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Eleanor Roosevelt: A Voice for the Oppressed

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Abstract

In this thesis, I discuss Eleanor Roosevelt as a political and social activist through the media. ER was the first First Lady to advocate for her own social and political agenda and a way in which she accomplished this was with her extensive relationship with the media. In my thesis, I first give a brief history of other sources regarding aspects of Eleanor Roosevelt's life that touch my own project. Then, I examine the reasons Eleanor Roosevelt felt compelled toward activism. In the next section I analyze several different media outlets, beginning with her book *It's Up to the Women*, followed by her radio broadcasts, then her press conferences, and finally her newspaper column, *My Day*. In doing this, I hope to prove that although Eleanor Roosevelt definitely accomplished what was expected of First Ladies at the time, she also enjoyed engaging with the media and used it to advance her own agenda.

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The first thing to learn is that freedom must always be qualified by the fact that your own freedom must not mean somebody else's slavery. – Eleanor Roosevelt, *It's Up to the Women*

Eleanor Roosevelt is often regarded as one of the most influential women of the twentieth century. A very important aspect of her life, and a main reason she was so influential, was the political and social activism she pursued while her husband was president. Another very compelling aspect of Eleanor Roosevelt's story is her extensive relationship with the media. Coupling these two items together—her activism and her use of the media to pursue here political and social agenda —make for a fascinating look into a relatively unexamined aspect of Eleanor Roosevelt's life. In 1933, when FDR was elected president, ER was more aware of social conditions around the country than any of her predecessors as First Lady, and her activism in the interest of ordinary Americans regardless of sex, race, or class is evident. ER also set a new standard for First Ladies by not only tending to the traditional duties of the First Lady, which tended to be apolitical, but also by writing books, appearing on the radio, holding press conferences, and by expressing her opinions candidly in her newspaper column, *My Day*, which she began writing in 1936. By looking at the reasons why ER became a political and social activist, and examining what ER talked about in the various types of media she engaged with as First Lady, it becomes clearer as to why ER used different forms of media as one means of engaging in political and social activism. ER was not only the first First Lady to advocate for her own social and political agenda, but that she

also spent a lot of her time on it. Though she definitely did the traditional things that were expected of First Ladies, she also enjoyed engaging with the media and used it to the fullest to advance her own political and social agenda, as well as the political and social agenda of her husband.

Historiography

There is a great deal of work on the various aspects of ER's life, but very little has been done regarding her use of the media, and there is certainly a gap when one looks at her interactions with the media on behalf of subordinated groups and in the interest of politics.

In *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment* Maurine Beasley argues that ER used the media to find self-fulfillment in a life separate from FDR. Beasley discusses, at great length, how ER used the media to talk about women and women's place in the home and in the workplace. She also reviews how ER used the media to communicate her thoughts on the war and how she viewed women's role in the war. Beasley explained how ER would not have been the woman she was if she had had a model childhood, or a perfect marriage. Instead, Beasley shows that ER used these things as fuel to discover herself, and in doing so changed the role of women in the media.[1] While I do not disagree that ER definitely used the media to establish a life separate from FDR, it is my assertion that she found her self-fulfillment in helping

[1] Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment,* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

others. She obtained this viewpoint when she was a teenager at school in England, and continually acted upon that throughout her life, which happened before she met and entered a relationship with FDR. Therefore, it is an oversimplification to assume that ER's political activism was done solely as a way to establish a life outside of her husband. Beasley's focus on the media, however, was relatively unique, as most authors chose to focus on an aspect of ER's political life. An example of this is Brigid O'Farrell.

Brigid O'Farrell focuses on ER's involvement with the labor movement in *She Was One of Us: Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Worker*. She also brings up women's issues, as they relate to the workplace. For example, she describes the Equal Rights Amendment and ER's opposition to it, and also discusses ER's disappointment with the lack of female labor leaders. O'Farrell cites several reasons why ER felt so invested in workers' rights. She argues that ER believed that unions were essential to democracy, and delves into ER's involvement in developing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. O'Farrell explicates the emphasis on altruism from her schooling at Allenswood Academy in London, and that these ideas were only furthered by ER's work in the settlement houses of Manhattan's Lower East Side. It is these ideas that O'Farrell continually refers back to—that it's her foundations in helping people, and the liberals she met throughout her life, that made her act the way that she did.[2] The idea of

[2] Brigid O'Farrell, *She Was One of Us: Eleanor Roosevelt and the American Worker*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 2010).

personal influences is consistent among ER works, as it is similarly discussed by Tamara Hareven.

In *Eleanor Roosevelt: American Conscience*, Tamara K. Hareven followed ER from the White House to her public activism after FDR's death. I think that this really stands out as the most prominent time in ER's career because she was in the public eye for such a long time, and so a lot of historians focus on this "post-FDR" period. The popularity of this time frame is one of the reasons I chose to focus on the White House years. While Hareven illuminated ER's horrible childhood and enlightening school experiences as do most ER biographers, Hareven did not use what she found out about ER's early life to explain ER's adult behavior. Instead Hareven pointed to things like ER's relationship with those around her, her stubborn personality, her extreme social awareness, and her general love of people as reasons for her altruism.[3] Hareven was not the only author to focus on ER's adult relationships, as Maurine Beasley focus is similar.

In *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady,* Maurine Beasley argues that ER's personal relationships led her to improve skills that resulted in the evolution of the position of First Lady to one of active political participation. Beasley also briefly discusses the causes that ER supported and in the chapter "Claiming the Public Stage"

[3] Tamara K. Hareven, *Eleanor Roosevelt: An American Conscience,* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968).

explores ER's relationship with the media.[4] This section of the book is the most closely related to my project.

