his first year:

And you know, if there's one thing that I regret this year, it's that we were so busy just getting stuff done and dealing with the immediate crises that were in front of us, that I think we lost some of that sense of speaking directly to the American people about what their core values are and why we have to make sure those institutions are matching up with those values. And that I do think is a mistake of mine. I think the assumption was, if I just focus on policy, if I just focus on the, you know this provision, or that law, or are we making a good rational decision here...that people will get it...and I think...what they've ended up seeing is this feeling of remoteness and detachment...⁷⁴

Obama's agendas for policy change in education loans, health care reform, and financial regulation progressed quite remarkably during 2009, yet much of what was achieved remained invisible or incomprehensible to most citizens. Although he often talked about investing money in health care, energy, and education, he rarely explained why these investments were essential to his plan to stimulate the economy and create jobs, and as

⁷³ Scott Lilly, "Communication is Destiny," in *Obama in Office: The First Two Years*, ed. James A. Thurber (Boulder: Paradigm, 2011), 179.

⁷⁴ Barack Obama, "George Stephanopoulos' Exclusive Interview with President Obama," Interview by George Stephanopoulos, ABC News, January 20, 2010.

noted by political pollster Geoff Garin, “for the voters, health care fell in the category of ‘not the economy’ so as far as they were concerned Washington took its eye off the ball.”⁷⁵ By focusing too much on health care without explaining how health care reform would help the economy, the public considered the two initiatives mutually exclusive and considered Obama more concerned with health care than unemployment, when in fact he viewed health care as an essential part of economic recovery.

This failure in communication has arguably been the Obama administration’s biggest mistake, one that quite possibly explains why the Democratic Party lost its Congressional majority in the 2010 midterm elections. This argument is supported by a *Bloomberg* poll conducted a week prior to the midterm elections that showed 52 percent of voters believed that taxes on the middle class had gone up under Obama, 60 percent that *most* of the TARP money was lost, and 61 percent that the economy had shrunk over the course of 2009. The comparison of these perceptions with the actual state of the economy is very telling. The charge from pollsters that Obama was a tax-and-spend politician conflicts with the reality that his policies resulted in tax cuts. Only 19 percent of the people surveyed disagreed with the assertion that taxes under Obama have gone up, despite the fact that 37 percent of the money taken from the Treasury in the stimulus package went for tax cuts. Voters’ perceptions were even more out of sync in regards to taxes on middle-income families with 63 percent of people with household incomes of \$25,000-\$50,000 and 45 percent of people with household incomes above \$100,000, believing that taxes on the middle class had been raised under Obama. These voters’ views sharply contradicted Obama’s actual economic policy, which targeted the majority

⁷⁵ Elving, 163.

of tax cuts to middle-income households. The fact that two to one of likely voters thought that the economy had shrunk, despite fifteen months of consecutive growth, sheds even further light on the miscommunication from the White House and the confusion of voters.⁷⁶ The dramatic disconnect between the Obama administration's actual fiscal policies and accomplishments and the views of voters at the midterm elections supports the assertion of journalist Drew Westen that "the average American had no idea what Democrats were trying to accomplish because no one bothered to explain it to them with the repetition and evocative imagery that our brains require to make an idea 'stick.'"⁷⁷ These figures support the deduction that tepid presidential framing of the economic narrative bears part of the responsibility for Americans' sustained confusion about the economy, in addition to inescapable constraints of the media environment.

Obama v. FDR

Despite the fact that Obama passed even more policy legislation than Roosevelt in his first hundred days in office and made efforts to reach out to average Americans on the Internet and popular television shows like *The Tonight Show* and *The View*, Obama was unable to restore the public's confidence in the economy and in his administration in the same way that FDR did in 1933. Some historians and media experts argue that Obama was overexposed, saturating the media with too many speeches and appearances, in contrast to Roosevelt whose speeches and public appearances were much less frequent. In their study of presidential rhetoric, Matthew Eshabugh-Soha and Jeffrey Peake

⁷⁶ Lilly, "Communication is Destiny," 173-177.

