

Eleanor Roosevelt as “Ordinary” Citizen and “Expert” on Radio in the Early 1950s

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Abstract

Eleanor Roosevelt, former First Lady of the United States, used radio to communicate on a wide variety of issues that she felt the American public, and women in particular, should know or think about. She had been a radio pioneer, broadcasting from the 1920s onward and starting with her own radio show in 1932. By the 1950s, radio as a technology began facing increasing competition from television. Yet, as a medium to reach mass audiences and women in particular, radio continued to play a vital role. From October 1950 until August 1951, Eleanor Roosevelt together with her son Elliott hosted a daily show on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) called *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*. Focusing on this 1950–1951 program, this article seeks to examine the way in which Mrs. Roosevelt communicated with her listeners and successfully blended that which at first sight might seem opposites: the domestic with the global, the informal mode of address with the serious topics, the public with the private, and the ordinary woman’s view with that of the expert international stateswoman.

Keywords

radio, 1950s, Eleanor Roosevelt, women’s history

Introduction

As Eleanor Roosevelt was leaving the White House following her husband FDR’s death in April 1945, she informed the women’s press corps that instead of being their subject, in future, she only wanted to be their colleague. “The story is over,” she told them (Black, 1996, p. 52). Nothing could be further from the truth, though, as Black (1996) explains,

Once freed from the constraints of the White House, ER eagerly expanded her career and unabashedly challenged both the Democratic party and American liberals to practice what they preached. Whether the issue was civil rights for African Americans, opposition to the House Un-American Activities Committee or Senator Joseph McCarthy, defending Alger Hiss, or questioning John Kennedy’s character . . . (p. 2)

This “career expansion” and “unabashed challenging,” however, did take some time to grow. When asked by President Truman, in December 1945, to become a member of the U.S. delegation to the first meeting of the UN General Assembly in London, she was very hesitant. “How could I be a delegate to help organize the United Nations when I have no background or experience in international meetings?” (Roosevelt, 1958, p. 39), she mused. After much deliberation, spurred on by advice from her assistant Malvina “Tommy” Thompson and her family and friends, she took the job. Not only did she disprove her own and her critics’ doubts about her appointment, she went on to become the Chairman of the UN Commission on Human Rights a year

later and under her able chairmanship, 18 countries drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was approved by the UN General Assembly in December 1948 (Glendon, 2001). This far-reaching document guided governments in the protection and welfare of their subjects as nothing before: “the Magna Carta of our time . . . the basis of all subsequent covenants and conventions developed within the United Nations” (Fenton Herdt, 2008, p. 2). Her son Elliott wrote that by 1946, his mother

had conquered timidity. She would commit herself to making the United Nations strong. In doing so, and in talking about the need to audiences everywhere, she came into her own. In her unique fashion, she spoke from her tormented heart in behalf of the common people, who to her meant more than anything else in the affairs of nations. Millions of them in the United States and around the world gave her their love in return, perhaps in greater measure than Father ever enjoyed. (p. 83)

One of the ways she chose to address audiences everywhere was through radio. She spoke on U.S. domestic radio, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America, French radio (in French), and Italian radio (in

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Italian). She was also interviewed in Spanish and German. In 1948, she hosted a twice weekly radio program with her daughter Anna on American Broadcasting Company (ABC). That program, although well-received, was dropped due to lack of sponsors (Beasley, 2010). Undeterred, in 1950, she started a new program, titled *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*, this time with her son Elliott. The programs covered a great variety of topics, although many of them were related to Mrs. Roosevelt's knowledge of and interest in international affairs and politics. There were few women in the 1950s who like ER talked about serious issues on the radio (Halper, 2001) and none, with perhaps the exception of Mary Margaret McBride (Ware, 2005) who were as popular as her. Mrs. Roosevelt was no stranger to communicating with "ordinary" citizens; unlike previous First Ladies—and many First Ladies since—(Winfield, 1990) she reached out to "ordinary" Americans in numerous ways before, during and after her time as First Lady: through personal meetings, letters, columns, articles, books, speeches, radio, and television.¹

In studies of the media, radio has received comparatively less attention than other media, and women less than men. Eleanor Roosevelt's radio career has not been studied in depth at all. As Loviglio (2005) says, "That her contributions to radio have been largely forgotten says more about the continued power of . . . gender discrimination and perhaps the general amnesia that clouds over nearly all of our historical memory of radio" (p. 28). This article then aims to fill a gap in the literature with respect to the radio work of this important public figure and focuses on the time when she was no longer First Lady of the United States, but rather "First Lady of the World." Through an analysis of recordings of the 1950-1951 program, it seeks to answer how ER conversed with the American people, moving between being an "expert" and an "ordinary citizen" interested in explaining complicated international affairs in her bid to educate her listener. Furthermore, it examines the extent to which she capitalized on her personality when using the medium of radio, at a time when she was not constrained by White House protocol or her husband's political considerations. It was radio in particular that allowed Eleanor Roosevelt to combine both her expertise and her "ordinariness" when trying to reach a mass audience, more so than her speeches, books, or columns.

