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Presidents and the Media



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MEDIA MAN

The modern relationship between presidents and the press was made in New York by the Roosevelt cousins.

The endless battles between Donald Trump and the journalists he often derides as “enemies of the people” might strike many observers as a sudden change in a long-respectful relationship. In truth, presidents have always feuded publicly with the press, or routinely turned to alternative media (in Trump’s case: Twitter) to get their messaging out unfiltered.

But presidents and journalists have been at odds since the days of the Founders. George Washington complained bitterly (but privately) about newspaper attacks. John Adams signed a federal law making it a crime to criticize the president in print.

But it took two twentieth century presidents to bring the inherently disputatious relationship to new levels: befriending press admirers on the one hand and punishing critics on the other, while using alternative means to reach their constituents. Although one was a Republican, the other a Democrat, they otherwise had much in common: they were not only distant cousins, but each served first as state legislators and governors of New York. Both Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt found new ways to court journalists, new excuses to contain them, and new media to skirt traditional coverage.

“The Barber’s Hour”

Teddy Roosevelt honed his talent for courting journalists during his 1899–1901 term as governor. As an assemblyman, he had earned reporters’ gratitude by condemning “a bill for gagging journalists.” While governor, he regularly held not one but two daily press conferences, further building on relationships he had established years earlier as a crusading New York City Police commissioner who often took reporters along on his nighttime raids.

TR became the first president to allow journalists to cover him routinely and informally, inviting them to pose questions during daily shaves at the White House. The sessions became known as “the barber’s hour.” Near 1 p.m., reporters would enter his office to find Roosevelt seated in an “arm-chair ... his face covered with lather.” Whenever an inquiry aroused him, the “writhing” president would leap up and hold forth until he calmed down. “Steady, Mr. President,” his barber would plead, blade in hand, struggling to hold Roosevelt down. One correspondent called the sessions “more fun to see than a circus.”

TR proved the right man for the time. By 1900, presidents no longer secured positive coverage by giving loyal publishers government printing contracts or naming friendly journalists



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BY
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Friendly reporters secured a place in TR's "Paradise."

to federal jobs, as Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln had done. Roosevelt won attention through sheer force of personality and an unrestrainable eagerness to convey news, gossip, and sometimes even secrets. To Roosevelt, press management—sharing information at a whim, steering coverage in desirable directions, squashing negative or premature stories, and using what he called the “bully pulpit” to galvanize public support—became as crucial a presidential responsibility as commanding the armed forces. Needing bold headlines to sell papers on the streets, editors saw TR as a sure-bet newsmaker.

Roosevelt—with his bared teeth, walrus mustache, and pince-nez glasses—was also ideally suited for pictures. Conveniently, spot photography grew into a major form of journalism during his administration.

And TR seized every chance to create memorable photo opportunities. Once, when an AP photographer failed to appear for the signing of his annual Thanksgiving proclamation, Roosevelt simply postponed it until a cameraman could be dispatched. Some called it an example of Roosevelt’s considerate behavior toward the press, but the delay served TR as well. Why stage an event if the nation’s biggest wire service could not be on hand to immortalize it? Of “all the Presidents,” insisted one Washington correspondent, TR “best understood the uses of publicity. He had a genius for it.”

Access had its limits. TR also imposed stringent ground rules on the press. He punished reporters who



Reporters who violated TR’s rules were ostracized.

wrote about his family. And, no matter how much he talked, he expected his remarks to remain off the record unless otherwise specified. He considered leaks offensive and misquotes intolerable. Violators earned membership in what TR called his “Ananias Club,” a purgatory of ostracism named for a biblical character struck dead for lying to God. Conversely, friendly reporters secured a place in Roosevelt’s so-called “Paradise,” an Eden for writers who reflected what TR called “The Oyster Bay atmosphere” (in tribute to his Long Island home), defined by “mutual respect, confidence and friendliness.”

Yet journalist Isaac Marcosson noted “what sometimes seemed an almost incredible frankness” in TR’s offhand comments to reporters. This bluntness occasionally led TR into trouble—especially when he mistook the correspondents for pals rather than professionals. Occasionally, TR insisted that he had never uttered words cited by newspapers—even when he



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TR’s bluntness occasionally led to trouble.

had said precisely what they printed. Sometimes, he denied stories even as he was confiding them; once, he shared a complaint about Republican conservatives only to warn the reporter: “If you even hint where you got it, I’ll say you are a damned liar.”