⁷⁷ Drew Westen, "What Happened to Obama's Passion?" *New York Times*, August 6, 2011.

observed that, “even though they deliver many more speeches than their predecessors and engage in a greater number of public activities over time, it appears modern presidents’ audiences have diminished considerably.” This observation is interesting to the discussion of whether overexposure makes the public disinterested, or if the changing media environment requires overexposure to make them interested at all. In a statement on why he only delivered two to three Fireside Chats a year, Roosevelt explained, “Public psychology cannot be attuned for long periods of time to a constant replication of the highest notes on the scales.”⁷⁸ Obama, in contrast, offered scores of interviews to journalists and taped weekly informal addresses for the radio and the web in 2009. He sat for 152 interviews that year, leading political commentator Bill Maher to joke, “You’re the president, not a rerun of *Law and Order*.”⁷⁹ The most common media criticism of Obama was that he was overexposed, but what choice did he have in a 24-hour news environment in which one has to be omnipresent to avoid being drowned out by adversaries?

As noted earlier in this discussion, Barack Obama and Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered similar messages in their speeches, most notably in their informal appeals to the people through Obama’s weekly webcasts and Roosevelt’s fireside chats. In these formats, both of the presidents in this study asserted the need for “togetherness” and unified public action for economic recovery. They encouraged Americans to have reassurance in the banks and the safety of their money. The similarity between their economic messages is illustrated well in their familiar sentiments on the preference of depositing money in a bank rather than hoarding money at home. In his first fireside chat

⁷⁸ Alter, 284.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 278.

Roosevelt emphatically stated, “I can assure you...it is safer to keep your money in a reopened bank than it is to keep it under the mattress.” In 2009, in the first ever appearance of a president on a late-night talk show, President Obama told the 4 million viewers of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, that, “Everybody should have complete confidence in the banks. The deposits are protected. They shouldn’t be putting it [money] in their mattresses.” Their different political and media environments can partially explain the discrepancy between their similar message and their success at restoring public confidence in the economy. A contributing factor, however, could also be their different framing of the message, and the very notable difference between their narrative styles, evident in Roosevelt’s use of vivid metaphors to identify and criminalize the “villain,” and Obama’s reluctance to do so in his speeches.

Roosevelt was a master at identifying who was at the root of the economic problem and describing the person or group of people in impersonal terms in the passive voice, as evidenced in the previous analysis of his first fireside chat when he clearly identified the bankers as the cause of the banking crisis. Because Obama depended upon the bankers and other corporate hegemony to spark the economy, he never launched a full-throttled attack on them, particularly during his first year. Obama rarely excoriated Republicans like Roosevelt did in speeches when he would clearly outline why his side was correct and theirs was not. Obama’s intent to limit partisanship with his moderate approach was admirable, but perhaps a bit ignorant in light of the criticisms, exaggerations, and outright lies that were spread to Americans by the Republican right through media like Fox News. When Obama’s White House eventually fought back against Fox, it did so indirectly, with White House staff members making overt

comments against the network instead of having Obama do so himself. Obama occasionally made negative comments about an unnamed network, but he did not make his first direct criticism of Fox until September 2010 in an interview with *Rolling Stone* during which he called the network “destructive for the long-term growth of the country.” Obama’s occasional quips and negative comments about bankers and Republican obstructers did not equal Roosevelt’s outright denunciations of the same to mass listening audiences, nor did they match the volume of negative comments made by the Republican right and the Tea Party about him in the media.

Many conservative criticisms of President Obama from media commentators like Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck on FOX tried to demonize him by calling him a socialist and using racial slurs to question his legitimacy. The openly racist comments from conservatives, like Beck’s accusation that Obama “hates all white people,” suggest that Obama’s struggle to penetrate the media filter may be a consequence of his race.⁸⁰ While this discussion is mostly centered upon media climate and communication style, it is impossible to embark upon a comparison between Roosevelt and Obama without recognizing their racial differences, and how Obama’s stature as “the first black president” has dictated what he can and cannot do or say. Even Obama, who scholars praise as a masterful rhetorician, has been unable to overcome the country’s “inherent fixation with race as an apriori in its national discourse and as an accompanying explanation for many of its social ills.”⁸¹ In light of this fact, Obama has had to be mindful of what he says so as not to appear the “victimized, angry Black man” and

⁸⁰ Skocpol and Jacobs, 31.

⁸¹ Martell Teasley and David Ikard, “Barack Obama and the Politics of Race: The Myth of Postracism in America,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 40, no. 3 (2010): 411-425.

alienate his white voters. This caveat to Obama's position as the first black president is illustrated well by the drop in his approval ratings following his comments after the unjust arrest of Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, a professor at Harvard University. Obama remarked that the white police officer that had arrested the African American professor in his own home had acted "stupidly." This negative comment about a white man was followed by a national approval ratings drop from 53 percent to 46 percent within 48 hours of the comment. This event sheds light upon Obama's ability to speak about social ills and openly attack the white institutions that are responsible for them. In his book, *Not Even Past*, Thomas Sugrue recognizes this fact when he states, "if we take into account the dynamics of racialized thinking that inform and complicate how Obama can talk about race and speak to social inequalities, we can view his fence-straddling as a necessary, if regrettable, ploy."⁸² Thus, it is clear that Obama's race affected his ability to project as strong of a message against his opposition as Roosevelt could as a white president.

