The ethics of speechwriting
in the contemporary practice of the profession[1]

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Abstract

The present paper challenges the criticism found in literature on speechwriting that "deception is inherent in the practice of ghostwriting" and therefore, writing speeches for other people is "unethical" by juxtaposing it with findings from the author's research on *Speechwriting in British and American Politics and Business: A Study of the Practice, Profession, and Speechwriting Ethics*, funded by the National Science Center. For the purpose of this paper, I use the terms *speechwriting* and *ghostwriting* interchangeably. Specifically, I discuss two ethical aspects involved in *speechwriting*: audience deception and writing against a *speechwriter's* conviction. Critics have also argued that ghostwritten speeches fail to genuinely reflect the speaker's "honest,

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independent ability and achievement." My research indicates, however, that although deception is always a possibility in communication, speechwriters are dedicated to ensuring the speaker's authenticity, and the concept of *ethopoeia* is pivotal to comprehending the role of a speechwriter.

Keywords

ethics, speechwriting, ghostwriting, survey, ethopoeia

Etyka pisania przemówień
we współczesnej praktyce zawodowej

Abstrakt

Na podstawie wniosków z badania autorki na temat *Pisania przemówień w polityce i biznesie brytyjskim i amerykańskim: Studium praktyki, zawodu i etyki pisania przemówień*, finansowanego przez Narodowe Centrum Nauki, autorka kwestionuje argument występujący w literaturze przedmiotu, jakoby „oszukiwanie [odbiorców] [było] nieodłącznym elementem praktyki ghostwritingu." Autorka omawia pojęcie oszustwa w tym zawodzie oraz porusza kwestię pomijaną w literaturze przedmiotu, jaką jest pisanie na tematy niezgodne z osobistymi przekonaniami pisarza przemówień. Krytycy profesji twierdzą, że przemówienia pisane przez osoby trzecie nie odzwierciedlają autentycznych, indywidualnych umiejętności i osiągnięć mówcy. Autorka zwraca uwagę na fakt, że przemówienie jest zawsze efektem pracy zespołowej. Pisarze przemówień w ankietowanych organizacjach dążą do zapewnienia autentyczności mówcy, a koncepcja *ethopoei* jest kluczowa dla zrozumienia prawdziwej roli i misji współczesnego pisarza przemówień.

Słowa kluczowe

etyka, speechwriting, ghostwriting, ankieta, ethopoeia

1. Introduction

Speechwriting is a widespread practice in most large organizations and governments around the world, including the White House, European governments, the European Commission, NATO, WTO, the Silicon Valley tech companies, or banks. Critics have argued that ghostwritten speeches fail to genuinely reflect the speaker's "honest, independent ability and achievement." Bormann (1984) raised questions about ethical aspects of this activity, such as responsibility and audience deception. Knapp and Hulbert (2017:1) argue that *speechwriting* can create "a false impression of a communicator's knowledge, competence, or qualifications."

The present paper challenges arguments found in literature on *speechwriting* that the practice of writing speeches for other people is "deceptive" and therefore, is "unethical" (Borman 1961) and that ghostwritten speeches "are not to be taken as representative" of a speaker's "honest, independent ability and achievement" (Bormann 1961: 265). Although deception is always a possibility in communication, the surveyed speechwriters are dedicated to ensuring the speaker's authenticity; they believe it is their task to provide as accurate an account of the speaker as possible without turning the speaker into someone they are not. The concept of *ethopoeia* is pivotal to comprehending the role of a speechwriter.

Three main assumptions underlie the widespread use of executive ghostwriters (Seeger 1992: 501),

> First, it is assumed that most executives are simply too busy to engage in the time-consuming task of writing speeches [...]. Second, the use of a ghost in preparing a speech is little different than drawing on the expertise of an accountant or engineer [...]. Third, it is assumed that the audience is somehow aware that the speaker has expert assistance in preparing his or her speeches.

In what follows, I address each assumption starting with the last one.

(1) The audience is aware that the speaker has expert assistance in preparing his or her speeches.