My project examines why ER became a political and social activist. I also examine four types of media that ER used to communicate her political and social agenda. Through this examination, I argue that ER understood her audience well and thus tailored what she said—and did not say—to keep her audience interested, without alienating that audience. In this thesis, ER emerges as a savvy and astute activist who knew that she could only pusher message so far and remain a popular and sympathetic figure in American public opinion. While I drew inspiration from the authors of my secondary sources, my project is unique in that I coupled an examination of her activism with her extensive use of the media. Beasley discusses ER's media life in *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment*, but uses it as a means to an end of fulfillment, while I argue that it was a way to be an activist and further her own political agenda. O'Farrell discusses ER's involvement with the American working class, but does not include the media in her analysis of activism. Hareven also looked at ER's activism, but focuses on ER's life in the years after FDR's death, which is outside the scope of my project. Hareven and I also list different reasons for ER's altruistic personality. In *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady* Beasley touches on several

[4] Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady*, (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

media outlets ER utilized, but doesn't really assert that she was using them to accomplish anything specific, which is how my writing differs from Hareven's work.

Why ER Became a Political and Social Activist

Eleanor Roosevelt's attraction to activism has a threefold origin that must be understood to recognize her motivation for using the media in the way that she did. First and foremost, Roosevelt herself had a strong passion for helping those who she believed did not have the ability to help themselves. ER family and the schools she attended taught her that the privileged had a duty to help the less fortunate. From 1899 to 1902 ER attended Allenswood Academy, located in England and run by Headmistress Marie Souvestre. Souvestre ran a tight ship, enforced many rules, and demanded a high level of critical thinking, and ER loved Souvestre and flourished. While at Allenswood, Souvestre became a mentor for ER; Souvestre was not only an instructor, but also a pseudo-parent and an example of an independent, thinking woman. Souvestre taught ER social responsibility by taking her on trips to see the way that the underprivileged lived. Souvestre taught ER that those born into privilege had an obligation to help the disadvantaged.[5]

ER thrived at Allenswood in a way that she never had before. ER had always thought she made unpleasant company, but at Allenswood, she found her true

[5] Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor Roosevelt Volume 1: 1884-1933 (New York: Penguin, 1993), 102-124.

potential. At Allenswood, ER was encouraged to be a free thinker and an autonomous woman. ER's peers admired her, and Souvestre praised her intellect. Souvestre also instilled in ER and all students at Allenswood an obligation to champion the less fortunate. In an article titled "The Seven People that Shaped My Life," ER wrote, "As I look back, I realize that Mlle. Souvestre was rather an extraordinary character. She often fought seemingly lost causes, but they were often won in the long run… I think I came to feel that the underdog was always the one to be championed!"[6]

Second, Roosevelt engaged in activism to achieve the love that she craved as the result of her difficult childhood. ER's childhood gave her ample reason to help others—she desired love. Growing up, ER was the daughter of a beautiful mother and handsome father who were at the center of New York's social scene, but had significant problems in their marriage. ER's mother also deemed her unattractive and too serious and shy, nicknaming her "Granny," and she was never affectionate towards her daughter. ER wanted her mother's love more than anything, and often compared herself hopelessly to her attractive mother. While ER's father was kind and loving and doted on ER, he was also an alcoholic. ER clung to her father for his affection, but his alcoholism made him an inconsistent figure in her life, at best. By the age of ten ER had

[6] Eleanor Roosevelt, "The Seven People Who Shaped My Life, "*Look* 15 (19 June 1951): 54-56, 58.

lost both of her parents—her mother first, to diphtheria, followed by her father, whose alcoholism drove him to a failed suicide, which resulted in a seizure.[7]

The orphaned ER and her younger brother, Hall, were taken in by her maternal grandmother, Mary Livingston Ludlow Hall, who was strict and consumed with grief after losing her husband and favorite daughter (Anna, ER's mother). With the exception of ER's mother, Grandmother Hall had raised children who were quite wild. ER had two maternal uncles, Valentine III and Edward, and four maternal aunts, Elizabeth, Mary, Pussie (Edith), and Maude. Both of her uncles, as well as her aunts Pussie and Maude, lived at home into their adult years, during the time that ER and her brother lived with Grandmother Hall. Her aunts and uncles were great sportsmen, adventurers, and lovers of the arts, but they also lived frivolous lives of luxury, and exposed ER to many things she had never seen or done before.[8] Despite treating ER kindly exposing her to many wonderful things, her uncles were alcoholics. Valentine was especially out of control, and ER had to have several locks put on her door to keep her safe from him.[9] Grandmother Hall was determined to structure the lives of her orphaned grandchildren so that they did not end up like her unruly children. Grandmother Hall attempted to

[7] Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 78-88.
[8] Ibid, 93-100.
[9] Ibid, 101, 126.

control every aspect of ER's life, and often kept her in childlike short skirts, or dealt with her strictly.[10]

ER spent her entire childhood craving love and attention, only ever finding it briefly from people who would not, or could not, stay long, and this experience likely contributed to her desire later in life to help others. Finding a sense of self at Allenswood, ER made huge strides in coming to accept and love herself as a person. She found joy and purpose in helping others—for the first time in her life, someone really valued her for what she did and what she was capable of. It is because of this that ER came to attribute helping others with love. Reflecting on her childhood, the times when she felt closest to her mother were when her mother would have horrible headaches and ER would stroke her hair for hours on end trying alleviate her pain.[11] ER learned that she could "earn" love by helping others, and beyond that, through service to others she was able to achieve self-fulfillment.[12]

