

# Crafting a Public Image: An Empirical Study of the Ethics of Ghostwriting

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**ABSTRACT.** Ghostwriting is viewed by some as a necessary element for crafting an effective public image. Defenders of ghostwriting see no ethical dilemma in the practice because the audience knows the "speechgiver" is not necessarily the "speechwriter." Alternatively, those regarding ghostwriting as unethical view the practice as deceitful. This group argues that the audience does not recognize the employment of a speechwriter and thus a speechgiver relies on the words of another to fortify personal ethos. This article examines several positions regarding the ethics of ghostwriting and discusses an empirical study testing three major positions found in ghostwriting literature. Findings from the study indicate that respondents do recognize the use of speechwriters by certain individuals in certain circumstances.

## Introduction

"Almost every statement spoken today by major political, business, and academic leaders was written by someone else" notes Einhorn (1991, p. 115). According to Campbell and Jamieson "virtually all presidents had collaborators in creating their rhetoric" (1990, p. 10). Yet surprisingly little research has empirically investigated the ethics of this practice or the perceptions of the receivers of ghostwritten messages.

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The quantitative approach of the study discussed in this article provides insight into public perceptions concerning ghostwriting. These insights offer a starting point for examining the ethics and viability of this practice. Furthermore, people who use or contemplate using ghostwriters need to consider the effect of nonattribution on their perceived ethos and the ethos of the organization for which they speak.

Our study investigates several ghostwriting arguments or positions, develops these arguments into hypotheses for testing, tests those hypotheses with a survey instrument, and discusses the implications of the findings while suggesting areas for further research.

## Three positions on ghostwriting

*Ghostwriting* has been traced to antiquity and is directly connected to the origins of rhetoric. As noted by a number of rhetoric scholars, the practice of *logography*, or "wordsmithing," is commonplace at least as far back as the fifth century B.C. (Corbett; Enos; Kennedy; Einhorn, 1981). Murphy suggests the practice was widespread in the medieval ages where poorly educated royalty were dependent on scribes and professional advisors to "compose as well as write down his message" (p. 196). Describing his duties to an illiterate king of Italy, Cassiodorus Senator wrote: ". . . the Quaestor has to learn our inmost thoughts, that he may utter them to our subjects . . . He has to speak the king's words in the king's own presence" (Murphy: p. 198). In the U.S., Brigrance, among others, traces the use of ghostwriting to the earliest days of the American Presidency.

Present day discussions of ghostwriting, however, focus on the ethics of such practice (Medhurst, 1987, p. 241). A survey of the literature suggests that these discussions usually address one of three perspectives: an ethicist position, an organizational model or leadership position, and the speechwriter's position. For brevity, we restrict our discussion to an overview of germinal works associated with each argument. More comprehensive treatments can be found in Medhurst, 1987; Einhorn, 1981, 1991; Nichols, 1963; Brigance, 1956. These works form the basis for the hypotheses tested in the study which follows.

### The ethicist position

Bormann (1956, 1960, 1961a, 1961b, 1984) suggests that the practice of ghostwriting is "deceptive" and therefore unethical – a spokesperson using "collaborators" is a form of plagiarism if the audience is not informed of their use. Bormann (1984) further suggests that the study, teaching, and practice of speechmaking is threatened and trivialized when ghostwriters are employed. Everyone, he argues, should have the ability to communicate effectively, a premise presupposed in academic speech programs (Einhorn, 1981, p. 42). Bormann's argument is based on the supposition that the audience assumes the speaker is speaking his or her own words. Ghostwritten speeches, as Eric Sevareid condemns them, violate the principle that "a man's words are the man's own self" (1952, pp. 162–163).

Seeger (1985) submits that Bormann's position has its roots in "the classical view of ethos as presented by Aristotle and the view of the perfect orator presented by Cato and Quintilian" (p. 354). Ethos is cultivated through speeches. The speaker deceives the audience when words spoken to fortify ethos are the words of another. Jamieson (1988) is concerned that ghostwriting "has sundered speaking from thinking, the act of delivering the message from the process of conceiving it" (p. 204).

