SPEECH WRITING

IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Rhetoric, Politics and Society

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To our colleague and friend, Jette Barnholdt Hansen (1966–2017).
Her passion for the spoken word was a joy of life itself.

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Introduction: The Case for Speechwriting

The art and practice of rhetoric and its early emphasis on speaking in public commenced around 500 BCE in Syracuse, Sicily, and at its inception, itinerant teachers known as the sophists, taught others the art of speaking in public, primarily out of local necessity born of a revolt against a local despot and the need to reclaim lost properties. Speechwriting, or the help others provide speakers in designing, drafting, editing, and finalizing speeches, is still the prevalent practice of the speechmaking process. Most speakers, often leaders of politics or industry, entrusted with the production of a given speech, rely on the help of others in securing the most effective speech possible. For some, such help is done informally while others employ professional writers to help them draft and improve the quality of a speech. The assistance involved includes assessing some or all the crucial variables included therein such as figuring out the best arguments to the designated audience, presenting a responsible reasoning process given the issue at hand and seeking to maximize the speech's overall effectiveness by employing attractive phrasing and proper delivery.

Our book presents the case for speechwriting as a practice and a profession that is based on long-standing theoretical grounding. Speechwriting and speechwriters enjoy a long-standing tradition that is quite vibrant in contemporary practices. The political and the businesses worlds, as well as related professions, resort to speechwriters on a continuous basis, seeking efficient, adaptable, and appealing speeches on a host of issues. Beginning with the sophists and through the Greek and

Roman periods, treatises on rhetoric through contemporary practices and examples, the art of writing public speeches for clients has stipulated principles and processes that can be taught, practiced, and perfected. Speechwriting is situated in a discipline with a rich history that is based on recognized theories and teachable practices based on well-established rhetorical principles.

Most texts about speaking in public are devoted to the speaking part of the oratorical process and seeking to prepare speakers to develop their own speeches. In the USA and to some extent in Europe too, courses in public speaking are abounded and are often required by some disciplines in academic institutions and across disciplines. The concept of an involved and educated citizenry often grounds this academic need. The prevalence of public speaking courses in the USA, a practice that began early in the nineteenth century, is closely tied to the appreciation of a democratic political system that is founded on the principle of freedom of speech and the subsequent need to educate citizens in the art of speaking ethically and responsibly in public.

Our text takes a different focus, that of instructing the art of writing of speeches with a specific focus on writing such speeches professionally and for clients. We approach this topic with the recognition that the speechwriting process is the habit of many speakers who, to one degree or another, rely on the ideas, their development, input, and feedback of others in the process of crafting, editing, and finalizing effective speeches. Ours is not a handbook. There is plenty of these. Our objective is to offer a well thought through account of the speechwriting process, its theoretical underpinnings, ethical implications, and practices. To accomplish this task, we adhere to the fundamental principles of rhetorical theories and public speaking and adopt them here to the art of writing speeches.

We consider the speechwriter a professional who is an expert in the art of writing and public speaking and who is able to write speeches for clients. We recognize the fact that professionals from different but related fields often lend themselves to the practice of speechwriting. Policy advisors have dabbled in speechwriting as have those with strong writing skills or those from the legal profession. In other settings, professionals in public relations sometime function also as speechwriters. What we seek here is to put the practice of speechwriting under theoretical, conceptual, and ethical lenses in order to ground it in a critical process whereby a thoughtful and critical perspective drives the writing of speeches for clients.

We hope that such a perspective would yield greater understanding as well as improved speechwriting processes.

Despite the growing reliance on technology to enhance and manage multiple and diversified audience able to receive messages, be it the Internet and its voluminous web pages as well as the many social media outlets, human beings still resort to the one activity that has remained constant for some three and half thousand years: speaking in public as the primary mode of communicating with others. From Biblical times to ancient Greece, to the Roman Empire and later, the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle-Ages to the modern world, people still speak in public and they do so most extensively to present ideas, advocate positions, find adherents, and move people in a given direction. The physical and the creative are still the key variables in assessing skills, strength, and potential, often rendered necessary in assessing the credibility and viability of one individual to embody specific ideas. Put differently, our messages are still subsumed in our persona that in turn relies on the creative and performative process of constructing and delivering effective speeches.