Today the presence of speechwriters is well known, and "viewed as a necessary element for crafting an effective public image" (Riley and Brown 1996: 711). A speechwriter "is not a recent development, a reaction to twentieth-century media demand" (Humes 1997: 5). *Logography* or *wordsmithing* has been known since antiquity (Riley and Brown 1996: 712) and is connected to the origins of rhetoric (Knapp and Hulbert 2017). The idea of democracy and rhetoric were born at the same time in Athens, in the fifth century BC. The moment democracy was born, rhetoric became critical, and the art of persuasion became a currency of politics. Instead of commanding things into being, democratic leaders would now have to persuade and cajole the public. Nowadays, dozens of men and women worldwide help craft executive speeches and other communications across a broad spectrum of business, political, and academic institutions every day and "public knowledge of the involvement of speech writers in major addresses has made clear the value of speech writing for any speaker who wishes to be effective" (Tarver 1987: 6).

The White House speechwriters have influenced "the increasing acceptability of the speech writing function by a huge number of business and government speakers," (Tarver 1987: 5).[2] Moreover the "White House model can even be said to have had an impact beyond the boundaries of the United States" (Tarver 1987:5).[3] According to Campbell and Jamieson (1990:

[2] Yet, with few exceptions (Kjeldsen et al. 2019), literature on speechwriting is produced mainly in the United States.

[3] Professional speechwriters' conferences, e.g. The Professional Speechwriters Association World Conferences in Washington DC and Speechwriters' & Business Communicators' Conference organized by the European Speech-

10), "virtually all presidents had collaborators in creating their rhetoric." In fact, only Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson, wrote their own speeches. American political *speechwriting* dates to the presidential years of George Washington. His famous Farewell Address, for instance, was ghosted by Alexander Hamilton (Schlesinger 2008). In the 1880s, Chester Arthur employed a friend named Daniel Rollins to help draft presidential messages. Yet, it was not until the 1920s that the White House hired a speechwriter. Judson Welliver was the first White House staff person whose chief responsibility was to craft oratory for President Warren Harding. Calvin Coolidge increased the number of speeches with the assistance of Judson Welliver and others. This precedent changed the perception of the president's office. The president would be seen as a leader "whose fate was determined by the quality of his staff as well as his own efforts" (Denton and Woodward 1985: 206). The *speechwriting* position in the White House coincided with the establishment of the first radio stations in the United Stated in the 1920s. Radio became a powerful tool the President could utilize to communicate with the people.

The "first person to be given the title of speechwriter in the White House was Emmet J. Hudges who wrote for President Eisenhower" (Collins 2017: 7). But it was not until 1960s and President Kennedy's Special Counsel Ted Sorensen that speechwriters started to be recognized nationally. Sorensen was known for his unique ability to combine the duties of a top presidential advisor and speechwriter. However, the reliance on the help of top presidential advisors in connecting presidential *speechwriting* with policy deliberations ended with the Kennedy presidency (Hult and Walcott 1998: 467). Since the Lyndon B. Johnson presidency, *speechwriting* has been "delegated to professional speechwriters who are often weakly connected to the

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writers Network gather dozens of international speechwriters who seek inspiration and advice from notable White House speechwriters.

President and the policy deliberation process," and "often too poorly informed about administration objectives and policy proposals to write accurately and persuasively about them" (Hult and Walcott 1998: 466). The establishment of a Writing and Research Department in the White House in 1969, the first *speechwriting* office, under president Richard Nixon, solidified the disjunction of policy deliberations and *speechwriting*. Speechwriters became separated from policy advisers.

(2) The use of a ghost in preparing a speech is little different than drawing on the expertise of an accountant or engineer.

The existence of professional speechwriters in governments worldwide demonstrates that the institutionalization of *speechwriting* has also become a fact beyond the White House. As a result, Kenneth Collier (2018: 12) argues, "speeches are the product of the complex institutional arrangement of the speechwriting process. The presidency" – and other high-profile offices by extension – "may speak with one voice, but its message often reflects the efforts of many people." The institutionalization of the *speechwriting* process brought more people and perspectives into the speech production process. As Kjeldsen (2019: 5) notes, "most speakers seek feedback, advice, and a second opinion […]. The re-drafting and finalizing of speeches then are already the combined efforts of more than just the speaker." In addition, given the immense "variety of issues, audiences, and goals, relying on one or two speechwriters to fully anticipate the political and foreign policy impact of […] speeches is risky" (Collier 2018: 39).