Audience expectation, however, creates pragmatic concerns. Audiences expect a chief

executive officer of a corporation (CEO), the president of the United States, and the Sunday minister to communicate in an effective and eloquent manner. Haiman (1984) explains that this need is perpetuated by a "cult of leadership":

those in position of authority . . . wish to create and perpetuate a myth – a myth that authority figures are all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-doing – a cult of leadership which . . . turns away from the reality that in any group, organization or society the functions of leadership are, to one degree or another, inevitably shared. (p. 302)

Haiman lays blame for the perpetuation of this myth on both the audience and media. If they – the audience and media – did not expect a "great man," a leader would feel less inclined to maintain those practices, such as ghostwriting, which preserve the myth of omnipotence (p. 302).

Individuals viewing ghostwriting as an ethical activity defend their stance on any one of a number of grounds. The public, they argue, is aware that speakers use ghostwriters: Duffy and Winchell (1989) note "Today, the names of presidential speechwriters are well known to the press and increasingly to the public" (103). Auer (1984) proposes that audiences not only recognize that speakers use ghostwriters, but still maintain that the speaker is responsible for what he or she says. Specifically, Auer suggests with respect to presidential rhetoric that public statements are notification of commitment conveyed through the mechanism of a speech. The audience assumes that these commitments and policies are those of the president and not of the speechwriter – regardless of who wrote the speech, the public holds the deliverer of the message ultimately responsible for its contents. Whether the speech is given by the president of the U.S., a CEO, or a university president, its presentation is an organizational commitment not easily retracted when associated as "policy" with the spokesperson.

### The organizational position

In an organization, leaders attempt to use the best possible human resources available. A CEO directs accountants, marketers, financial analysts, and advertisers as specialists in support of organizational goals. The use of ghostwriters mirrors the use of other specialists, argue advocates. Several draw an analogy to the legal profession. Smith suggests “Like lawyers, speechwriters provide a service for clients, give voice to the arguments of clients, and help clients present their ideas in the marketplace in a competitive way” (Einhorn, 1991, p. 126). An individual in need of legal assistance employs the services of a lawyer to present his or her case. Auer (1984) argues that if using the best available professionals in the legal field is not considered unethical, then neither should ghostwriting.

Einhorn (1981) recognizes the underlying pragmatics of using ghostwriters by business and public leaders: numerous responsibilities, lack of time and energy, and the “essential and extensive use of mass media” (p. 41). She notes Jimmy Carter estimated delivering 2,100 speeches during his 1976 presidential campaign (p. 41). Campbell and Jamieson (1990) suggest that “Because the processes through which presidents come to the White House do not ensure that occupants will have highly developed rhetorical skills, presidents turn to ghostwriters for assistance” (p. 10). Oliver argues that “If you’re going to insist on not using ghostwriters, then you’re going to have to insist on accepting executives who have a very narrow range of responsibility so they can understand all the issues and ideas they are dealing with” (Einhorn, 1991, p. 125).

Seeger (1984) argues for an organizational model of ghostwriting, stressing the utilitarian need for the position. Time constraints require the most efficient use of organizational resources, including ghostwriters. Smith (1956) asserted:

I cannot conceive of the president of the United States, or the head of any other large institution doing his job responsibly and effectively without displaying the fullest range of talent available to him in the conduct of that job. And it seems to me that the president who seeks out the finest writers he

can command to help him with his speeches is acting both responsibly and ethically. (p. 418)

Inherent to Seeger’s argument, however, is an obvious ethical paradox. If it is ethical for the president of the United States, or the CEO of a corporation, to employ ghostwriters in the name of efficiency and effectiveness, then what of a student taking a speechwriting class and using a “ghostwriter?” Bormann labels the practice dishonest and unethical (1961a, p. 263).

### The speechwriter’s position

The speechwriter has an entirely different view of the ethics involved in ghostwriting. Although different writers see their roles differently – some arguing that they are policy makers and others arguing that they are “primarily language craftspeople” (Einhorn, 1988, p. 107) – few see their position as unethical (Einhorn, 1988, 1991).

Peggy Noonan (1990), a speechwriter for former President Reagan has written about her role and activities as a speechwriter in that administration. In describing her role, the question of ethics is wholly absent. To Noonan, a speech is “part theater and part political declaration; it is a personal communication between a leader and his people; it is art, and all art is a paradox, being at once a thing of great power and great delicacy” (p. 70).