Finally, Eleanor Roosevelt's activism was also a way that she worked to further her husband's political agenda. In the early days of their courtship, FDR proved to be quite smitten with ER. She was intelligent, and passionate, and unlike other women in their upper-class social circle, she was more interested in devoting her time to children in tenements than going to glamorous social events. ER, in turn, saw her handsome,

[10] Ibid, 92-101.
[11] Ibid, 69.
[12] Beasley, Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media

flirtatious, outgoing distant cousin as fun and charming—in many ways he was like her beloved father.[13] The two fell deeply in love and in March of 1905 they were married.[14] ER, however, became unhappy in the marriage. She spent the early years of her marriage chained to her overbearing mother-in-law and could not explore the freedom of having her own home and family. Not only was ER dejected due to her lack of control in her own life, but she was pregnant for the majority of her time from 1906-1916, despite the fact that she never saw herself as being very fit to be a mother.[15] These factors led to ER's discontented disposition, and a mild depression. Sometime in 1916, the vibrant and charming FDR began his extramarital affair with Lucy Mercer, ER's social secretary. ER discovered the love affair in 1918, and the marriage between the two was never the same. After FDR rejected the idea of a divorce (which would effectively shatter his hopes of presidency and ruin his family name) ER set up the conditions by which she would stay: FDR had to end his affair with Mercer, and they would never share a marital bed again.[16] Although FDR's affair effectively ended the intimate part of their relationship, it gave way for a new type of relationship to arise—a powerful political alliance, and a trusting cooperation between close friends.

Two major contributors can be given credit for ER's rise to political prominence other than this unnamed partnership with FDR: polio and the influence of Louis Howe.

[13] Cook, Eleanor Roosevelt, 132-140.
[14] Ibid, 162.
[15] Ibid, 162-186.
[16] Ibid, 228-232.

In 1911, FDR became acquainted with Louis Howe, who became FDR's campaign manager, chief of staff, political confidant, and close friend. Howe saw potential in ER and taught her to speak publicly, and coached her in politics. In 1921, when FDR was struck with polio, it was Howe who helped save his political career, and who encouraged ER to go where FDR could not. Howe proved his loyalty to the Roosevelts by helping ER establish herself politically and by helping FDR secure many of his political goals despite his polio. FDR's polio provided ER with an excellent reason to immerse herself in politics. ER found that she was no longer the shy wife of the assistant secretary to the navy who did not involve herself in politics. Now, she was making a name for herself—perhaps not a politician in her own right, but as a strong representative of her powerful husband.[17]

Eleanor Roosevelt's activism can also be seen as a strategy for "test driving" FDR's own liberal policies—if the public reacted positively to his wife's championing of the poor, for instance, then perhaps he would propose legislation that had the same goal.[18] Furthermore, FDR relied on the votes of working-class Americans —while his disabilities prevented him from being everywhere and reaching out to everyone, Eleanor Roosevelt could be that link for him.[19]

[17] Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume 2 1933-1938, (New York: Viking, 1999), 15.
[18] Cook, Eleanor Roosevelt
[19] O'Farrell, She Was One of Us

It's Up to the Women

In a way that no First Lady had ever done publicly, ER made a clear statement about women and politics from the very beginning of her husband's White House tenure. In 1933, just months after moving into the White House, ER published *It's Up to the Women*. In this first, big move as First Lady, ER asked women to fight for rights she felt they were denied. This book began a pattern that ER followed for the rest of her time in the White House. ER published *It's Up to the Women* in 1933, and throughout the following twelve years she spent in the White House she continually called women to action through her press conferences, her newspaper column, and her many radio appearances.

It's Up to the Women was a significant media tool for ER because books were a great way to communicate larger quantities of information to the mass public in the 1930's. This book was especially unique because no First Lady before ER had written a book outside of personal memoirs, and so a politically charged work from a First Lady was unprecedented and perhaps even a bit scandalous. The sensationalism of the book being written by a First Lady just months after her husband took office gave a unique spin on a relatively common source of media, which added to the appeal of this work.

The main focus of *It's Up to the Women* was persuading women that the future of America was up to them. The timing of this book shows that this was clearly an

important message to her. ER focused on several different issues that she believed to be "up to the women" that can be split into two groups: women in the home and women in the public.

ER opened the book with several chapters devoted to women's role in the home. ER began with a conversation about the importance of women learning to cut back in economically trying times. She presented the idea that showing fortitude in times of economic difficulty showed true character. ER followed this by describing the problems facing young married people. ER expressed her beliefs about how young wives should treat their housemaids, should they be so lucky to have one, and that she believed ones social merit and ability to entertain were not contingent on income. ER examined "family health" which she saw as contingent on women feeding their families a balanced diet, and also seeing that their families received fulfilling recreation, which could include active work for the community. ER also gave mothers advice for caring for babies and child rearing, and then moved into explaining the role of women after their children had married, arguing that young people need advice and help, not criticism or interference (perhaps a direct reflection on her relationship with her own overbearing mother-in-law). ER spent the first half of *It's Up to the Women* explaining

domestic roles she believed women had to play, and how to deal with the everyday issues she knew they would face.[20]

ER devoted the second section of the book to roles that she felt women should play outside the home. She began with a chapter entitled, "Women and Jobs" in which she elucidated her belief that women should be able to work—not even out of economic necessity, but out of "the necessity of expressing her own personality." "Women," she says, "may have to sacrifice certain things at times—so do men." ER encouraged women to ask for equal pay, to form unions, and to work jobs that would pay them the same as men.[21]

ER also examined the issue of women in the workplace by arguing that women should not stop working after they were married, and that working women are not contradictory to a woman who handles her home—ER argued that the two ideas of woman could easily exist together. ER went into jobs that she felt best suited women—teachers and nurses—though she was quick to point out that women can do anything they set their minds to.[22]

ER believed that women needed to more effectively harness the power of their vote. She said,

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[20] Eleanor Roosevelt, It's Up to the Women, (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1933), 1, 21-22, 25, 34, 63, 82, 90-108, 132.
[21] Ibid, 145-146, 230.
[22] Ibid, 153-175.

