

Fundamentals In

MASS MEDIA & COMMUNICATION

Theodore Roosevelt and His Relationship with the Press

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Journalists and US presidents have often had contentious relationships. Certain administrations, though, seem to battle the media more than others, sometimes interfering with how reporters do their jobs by blocking White House access or attempting to spin, or control, messages.

Theodore Roosevelt knew how the media worked and what he needed to do to get favorable press. Yet, his interactions with the press were not always positive. In his career as a state assemblyman, police commissioner, governor of New York, army officer, vice president, and the twenty-sixth president of the United States, Roosevelt befriended and collaborated with journalists even as he tried to shape what information appeared in the newspapers. “People think of TR as this caricature, that he is all glasses and big teeth, but what they don’t realize is behind that big grin was a man who was fully aware of how to manipulate the press and others into doing his bidding,” said Susan Sarna, curator of Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, Roosevelt’s former home on Long Island (personal interview, Nov. 7, 2019).

A man known for “titanic energy,” and “a fiery temperament,” Roosevelt was also considered tender and subtle—someone who loved the “beauties of the natural world.” He had a “wide-ranging, if not contradictory character” (Van Doren, 2015, p. 31). The same mercurial personality dictated his relationship with journalists, and although he actively cultivated them as colleagues, he also argued with them over their published work. For example, he aided investigative journalist Lincoln Steffens during his research on federal corruption, but also complained about the articles when he disagreed with points made in the published syndicated series (Goodwin, 2013).

Roosevelt would lambast the press when frustrated by their coverage. When he attempted to pass railroad regulation in Congress, he became aggravated after a series of articles that, in his view, negatively impacted his proposed policies (Dalton, 2002). He railed against these “muckrackers,”—a term Roosevelt appropriated from John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and used to describe some journalists who were so busy looking for problems in the “muck” that they could not see anything positive—thus coining a pejorative term for the investigative journalists of the era (Hillstrom, 2010, p. 79).



President Theodore Roosevelt with reporters at his home, Sagamore Hill, Cove Neck, Long Island, New York, 1912.

Bain News Service photograph collection. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

When progressive journalist Ray Stannard Baker cautioned him against formally castigating the press, Roosevelt considered his words. As he delivered his “Man with the Muck Rake” talk on April 14, 1906, he balanced his criticism of slipshod reporting with the emphasis that in-depth research on corruption was important. Despite his careful phrasing, the speech was interpreted as an attack on reform journalists that did not distinguish between the “yellow” sensationalist press and the more responsible element (Goodwin, 2013).

Roosevelt and His Relationship with Journalists

Many journalists influenced Roosevelt and impacted his policy decisions during his political career. The work of Jacob Riis, author of *How the Other Half Lives*, for example, affected his time as New York City police commissioner (Goodwin, 2013). Riis, who photographed the poor living conditions in the city tenements, became an important confidant to Roosevelt, even taking him on a tour of the lodging houses, police beats, and other places he covered, showing Roosevelt firsthand the terrible conditions the poor endured. Riis also introduced Roosevelt to influential politicians and reformers (Dalton, 2002).

In turn, Roosevelt helped Riis’s cause. When Riis took Roosevelt to a police-run hostel, the Church Street Police Lodging House, and spoke to him about the poor conditions and police mistreatment there, Roosevelt closed the police-run lodgings and created municipal lodging houses instead (Dalton, 2002). Roosevelt spoke about the symbiotic nature of their relationship in his autobiography: “As President of the Police Board, I was also a member of the Health Board. In both positions I felt that with Jacob Riis’s guidance I would be able to put a goodly number of his principles into actual effect. He and I looked at life and its problems from substantially the same standpoint” (1985, p. 174).

Riis became a de facto advisor to Roosevelt. When Roosevelt was accused of anti-union bias, Riis told him to meet with union leaders and speak to them as a person, not an official. Roosevelt did so, and after a three-hour meeting, he had smoothed over their feelings (Goodwin, 2013). Riis and Roosevelt often discussed politics and became friends. When Roosevelt returned to New York after a European tour in 1910, Riis was on hand to greet him along with other close friends and family, and Riis attended Roosevelt’s daughter Ethel’s wedding in 1913 (Dalton, 2002).