Noonan and other speechwriters do not view their speechwriting activities as an ethical problem. From their perspective, the speechwriter is as an artist. In fact, the ethical questions for Noonan in speechwriting involve those instances when she felt her speeches were so “diluted” with reviewer comments, insertions, and concessions to political mechanisms that the speech was no longer her “work.”

But another paradox intrudes. For the most part, the ghostwriter is not entirely responsible for the speech; the process is a collective one involving at times different groups and individuals. Researchers, fact-checkers, spin doctors, librarians, reviewers, the individual the speech is written for, and advisors are all involved in the speechwriting process. Noonan notes that after

an acceptable draft left her department as many 50 staffers might recommend changes to a speech before the President saw it.

Craig E. Smith, a speechwriter for President Bush's presidential campaign and for Lee Iacoca, describes the process of writing for Bush as a collaborative effort. Bush would provide detailed instructions, "usually one or two pages of talking points, almost a point outline" (Einhorn, 1991, p. 119). Smith would depend on the White House research staff to provide background and facts for the speeches he wrote for Bush.

What is clear from the perspective of the speechwriter is that a speech is often the result of a collective effort. Many individuals are involved in the speechwriting process, sometimes to the dismay of the speechwriter. While much has been written on the role and participation of speechwriters in political or presidential rhetoric, many of these pieces study the rhetoric of the president as if he wrote the speech himself, ignoring the contribution, or collaboration of speechwriters. Robert T. Oliver, who wrote for President Syngman Rhee of Korea and other Korean public figures, notes however, "When the primary concern is the influence of the speech given by the speaker who represents the institution, it doesn't really matter who did the writing" (Einhorn, 1991, pp. 130-131). Campbell and Jamieson (1990) echo Oliver; institutional constraints and the inherent symbolic functions of various speech genres, they argue, negate the stylistic idiosyncrasies of any one individual (pp. 10-11).

### **The study**

Our study explores perceptions relating to the use and practice of ghostwriting. Is ghostwriting seen as an ethical or unethical act? Do individuals recognize the contribution of researchers, editors, and reviewers in the speechwriting process for public leaders? The major positions previously presented on the ethics and nature of ghostwriting are stated as hypotheses for the purpose of constructing a research instrument. Lacking significant empirical evidence upon which to build a framework of foundation for

developing a primary research instrument, we suggest that this study is by necessity exploratory and descriptive in nature.

The arguments, hypotheses, and operationalizations are listed in Table I. For each operationalization, the number of testing items on the survey instrument is indicated.

Prior to the final administration of the survey instrument, we conducted a pretest to assure item accuracy and respondent comprehension. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed with a computerized content analysis program to secure interrater reliability. Finally, the survey results were analyzed employing the SPSSx statistical program.

### **Sample**

The sample for the study consisted of students attending a southwestern university. Respondents were members of randomly selected business courses in the College of Business Administration and Economics. Every measure was taken to assure randomness in the sampling procedure. Each class received an identical set of instructions from the questionnaire administrator. In total, the study included 180 useable questionnaires out of a total population of approximately 2,000 students.

Respondent demographics were also solicited. The data show that 96% of respondents had enrolled in at least one speech course; the average number of speech courses taken was 1.7; the average age of respondents was 23, and the gender breakdown of the sample was 45% male and 55% female.

### **Limitations of study**

Several limitations are noted in reviewing the results of the survey. Since a well-tested instrument or index did not exist prior to this study, the issue of instrument validity arises. Also, as a pilot study, extrapolation to the "general" population outside the university setting should be approached cautiously. Last, the empirical approach employed in this study is different than,

