In a time before television and the Internet, Franklin D. Roosevelt made himself present to the American people as no president had done before. With his confident, engaging manner and warm voice, FDR was at his best when he could reach people directly. From the traditionally remote seat of power in Washington, DC, he created a new, more open and more familiar communications strategy that played to this strength. By stripping away layers of official mediation to speak straight to Americans, FDR gave the presidency a more central place in American life and gave citizens the sense that the president worked for them.

Just days after his inauguration, he told reporters crowded around his desk that while the Constitution required him to report to Congress on the country’s condition, he believed he had “a like duty to convey to the people themselves a clear picture of the situation in Washington itself whenever there is a danger of any confusion as to what the government is undertaking.” The next day, he delivered the first of many radio addresses—his famous “fireside chats.”

FDR’s radio talks and twice-weekly meetings with reporters not only gave him routine opportunities to inform, persuade,
and reassure a mass audience, but also allowed him to bypass intermediaries who were considerably less receptive to his message. A great majority of editors and publishers, some 87 percent, opposed the New Deal.

Eleanor Roosevelt, meanwhile, created an entirely novel media presence for the First Lady. She was the first presidential spouse to hold press conferences (for women reporters only), write a syndicated column, and make regular radio broadcasts. Her efforts amplified FDR’s message, in a voice that was all her own and beloved by many.

Most Americans, whether families gathered around their radios or reporters pressing in for a lively give-and-take with the chief executive, greeted FDR’s unprecedented outreach with enormous enthusiasm.

More than two-thirds of the nation routinely listened to his fireside chats, their ears, as New York Times reporter Anne O’Hare McCormick noted, “cocked at the same moment to the same sound.” “The spirit, even more than the content, of his ‘My Friends’ speeches,” journalist and FDR speechwriter Stanley High observed “was something new in the annals of our democracy. . . . They invite familiarity.” Americans by the millions accepted FDR’s invitation; eight thousand citizens wrote to him each day.

The reporters covering FDR also welcomed his overtures. They appreciated his “news sense,” his respect for their deadlines, his off-the-record briefings, and his faithful attendance at their major dinners and conferences. FDR, author and sportscaster Heywood Hale Broun wrote, was “the best newspaperman ever to have been President.”

Some critics predicted Franklin D. Roosevelt would never be elected president because of his disability. But by using the most popular and pervasive media of the day—including radio and newsreels shown in movie theaters—FDR reached the American public like no president before him.

Top: Press with radio equipment at the White House, 1938 or 1939. LOC

Right: Press with film equipment at the White House, 1938 or 1939. LOC
The Fireside Chats

"You have no fireside?" a puzzled Groucho Marx exclaimed. "How do you listen to the president's speeches?" Across the nation, movie audiences howled with delight. Most Americans would never dream of missing a "fireside chat," even if it meant skipping a party or, for those who had no radio, listening in at a neighbor's. The president's chats, one Alabama woman wrote Franklin D. Roosevelt, were "akin to a visit with a good friend."

Churches and synagogues interrupted their services so their congregations might listen. Movie theaters adjusted their showtimes so they could pipe the president's voice in to their audiences. The novelist Saul Bellow recalled walking down a Chicago street on a summer night and hearing a fireside chat pour from cars parked all along the side of the road, their windows down and doors open. "Everywhere the same voice," he observed. "You could follow without missing a single word as you strolled by. You felt joined to these unknown drivers. . . . not so much considering the President's words as affirming the rightness of his tone and taking assurance from it." By connecting with the people, FDR was also connecting Americans to one another.

No president had ever established such a personal relationship with the American public, nor displayed such unerring instinct in exploiting the potential of a new communications medium. Both Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover had used the radio, but their broadcasts were more in the way of announcements and formal speeches. FDR, on the other hand, was explaining himself to the public, educating Americans on the critical domestic and international issues of the day, and telling them why he thought his policies would work. FDR recognized that most Americans got their news (as well as their entertainment) from the radio rather than a newspaper. If John F. Kennedy outshone Richard Nixon on television and Bill Clinton became the first American president to establish a White House website, it was FDR who showed how radio, then entering its heyday, could create a sense of immediacy, erasing the distance between himself and listeners.

