

Political Marketing Through New Media: A Comparison and Contrast of FDR'S Fireside Chats and Trump's Tweets

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This paper contains both a comparison and contrast on the use of nontraditional media channels by a US president in order to communicate directly to the American population. Presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Donald J. Trump have utilized the technology available in their respective time periods for the process of political disintermediation, side stepping the traditional news media to communicate directly with the American population.

Keywords: political disintermediation, political marketing

INTRODUCTION

The State of the Union address is an annual message delivered by the sitting President of the United States to a joint session of Congress, which fulfills the requirement from Article II of the US Constitution. In 1913, President Woodrow Wilson became one of the first US Presidents to personally give an oral address to the Congress; previous Presidents before Wilson had normally submitted a written address to the Congress, beginning with George Washington. (House.gov, 2019) In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson became the first President to have his address televised to the American population (House.gov, 2019). All of the US presidents after Johnson have kept to that practice with a live address to Congress and the people of the United States along with anyone who wished to watch the address. Technological advancements have allowed for interested parties to record the address to watch later and to also watch live via the Internet instead of via a major television channel (e.g. ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX and other national and international channels). While the State of the Union is certainly a direct address to the American population by the sitting President, it is in concert with the traditional news media. In the age of radio, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was well known for many communication and political initiatives; however, his Fireside Chats were a direct address to the American population that bypassed the traditional media of the time. Currently, President Donald J. Trump is utilizing Twitter in the same manner- bypassing the traditional media of this current time period to communicate directly with not just the American, but international, population. This paper will analyze both the similarities and dissimilarities between the two presidents in this form of political communication.

COMPARISON

There are multiple similarities in the political marketing communication process when the situations of both Fireside Chats and Twitter are compared. First, the term disintermediation has become

commonplace in the area of Internet commerce and supply chain as many firms became household names due to the practice of removing members of the supply chain and marketing directly to their target markets. This idea of “political disintermediation” is applicable in both cases. President Franklin Roosevelt gave his first Fireside Chat on March 12, 1933 just days after his inauguration at a time where the Great Depression was in full force- this was one of nearly thirty Fireside Chats that Roosevelt gave while in office- using the Fireside Chats to communicate directly to the American population through radio. With nearly ninety percent of American households owning a radio at that time, it is estimated that up to fifty to sixty million people tuned in to hear the different Fireside Chats that were broadcasted (History.com, 2009). FDR utilized the Fireside Chats to communicate about current events that directly influenced the population, to criticize journalists, and to present himself more personally to citizens. While President Obama was the first US President with a Twitter account, it would be then candidate (@realDonaldTrump) and later President Donald J. Trump (@POTUS) who would elevate the use of the social media platform into nearly an art form to communicate his message, lambast critics and news media, and communicate directly to those who followed his Twitter account (Manchester, 2018).

Another similarity between Roosevelt and Trump would be the adversarial relationship each had with the respective news media of their time periods. Roosevelt frequently complained about how the press was “poisonous” and historical research backs up Roosevelt’s claim that most of the writers of editorials and news columns were opposed to his administration (Beito, 2017). Roosevelt found a freedom in the radio addresses since they could not be edited for content by news organizations just as Twitter is not able to directly edit the tweets put out by candidate and then President Trump. It is difficult to not spend any time on Twitter and not come across hashtags and phrases, such as #FakeNews or Clinton News Network or Corrupt News Media or Dishonest Press, usually emanating from Trump’s tweeting. There are also the many nicknames, mostly unflattering, that Trump has bestowed on various political and news personas (@POTUS). The communication from Trump on Twitter to his followers is almost instantaneous and gives followers of the account near real-time information about what Trump’s opinion is on current events and political proposals. Both presidents benefitted in this situation by not going through multiple layers of gatekeepers from the news organizations of their respective eras.

CONTRAST

However, there are certainly areas where there are dissimilarities between the marketing communications tactics between Fireside Chats and Tweets. The first major contrast would be the lack of media fragmentation in Roosevelt’s era versus today. The news organizations in the Roosevelt era consisted mostly of radio and newspaper companies while today the depth and breadth of news organization has blossomed into a twenty-four hour news cycle, including not only radio and newspapers, but also social media, broadcast and cable television, podcasts and other online platforms. In addition, it would be very easy, but time consuming, to scroll through all of Trump’s tweets to know what has been said not just today, but in the past. The tweets of President Trump will also be archived as per The White House policy, so future historians and researchers will be able to access and conduct research. There was not that immediate availability of Fireside Chats for a newspaper reporter or an American listener to access in case they missed listening to the Fireside Chat. Most of the Fireside Chats actually went through many drafts before President Roosevelt read the script to the American public- they were not off-the-cuff talks about whatever was on the president’s mind. The chats were carefully crafted to appeal to most voters and use language that a majority of the population would understand. Given the content of many of the Tweets by Trump, it does not seem that many tweets were actually drafted and proofed before the Tweet is published, although it is well-known that not all of the Tweets are actually written by Trump himself. In fact, there is a Twitter account whose sole purpose is to estimate the likelihood that the Tweet was written by Trump or not (@TrumpOrNotBot), which has around 5200 followers. The @POTUS account has around 65 million followers, although as with most Twitter accounts, there will be a number of followers that are ‘bots or fake followers.

Furthermore, there are other dissimilarities in the audience between Fireside Chats versus Twitter Tweets. President Roosevelt was certainly marketing to the American population with little overlap to any international market; however, President Trump's tweets are open to anyone to see no matter what the geographical area that they are residing in. There are no geofencing restrictions on Twitter, barring the normal blocks on the social media platform itself by certain countries. Scheduling differences are also present. Given the inability of technology at the time to record a radio broadcast at home, people needed to know when the Fireside Chats would be held in order to be able to listen to them. Trump tweets when Trump tweets and there is really no schedule as to when that it going to happen, although the tweets are most likely to happen along with scheduled events or breaking news.

CONCLUSION

Going around the filter of the press has been a goal of many politicians, not just American presidents. While many politicians have utilized the technology available in their eras, both President Franklin Roosevelt and President Donald Trump have raised the bar so to say in harnessing the power of radio and social media respectively to communicate effectively and directly with average citizens sans the normal media filters.

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