TABLE I  
Operationalization of ghostwriting arguments

Ghostwriting argument	Hypothesis for testing	Operationalization of argument
<p><b>Bormann</b> Audience is deceived because speaker is implying ideas, arguments and appeals are those of the speaker.</p>	<p>H<sub>1</sub> – Audience assumes that an individual delivering a speech wrote the speech.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Define the speechwriting/delivering activities.</li> <li>2. Measure whether a respondent perceives that other individuals or groups might assist a person in the preparation of a speech.</li> <li>3. Measure to what degree a respondent feels that other individuals might assist in speech preparation.</li> <li>4. Determine whether the practice of using others in speech preparation is perceived as ethical.</li> </ol> <p>36 items testing hypothesis.</p>
<p><b>Smith/Noonan</b> All individuals of “position” use the services of others, to do a job effectively, including those of speechwriters. To do otherwise would be unethical.</p>	<p>H<sub>2</sub> – Audiences expect individuals of “position” to use speechwriters.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Investigate perceptions of who uses speechwriters and what activities these individuals undertake for a speaker.</li> </ol> <p>9 items testing hypothesis.</p>
<p><b>Auer</b> Audience is sophisticated. Reason why individuals (especially president) uses a speechwriter is because of lack of time.</p>	<p>H<sub>3</sub> – President Bush uses speechwriters because he is too busy to write the speech himself. (questionnaire was administered to sample during Bush administration)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If respondent thinks that President Bush uses a speechwriter, determine perceived reasons why President Bush might use a speechwriter.</li> <li>2. Assess what percentage of presidents the respondent perceives used speechwriters.</li> <li>3. Discern whether respondent perceives a difference in the number of speeches different individuals give over the course of a year.</li> </ol> <p>8 items testing hypothesis.</p>
<p><b>Haiman</b> There are differences in the perceived “ethics” of using speechwriters depending on the circumstance or situation of an individual.</p>	<p>H<sub>4</sub> – Using speechwriters in certain circumstances for certain individuals is “ethical.”</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Determine perceived differences between three individuals and their speechwriting practices.</li> <li>2. Determine ethics involved with each individual using speechwriter.</li> </ol> <p>26 items testing hypothesis.</p>

although not in opposition to the more traditional qualitative past studies of ghostwriting. This paradigmatic shift presents both challenges and opportunities in the analysis of ghostwriting.

**Findings**

The survey instrument was designed to address the four primary hypotheses stated in Table I by measuring respondent perceptions among three speechwriting/delivering scenarios. These

scenarios asked respondents to answer questions about (1) their own speechmaking activities; (2) speechmaking activities performed by a university president (representing the CEO level of an organization); and (3) President Bush (representing the “CEO” of the U.S.). Our intent was to test whether and how ethical perceptions regarding ghostwriting vary across institutional roles.

In discussing the findings in the tables which follow, “between individuals” refers to the findings between the three individuals for a single activity, or among the rows of the table. “Within individual” refers to the various activities within a specific column or for a single individual.

As a first measure, respondents were presented with this request:

There *may be* many activities and individuals involved in writing and delivering a speech. Let’s consider (1) a president of a university; (2) President Bush; and (3) you. For the activities that might be included in writing and delivering a speech, please estimate what percentage of the total speechwriting/delivering time is spent completing each specific task . . . if any. Please remember that the

total percentage of time for each column should add up to 100%.

Based on an analysis of variance (ANOVA) between individual scenarios, the results in Table II show that respondents do not perceive a significant difference in the amount of time each of the three individuals spend on the separate speechwriting activities. However, respondents did perceive a significant difference in the perception of time spent by each individual in the delivery of speeches.

The test of Hypothesis One,  $H_1$  – *The audience assumes that an individual delivering a speech wrote the speech*, is presented in Table III. The sample averages here indicate that respondents perceive the assistance of others between and within all three speechwriting/delivering scenarios. Additionally, for the three activities involved in writing the speech, significant differences in the perception of who contributes to the speechwriting activity between individuals exist at the  $p \leq 0.01$  level. Our respondents, contrary to Bormann’s argument, apparently do recognize the contribution of others in the speechmaking activities in each of the three roles.