Speaking in public then is a practice whereby a person exemplifies key qualities such as wisdom, character, and confidence in front of spectators. Public speaking has not changed much since antiquity in the sense that it is still considered among the most telling characteristic of an individual. On the strength of their rhetorical qualities, leaders have risen to prominence, some pursuing the most altruistic principles while others have resorted to manipulative and unethical practices. At its core, speaking in public is still oral, still an address to others, still a one-shot attempt at achieving a given objective and still the most real of all communication practices even with the aid of the megaphones, public address systems, radio, television, and the teleprompter. The judgments spectators make about speakers are holistic as they account for the selection of topic, organization and structure, style and delivery, and the overall believability as one embodied package. And as an embodied account, speaking in public is a risky task since so much hangs on the success of a performance that cannot be undone or goes through a "do over." For this very reason, those entrusted with the presentation of important topics have sought the help of ghostwriters to ensure that at least some of the more controlled performative aspects of public speaking can be planned and hence secure some measure of success or, at the minimum, to minimize weaknesses or failures. This is where the speechwriter comes

in, helping the speaker with a comprehensive understanding of the task ahead and aiding the speaking in narrowing down uncertainties and constructing a viable speaking opportunity.

For better or worse, public speaking has been used by honorable people and those of ill repute. Great leaders such as Abraham Lincoln spoke in public about human virtues to advance the cause of humanity by emancipating slaves while ruthless rulers like Adolf Hitler used the same art to move people in the direction of mass murder. Clearly, the creative art of speechwriting is heavily invested in ethical implications. The ethics of writing speeches for clients, or ghostwriting, are discussed here in order to give the art of speechwriting legitimacy and to allow speechwriter professionals to engage confidently and ethically in this practice of writing speeches for others.

The modern polity as its ancient counterparts relies on public speeches to advance policies or ideas and they will likely remain a staple of most social and political systems. The interaction between leaders and followers often centers on addressing the public, hence, the need for effective speeches. As long as speeches are needed and speakers need speeches, the practice of writing speeches will continue. In principle, speeches are written prior to their delivery and the better speeches are those that have been prepared in advance and that went through an editorial phase. The practice and process of developing speeches have often been in the hands of more than just the speaker alone. Speakers or speechwriters draft speeches, write portions thereof, seek advice from others, and receive solicited and unsolicited drafts or points for inclusion. Some speakers will practice a heavier hand than others over the speechwriting process. Some will have their speeches drafted entirely by others only to be finalized by the speaker prior to delivery. The principle notion advanced here is that speechwriting is usually a collaborative art but that no consistent approach is apparent.

One of the thorniest issues related to speechwriting is the notion that speakers who rely on the work of speechwriters, deliver speeches that they did not write and that such a practice is inherently unethical because the true writers of speeches are not identified nor credited. However, this stance is rather limited and not altogether accurate. There are several reasons that can be cited here as to the legitimacy of writing speeches for others. Most speakers seek input from colleagues, associates, and experts in perfecting their speeches, even when they drafted the speech themselves. When covering a specific topic in a speech, most speakers who are

likely leaders of one sort or another, need to rely on the input of others in order to secure effectiveness and avoid making mistakes or errors in judgment or intent. Most speakers seek feedback, advice, and a second opinion in order to avoid a less than favorable impression and to maximize receptiveness, recognizing that no individual can contemplate accurately all the speaking variables involved in a speech situation. The re-drafting and finalizing of speeches then are already the combined efforts of more than just the speaker. Speaking in public requires unique understanding of the public mode of communication and not all speakers possess knowledge and expertise in this field. Hence, the input of those more astute in public presentation can ensure greater effectiveness as well as minimizing weaknesses.