Most consequentially, TR forged a historic, almost collaborative, relationship with the new breed of progressive, long-form journalists who became known as “muckrakers.” When TR

arrived at the White House in 1901, testified one such crusader, Lincoln Steffens, “reformers went there to see the first reformer president take charge.” The big-game hunter-turned-president exulted: “It was just as if we had shot some big animal and the carcass lay there exposed for a feast.” Investigative reports by Steffens and Ida Tarbell exposed the stranglehold big corporations held over both consumers and a subservient federal government and built public support for Roosevelt’s crackdown on industrial trusts.

Modern Muckrakers

Contrary to legend, TR did not always trust these crucial press allies. In June 1900, while still New York governor, he had produced an article for *Century Magazine* warning against “unhealthy extremists who like to take half of any statement and twist it into an argument in favor of themselves or against their opponents.” Such zealots, he taunted, must either be “low moral types” or “slightly disordered mentally.” Later, in a blunt 1906 presidential address to the Gridiron Club, TR famously likened the investigative journalist to “the Man with the Muck-rake” in John Bunyan’s novel *Pilgrim’s Progress*, “who could look no way but downward.” Modern muckrakers, he charged, focused “only on that which is vile and debasing,” providing “not an incitement to good, but one of the most potent forces of evil.” This was the first time the “muckraker” label had been attached to these writers—and it was not meant as a compliment. “Well,” muckraker Lincoln Steffens sourly told Roosevelt, “you have put an end to all these journalistic investigations that have made you.”

Roosevelt not only ended the chapter; in typically aggressive fashion he published his condemnatory ora-



ROOSEVELT HOUSE

By mutual understanding, the press did not photograph FDR in his wheelchair.

tion in *Putnam’s Magazine*. Thus did TR not only ruthlessly distance himself from a form of journalism he had used to his advantage; even before leaving the White House in 1909, he became a journalist himself.

After losing his 1912 comeback bid for the presidency, TR further embraced the profession. Named a contributing editor of *The Outlook*, Roosevelt produced 190 articles before his death in 1919. He even briefly considered becoming the full-time editor of a daily paper. “It would have been great fun,” he admitted. But in a profession still marked by sensationalism, he might not have fit. “I believe in the kind of American

journalism,” he said late in his life, “as far removed as the poles from the apostles of the hideous yellow journalism which makes a cult of the mendacious, the sensational, and the inane.” Roosevelt had never been mendacious or inane, though to the press corps, he was always a sensation, and a shrewd manipulator of the power of the press.

FDR’s Relentless Briefings

One rising politician who took note of TR’s efforts to dominate—yet simultaneously harness—the press was his Hyde Park cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. During his own two terms as governor from 1929 to 1933, FDR

revived Teddy's habit of relentlessly briefing the Albany press.

FDR's presidential press strategy also echoed Teddy's blend of outreach and restraint—in Franklin's case, conviviality that eventually yielded to wartime censorship. Then there was the added element of secrecy.

Unable to walk on his own after surviving polio, FDR was shielded by a so-called “unwritten rule”—in fact one of the most rigorously enforced gentlemen’s agreements in American political history—under which journalists kept his disability secret.

“News stories seldom, if ever, mentioned that he was a cripple,” reporter John Gunther bluntly admitted, “and the fact that he used a wheelchair was never printed at all.”

Photographers imposed a black-out, too. By mutual understanding, cameramen lay down their equipment whenever Roosevelt's wheelchair came into view or aides lifted his inert body into and out of automobiles.

Technically, insisted a *Pathé News* photographer, “you were requested, not ordered, to refrain from taking pictures of this type.” But later, when rogue lensmen tried defying the tacit ban, Secret Service agents intervened, stepping protectively in front of the President to shield him from intrusive lenses, or, in extreme cases, yanking film from cameras. “By what right they do this I don’t know,” another photographer admitted, “but I have never seen the right questioned.” Persistent offenders risked losing their press credentials. Later in the Roosevelt presidency, his chief press

aide, Stephen Early, forbade even candid photography.