TABLE II  
Perceived amount of time spent on separate speechwriting/delivering activities for three individuals

Activities involved in speechmaking/delivering	I, and those individuals helping me spend <u>X</u> % of time completing each task. <i>Sample average</i>	A president of a university, and those helping him or her spends <u>X</u> % of time completing each task. <i>Sample average</i>	President Bush, and those individuals helping him spends <u>X</u> % of time completing each task. <i>Sample average</i>	F Significance
Searching for, and collecting background research	38% of time	34% of time	38% of time	not significant
Writing the first draft	21% of time	20% of time	17% of time	not significant
Revising/writing subsequent drafts	15% of time	17% of time	16% of time	not significant
Practice in delivery	14% of time	14% of time	15% of time	not significant
Actual delivery of speech	11% of time	15% of time	18% of time	0.05*

The percentage figures in each column represent the sample average for each activity and may not add up to exactly 100%.

\* Significant difference in the perception of time allocated to the speech delivering task at the  $p \leq 0.05$  level.

TABLE III  
Perception of who is involved in the speechwriting activity

Activities involved in speechwriting/delivering	Who's involved in the activity? <i>Sample average</i>		Who's involved in the activity? <i>Sample average</i>		Who's involved in the activity? <i>Sample average</i>	
	% of time respondent spends on activity	% of time others assisting respondent spends	% of time university president spends	% of time others assisting president spend	% of time President Bush spends on activity	% of time others assisting President spend
Searching for, and collecting background research	81%	19%	31%	69%	18%	82%
Writing the first draft	83%	17%	44%	56%	24%	76%
Revising/writing subsequent drafts	75%	25%	44%	56%	28%	72%
Practice in delivery	79%	21%	70%	30%	67%	33%
Actual delivery of speech	91%	9%	92%	8%	92%	8%

The responses suggest a pattern about perceptions of assistance in the speechwriting process. For example, the respondent – a student – indicates that others assist to a certain degree in all activities involved in the speechwriting/delivering activities. This recognition and acknowledgment that a speech is a collective effort is significant. Moving between scenarios, respondent perceptions concerning the assistance a university president and President Bush receive demonstrate that respondents recognize that the words spoken by these individuals are not necessarily “their” own words.

As a test for Hypothesis Two,  $H_2$  – *Audiences expect individuals of “position” to use speechwriters*, respondents were asked what percentage of presidents in the twentieth century used speechwriters. Respondents felt on average that 84% did so. Moreover, from Table III, respondents indicate they recognize that both the president of a university and President Bush have others assisting in “writing the first draft” and “revising and writing subsequent drafts.” Therefore, respondents did discern different patterns of ghostwriter usage depending on the “position” of the individual.

Hypothesis Three states:  $H_3$  – *President Bush*

*uses speechwriters because he is too busy to write the speech himself.* When queried in an open-ended question on the survey – later categorized by a computerized content analysis program – on why President Bush might use a speech writer, respondents provided several reasons. Table IV indicates that 72% of the respondents mentioned “time constraint” as the primary or secondary reason that President Bush might use a speechwriter. However, when combining items 1 (President doesn’t have enough time to write) and 2 (President is too busy with other duties), a total of 87% of respondents indicated that “time constraints” were the reason the President would use a ghostwriter. These responses imply that respondents support Hypothesis Three which encapsulated Auer’s argument that the audience is sophisticated and recognizes the time constraints of the President.

What was not anticipated in the responses to this question was the overwhelming appreciation of speechwriters as possessing a special qualification or skill. Combining items 3 (A speechwriter is better qualified to write a speech), and 4 (The President is not skilled in speechwriting), a total of 96% of the respondents indicated skill on the part of speechwriters and lack of skill on the part

TABLE IV  
Perceived primary and secondary reasons President Bush would use a speechwriter

Reason cited	Primary reason % of respondents answering	Secondary reason % of respondents answering
1. President doesn't have enough time to write	55%	17%
2. President is too busy with other duties	5%	10%
3. A speechwriter is better qualified to write a speech	23%	33%
4. President is not skilled in speechwriting	12%	28%
5. President knows nothing about the topic of the speech	3%	7%
6. President doesn't want to look stupid	2%	5%

of the President were the primary and secondary reasons the President uses speechwriters.

More difficult to measure are perceptions of "acceptable" or "unacceptable" acts. Hypothesis Four,  $H_4$  – *Using speechwriters in certain circumstances for certain individuals is "ethical"*, was tested by presenting respondents with hypothetical statements measuring an underlying construct of ethical behavior. Responses were measured on a 1 to 5 likert scale, where 1 means "totally acceptable" and 5 means "totally unacceptable." Table V shows that respondents felt in certain circumstances that the use of speechwriters was more "acceptable" than in others. Further, certain acts were seen as more acceptable for particular individuals.