Reporters such as Richard Harding Davis helped create Roosevelt’s reputation as a courageous and spirited fighter during the Spanish-American War, in which Roosevelt headed the storied “Rough Riders” cavalry regiment. Roosevelt gave Davis unusual access, allowing him to write from the Rough Riders headquarters (Goodwin, 2013). Davis at times even fought beside Roosevelt, and wrote many stories about his heroism. In particular, Davis wrote about the

Timeline of Theodore Roosevelt	
1858	Born Oct. 27
1880	Graduated Harvard University magna cum laude Married Alice Hathaway Lee
1881	Elected to New York State Assembly
1884	Roosevelt’s wife and mother both die on Feb. 14
1885	Sagamore Hill construction is finished
1886	Married Edith Carow
1895	Became Police Commissioner of New York City
1897	Appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy
1898	Received Lieutenant-Colonel commission and “Rough Riders” created Elected governor of New York State on Nov. 8 (through 1900)
1900	Elected vice president
1901	President William McKinley assassinated and Roosevelt becomes 26th president of the United States
1904	Re-elected president
1909	Finished presidency
1919	Died on Jan. 6

Table 1. Timeline of Theodore Roosevelt.

Source: Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University
<https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org>

skirmish at Las Guásimas on June 24, 1898, as well as the famed Battle of San Juan Hill on July 1, in which Roosevelt exposed himself and his men to gunfire with little protection to take a key position from the Spanish (Dalton, 2002).

Some journalists even gave Roosevelt special access to the information they collected. Ray Stannard Baker, for example, aided Roosevelt as he campaigned for railroad regulations—and shared research with him and provided him with advance copies of his articles (Goodwin, 2013).

Roosevelt, the Press, and the Presidency

As president, Roosevelt was “hands-on” (Dalton, 2002, p. 210) and it would be him—and not his cabinet—who would tell the press what went on during their meetings. Roosevelt also discouraged leaks from his administration. He knew how to frame stories that appealed to the media and used his colorful personality to fuel coverage. He aided the media’s ability to cover his administration by creating the first press room inside the White House, and giving journalists access to phones (Dalton, 2002).

Roosevelt believed that news in the daily paper influenced the public more than editorials, and he sought to capture front-page headlines, believing, according to scholar George Juergens, that a “strong president must not only make news, he must pay close attention to how the news is disseminated as well” (1982, p. 117). Roosevelt, who read several newspapers every day, knew the opportunity that Monday papers provided: with little news on Sundays, editors were always on the lookout for information to fill the next day’s papers, and Roosevelt was happy to provide it. Roosevelt also knew how to blanket the news, promoting his perspectives to drown out those of his rivals (Juergens, 1982).

To create the image he sought, Roosevelt also spoke to his favorite reporters, like Joe Bishop, who worked for the *New York Commercial Advertiser* among other papers, on a regular basis (Roosevelt, 1985). He was known to speak to media during his 1 p.m. shaving appointment on weekdays, and “they were so flattered they fell into line,” printing favorable articles (Dalton, 2002, p. 212). He even offered reporters off-the-record information, telling them that he’d deny anything they credited to him (Dalton, 2002). Reporters who respected Roosevelt’s confidences and wrote about him and his programs in a positive way received remarkable access to the president. “Reporters were amazed, and sometimes a bit concerned, at the things he told them,” wrote Juergens (1982). “He talked freely about the most delicate matters of state, and seemed at times to be almost courting danger by the bluntness with which he discussed personalities in Washington” (p. 114).

Roosevelt treated these journalists as friends, using their first names and inviting them to social occasions (Juergens, 1982, p. 114). He also gave “leaks” to trustworthy reporters, information they could distribute without revealing the source. He offered backgrounders, speaking with them with the understanding that anything used in the press would not be directly attributed (p. 128). “Supposedly on a Sunday night he would actually leak to the press . . . about what he was going to do during the week, sometimes about policy and he waited to see the reaction of the people,” said Sarna (personal interview, Nov. 7, 2019). If it was good, Sarna explained, he implemented the proposed policy. If it wasn’t favorable, he denied the leak and said it never happened. “So this is a man who’s very intelligent,” she said. “He knew exactly what he was doing.”

Reporters that crossed him were considered part of what Roosevelt called the Ananias Club, after a liar in the Bible who was killed for speaking untruths. Such individuals were no longer welcome in the White House (Dalton, 2002). “He had a hard time distinguishing between criticism and reporting . . . He didn’t necessarily see the difference,” said Rutgers University professor David Greenberg (2019). “Usually he believed in one right way of framing an

issue and that was his way. It was sort of the press’s job to reflect it.”