His thirty-one fireside chats—roughly two or three a year—distributed his message far more broadly than newspapers alone could have. Radio stations often rebroadcast a chat on the following night for the benefit of those unable to hear it at the regular time. Movie newsreels featured specially filmed excerpts, and newspapers both summarized his remarks and reprinted the chats in their entirety.

In short, the chats let FDR, not the press or his critics, set the agenda. They also allowed him to project his persona—along with the vigor, warmth, and charm that were among his personal qualities—into places his disability didn't allow him to go. Although FDR traveled a great deal, his compromised personal mobility (as well as his demanding schedule) made it difficult for him to go into people's homes, churches, or community centers. He understood that his voice could transcend barriers, and he treated each radio address as though he were having a one-on-one conversation in a citizen's living room.

He spoke clearly and calmly. He made his points simply and concisely, with each chat averaging twenty-six minutes. "My friends," he often began. "His voice," one listener wrote, was very much like his most familiar expression—it gave "the impression of a genial smile." The intimacy his talks generated allowed Americans to focus on critical and at times deeply alarming issues in a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere.

Often FDR asked his listeners to let him know their thoughts. "Write or telegraph me personally at the White House," he would say. Millions responded; the thousands of letters pouring in each day required the White House to hire a night shift to process them. Louis Howe, who managed this correspondence for FDR, told the press the letters provided "the most perfect index" of America's state of mind.

Reporters understood this. America "sends its orders to a Congressman," the Literary Digest noted, "but it talks things over with its President."
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Eleanor Roosevelt on
Franklin D. Roosevelt,
Fireside Chats, and
the Radio

A prolific writer, public speaker, and radio broadcaster herself, Eleanor Roosevelt well understood the value of her husband's aptitude in these areas.

She also knew his “chats” required preparation. However casual their tone, their message was carefully honed for content and clarity. Each “entailed a great deal of work on Franklin's part,” ER observed. “I have known . . . Franklin to take a speech that had reached the final stages and tear it up and dictate it from the beginning, because he felt the others had not made it clear enough for the layman to understand. Franklin had a gift for simplification.”

FDR's delivery, on the other hand, was quite effortless. “His voice,” ER told an interviewer, “lent itself remarkably to the radio. It was a natural gift, for in his whole life he never had a lesson in diction or public speaking. His voice unquestionably helped him to make the people of the country feel that they were an intelligent and understanding part of every government undertaking.”

ER relished her own intimate encounters with Americans in their homes, schools, and workplaces, something FDR was not as free to pursue because of his disability as well as his executive responsibilities. She often facilitated her husband's contact with interesting or illuminating individuals by bringing them to the White House to meet him. According to ER, the radio was important to FDR as a way of staying in touch with Americans in all their diversity. His chats and the personal letters listeners sent in response were “a real dialogue between Franklin and the public,” ER remarked. “He would read samplings of his mail. . . . He always knew what the reaction was to what he was doing, and he could respond to that reaction.”

Eleanor Roosevelt opens a new series of twice-weekly radio broadcasts on NBC Radio, April 30, 1940. Her extensive travels, she told the nation, were motivated by a desire to escape a “feather-bed kind of existence at the White House.” ER had long experience hosting radio shows when she entered the White House in 1933, and continued to deliver regular commercially sponsored broadcasts, donating the proceeds to organizations she supported. LOC
Meeting with the Press

Franklin D. Roosevelt, as historian Graham J. White noted, “wooed and won” the Washington, DC, press corps. Not only did he invite reporters into his office twice a week—a watershed innovation—but he also joked with them, called them by their first names, and often went “on background” to speak candidly but not for attribution. In the midst of witty repartee, he was always cognizant of just what information was getting out and how it could be handled in print. “Just between us boys and girls,” he would often say with a smile.

Reporters, long used to being held at arm’s length, found that FDR preferred to welcome them as friends rather than treat them as interlopers. No longer did they have to submit their questions in advance of press conferences. They could just ask FDR in the conference—although in announcing this policy a few days after his inauguration, he told reporters there would be questions “which for various reasons I do not want to discuss, or I am not ready to discuss, or I do not know anything about,” itself an arresting candid statement from a president.