> Fourteen years have now gone by and everywhere people are asking "What have women done with the vote?" I often wonder why they don't ask men the same question, but I realize that it is a high compliment to women that evidently they were expected to bring about some marked change in political conditions…[23]

ER lectured about being informed voters and women using their collective vote to bring about political change, and she predicted women would use their power to eventually gain office. She brought up this idea of women in public office further in the next chapter "Women in Public Life." In this section she debated the pros and cons of women in the political field, and she also gave details about the women already in political life.[24]

In the chapter entitled "Women and Peace" ER asserted that the will to peace must start with the women. ER believed that only women could bring about peace around the world, and that only women could save the youth from the evils of previous generations.[25]

ER brought up a myriad of ideas about women in every chapter, offering a new idea for women in every line. Though it is impossible to list every idea that ER discussed in *It's Up to the Women*, ultimately all of them went back to the potential that she believed women held. ER argued that women had always been held to a higher standard than men, without recognition—she believed that it was time for women to

[23] Ibid, 190.
[24] Ibid, 199, 205-219.
[25] Ibid, 237-247.

achieve recognition for the social power that they had always held, and move into being powerful in other realms, like politics.

In 1932 *Ladies Home Journal* used the phrase "it's up to the women!" in a campaign focused on championing consumer spending as the only way out of the depression.[26] ER then wrote this book with the same title in 1933. ER used *It's Up to the Women* as part of a media strategy to reach out to women as soon as she entered the White House. Using the language of the *LHJ* campaign against the campaign itself, ER's book reached out to women to describe their potential. In this context, this book could be seen as a feminist response to the *Ladies Home Journal*'s campaign. ER's book received much more attention than *Ladies Home Journal* did, and so the legacy of the message "it's up to the women" lies with ER's empowering message of female worth and power. As First Lady, *It's Up to the Women* was ER's first big political statement. ER established herself with this work, both as an activist willing to air her views publicly, and as her husband's political partner.

ER used *It's Up to the Women* to make a statement about women's rights and to call women to action. ER continually showed support for women's rights throughout FDR's presidency, and the rest of her life. ER was an advocate for women in FDR's administration throughout the New Deal, and she fought to help women fighting on the

[26] "It's Up to the Women: Leaders of Millions of Women Support the Seven-Point Plan for Normal Living," *Ladies Home Journal*, February 1932, 6-7.

home front in WWII.[27] *It's Up to the Women* was also showed the Americans what they could expect from ER as First Lady.

It is easy to see ER's background and education in *It's Up to the Women*. At Allenswood, ER learned the importance of affluent people giving back by helping the less fortunate. Allenswood was enlightening as it taught her to think, not about her own life of privilege, but about how she could contribute to society. The influence of this idea is very clear, as ER repeatedly criticized the women of the upper class and urged them to volunteer and to be less materialistic (clearly the opposite of the consumerist argument made in *Ladies Home Journal*). ER criticized these women of privilege because of their lack of regard for the important issues that affect them, and for their disinterest in helping the less fortunate, which she saw as a social obligation. Souvestre also instilled ideas of a strong, liberal woman in ER that she carried with her throughout life, and that are echoed very loudly in *It's Up to the Women.* ER showed confidence that women can hold their own alongside men, if not surpassing them in some fields.

It's Up to the Women was revolutionary for its time, not because of the content which was relatively commonplace amongst women's rights advocates, but because of its delivery and who delivered it. Because of her position, ER could reach a significantly wider audience than other activists could. Furthermore, ER blatantly critiqued women

[27] Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

of her own class, something that was hugely popular during the worse years of an economic depression that many Americans blamed on the country's elite. In this way, ER showed her sympathy and solidarity with the vast majority of Americans as her and her husband entered the White House.

Radio Broadcasts

Even before the Roosevelts entered the White House, ER had experience with the radio. Though radio broadcasting was a fairly new technology that grew in popularity in the beginning of the twentieth century, ER utilized it rather frequently to reach a broader audience with her altruistic ideas and political messages. ER used the radio as a way to reach out to Americans and "come into" their homes.

Throughout her time as First Lady, ER made roughly 300 radio appearances, which consisted of eight commercially sponsored radio shows. ER did not make her first appearance while in the White House until 1934. This program was her own commercially-sponsored, prime-time, Tuesday evening show, in which ER discussed subjects she thought were appropriate for female listeners. Although ER discussed things such as entertaining at the White House and taking care of the family, her programs also took on broader topics, such as challenges for working women and women's place in politics.[28]

[28] Stephen Smith, ed., *The First Lady of Radio: Eleanor Roosevelt's Historic Broadcasts*, (New York: New Press, 2014), 31, 33, 85.