Roosevelt and the Repercussions of Crossing Him

Roosevelt could be vindictive when he felt betrayed by the press. When a *Boston Herald* reporter wrote an article in 1904 about Ethel and Quentin, two of the president’s children, following a turkey across the White House lawn and pulling its feathers on Thanksgiving, Roosevelt banned the journalist, Jesse Carmichael, and his newspaper from the White House (Shafer, 2019). But that didn’t satisfy his fury, and he even allegedly attempted to get the US Weather Bureau to stop sharing Boston weather information with the paper. Eventually the *Herald* apologized and was forgiven (Dalton, 2002).

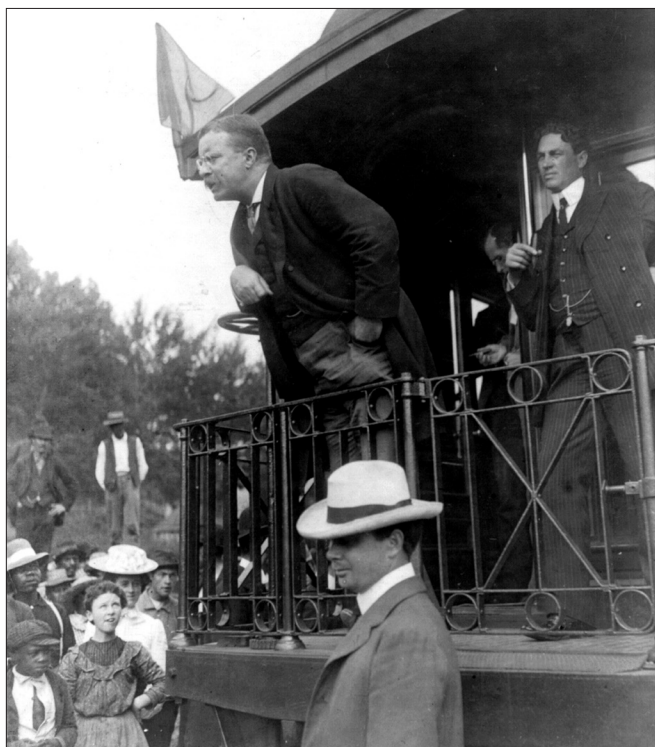
Another battle Roosevelt had was with the *New York World*, run by Joseph Pulitzer. The newspaper had run a series of articles in 1908 about the controversial Panama Canal construction project, alleging financial misconduct during the purchase of the land from the French and accusations that Roosevelt had been knowingly untruthful about the deal. Roosevelt said the claims were a “string of infamous libels,” and the Roosevelt Justice Department handed down libel indictments against Pulitzer, his editor, and his newspaper; the charges were ultimately dismissed, but typified Roosevelt’s combative nature (Abrams, 2013, p. 187).

When Roosevelt first arrived at the White House as president, he immediately met with various members of the press, including the managers of the Associated Press, the Scripps-McRae Press Association, and the *New York Sun*, and pledged that he would offer access if they agreed not to violate confidences and not publish certain information (Goodwin, 2013). “The president saw news as an



Theodore Roosevelt speaking with two men, probably reporters.

American Press Association, photographer. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>



Theodore Roosevelt speaking at the back of a railroad car.

Underwood & Underwood, publisher. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>.

instrument of power," wrote Juergens (1982). "It followed that he wanted to waste no time getting his publicity operation in order" (p. 113).

Conclusion

Roosevelt was a master at influencing the media. He courted journalists, using friendliness and favors to sway them into covering his administration more positively. He assessed public opinion through leaks, floating policy ideas in the media. He used his hunting trips to garner publicity and engaged in stunts like riding a submarine in the Long Island Sound to gather support for new vessels. He understood the importance of creating an accessible press room and having press conferences, and he employed the first government press officer, allowing his personal secretary, William Loeb, Jr., to speak with journalists for him.

In part, Roosevelt helped shape his legacy by convincing the press to tell stories that cast him as a brash innovator through his creative use of publicity stunts. He enthusiastically opened the White House to the media and offered great access to the presidency, which created close relationships with reporters. Roosevelt exploited this intimacy

by gaining early access to their research and information, which helped him make policy decisions. Although he could not always control the press, Roosevelt did set a precedent for future administrations, in which publicity and influencing public opinion through crafting media messages became an important part of a strong presidency's strategy.

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About the Author

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