Conclusion

Observing the differences between the political and media environments in which President Obama and President Roosevelt governed during their first year of presidency led me to conclude that comparisons between the two men by the popular press have been unfair. Although Barack Obama was a change-oriented president facing an economic crisis at the start of his term in 2009 like Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, he was confronted with a more complicated political and media climate in which to govern. The fact that the economic situation in 1933 was in a much more desperate state

⁸² Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

than it was in 2009 worked in Roosevelt's favor by providing him with a compliant Congress. Because Obama entered office as the recession was just evolving he did not have the same legislative edge. Obama also faced virulent opposition from congressional Republicans who obstructed every major initiative that Obama tried to pass, which sharply contrasted the level of bipartisanship enjoyed by Roosevelt after his decisive election. While Roosevelt inherited a more challenging economic crisis, Obama was faced with two costly foreign wars and a variety of domestic concerns about the availability of health care and new policies on immigration, in addition to a dawning recession. Obama was also bombarded by a much more hostile press than Roosevelt, who was protected by the press in ways that no president has been before or since. Even later detractors like radio commentator Father Charles Coughlin and publisher William Randolph Hearst supported Roosevelt during his first year as president, and even when they did make negative remarks, none had the constant presence of the 24-hour news networks that have denounced Obama since his inauguration. One rather important similarity between the two men, however, is that by the close of their first year in office, neither Roosevelt nor Obama could point to a major turnaround in economic activity. This similarity is of the utmost importance because it inspires the question of why, if both Roosevelt and Obama were unable to spur a massive economic recovery, was Roosevelt able to restore confidence in the economy his first year in office when Obama was not?

The answer to this question and the main argument of this discussion lies in President Obama's failure to communicate and connect with the masses in 2009. In the same 2010 interview with George Stephanopoulos referenced previously, Obama admitted that his major challenge during his first year as president was successfully

“breaking through the noise and speaking to the American people in a way that during a campaign you can do.”⁸³ Despite Obama and his communication team’s valiant efforts to reach ordinary Americans 2009, Obama was not nearly as successful at connecting with the general public as he was during the 2008 campaign. In comparison, Roosevelt continued the success he had with reaching voters on the radio during his 1932 campaign throughout his first year as president and beyond. I argue that the disappointment expressed by the popular press in Obama’s inability to emulate Roosevelt’s inspiring informal addresses to instill Americans with hope is a bit unreasonable. The comparisons made between the two men in the press do not recognize the crucial differences in the media cultures of Obama in 2009 and Roosevelt in 1933. Roosevelt had a relatively unfiltered media opportunity in comparison to the fragmented media and segmented audience that characterized the “new media” environment in 2009. Whereas Roosevelt could reach a mass audience of over 60,000,000 people with one radio address, Obama was lucky if more than one million people tuned in to his weekly web addresses in 2009. It is questionable whether Roosevelt would be heralded as the “Great Communicator” in today’s media climate, where media are visual, competitive, and sensational. It is arguable, however, that Roosevelt may have been more successful at easing the public’s confusion about the economy in 2009 than Obama because of the simple rhetoric he employed when discussing the economy in contrast to Obama’s complex explanations. He also may have been more successful than Obama at projecting a hopeful message and condemning those that opposed him.

With the 2012 election fast approaching, President Obama may want to adopt Franklin Delano Roosevelt's narrative strategy of naming the villain. When Roosevelt's faced harsh opposition from Republicans during his 1936 re-election campaign, he delivered a speech warning Americans against electing Republicans during which he openly mocked the hypocrisy of the opposition party who criticized his policies while simultaneously saying that they could do them better and "it wouldn't cost anybody anything."⁸⁴ If President Obama wants to win a second term, he will need to adopt this narrative strategy to draw attention to the lies espoused by the Republicans throughout his first term, and provide Americans with the facts about the fiscal policies he enacted. If voters remain as ignorant of the reality of the state of the economy under the Obama administration as they were when they went to the polls for the 2010 midterm elections, then President Obama runs the risk of becoming a one term president.

⁸⁴ "2012: Can Obama Beat The Odds in a Bad Economy Like FDR in 1936," *The Last Word*, MSNBC, September 2, 2011.

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