Of the commercial radio programs, one in particular was an exceedingly political series. The series was sponsored by the Pan-American Coffee Bureau, a trade group of Latin American countries designed to encourage Americans to buy coffee from Latin America. ER called her series *Over Our Coffee Cups*. The series began on September 28, 1941 and ended on March 15, 1942, in the middle of World War II. In this series ER discussed many things such as the concept of pan-Americanism, democracy, children, schools, and the condition of living in South America. Despite the structured topics of these talks, ER found ways to slip in her opinions. The Pan-American Coffee Bureau Series, *Over Our Coffee Cups,* shows that when ER had a consistent platform she could use it to covertly insert rhetoric to further her aims.

In the fourth program of the series which aired on October 19, 1941, ER discusses women in government departments, amidst her discussion of national defense and an FBI investigation that was taking place at the time.[29] Debuting on November 30, 1941, the tenth program of the series was focused on FDR's Good Neighbor Policy in Latin America and the idea of Western Hemisphere defense. In this talk, ER reached out to all of the women of the America's, telling them that achieving hemisphere solidarity was up to them.[30]

[29] Eleanor Roosevelt, *Pan-American Coffee Bureau Series- Program 4*, October 19, 1941, Recorded Speeches and Utterances by Eleanor Roosevelt, 1933-1962, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, NY.
[30] *Pan-American Coffee Bureau Series- Program 10,* November 30, 1941.

Continuing with her eleventh scheduled program on the evening of December 7, 1941, just hours after Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor, ER told the American people that FDR had been meeting with cabinet members and officials all day, and that Congress would make a full report on the situation for the following morning. She gave the American people a word of bolstering encouragement and then, as if nothing was wrong, she continued with her scheduled topic for the evening broadcast. ER even used this opportunity to reach out to women, telling them that they must build the morale of the nation.[31] When the nation was in a state of panic, it was not the president that spoke to the American public first, but the First Lady.[32] This important radio broadcast displays the political partnership between ER and FDR. While FDR was not always as liberal as his wife, ER admitted that he rarely tried to restrain her.[33]

After the US entrance in World War II, the Pan-American Coffee Bureau Series became much more heavily focused on war time discussion. ER often urged that national defense began in the home, and that children's lives should remain as normal as possible. She spoke about keeping the national morale high, and the importance of rations. Among the normal war time talk, in the nineteenth program ER argued that homemakers are the first line of defense in the war.[34] The twenty-first program in the

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[31] *Pan-American Coffee Bureau Series- Program 11,* December 7, 1941.

[32] Ibid, 27-29.

[33] Maurine Hoffman Beasley, ed., *The White House Press Conferences of Eleanor Roosevelt*, September 27, 1939, (New York: Garland, 1983), 128.

[34] *Pan-American Coffee Bureau Series- Program 19,* February 1, 1941.

series was very interesting because ER advocated for the rights of working women in the war, and spoke about the internment of Japanese Americans.[35] Despite her usual respect of FDR's political career in voicing her opinions, ER openly rejected the internment of Japanese Americans.[36]

While other sources of media that ER utilized were geared toward a specific audience, it is clear that men, women, and children listened to ER radio programs from the letters that she received in response to her broadcasts.[37] In her radio broadcasts ER tended towards political discussion more than any other source of media she utilized, though she was careful to always frame her talks as being concerned with the women's sphere. For example, when discussing the war, ER primarily addressed women and children about what they could do to help war time efforts, as opposed to being concerned with what men were expected to be doing.

Even after the death of FDR, ER's radio career continued. She went on to host programs by herself, as well as with her children, continually using the radio to further her political purposes. While ER's radio broadcasts during her years as First Lady might have been seen as inappropriate by some, her popularity kept her on the air until her death in 1962. ER used the radio as another means of furthering her altruistic agenda, and a very important means as this reached a wider demographic than any other form

[35] *Pan-American Coffee Bureau Series- Program 21,* February 15, 1941.
[36] Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 427-431.
[37] Smith, *The First Lady of Radio*, 35-37.

of media she interacted with. The radio became especially important to ER during the war years, when she could use her programs to talk to American citizens about national defense, but also to reassure women that this was their time to act.

Press Conferences

ER became the first First Lady to hold regular press conferences, and made a political statement about how she viewed women by holding press conferences that only female reporters could attend. These all-women press conferences began just two days after FDR took office, on March 6, 1933. Furthermore, the content of her press conferences was frequently political, as she spoke about the New Deal, women's legislation, as well as criticisms of FDR.[38]

ER's insistence that her press conferences remain all female forced newspapers to hire women reporters so that they did not miss ER's press conferences. An example of this is Ruby Black, who United Press hired when they realized that they needed to cover ER.[39] ER said that she held press conferences with only women reporters because they were responsible for "leading the women in the country to form a general attitude of mind and thought."[40] Furthermore, ER touched on things that she felt would appeal more to women, both reporters and readers, and women reporters would be more open

[38] Beasley, ed., The White House Press Conferences of Eleanor Roosevelt, 1-2.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid, March 6, 1933, 7.

to reporting what ER had to say.[41] In a press conference given in June of 1938 a female reporter said, "There are some gentlemen of the press who very much would love to come to a press conference and see what you do," to which ER replied:

> "I have had those requests to come to a press conference very often, and I have answered them the same way each time. The answer is this: The President's press conferences are for general information. The reason I have a press conference is that there are things that I consider are of special interest to women and I consider that women will read about them better and understand them better… I think the whole reason and object for my having a press conference is to have it for women writers."[42]

This awareness of who her audience was may have shaped the topics she chose to argue, and how she brought them up. Unlike other forms of media in which ER appeared, she geared her press conferences toward women because she knew the female reporters covering her would give what she had to say a full and sympathetic hearing. Furthermore, ER knew that the male reporters who would have been sent to cover her press conferences would have been dismissive of what she had to say, so she created a press corps for herself that would be far more willing to listen and report what she had to say.