Out of twenty survey respondents, seventeen identified as *speechwriters* and five as *ghostwriters*, or both as speechwriters and ghostwriters. Campbell and Jamieson (1990: 29) argue that *ghostwriters* and *speechwriters* are used interchangeably, but the difference between the two is that the activity of *ghostwriters* is concealed, while the activities of *speechwriters* are known.

The present study does not provide sufficient evidence to confirm the implications of this distinction. Only one respondent pointed out that being a speechwriter "is a recognized role in the organization, facilitating and helping to organize the communication of the speaker" (SW for WTO official). The specific steps involved in the composition process – "research, organize, focus, draft, and edit" (Murray 2005) – are identical for both *speechwriters* and *ghostwriters*. Moreover, as section 2.3 indicates, regardless of their title, the job of the respondents surveyed in the present study includes collaboration with the speaker, getting the speaker's message across, and providing "as good an account of the speaker as possible" (speechwriter for British PM).

(3) Most executives are simply too busy to engage in the time-consuming task of writing speeches.

As *speechwriting* professionalized, the act of crafting a speech has separated from the process of conceiving it (Collier 2018). *Speechwriters* nowadays play an essential role in shaping the public image of leaders worldwide through words. Although the process of drafting speeches has evolved from the classical steps of *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *actio* advanced by Cicero (Herrick 2017), Jameson (1988: 204) argues that "the responsibility for discovering (*inventio*), structuring (*disposition*), and expressing argument in apt language (*elocutio*) resided more centrally with the speaker than now does." In ideal world, politicians or businesspeople would be capable of doing all their writing and thus presenting a genuinely authentic self. Given the reality of modern times, however, the "self" must be at least partially managed or invented by their staff. But "[i]n the best case a speechwriter only 'brushes up what's already there.' They edit out all the boring parts" (SW for Dutch government). The ethical aspects of whose ideas are expressed in a speech have become one of the critical issues of this multifaceted subject.

2. Research method

A survey was the primary research method to elicit insights into contemporary *speechwriting*. The respondents included speechwriters to European Prime Ministers and governments of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Australia, and Canada; a European Commissioner, a WTO official, and the Director of National Intelligence (USA). Out of the twenty respondents, twelve were government speechwriters, five were business speechwriters (USA, France), one worked in a US Presidential Foundation, one was a freelance speechwriter (Finland), and one wrote speeches for the Vice-Chancellor at the University of Cambridge (Great Britain). Speechwriters were asked to complete a printed version of the survey or respond to an online survey on SurveyMonkey. The data was provided voluntarily by the respondents. The survey included both open-ended and close-ended questions, which concerned various aspects of a speechwriter's job. In the sections that follow, I focus on ethical aspects of the profession, such as 1) a possibility of audience deception, 2) writing against speechwriter's convictions, and 3) ways of achieving a speaker's authenticity.

3. Speechwriting ethics: writership, not ownership

Three positions have dominated the literature on the ethical aspect of *ghostwriting*: 1) "the ethicist position" (Bormann 1961; 1984: 2) "the organizational position," and 3) "the speechwriter's position" (Riley and Brown 1996: 712-714). Today, the discussion would not be complete without the implications of AI in professional communication.

3.1. The ethicist position

The ethicist argument advanced by Bormann (1961: 265) that *ghostwriting* is "unethical and deceitful" and represents "a kind of audience deception akin to plagiarism," originates

with, as Seeger (1984: 354) argues, "the classical view of *ethos* as presented by Aristotle and the view of the perfect orator presented by Cato and Quintilian. The speaker deceives the audience because "a speechgiver relies on the words of another to fortify personal ethos" (Riley and Brown 1996: 711).