Method

This article offers a close listening and reading of the broadcast texts, using an interpretative form of discourse analysis that takes into account the concept of the context in which the utterances were made (Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008) and in light of research into Broadcast talk (Crisell, 1994; Scannel, 1991), American radio history (Craig, 2009; Halper, 2001; Hilmes & Loviglio, 2002), and other relevant primary sources and secondary literature on Eleanor Roosevelt. By listening to the programs themselves, the researcher obtains

some sense of what it could have been like for Mrs. Roosevelt's 1950s listeners. This would not be possible with only transcriptions of the programs. An oral source deserves an aural approach. As Crisell 1994 points out, words on the radio "constitute a binary code in which the words themselves are symbols of what they represent, while the voice in which they are heard is an index of the person or 'character' who is speaking" (p. 43). To examine ER's personality on the radio, listening to the programs' words is therefore paramount. Because of the ephemeral nature of radio—it goes in one ear and out the other—unless there are recordings, the sound has gone. The lack of available transcripts of ER's radio programs makes the ability to listen to the recordings particularly important.

There are a total of 233 episodes of *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*, available on CDs at the Roosevelt Study Center in Middelburg, the Netherlands (and in the FDR library at Hyde Park, New York State). Twenty-six programs were listened to in Middelburg for the purpose of this article, although not all of them have been cited here. In selecting which ones to listen to both a random sampling method was used, selecting every 20th program (20, 40, 60, 80, 100, 120, 140, 160, 180, 200, 220), and a more specific sampling method to select particular programs. For example, it was important to gain a comprehensive overview of the whole series to include the first few programs (1, 2, and 3) and the last program (233), as well as a mix of topics, such as the United Nations, Europe, communism, women, and named individuals from the world of show business, which were covered either in the "letter discussion" section of the program or during the interviews, which Mrs. Roosevelt conducted. These topics were identified using the (very brief) description of the Eleanor Roosevelt audiovisual material index from the FDR Library (Programs 8, 42, 49, 59, 69, 81, 122, 134, 144, 168, and 208). Eleven of the programs were transcribed in full; for the others, extensive notes were made and pertinent quotes were written out. Before getting to the specific 1950-1951 program, the next section offers a brief overview of Eleanor Roosevelt's earlier media work.

ER and Media

The Eleanor Roosevelt Program was the latest in a long line of media appearances for ER. She had been a radio pioneer, starting with broadcasting in the 1920s over several New York stations (Belgrade, 2001). In 1932—a year before her husband FDR began his "Fireside Chats"—she had her own series of radio commentaries (Loviglio, 2005). Lou Henry Hoover had been the first ever First Lady to give radio talks (to celebrate the work of voluntary organizations such as the Girl Scouts and 4-H clubs), but the number of appearances was minimal as Herbert Hoover did not like his wife adopting a public role (Beasley, 2010). Eleanor Roosevelt, however, was frequently on the airwaves during her time in the White House; one of her most famous broadcasts is that for

the Pan-American Coffee Bureau on the evening of December 7, 1941, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in which she spoke of her feelings as a mother of a son serving in the navy. Radio was one of the many forms of communication she used to reach ordinary Americans; she also traveled extensively throughout the country and she gave thousands of speeches both on behalf of the Democrats and her husband and on issues that were dear to her. In 1933, she had started press conferences; not only was she the first, First Lady to do so, but she also limited attendance to women reporters forcing newspapers to appoint female journalists. In the 12 years that she was in the White House, she gave 348 conferences (Beasley, 2010). Despite using such conferences as vehicles to comment on political issues, the main stories that resulted from these occasions were usually ones that revolved around the First Lady's social engagements for the week and trivial issues such as the bad behavior of her dogs Major and Meggie (Beasley, 2010). In the 1950s and 1960s, ER appeared on television, both with her own programs and as the guest on others, and throughout her life, she wrote numerous books, as well as articles and columns for several magazines and newspapers. Most notable is her daily column, *My Day*, which she started in 1935 and wrote until shortly before her death in 1962. *My Day* was syndicated to newspapers throughout the United States, reaching millions of readers. Major clients included the 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 (Columns, 2014).