The topics of these press conferences were from across the spectrum of what ER felt was the women's sphere. She would explain anything from entertaining at the White House to her opinions on war, and ER would also occasionally bring in other women from within FDR's administration to talk to the group of female journalists.

[41] Ibid, 1-2.
[42] Ibid, June 16, 1938, 56.

Mary Anderson, Head of the Women's Bureau; Dr. Louise Stanley, chief of the Bureau of Home Economics; and Florence Kerr, assistant administrator of the Works Progress Administration, for instance, would promote the New Deal to bolster support for New Deal policies. This use of both female journalists and female political officials had never been done before. ER sought to educate American women about her husband's policies and saw female reporters as the most successful channel for doing so. When addressing issues not directly related to the president's policies, however, ER was careful to point out that her ideas were separate from the president's. In her first press conference, when asked if she had any message for American women, she said that the president had delivered his inaugural address to the American people and "American people include the women…there is no difference as between men and women, their duty being the same, to do the best they can at this time."[43] ER made it clear that her press conferences did not reflect FDR's views, as she did not want his political career to be damaged if the public disagreed with her ideas. Despite attempting to remain separate from FDR, ER's press conferences were often focused on political discourse. Though ER was willing to entertain questions about her fashion choices, she kept her responses limited, preferring to comment on social and political issues, or questions about her family. In one instance, for example, after being informed that she was voted one of the

[43] Ibid, March 6, 1933, 7.

ten best-dressed women of the year, ER responded by saying, "Was I? I didn't know it."[44]

These press conferences were not just important to the women reporters, but also because of what ER said during them. ER used the press conferences to speak out against the National Woman's Party and aspects of the Equal Rights Amendment because she felt it would interfere with protective legislation for unskilled women workers who were not union members. At the end of a long speech about the differences between men and women in the workplace, and the need for female protection in the workplace she said, "I'm in perfect sympathy with many things the National Woman's Party stands for."[45] This shows that ER was interested in the advancement and betterment of women, but she would not blindly back an organization, even though she shared some of its ideals, if she felt it did not help all women.

ER also made a point of discussing African Americans in her press conferences. ER never directly brought up issues regarding racial minorities, unless a reporter brought them up first, or she casually brought up African Americans in answers to other questions. For example, she argued her desire for better equipment for black

[44] Ibid, December 28, 1934, 27.
[45] Ibid, July 6, 1933, 13-14.

medical schools[46] and addressed her decision to have her friend Marian Anderson, a black singer who performed for the visiting King and Queen of England, meet the King and Queen.[47] It would seem that ER established that while race was not something that she felt necessary to bring up with frequency, she brought up the topic casually and was always careful to advocate for bettering black life while never challenging the larger system of segregation.

These press conferences thus showed that ER was politically smart because she knew that much of her white audience would tune her out if she directly challenged segregation. What she did say about improving conditions for blacks, however, were probably appreciated by many African Americans who heard her press conferences. ER was also walking a fine political line here because black northerners, who could vote, were an increasingly important part of the Democratic Party's coalition. At the same time, white southerners had been the party's most reliable voters since the Civil War, and ER knew that alienating those voters would damage her husband politically. That ER used a sympathetic all female press corps to spread her views on race shows that she was very astute when it came to using the press to advance her own agenda while also promoting her husband's political interests.

[46] Ibid, February 14, 1938, 49.
[47] Ibid, May 4, 1939, 105.

My Day

Possibly the most effective method ER used to address the American people was *My Day*, a newspaper column that she wrote six days a week. While the exact readership is unknown, *My Day* was published in newspapers such as *Birmingham Post, Los Angeles Daily News, Washington Daily News, Chicago Sun-Times, Boston Globe, New York World -Telegram, Memphis Press-Scimitar, Dallas Times Herald, Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* and *Madison Capital-Times*.[48] ER began writing *My Day* in 1936, three years after she began her career as First Lady, and continued for the next twenty-six years until her death in 1962. Through her column, ER covered topics such as World War II, women's rights, workers' rights, and racial justice. By positioning herself as a columnist concerned with household affairs, she gained the opportunity to almost furtively sneak politics into the women's sphere, in a way that she could never have done with an overtly political column.

ER was a popular figure, both socially and politically, at the time. Her status gave her a following, which presumably afforded her some influence with the public. Because ER wrote her column six days a week, she had regular access to the American public. ER's popularity combined with the frequency of the column, gave her the ability to shape public opinion in a way that very few others were able to. What's more, *My Day* showcased ER's true versatility as a person and as a political activist. While she

[48] The George Washington University. "Columns by Eleanor Roosevelt." The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project. Accessed February 11, 2015. http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/abouteleanor/ercolumns.cfm.

wrote many politically charged articles about women and the working class, these articles were mixed in with commentary about White House picnics and stories about her family. *My Day* shows that ER was able to perform the traditional role of First Lady, as hostess and homemaker, just as effectively as she was able to assert herself politically, and in using herself as a model, shows that domestic women could also be interested in politics. Furthermore, this shows that ER was savvy- she knew that she could discuss politics and still maintain the approval of her audience as long as she included topics within the traditional women's sphere as well.