Ghostwriting for US presidents was once considered "an unthinkable sharing of responsibilities" (Denton and Woodward 1985), yet today, "almost every statement spoken by major political, business, and academic leaders was written by someone else" (Einhorn 1991: 115). However, even today, the work of speechwriters is treated "if not deceptively, then at least discreetly" (Tarver 1983: xiii). As Tarver (1983: xiii) argues, a public acknowledgement of a speechwriter's contribution by stating, "I wish to close with an expression of appreciation for the work of my speech writer on this talk," would significantly hamper the effectiveness of most speeches.

In 2020, *The Professional Speechwriters Association* (PSA), an organization dedicated to supporting and advancing the profession of *speechwriting* by offering access to industry-specific knowledge and best practices, created *The Speechwriter's Code of Ethics* (ProRhetoric). The preamble of the Code recognizes the ethical dilemma inherent in the profession,

> Speechwriting is and always will be ethically fraught. The very attempt of one human mind to write an expression to be issued by another human mouth—that mouth usually owned by a figure vastly more influential than the writer—makes speechwriting an ethically complicated job.

The Speechwriter's Code of Ethics outlines several principles that professional speechwriters are expected to adhere to maintain credibility and trust, including: "[s]peechwriters never plagiarize", "[s]peechwriters are willing to speak "truth to power," and [s]peechwriters use all their abilities to make clients better communicators" (ProRhetoric). Thus, ethical behavior in *speechwriting* involves originality and integrity, courage to

confront the speaker about deceptive, misleading, or false infor-
mation, and commitment to enhancing communication aligned
with the speaker's intentions and values.

The ethicist argument, discussed further in section 2.3, is
rejected by most survey respondents. According to survey re-
spondents, ethical concerns arise when there is insufficient col-
laboration between the speechwriter and the speaker (SW for
Danish government SW; American business SW), or when
a speaker delivers a speech written by lobbyists or sponsors,
potentially compromising their independence and integrity. But
if the message is genuinely the speaker's own, professional as-
sistance in crafting the speech is seen as acceptable (SW for
Norwegian government).

The ethicist argument has recently emerged in discussions
on the implications of AI communication tools for professional
writing. Confronted with a choice between an AI tool and a hu-
man speechwriter, an involvement of a human seems essential
"to communicate genuine ideas and feelings to other human be-
ings" because "good writing demands good thinking," instead of
having "ChatGPT scour the Internet and spit back something
like what they [speakers] would have said themselves" (Murray
2023).

3.2. The organizational position

The organizational position views speechwriters as any other
"specialists in support of organizational goals" (Riley and Brown
1996: 713; Richardson 2017: 4-5). "Ghostwriting is efficient for
a principal. No one considers hiring an accountant to be uneth-
ical" (American business SW), or "coaching in sports" as decep-
tive (Finnish freelance SW). The mission of speechwriters is to
"use all their abilities to make clients better communicators"
(PSA Code of Ethics). Speakers "lean on those who can best as-
sist [them] so that [they] are freed to spend time on the things
that need your greatest attention" (American business SW). This

perspective is captured convincingly by another American business speechwriter who noted,

> I try to explain to skeptics that businesspeople do not view writing as their 'core competency.' It's a skill they farm out to a professional writer. I often say, "You wouldn't take out your own gall bladder. You would hire a surgeon. In the same way, you hire a writer for a speech because speechwriting isn't something you know how to do."

Munter and Hamilton (2014: 48) argue that "[g]roup writing is increasingly prevalent in business today." In organizations, such as the World Trade Center, *speechwriting* "is a recognized role in the organization, facilitating and helping to organize the communication of the speaker" (SW for WTO official). Business and public leaders use speechwriters in the name of efficiency and effectiveness due to "numerous responsibilities, lack of time and energy," and the "essential and extensive use of mass media" (Einhorn 1981: 41). Leaders turn to ghostwriters for assistance because they may not have "highly developed rhetorical skills" (Campbell and Jamieson 1990: 10) and because they should "talk with someone else about [their] writing. Discuss [their] ideas, or [their] overall organization, or specific points;" it is through collaboration that speakers benefit "from a wealth of talents and differing sources of credibility" (Munter and Hamilton 2014: 47).