The Eleanor Roosevelt Program, NBC, October 1950 to August 1951

In the 1950s, despite the increasing competition from television, radio continued to play a vital role as a medium to reach mass audiences and women in particular. According to Rothenbuhler and McCourt (2002), the early part of the Cold War was a very important time for radio: "by providing new venues for expression of regional, class, and ethnic identities, radio played an instrumental role in a series of major transformations, if not revolutions, in American culture" (p. 368). In rural America, for many decades, radio was a lifeline and an integral part of people's daily lives. Craig (2009) describes how whole families and neighbors would gather around the radio set to listen often in the evening, while during the day, rural women could continue their daily routine of housework when the radio was on. Rural audiences especially appreciated the way radio gave them information about events in the United States and abroad.

Surveys of rural listeners consistently found news and political and religious talks to be the most important benefits of radio ownership. The troubled times made such programs especially important as Americans turned to radio to keep abreast of the

latest economic news and a worsening international situation. (Craig, 2009, p. 93)

In 1930, just more than 40% of U.S. households owned a radio; by 1950, that number had increased to 95.7% (as cited in Craig, 2009). Wang (2002) argues that by the late 1940s, the commercial radio networks started to focus on lower to middle-class women, particularly by broadcasting serials, whereas quality programming for families became the target of evening television. Scholars such as Halper (2001) and Ware (2005) point out that although the listening public for radio during the day was predominantly female, large numbers of men did listen. In addition, women also made up the majority of the audience for evening programs, so it is strange, to say the least, that daytime radio was considered less prestigious. Ware (2005), writing about popular radio show host Mary Margaret McBride, asserts that

this nighttime/masculine, daytime/feminine dichotomy is crucial to understanding the history of radio in general and Mary Margaret McBride's place in it . . . and that] unfortunately, the creativity and interest of many of [the programs on daytime radio] was lost in the stereotyped and limited view that daytime equaled soaps, and soaps equaled drivel. (pp. 54-57)

If it is taken that daytime programming was aimed at a female audience, then ER and her son would have been doing just that with their daily 45-min broadcast at 12.30. Certainly in the first episode broadcast on October 11, 1950 (coincidentally Eleanor Roosevelt's 66th birthday), comedian Fred Allen gives that impression. When asked by ER for advice on presenting, he answers that "You are a woman and much better at telling women." She in turn quips back, "women love to be told by men and they like men to feel they've had the chance to give advice, . . . and then work it round into doing exactly what they want themselves." Several of the other programs include lively conversations such as the one between Fred Allen and Mrs. Roosevelt, and lighter subjects, such as her dog Fala, Thanksgiving, and the most beautiful views ER had seen. However, the majority of the topics are heavier, sometimes very serious indeed: the threat of a third world war, the conflict in Korea, communism, human rights, economic hardships, and so on. This great variety of topics is tackled either during the question-and-answer session between ER and Elliott in response to a comment by listeners or in her questioning of her guests, both the famous and the less so. Guests on the show range from the actress Tallulah Bankhead to Nobel Peace Prize Winner Dr. Ralph Bunche, from senators, congressmen, journalists, and foreign dignitaries to writers and administrators.

Reception

The Eleanor Roosevelt Program broadcast on WNBC, New York, could also be heard over some 20 other stations through

the United States (Wamboldt, 1952). A typical show started with a word of welcome by Mrs. Roosevelt, then a discussion by her and her son Elliott on an issue or question raised in a listener's letter, followed by the interviewing of a guest. The former First Lady's tone was warm and friendly toward her listeners and she appears more relaxed than in her 1930s and 1940s broadcasts. Partly, this is due to the fact that these earlier programs were "talks," similar to public speaking, instead of discussions and conversations as in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*. Although in the 1930s, ER had been criticized for her "high-pitched voice and creaking delivery" (Kearney, 1968, p. 228), in the 1950s, there were no longer such acerbic comments to be heard (ER had had voice coaching in the intervening years and one wonders to what extent the improvement in radio technology would also have affected the listening experience). The audience ratings for WNBC showed that *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program* was the most listened to program in all of New York (Program 233, August 31, 1951). Although the audience distribution for the program is not known, most of the letters appear to come from women, but several of the programs also include letters from male listeners. This was not something unusual for ER's broadcasts; in the files of listener correspondence about ER's programs of the late 1930s and early 1940s—available in the FDR library in Hyde Park—there are numerous letters from men too.