FDR’s administration made reporters’ jobs easier, a practice that could hardly fail to engender goodwill. If they needed an answer to a question on days when there was no press conference, they could contact Steve Early, FDR’s press secretary, who made it his business to be on call for them around the clock and to get the information they required—even if he had to go to cabinet members or the president to get it.

Political reporters appreciated the basic consideration they received from the White House and responded in kind. Photographers largely cooperated with an unwritten White House policy regarding depictions of FDR and did not capture him being carried up stairs, shifted into a car, or loaded on a train or plane. Cartoonists likewise never parodied his paralysis but drew him as a man of constant action.

FDR’s management of reporters reflected his view of the roles each party to the exchange had to play in a democratic society. At a 1940 Democratic dinner he described the presidency as “the most important clearing house for the exchange of information and ideas, of facts and ideals, affecting the general welfare.” White has noted that FDR believed the public at large would reach the soundest judgments when given full, unmediated access to this flow of information. From this conviction “arose [FDR’s] insistent demand for straight, factual, even literal reporting,” White wrote.

The president was keenly aware that many journalists’ bosses were hostile to his policies. Republicans and anti–New Deal Democrats owned some 87 percent of the nation’s newspapers and used their editorial pages to rail against FDR, sometimes tarring him as a communist. After FDR’s landslide electoral victory in 1936, journalist I.F. Stone remarked that he had won “with 80 percent of the editors of the nation shouting ‘Villain!’ at the top of their lungs.” The president decried the conservative publishers, claiming their profit motive had supplanted “the old patriotism and the old desire to purvey straight news to the public,” but he would also tell reporters that he understood the “personal slant” their editors and publishers wanted them to take.

FDR’s approach to the press—a combination of professionalism, charisma, and accessibility—expressed respect for the fourth estate, while encouraging sympathetic and thorough coverage of his administration. Reporters’ engagement, in turn, stimulated FDR.

As he neared the end of his second term, FDR hosted editors for a press conference. After a challenging exchange, the Kansas editor William Allen White took the floor to conclude the conference. “You are still the most interesting person,” he said, turning to FDR. “For a box office attraction, you leave Clark Gable gasping for breath.”
Drawing Franklin D. Roosevelt: From Lumberjack to Quarterback

Cartoonists loved to draw so instantly recognizable and lively a figure as Franklin D. Roosevelt. His jaunty smile, prominent cheekbones, broad shoulders, and omnipresent cigarette holder drew their eyes (and pens) away from his frail legs and braces. When they sketched FDR, the image that emerged reflected the dynamism of the man and of his ambitious, controversial policies. Even when a cartoon showed FDR sitting behind a desk, the figure projected strength and athletic prowess.

Clifford Berryman, for example, depicted FDR as a quarterback, a bronco buster, a boxer, a catcher, and a lumberjack. Berryman’s FDR was also a doctor who paid house calls, the leader of a Revolutionary fife-and-drum corps, and a sailor hauling a destroyer out of the water. He wrestled Tammany tigers, pushed GOP elephants out of the circus corral, and stood alongside Winston Churchill scouring the ocean for Nazi submarines. Even in cartoons criticizing FDR’s policies (such as his proposal to enlarge the Supreme Court or his response to widespread labor unrest), Berryman never showed FDR himself as frail or weak.

Indeed, while cartoonists’ points of view on FDR differed, most, like Berryman, tended to characterize him as a highly robust personage. Fred Seibel’s 1933 cartoon for the Richmond Times-Dispatch had a towering FDR, clad in a ship captain’s uniform, dominating the deck of the passenger ship Courage. The work of Herbert Lawrence Block (“Herblock”) showed FDR wrestling with his opposition and walking away from Congress with the Supreme Court building slung over his shoulder. In the throes of World War II, despite rumors of FDR’s declining health, Charles Kuhn drew FDR as Atlas, struggling to carry the world on his shoulders.

Whether praising or lampooning FDR’s decisions, these artists drew what Americans envisioned in their president—a man larger than life, committed to action.