3.3. The speechwriter position

Speechwriters do not view their activities as an ethical problem and disagree that "speeches are not to be taken as representative of honest, independent ability and achievement" (Bormann 1961: 262–267). Most survey respondents rejected the ethicist argument as "ridiculous" (SW for British PM), "definitely not true and really a nonsensical opinion" (SW for Dutch PM), or simply "stupid" (American business SW).

The speechwriters under study operate on the assumptions that:

(1) *The speaker owns the speech.* The first rule of *speechwriting* is that "the words aren't yours; you don't speak them, you don't own them, you don't live with their unspooling into the world" (Richardson 2017: 5). "The speechwriter works for a principal, who is the owner of the speech. The speechwriter should facilitate the delivery of the ideas of the principal and try to maintain an open channel of communication" (SW for WTO official). Speechwriters "write what the boss would write if he/she had the time and inclination and to write what the audience needs to hear" (American business SW).

(2) *The speaker collaborates with the speechwriter.* Ideally, a speech writing process should be a collaboration between a speechwriter and a speaker. "I know, after hours and hours of dialogue, what the person I write for want to say, and how he wants to say it. If I fail to write what he wants and how he wants it, he will tell me, and he has never said anything that he doesn't believe in. He just doesn't have time to personally write and prepare everything by himself." (SW for Swedish PM).

(3) *The speechwriter only assists the speaker in achieving the speaker's goals.* "No speech should ever be delivered that the speaker does not entirely endorse/own/feel comfortable with. That being the case, our role is to assist the speaker to get his message across. There is no deception." (SW for Cambridge University Vice Chancellor).

(4) *The speechwriter is there to provide* "*as good an account of the speaker as possible*" (SW for British PM). The "goal of good speechwriting isn't to turn the speaker into someone they're not. The goal is to help them present their best version of themselves" (American business SW).

The "art of capturing a client's voice in a believable and engaging manner," Kristine Bruss (2011: 25) argues, is inevitable for *characterization,* which is "[o]ne of the most distinctive stylistic virtues of speechwriting." This aspect of speech preparation, as

Bruss (2011: 26) points out, calls to mind "an ancient practice seldom mentioned in our contemporary rhetorical vocabulary: *ethopoeia*, literally "character-making" (ethos, "character" + poiein, "to make")."

Ethopoeia, Bruss (2011: 26) argues, "is a multidimensional activity involving the assessment and representation of ideas and words well-suited to the character of a given speaker." This quality manifests itself in "thought, language, and composition." According to Aristotle, characterization is often equated with authenticity, or "appropriate style," which reflects one's "age, gender, place of origin, moral state, and education."

Bruss (2011: 30) further notes,

> the primary aim of character portrayal is plausibility; the 'ethical style' expresses character through the use of words that are suitable and fitting for the character being portrayed. Such words ensure that a speaker meets socially and culturally conditioned expectations with respect to character types.

As Duffy and Winchell (1989: 104) argue, ghostwriters must find a "voice" which,

> though not precisely the voice with which the client ordinarily speaks, captures the essence of the person, and creates the image the speaker intends. The process is not imitative, it is representational. The ghostwriter seeks to establish through language a persona that is both interesting and believable. The first criterion of the ghostwritten speech or book is that it sounds like the person with whom it will be most intimately identified, the client.

Thus, "for ethopoeia to be effective, writers must understand what sort of words would be appropriate for different types of characters" (Bruss 2011: 30). For speechwriters collaborating directly with the speaker, characterization is essential to crafting a good speech; "it's a continual process" (American business SW); "I work directly with the speaker, and I don't think that you can get authenticity without that" (SW for Danish

government). A successful characterization should leave the audience with the impression that "no one should be able to deliver the speech you write other than the speaker you wrote it for" (American SW). Speechwriters strive for a speaker's authenticity by "trying to find things that only this one speaker could say" (SW for British PM); "using words and jokes only they would use. By being sensitive to what a person in that position can/can't say" (SW for Dutch PM), by "listen[ing] hard, review[ing] previous work, try[ing] to capture the language appropriate to the place and time" (American SW); by "referenc[ing] previous speeches and writings to find phrases and wording that can be re-used in order to convey a consistent message" (American SW).