ER used *My Day* to continue examining all the issues she had raised in *It's Up to the Women.* She continued to raise women's issues in the column, and continually urged women to fight for their rights. She was a part of the group of women who believed that women deserved equal rights. In a *My Day* article published in August of 1941 ER wrote:

> There was a time when a woman married and her property became her husband's, her earnings were her husband's and the control of the children was never in her hands. The battle for the individual rights of women is one of long standing and none of us should countenance anything which undermines it.[49]

This passage demonstrates ER's fierce devotion to women's rights. While women achieved the right to vote in 1920 and they had been working outside the home for

[49] Eleanor Roosevelt, My Day, Aug. 7, 1941, http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1941&_f=md055958

quite some time by the 1930s, ER felt that women's rights should extend to upper-class women. Oftentimes, upper-class women did not work because their husband's salary could support the family sufficiently, and so the conventional wisdom was that these women did not have to work outside the home. ER believed that women should be able to and should want to hold jobs no matter their class and that working-class women in particular should be able to unionize. Although there was not a visible women's rights movement in the 1930s there was momentum from the women's movement that had won women's suffrage. This momentum was channeled, by some activists, into the pushing the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). ER was opposed to the ERA because she feared that recently won protections for working women might be lost. Though she did not disagree with all of the aims of the ERA, ER believed in the "separate spheres" idea: women should inhabit a private, domestic sphere while the public sphere of business and politics belonged to men. While she felt that women belonged in a sphere separate from men, she was a firm believer that women were equal to men, and felt that the women's sphere should be expanded outside of the home. She felt that women belonged in the workplace- whether they had financial need of work or not- and that women should have a place in politics. ER frequently voiced her opinion, and used her column to answer criticism from her opponents. An article that particularly highlighted ER's willingness to address her opponents was written on August 5, 1939. In the article, ER described a magazine that was sent to her containing the following passage:

"Women are generally more intuitive than empirical. In other words, they play hunches instead of examining facts in the evaluation of a situation. And I have never yet seen one who, in a tight spot, didn't try to take advantage of the fact that she was a woman." She answers it quite fiercely saying,

> What good would it do to try to get someone else to stand by when you are about to have a baby? What good would it do to turn to anyone else if your husband drank and you had to try to collect his wages before they were all spent? A woman may use her womanly wiles to help her in tight spots, but she isn't trading on being a woman, she is just handling the job which is hers, and frequently it is the job of handling a man and making him think he isn't being handled. These doctors and editors who write for magazines like this are very clever, but they should know a little more about women and real life before they venture to write about them.[50]

My Day also showed several instances of ER arguing her belief that women should have more rights than they were being afforded. ER constantly urged women to remember that they were important, vital members of society. In August 1942, in the midst of World War II, she wrote:

> In countless homes in this country today, there are women who are "casually unaware" of the great accomplishments which are theirs. They will be recognized by history, but today we forget them because they do their daily tasks so casually that their heroism and the vital place which they fill in our world passes almost unnoticed, and certainly unsung in the present.[51]

[50] Ibid, Aug. 5, 1939.
[51] Ibid, Aug. 13, 1942.

It seems that ER was constantly concerned with convincing women that they had value, and convincing society—men and women alike—that it was appropriate and even honorable for women to work outside of their homes. ER regularly argued that no one could say whether or not a husband made enough to support his entire family, except the husband and wife in question. War times were the perfect opportunity for ER to push the idea of women in the workplace, because there were fewer men around to hold the jobs, and so it became patriotic for women to go to work. She felt that it was a mistake to say that women of a certain age or women that were mothers could not work. Not only did she see the financial merit of allowing women to work outside of their homes (widows supporting dependents or working-class families who relied on a two parent income) but she also recognized the emotional merit. ER believed that it was imperative for women to have the option to be in the workplace if doing so gave them fulfillment. It is important to note that merely in the way she chose to live her life ER was making a deliberate statement about women's rights; she was a woman working outside of the traditional role as homemaker and nurturer, not because she needed the money, but because it was essential in helping to fill a void in her life.

In the years following the US entrance into World War II, ER continually expressed her belief that women should be praised for their contributions to the war effort. ER believed that women who worried about their husbands, sons, and fathers were just as significant to the war cause as the women who went into military service as

nurses, or the women that took up factory jobs building ships and planes. ER was frequently quick to point out that the war effort belonged to the women at home, patriotically taking care of their family's rations and planting victory gardens, just as much as it belonged to the men on the frontlines. ER also used *My Day* to urge women to organize and be the peace movement in world.

Through her writings, radio broadcasts, and public appearances, ER earned the same amount of money as FDR did as president (though she gave the majority of her earnings to charities).[52] The fact that the First Lady made as much money as the president made an astonishing statement—ER did not just preach women's rights, but thoroughly embodied the idea of an independent, free-thinking woman who worked despite her husband's financial stability.

ER had advocated for workers' rights in *It's Up to the Women* to advocate and she continued to do so in M*y Day.* Likely from the influence of Souvestre, ER felt an overwhelming sense of duty to speak in the interest of the working class. She spent a considerable amount of time with workers, discovering their living conditions and listening to their stories. Her *My Day* columns were evidence of how passionately she felt about workers' rights. Whether she was discussing the working conditions of laundry workers, or endorsing the film, "Boy Slaves," about children working in a

[52] Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume 2 1933-1938, 3.

turpentine factory, ER made it clear that she believed workers deserved better working conditions and she was in favor of labor unions.