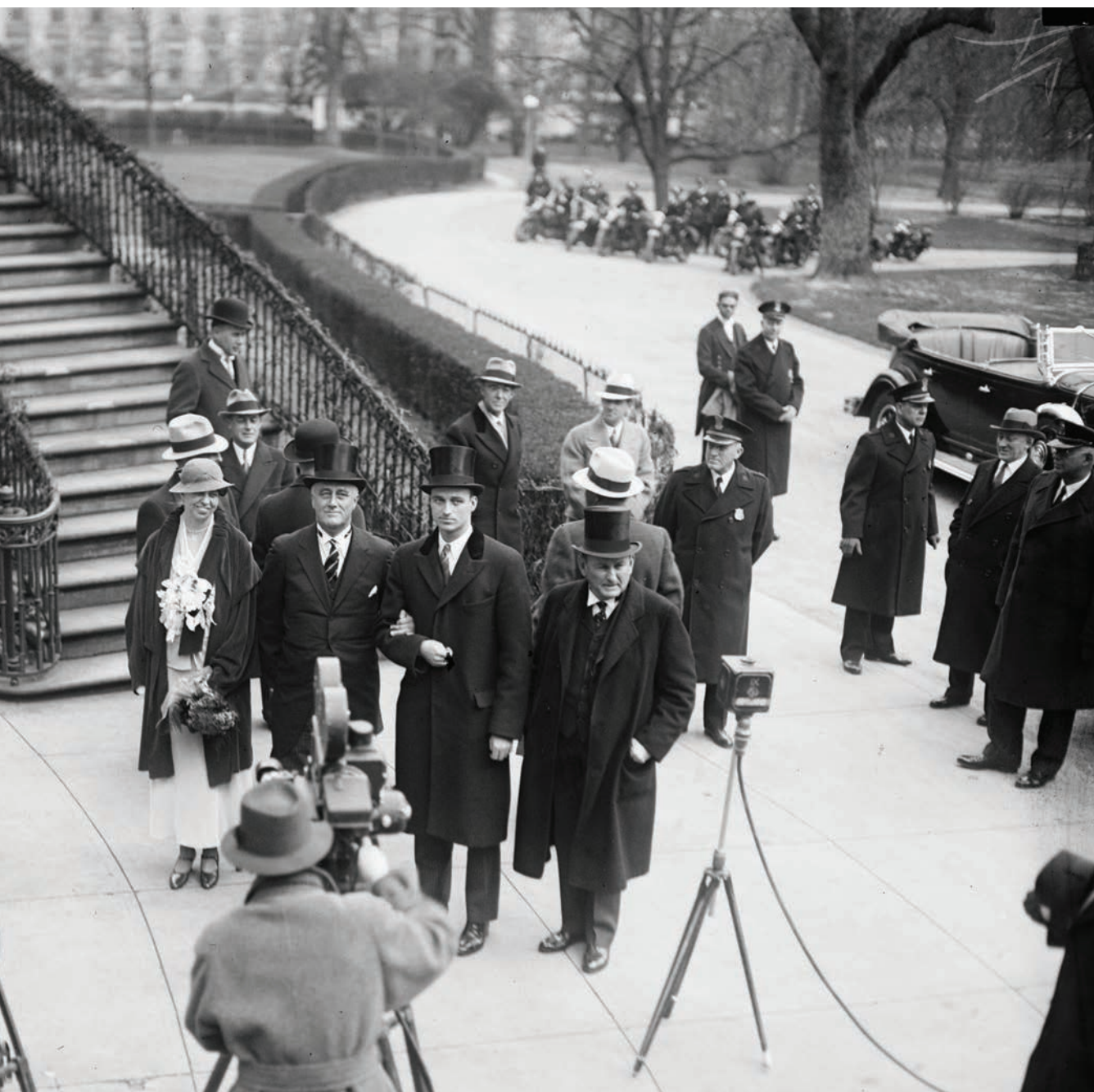
The administration made up for its restrictions on photographers by granting unprecedented access to reporters. During his twelve years in office, FDR held an astounding 998 news conferences—an average of two each week. Per custom, the president's comments remained off-the-record, though FDR frequently granted exceptions. Meanwhile, he dazzled reporters with his knowledge and wit.