One person who was not charmed apparently by *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program* was FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who wrote to complain to ER about comments she made on-air about FBI investigations (FBI Files on Eleanor Roosevelt 1951). There was also criticism from some quarters about the commercials (Wamboldt, 1952). In the first programs, Elliott read out messages from sponsors, and friends voiced concern that Elliott Roosevelt was compromising his mother's good name (Beasley, 1987). Henry Morgenthau III, who initially co-produced *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*,² was perturbed by the influence Elliott had.

It was difficult for [Mrs. Roosevelt] to accept criticism of him [Elliott], although I'm sure she wasn't pleased with a lot of the things that were going on . . . eventually I resigned because I realized that there were certain things that were going on that she didn't really want to hear about and that were intolerable for me because I knew that she could be persuaded to do things that really were against her better judgment and her taste. (Morgenthau, initially co-producer on *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*)

In later programs, the announcements or commercial messages appear to be taken over by Ben Grauer (who interestingly enough had been the announcer on Mrs. Roosevelt's series of programs for Sweetheart soap in 1940).

Although other broadcasters of the time also successfully conversed with the audience, none managed to do so the way ER did. Mary Margaret McBride, whose program slot ER

took over on NBC when the former went to ABC, in particular shared some of the characteristics that made ER such a popular broadcaster:

she [McBride] was there for [her listeners] during the hard times of the Depression, the patriotic sacrifices of wartime, and the uncertainties of the cold war that followed. Even though she was herself a celebrity, listeners felt that she was a dear personal friend to whom they could turn in good times and bad. (Ware, 2005, p. 73)

McBride, just like ER, combined serious and lighthearted topics and similar to ER, she "used her stature in the radio industry for cultural and political results" (Ware, 2005, p. 187). McBride, just like ER, had a commitment to women's advancement (Ware, 2005) and similar to ER, she received thousands of letters from listeners. That is where the comparisons between the two women, who were good friends and frequently appeared on each other's shows (McBride is the main guest in Program 69 of *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*), end. Ware (2005) calls McBride "the first lady of radio," a title that NBC had already bestowed on Eleanor Roosevelt in 1939 (FDR Library & Museum exhibit). McBride was from a humble background and would not have had any trouble communicating with listeners from equally humble backgrounds; McBride had no overt political or diplomatic position, her job first and foremost was that of a commercial radio host who earned her living from promoting products on her shows. Although Eleanor Roosevelt was paid handsomely for her broadcasting career, she did not have to earn her living that way. According to the National First Ladies Library (2013), ER was paid US\$3,000 per broadcast for her show with Pond's in 1937. However, most of the earnings then went to charities such as the American Friends Service Committee (American Friends Service Committee, 2010; Halper, 2001). It is not known how much she was paid for the 1950 show, but Elliott in his book *Mother R* says his company that produced the radio and TV show, Roosevelt Enterprises, at that time was doing very well. She used much of the income from this show to help her daughter Anna who had large debts. Radio broadcasts therefore were a means to make money—either for her charitable causes or to help out her children. Beasley and Belgrade (1985) argue that by doing commercial radio broadcasts, Mrs. Roosevelt acted as a role model for other women looking for a career on-air. Just as important, if not more so, for ER was that through radio, she could reach the dispossessed and bring about greater understanding of domestic and world events, believing that by educating people, they could take a more proactive role in making the world a better place.

Expert Versus Lay Person; Public Versus Private

It is clear from *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program* that the people who write in feel they can approach her as someone who is "ordinary," someone who understands and cares about

them. Each time they ask her opinion on an issue, it is both because they see her as expert—they value what she thinks about a complex issue that is exercising them, and they want *her* expertise—and they want her to help *them* understand—and because they see her as a woman, a mother, and not as someone in the government. For example in Program 69, when a listener from Brooklyn writes,

I have a brother who is in Korea. Our boys are getting killed while the president attends the navy football game . . . I can't sleep worrying about please try and do something before it is too late . . . please sincerely Misses Sylvia. (Burkowitz)

PS. Perhaps you know the answer.