Respondents seem to hold themselves to high standards of ethical behavior as is indicated in points 3, 5, 6 and 7. Additionally, respondents held the President to a high level of ethical behavior. Although respondents recognize that individuals of position in certain circumstances use ghostwriters, the practice of "nonattribution" is viewed as far less acceptable.

Also in relation to Hypothesis Four, respondents were asked whether or not the president of the U.S. is compromised ethically by using a speechwriter. Table VI shows that 85.4% of respondents did not question a president's ethics if a speechwriter was used.

### Implications

Johannesen (1990) identifies five areas of inquiry for exploring the ethics of ghostwriting: (1)

speaker intent and audience awareness; (2) accuracy of character portrayal; (3) communicator's position and circumstance; (4) speaker participation; and (5) speaker responsibility for the message (pp. 133–134). Our respondents parallel several of Johannesen's concerns.

The most significant finding suggests that respondents recognize the use of speechwriters by certain individuals in certain circumstances. Given this recognition, however, respondents still indicate the act may be less than totally acceptable. The question of nonattribution by a speechgiver is viewed with even more skepticism. While respondents realize that constraints impinge on some speakers, most assume that the speaker takes an active role in developing the material of a speech. Most also indicate that regardless of who wrote the speech, the speechgiver is ultimately responsible for the commitments delivered in it.

The responses collected here have several implications worth noting. From the speaker's perspective, it seems that ghostwriting can be used with little loss of credibility. Users of "ghosts," however, must take care that the material they present is indeed appropriate to their ethos, especially if the speaker is representative of an institution. Audiences will grant the use of material developed by speechwriters, but they will assign responsibility for what is said to the speechgiver.

From an academic perspective, an encouraging note is that students hold themselves to high levels of ethical behavior when it comes to using ghostwriters themselves. While they recognize the value of collaboration and peer review, students apparently know where the line crosses

TABLE V  
Ethical perceptions regarding speechwriting

Statement	Mean score of sample 1 “totally acceptable” 5 “totally unacceptable”
1. Having a classmate read over a speech you’ve prepared and offer suggestions for making it better.	1.1
2. The President of the United States not taking responsibility for following through on commitments made in a speech.	4.3
3. A student citing an article in a speech without ever reading the article.	3.8
4. The President of the United States collaborating with a speechwriter to write a speech.	1.8
5. A student using a classmate’s speech who is in another section of a speech class with a different instructor.	4.3
6. Having a friend write a speech for you that you will deliver in speech class.	4.2
7. Using a quote in a speech from another individual without attributing the quote to that individual.	4.3
8. The President of the United States using a paid speechwriter to write his speeches.	2.5
9. The President of the United States giving a speech and not acknowledging those individuals who contributed to research and writing the speech.	3.3

TABLE VI

Does a president of the United States who uses a speechwriter cause you to question his “ethics?”

Response	% of respondents
Yes, I question the President’s ethics.	14.6%
No, I don’t question the President’s ethics.	85.4%

from ethical use of outside help to unethical use. Where this sense comes from bears further investigation. Given the high number of speech classes taken by this sample suggests that coursework is providing at least some of this awareness.

We must caution that a great deal remains to be investigated about the role and practice of ghostwriters. A more discriminating breakdown of the different ethical acts involved in speechmaking is one such area, especially from a case perspective that examines attribution and non-

attribution practices. The relative effect on audience also should be examined – what are the benefits versus costs of using ghostwriters. This would seem to lend itself to a controlled experimental design. Further investigation also needs to focus on speechwriting activities in academic and business contexts – little seems to have been done in these areas since Einhorn suggested the need for further research in 1981.

With the increasing public and media scrutiny of political, academic, and business leaders, we can only assume that ghostwriting will thrive. Starr (1978), drawing on an historical understanding of ghostwriting, argues it “is a barometer of democracy; it thrives only when democracy thrives” (p. 11). Given the pervasiveness of its practice and the importance we attach to what our leaders tell us, we might attend more closely to how those words come about.

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