ER used these press conferences as a platform to maintain her opinions on issues concerning racial relations. "It is important for all of us to know the story of the people of the United States as a whole, and every minority group has contributed toward the making of our nation. The Negroes have done much for our country. There are no wars in which they have not participated."[53] In this quote from a 1943 *My Day* article ER showed her commitment to improving the situation for racial minorities. ER frequently used *My Day* to explain her opinions on equality of racial minorities and to contest racist practices that kept minorities subjugated. While ER believed that blacks and whites should remain separate—she is clear not to argue against segregation—she felt that there should be an effort to better the condition in the black segregated communities. ER made a point of establishing her beliefs very publicly, despite the disapproval that her views sparked in the white, upper class world from which she came.

ER also continued to advocate for racial minorities in the *My Day* column. She frequently endorsed the United Negro College Fund, and spoke on behalf of African Americans getting an education. ER saw African American health as a critical issue, and

[53] Eleanor Roosevelt, My Day, Feb. 13, 1943, http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1941&_f=md055958

therefore, argued that it was important that African American doctors received a good education. ER also used *My Day* to advocate for the African American right to get involved with national defense, as this was something she saw a lot of discrimination in.

Quite regularly ER made a case for bettering the living situations in black communities. In an article published in January of 1944 ER wrote:

> I have a number of letters asking me why I am so interested in Negro housing in Washington when white people find it so difficult to get decent housing, not only in Washington but in many other places in the United States. The answer is that there are more people to speak for white tenants than there are for colored tenants.[54]

This passage shows ER's interest in advocating for black communities. She also argued for better conditions for African American children, highlighting the inadequate schools and lack of equipment on their playgrounds. In a *My Day* article written in January of 1944 ER wrote: "These are our citizens, and their right to live decently at the same costs and under similar conditions as other citizens I think must be accepted by all. Present conditions add to the poor health and delinquency problems of the whole city."[55] At a time when racial subjugation was the norm, ER advocated for the rights of African Americans to have the same privileges as whites, but in their own communities. As in

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[54] David Emblidge, ed., My Day: The Best of Eleanor Roosevelt's Acclaimed Newspaper Columns, 1936-1962, (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 86.

[55] Eleanor Roosevelt, *My Day*, Jan. 22, 1944. http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1944&_f=md056699

her press conferences, *ER* used *My Day* to advocate for better conditions for blacks, but she was careful not to challenge the system of segregation that helped create poor conditions in black communities. Essentially, ER was saying that the separate but equal doctrine should be taken seriously. This shows just how shrewd ER was—she managed a message that appealed to racial minorities ("you deserve better living conditions") but did not alienate whites either.

At the same time, ER also went out of her way to disassociate herself from people or groups who endorsed racist practices. For example, in 1939, ER wrote a *My Day* column about her resignation from the Daughters of the American Revolution, after they adopted a "No Negroes" policy in which they would not allow African American women to join the organization. In this article she said, "To remain as a member implies approval of that action, and therefore I am resigning,"[56] but she did not say that The Daughters should abandon their "No Negroes" policy.

ER made it very clear that she did not think the country could exist peacefully with so much internal hatred. ER emphasized improving black life inside the system of segregation. This was a typical position on race among upper-class white liberals in this time period. Over time, the language of ER's *My Day* articles changes to that of unwavering support for African American civil rights, but during the White House

[56] David Emblidge, ed., My Day: The Best of Eleanor Roosevelt's Acclaimed Newspaper Columns, 1936-1962, (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 34.

years, both ER and FDR knew that pushing too hard for African American civil rights would erode white southern support for the Democratic Party, and so as a clever politician ER worked within the confines of what would have been deemed acceptable to better the black standard of living.

The *My Day* columns during ER's time as First Lady very effectively, though not overtly, also show the political partnership between ER and FDR. ER made bold claims about things such as communism, racism, and World War II, and support for her did not falter as is evident by her appointment as a United Nations delegate, as well as the rumors that she would run for political office[57]. Rarely did ER avoid controversial topics, even during elections—this speaks to both FDR's trust in ER, to not damage his political career, but also to the unwavering love that ER had earned from the American people. ER was not afraid to speak her mind, and FDR was willing to listen to her opinions, which made for a very effective partnership and a successful alliance in furthering their liberal agenda. While Franklin was not as liberal as his wife, he could test liberal policies and ideas through ER. Using his wife as a political weathervane, FDR was able to measure public response to the issues she championed, to determine whether he should pursue these issues as well. ER and FDR's political partnership afforded her the ability to say what was on her mind.

[57] Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961).

Conclusion

By utilizing different forms of media in a way that no other First Lady had ever done before, Eleanor Roosevelt used the media to champion the less fortunate. Combining her activism and her use of the media make for a fascinating look into a relatively unexamined aspect of ER's life. Through examining the different types of media that ER used during her time as First Lady, it is possible to see the different groups that ER's activism touched, as well as her reasoning for doing so. Looking at the widespread influence that ER had, it is easy to see why Eleanor Roosevelt is often considered one of the most significant women of the twentieth century.

In looking at the reasons ER felt compelled towards activism—her loveless childhood that made her crave adoration, the influence of Marie Souvestre, and her desire to help further her ailing husband's political career—it is easier to understand ER's motivation for becoming a representative for the oppressed. It's not to say that ER used the media with the express purpose of championing others, but that ER's media presence was a reflection of the altruistic way that she lived her life. Through examining ER's relationship with the media and altruism, ER emerges as a savvy politician who could navigate rhetoric to appeal to the masses. Not only did ER use the media, but she used it quite skillfully.

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