ER was no stranger to receiving letters from the public; as First Lady, she received hundreds of thousands of letters a year (Baritono, 2013; Loviglio, 2005); in *On My Own* written in 1958, she mentions how she is still receiving 100 letters a day (and replying to all of them). Those who wrote to ER came from all walks of life. During the Great Depression, many such letters came from the poor, because as Cohen says, “both in print and on the radio she repeatedly indicated her interest in hearing from ordinary Americans about their problems” (as cited in Baritono, 2013, p. 67). Not only was ER genuinely interested in what people thought and experienced, she also felt she could understand them, that she in many respects was an “ordinary” citizen herself. Although she had been born into a life of privilege, was the niece of one President, and the wife of another, she too had had her fair share of heartache (alcoholic father, orphaned at an early age, strife with her mother-in-law, death of a son, marital problems of her own, and those of her children) and had from the time she was a young woman been keenly interested in helping the less fortunate. This commitment to and understanding of the plight of others were recognized by many. The federation of unions, AFL-CIO, in a Memorial Fund Pamphlet in 1963, speaks of how ER was “one of us” (as cited in O’Farrell, 2010). In December 1945, Eva Lane of the Berkeley Women’s Forum wrote to President Truman expressing the Forum’s delight with his decision to appoint ER to the UN delegation as Eleanor Roosevelt had a

comprehensive understanding of World Affairs [and] the courage to speak for the many millions of plain people both at home and abroad, whose interests are pleading for understanding and who fervently desire a wise solution of the problems that lead to war. (as cited in Baritono, 2013, p. 68)

Large numbers of the letters from listeners to her 1937 and 1940-1942 programs are heart-rending requests for help, often asking for work for themselves or for their husbands or for help to stop them being evicted from their homes. Others are fan letters expressing their gratitude for her hard work and her concern for them, the ordinary citizen.

You are a wonderful person. I wish I could do one fiftieth as much but here I am, 63 years of age in this little bump on the

road, with my husband who lost all his money during the depression and is trying to start over again. I wish I could help as you do our president. (Letter from Ridgeway, Ohio, June 1937; Eleanor Roosevelt Correspondence)

. . . how much I enjoy your programs. Your thought and consideration for people of all types and in all circumstances is something quite near under the sun. No other “First Lady of the Land” has ever thought to give so much attention to the people at large, and I want to assure you that it has brought you very near to the hearts of most of us. (Letter from Long Beach, California, July 1940; Eleanor Roosevelt Correspondence)

The Eleanor Roosevelt Program was no different in encouraging listeners to write in with questions and comments. Indeed, this was something that was standard practice from the early days of radio; Loviglio (2005) recounts how already in the 1930s, two thirds of NBC radio programs solicited listener letters. What does seem different for Mrs. Roosevelt, however, is that for this 1950-1951 program, the letters were a focal point at the start of most programs: First, a question was read out and ER would answer and then Elliott and she would discuss the issue further. For example, in Program 40, a listener from Georgia asks Mrs. Roosevelt to discuss the merits of good home-making. ER uses her answer to encourage women to engage in civic affairs: “To make a good home is the first duty of any woman, but it’s hard to make a good home if you don’t take an interest in your surroundings,” she says. Program 42 asks “would you and your son Elliott discuss whether or not you would accept a nomination to become president?” ER’s response is that she seems to have answered that question a number of times. Elliott makes his mother laugh by insisting this is the first time that she has been asked that on her *radio* program. The answer to the question, by the way, was “No.” In Program 100, Elliott starts by saying that “an increasing amount of mail is reaching us . . . many asking for enlightenment in both national and international matters.” The question in the letter that day is whether the UN should concern itself with a definition of Human Rights. Finally, in Program 122, the subject of the listener question is whether the United Nations’ troops should cross the 38th parallel in Korea. There were some programs where no letter was discussed at the start, as in, for example, Program 160 when ER and Elliott are in Switzerland for a meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission and in Program 200, when Elliott decides to ask his mother about a *My Day* column she wrote a month earlier in response to someone’s question then about inflation and disarmament.

ER is often forthright with her own opinions; at other times, she comes across as less confident or at least does not want to pretend she knows more than she does. In typical self-effacing style, ER interjects her answers with phrases such as the following: “I wish I really knew and intimately understood the 85 pages of the [socialized medicine] Bill that’s now up . . . I don’t” (Program 60) and “When you have that much help you’d be a very stupid person if you couldn’t

use what little knowledge you had to add to it (.) and that is something that I have fortunately always been able to do” (Program 233). This is reminiscent of the way she downplays her contribution to the success of United Nations’ business and the desire for others to share the credit for accomplishments, as when she reflects in her autobiography on when she had to take over from Ambassador Austin in presiding over the U.S. delegation to the UN in the autumn of 1951:

It was a great responsibility to preside over the delegation . . . but if you have to do things, somehow you get through them. And of course I had Mr. Sandifer and other helpful State Department advisers, so I managed to keep the delegation working as a team without any real catastrophe. (Roosevelt, 1958, pp. 92-93)