FDR savored his unscripted give-and-take with journalists, while remaining critical of the largely Republican “press lords” for whom they worked. Leo Rosten, a White House aide destined to become a best-selling humorist, described FDR's impact as nothing less than “galvanic.” Within days of his first Oval Office press conference, Rosten asserted, “Roosevelt was lifted to the stature of savior by the public and a political wizard by the newspapermen.” *Providence Journal* correspondent Ashmun Brown offered a more cynical appraisal: “If the New Deal was a success, we Washington correspondents were its parents. Day after day we informed the gullible public that FDR was by far the smartest politician who had ever occupied the White House. We even believed the myth ourselves.”

Of course, the “advantage” at such encounters, as Raymond Brandt of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* understood, rested “always with the President.” As Brandt pointed out: “While anyone can ask a question, there was and still is no way to get a satisfactory reply if the President wills otherwise. He can fail to hear the question; can give a facetious answer which usually calls forth thoughtless laughter from a small group of



reporters who like to see a colleague ridiculed; he can say, ‘there’s no news on that subject’; he can merely smile and say nothing; or he can give a diplomatic answer.” It remained “one of the unwritten rules of the conference that once he has signified his intention of not answering a question, he must not be pressed on the same topic.”



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FDR dazzled reporters with his knowledge and wit.

To some reporters, the restraints eventually grew intolerable, particularly when Roosevelt began ignoring or scolding those who pressed him for follow-ups. When riled, correspondent Merriman Smith conceded, he "could be as rough and tough as a Third Avenue blackjack artist. It just depended on the question, who asked it and how Mr. Roosevelt felt

when he got up that morning." And since he began each day by reading—and often complaining—about newspaper coverage, FDR usually felt the press was out to get him.

Fireside Chats

FDR's greatest media innovation was his extraordinary dominance of radio, through which he could bypass the

filter of journalistic oversight and speak directly to the public. Most impactful were his now-mythical Fireside Chats, a series of only twenty-eight radio messages over twelve years that brought his reassuring voice to millions of anxious Americans during the depths of the Depression and the darkest days of World War II. So impactful were these carefully scripted,



FDR's greatest media innovation was his extraordinary dominance of radio.

but seemingly extemporaneous, broadcasts that many listeners later convinced themselves that the president had been on air almost continuously.

"I have seen men and women gathered around the radio, even those who didn't like him or who were opposed to him politically," Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins reported, "listening with a pleasant, happy feeling of association of friendship. I have seen tears come to their eyes as he told them of some tragic episode. I have also seen them laugh." Complained a Republican skeptic: "A fireside chat never filled an empty stomach." But the tide of public approbation for the communi-

cator-in-chief—and his greatest communications innovation—swept away such criticism.

Well before FDR's death, even the long-hostile *Chicago Tribune* acknowledged him as "one of the most skillful publicists America has ever known." The passage of 75 years—and the introduction of new communication platforms of which Roosevelt never even dreamed—have not dimmed that appraisal. Merriman Smith credited him with a talent that transcended time and technology: he had been "a dramatic king." And, like his cousin Teddy, FDR ushered in a new form of presidential power: leadership through communications. ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

This article is adapted from Holzer's latest book: *The Presidents vs. the Press: The Endless Battle Between the White House and the Media—From the Founding Fathers to Fake News*. The Theodore Roosevelt Papers are at the Library of Congress in Washington. The transcripts of FDR's 998 news conferences, along with the papers of his press secretary, Stephen T. Early, are at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library at Hyde Park.



Learn more about FDR from previous issues of *New York Archives*:

- "Nuggets in a Gold Mine" by Paul Grondahl, Winter 2003
- "Available to Future Americans" by Bob Clark, Summer 2013
- "Forests for the People" by Diane Galusha, Spring 2012
- "Partners" by Mason B. Williams, Fall 2014
- "FDR's Fistfight" by Daniel J. Demers, Winter 2012
- "FDR and his Early Fireside Chats" by Geoff Storm, Fall 2007

Learn more about TR:

- "Portrait of a Friendship" by Edward J. Renahan Jr., Winter 2004
- "TR in Albany: The Lyall Squair" by Paul Grondahl, Spring 2005
- "The Lion and the Journalist" by Chip Bishop, Fall 2012

For more by Harold Holzer:

- "The Poetry and Prose of the Emancipation Proclamation," Summer 2001

And be sure to see the Winter 2009 special issue on Abraham Lincoln, guest edited by Harold Holzer.

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