However, presenting a speaker's authentic self through speeches requires understanding that speakers, like any human, have complex characters. And that a specific character comes into the light or is amplified in relation to particular people or situations. Richardson (2017: 9) notes that political speeches are an "intensive form of identity formation, a becoming through speaking of the political self, realised transindividually. That is, realised in relation […] identity, not as a set of masks but rather the coming into prominence of affective formations." Thus, *speechwriting* is not unethical if it does not change character but amplifies it. A limited access to the speaker professional speechwriters experience may cause that authenticity to be "often edited out by the approval process" (SW for Canadian government).

4. Writing against speechwriters' convictions

While scholarly literature on *speechwriting* overlooks the ethical implications of composing speeches that may compromise a speechwriter's personal beliefs or values, this study sought to address this gap by posing the following question to speechwriters: "Would you write/Have you ever written a speech without

believing in the ideas the speech presented, or a speech against your own convictions?"

Survey responses revealed a clear division: some speechwriters viewed writing such speeches as part of their professional duty or a valuable learning experience, while others adamantly refused to compromise their beliefs. The ethical dilemma of writing against one's convictions is perceived to be more pronounced in politics. As one speechwriter from France noted, the dilemma "applies more to politics. In business, this dilemma doesn't really arise." Political speechwriters believe in the importance of helping speakers articulate their views effectively, even if they personally disagree.

Consequently, most political speechwriters surveyed in the study agreed that:

(1) "occasionally that is the task. As long as it is not too important an issue, that is something that will be inevitable sometimes" (SW for British PM).
(2) "as a professional speechwriter or any employee in a ministry, it is your duty to assist any elected politician in carrying out their policies" (SW for Norwegian government).
(3) "I'm helping the speaker find his/her thoughts and voice, not expressing mine" (American business SW).
(4) "I would and I have a million times. Speechwriting is a trade. A speech reflects the opinions of a speaker, not of a writer. It's not about us." (SW for Dutch PM).
(5) "it is healthy to write for positions you disagree with, as you can learn new things and employ the Socratic method" (SW for Australian government).

Interestingly, the ethical aspect of writing against one's convictions is a significant issue for the surveyed American business speechwriters. They expressed a strong reluctance to write speeches for "a tobacco executive, a so-called pro-life group, or groups hostile to gay people;" "an anti-abortion or right-wing group, a Republican political candidate at this moment in time, a tobacco company, or Purdue Pharma." Additionally, one

respondent noted, "[t]here are moral principles of mine I would-n't cross in writing a speech if the speech was aimed at doing harm to people—I'd quit first—but I could write things that go against my politics." For instance, "the closest I've come to this is in having a speaker invoke God in closing, as I'm an atheist. That was fine for me, because I'm helping the speaker find his/her thoughts and voice, not expressing mine."

5. Conclusions

Although deception is always a possibility in communication, "persuasion in itself is a two-edged sword that can be used for both good and bad" (SW for Danish government); speeches can both mislead an audience and serve as channels of communication in a democratic society. Given the myriad issues politicians and businesspeople must address, they often rely on professional speechwriters whose expertise they can benefit from.

The perception of the profession as unethical and deceitful is outdated and idealistic, stemming from two main factors: first, idealism about public office and "way too high expectations of key political figures" (SW for Dutch government); second, limited public understanding of the speechwriting/ghostwriting profession, as well as an outdated understanding of the requirements of leadership. Leaders and businesspeople need others to talk about their ideas. Collaboration, getting the speaker's/leader's message across, and providing "as good an account of the speaker as possible" [SW for British PM] are operating principles of speechwriters.

Political speechwriters believe in the importance of helping speakers articulate *their* views effectively, even if they personally disagree. The ethical aspect of writing against their fundamental values or convictions is a prominent issue for American business speechwriters. While some speechwriters view writing contrary to their convictions as part of their professional duties or a learning experience, others draw clear ethical lines they will not cross, especially when it involves promoting harmful or

morally objectionable views. Writing against one's convictions remains complex, influenced by personal values, professional responsibilities, and the context in which the speech is delivered.

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