In her interviews with her guests on *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*, she always shows great interest in their opinions, also as a means to understand an issue better and to help the listeners understand:

Well, now I need an explanation of what you said on . . . my television program that by minimizing the effectiveness of the A-bomb you gave comfort of the Russians now I explained what I thought you were doing. I may have been entirely wrong and therefore today I’m going to ask you to explain just what you really think about it yourself. (Interview with Major Alexander DaSaverski, Program 49)

Comments such as these exemplify her no-nonsense approach to communicating with a variety of audiences and her feeling that she was not particularly extraordinary, but someone who through accepting help and learning from experiences in life could pass on knowledge to others. Sometimes in her drive to make things clear for herself and her listener, she can come across as rather bossy (see also Roosevelt, 1958: “I gave [the press] a little lecture . . .” p. 92) and she will need to do her utmost to get guests to explain things better or to make a weak talker say something interesting. There is a marked difference between the way she feels comfortable with some guests, laughing and using casual phrasing (e.g., Tallulah Bankhead, Program 8), and others whom she is more on edge with (e.g., Elizabeth Penrose, Program 60). There are also times when she feels so passionately about a subject that her guest is left with very little to say, as when she talks to the entertainer Bob Hope about communism in the theatrical world and he gets just a few sentences into the conversation compared with her very long view that,

I’ve felt very strongly there are two things in the entertainment world. First of all, it’s usual for you all to be asked to do benefits. You can’t look into every organization that asks you to do a benefit . . . Now it seems to me that that’s a very bad criterion for a lot of entertainers who don’t have any more idea about politics than the man in the moon. . . .

It’s very unfortunate and I don’t think the average person understands what happened and I’d like to see a real organized effort made to clear the people who are not really communists. (Program 144)

ER is curious and keen to learn in these programs, something evident throughout her life. Partly because she never quite feels she is good enough, partly because she feels the only way that people can actively participate in society, the only way peace can be achieved in the world, is if people understand more and take the trouble to educate themselves.

Learning and living. But they are really the same thing, aren’t they? There is no experience from which you can’t learn something. When you stop learning you stop living in any vital and meaningful sense. And the purpose of life, after all, is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience. (Roosevelt, 1960, p. xii)

ER does and at the same time does not see herself as an expert; she feels that she is often knowledgeable simply because of what she has witnessed and read and the people she has met in her life. She views herself as just an “ordinary” person learning and yet she realizes too that with her years of experience of politics and her intricate knowledge of the United Nations, she can use media outlets to tell people things she feels they ought to know. For example, in her special message to the UN forces in Korea on New Year’s Day 1951 she says,

I imagine there are fewer women who have a keener sense of the horrors of war and of all

the hardships and all the horrors that you men fighting in Korea have undergone. I had the opportunity in the last war to really see first of all how men were prepared . . . what happened after the war had passed over an area, . . . many times what happened to [the men] in their souls as a result of the war even if their bodies were intact. And yet I want to say to you . . . I think you are doing something the future of civilization and humanity that you may not even yourselves fully realize . . . (Program 59)

Kahn (as cited in Wamboldt, 1952), writing in the *New Yorker* in 1948, argues, it is the blend of “naivety and cunning,” something that he would call the “Mother Technique,” which is precisely why ER is so successful at persuading people:

Mrs. Roosevelt has, moreover, polished to a high degree an effective method of debating that comes natural to her but of the value of which experience has made her thoroughly aware . . . she goes out of her way not to appear opinionated even though her own mind may be pretty well made up, too. “Now, of course, I’m a woman and I don’t understand all these things,” she will remark softly, almost maternally, “and I’m sure there’s a great deal to be said for your arguments, but don’t you think it would

be a good idea if . . .” Stating her position hesitantly, interrogatively, and above all sensibly, she sometimes manages to elicit a “yes” or a “maybe” from someone who a moment before had seemed in immutable opposition. (pp. 274-275)

However, through her son Elliott’s eyes, we obtain a different view of ER: a person who is often insecure about her own abilities, not necessarily aware that she is able to have such a major influence, not cunningly planning to persuade people.

In her rare, off-duty moments, I saw a woman who bore little resemblance to the determined Madam Chairman who presided over the commission. . . . In her cottage or at her apartment, she was for the present a different person, shaking her head over her ignorance of parliamentary law and the ins and outs of procedures, resolutions and amendments. “I have to learn as I go along,” she said, but few people were quicker at studies than Mother. (Roosevelt & Brough, 1977, p. 92)

Although she uses columns such as *My Day*, public speeches and television too to educate ordinary citizens and question public figures, it is in radio in particular that she can more easily transgress the boundary between public and private. Not only is radio an intimate medium, but she also frequently addresses “our listeners,” drawing them into the conversation (“I’m very happy to have this little while with you each day,” Program 233). The listeners’ own words are brought into the program by Elliott when he reads out their letters and often speaks on their behalf to quiz his mother. Furthermore, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program* is broadcast into peoples’ homes from her own home at the Sheraton Park Hotel (“another visit here to my living room,” Program 100): a very public building with a public function, but within it a living room that is radio studio and at the same time, her private quarters, her sanctuary from public life. Nowhere is the public–private distinction and fusion clearer than here in her living room. The fact that her co-presenter is her son adds to the informality. ER’s Pan-American Coffee Hour radio show of 1941-1942 had already, according to Loviglio (2005), started to include more serious political and policy issues when compared with her earliest programs for sponsors such as Pond’s, Simmonds Mattress Company, and Sweetheart soap. This more serious content is not surprising as the early 1940s were serious times with the (imminent) outbreak of the Second World War. The move to include more policy and political issues was even more evident in *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program* of 1950. Just as in the 1930s and 1940s, she had chatted over coffee cups about domestic and international issues, she could in her 1950s program continue to blend the domestic with the global, the informal mode of address with the serious topics, the ordinary citizen in her home speaking directly to ordinary citizens in their homes with the expert stateswoman, journalist, and educator speaking to the voter, listener, and eager pupil.

The Final Program and Beyond

The final episode of *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program* (Program 233) was aired on August 31, 1951. In it, she and Elliott discuss whether the audience has gathered more information about the political life of the United States through the many public officials she has interviewed. ER confirms that her latest postbag suggests that listeners are getting a great deal out of the program. “I was quite pleased . . . it had cleared things up for them.” NBC apparently had told ER and Elliott that the program had lost a great deal of listening audience on the shows ER did from Europe when she was attending meetings of the United Nations (they were broadcast from either Paris or London).

ER: That must be partly difficulty with understanding with what the people were saying, perhaps a different accent in English and so forth and probably partly that there was less variety, that they were really all of them people in some way connected with public affairs.

Elliott: And yet most questions and answers we’ve had were public affairs.

NBC Executive Vice President Charles Denny who appeared later on that program did not mention the foreign broadcasts, foreign accents, or public affairs. He simply said Mrs. Roosevelt was “leaving us because of duties to the UN.” Paul Price in the *Los Angeles Daily News* of July 19, 1951, had said something similar (Wamboldt, 1952). As announcer Ben Grauer said goodbye to listeners at the end of the final program, he expressed the hope that Mrs. Roosevelt would return to the radio soon: “we warmly look forward to her next reappearance on the NBC airwaves.” However, she did not return to having her own radio program on NBC. Beasley (2010) suggests that the 1950-1951 program ended because of a lack of sponsors, yet Henry Morgenthau III (1978), who helped produce the program, says that it was the television series *Tea With Mrs. Roosevelt* that never gained a sponsor, whereas the radio series had many local sponsors. Indeed, in Program 59 of January 1951, Elliott lists a total of 12 sponsors (including Acousticon hearing aids, Flamingo frozen orange juice, Goldenmix for cakes and waffles and McKettrick dresses) that have “given up airtime” to extend best wishes for the New Year: Elliott, speaking in 1978, said that in 1951, his 66-year-old mother was tired and concerned that she would not have enough time for a radio program while she was flitting off to Europe. During her time in Paris for the UN General Assembly meetings in the autumn of 1951, she broadcast a series of weekly talks in French over the French National Network from November 18, 1951 to February 3, 1952. These talks were also broadcast to Belgium, Switzerland, Eastern Europe, and North Africa through the facilities of the Voice of America (Press Release No., 1295).

To [the VOA] Mrs. Roosevelt had assets possessed in Europe by no one else—a beloved and respected name, a reputation in her own right as a diplomat and a fighter for social justice, and a simple feminine manner which would appeal to the average listener. (Gardner, 1952)

ER, who in 1951 had been named as both the “greatest living American woman” and “the greatest woman in the world” by *the Saturday Review of Literature Poll* (Beasley, 1987, p. 177), carried on for the next 11 years to use the media to talk to people about the United Nations and other issues that were dear to her heart and that she felt should be dear to others’ hearts too. She did not have another radio show of her own, but did appear on those of others. Radio listenership declined throughout the 1950s and networks and advertisers focused more on television for audiences and investments; yet, the number of receivers used in the United States nearly doubled between 1950 and 1960 to 156 million (Rothenbuhler & McCourt, 2002), not least because of the increase in car radios. Perhaps there were no sponsors who were interested in a further radio program for Mrs. Roosevelt; perhaps it was felt that the women she broadcast most to were best reached by columns and particularly by television, which had now assumed an increasingly important role in the home. Henry Morgenthau III especially insisted on ER being on TV (Morgenthau). From 1959 to 1962, she hosted the TV series *Prospects of Mankind*, for National Educational Television: roundtable discussions focusing again “on many issues covering both domestic and international affairs, ranging from capitalism, democracy, disarmament, foreign policy, and the status of women” (Roosevelt Study Center, 2013). Perhaps the grueling schedule of traveling, public duties, and other media commitments did not allow enough time to also continue with radio. She was, after all, getting older and even Eleanor Roosevelt had to start slowing down.

Conclusion

ER was unique as a broadcaster in that she brought together many elements that at first sight were so strikingly different: her privileged background with her ability and wish to be “ordinary,” her political prestige with her desire to reach all people (not only Democratic voters or liberal women), her ability to talk about her role as a mother and wife with her role as a First Lady and international stateswoman, her profound knowledge and interest in domestic issues (whether it be politics or baseball) with her profound knowledge of world affairs, and her informal mode of address with serious topics. According to polls in 1939 and 1945, radio was viewed as the most trusted medium. Furthermore, it was at that time a medium favored by lower income groups, the less educated, and women (Kriesberg, 1949). The less educated would have had difficulty reading many newspapers and the cost of newspapers could have been prohibitive too. Eleanor Roosevelt’s role as a radio pioneer and her continued desire

throughout the 1940s and 1950s to communicate with the average American through radio helped reinforce her image as “one of us.” She had access to knowledge and people and through her radio broadcasts, succeeded in giving similar access to ordinary people. This is not to say that Eleanor Roosevelt was loved unanimously by all American citizens. On the contrary, she proved to be a highly controversial figure. “I will buy no more defense bonds until your husband or someone puts a muzzle on that big mouth of yours and stops you from shouting your socialistic opinions from the rooftops” (Letter, March 2, 1942; Eleanor Roosevelt Correspondence). ER proved to be unique as a broadcaster by prompting people such as the above correspondent to write in to so vehemently oppose the views she had aired on radio. In May 1951, a group of women in Los Angeles pressured local stores to end their sponsorship of *The Eleanor Roosevelt Program*, because they felt Mrs. Roosevelt was a “radical and evil force” (Wamboldt, 1952, p. 295). The protest failed when the radio station that sent out the program, KFWB, scheduled the syndicated broadcast twice a day instead of just the once for the sake of making a statement about Mrs. Roosevelt’s right to freedom of speech; although the station received 3 letters from listeners who were against that idea, 600 audience members wrote in to praise it (Wamboldt, 1952).

It is hard to imagine any woman, any person, in the 1950s who as a broadcaster and journalist could command as much respect and reach as many people as Eleanor Roosevelt did—much less even any other person who did all this media work while being a human rights activist and stateswoman too. She had the foresight and ability to recognize the importance of radio as a means to reach large swathes of people. Her column *My Day* had already “enabled the first lady to speak for herself, although in a muted voice, rather than have her views transmitted to the public via her press conferences” (Beasley, 2010, p. 111). Radio allowed her to speak for herself even more than *My Day*, as here, her voice was not muted, but loud and clear and here she could speak directly to the public rather than via a newspaper. The message (the changes effected) are in the prestige of the communicator. ER had tremendous social and political prestige, both domestically and internationally, both with world leaders and ordinary citizens—arguably more prestige even than the President himself. Particularly after 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt was remarkable at integrating the domestic with the global and balancing herself as the public versus the private individual, as the knowledgeable expert versus the ordinary, inquisitive learner. She understood—as few others—how best to use of the medium of radio to negotiate these balancing acts.

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1. Some of Eleanor Roosevelt's main works are as follows: *This Is My Story, It seems to Me, This I remember, You learn by Living, Tomorrow Is Now*, and *The My Day* column. For an extensive list of publications in which her byline appeared, see the website of the National First Ladies Library.
2. Henry Morgenthau III was the son of Henry Morgenthau Jr., U.S. Secretary of the Treasury during the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

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