Our aim is to describe and elaborate the process of speechwriting, highlight its theoretical, conceptual, critical, and ethical features in order to present the practice as a teachable art. We divide our book into thirteen chapters. Following the Introduction, we describe in Chapter 2 how speechwriting works in the twenty-first century. In Chapter 3, we describe the classical period in which the concept of speechwriting was first developed. In Chapter 4, we focus on research and theoretical faming of the speechwriting process. In Chapter 5, we delve into the canons of rhetorical theory. In Chapter 6, we develop rhetorical precepts and genres that are essential for speechwriters. In Chapter 7, we discuss the process of writing speeches and the varied types of speechwriters. In Chapter 8, we delve into the relationship between speechwriters and speakers for whom speeches are written. In Chapter 9, we describe features of writing for the ear, and in Chapter 10, we focus on writing for the eye. In Chapter 11, we explore the ethical issues involved in writing speeches for others. In Chapter 12, we describe the functions of speechwriting in contemporary society, and in Chapter 13, we offer practical steps in the speechwriting process.

Speechmaking in the Twenty-First Century

"Fire the Speechwriters"!

In 2009, former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, Matt Latimer, wrote an essay in *Washington Post* urging Barack Obama to eliminate his own profession: "Mr. President," he wrote, "fire the speechwriters; it might be the only way to save the presidency." Latimer argued that "The age of the Internet and cable news has opened the world to an onslaught of ideas, opinions and information," that is "stripping away the grandeur – and power – of the highest office in the land." Speechwriters, he claimed, "have become enablers, manning an assembly line of recycled bullet points so presidents can serve as the nation's pep-talk-givers, instant reactors, [and] TV friends."[1] Presidential candidate Donald Trump has opined during the summer of 2015, that he does not use speechwriters since he does not speak from prepared notes.

Is this the situation for speeches and speechwriters in the twenty-first century? Is speechwriting dying? Are speechwriters really reduced to assembly line workers producing recycled bullet points? We don't think so. On the contrary, we believe that writing and giving speeches is as important as it has ever been, but the dilemma posed by those critical of the role of speechwriters requires that we understand the criticism and address its concerns and explain the misperceptions therein.

[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/04/AR2009090402278.html. Accessed January 11, 2016.

Speechmaking is not for every occasion of communication, but in the right circumstances, speechmaking has a rhetorical power that is unequal to any other kind of communication. What we suggest here is that there is a direct correlation between the importance of a given speech and the importance of employing speechwriters to guarantee the success of the specific assignment. At the same time, though, Latimer may have a point: Many leaders, especially political leaders, probably plan and deliver too many speeches. Given this new pressure and the logistics of managing multiple speech events, there are practical reasons why speakers do not and cannot spend time on speechmaking and hence the need for others to help the process.

CEOs sometimes tell us that they do not want "to do" a speech; they just want to get the job done, instead of using valuable time and resources talking to audiences. They do not consider speechmaking a cost-effective activity. It is much easier, they assume, to distribute information online, prepare a short video, send an e-mail, or participate in an interview: Why prepare a formal speech, if engaging in an informal meeting would suffice? Yet, these informal settings, too, are speech acts and they, too, require preparations as the very publicness of a presentation must abide by rhetorical stipulations such as audience analysis and specific appeals to motivate audiences. A speech, then, is not a matter of length or a formal setting as even short statements such as a tweet might benefit from good editing as well as testing it for maximum effect.

Renaissance for Speechwriting

Anyone seeking to write good speeches must start thinking about why people deliver speeches at all—and more importantly: Why other people listen to them. Several key questions guide our quest here: What is in a public speech that requires a special focus? What separates speeches from other forms of communication? What is the unique selling point of a speech? And in the age of Internet, and social media, what role should speechmaking have?

We should start by discarding the notion that the time of speechmaking is over. It is not.

Take the British journalist and member of the European Parliament, Daniel Hannan. When he woke up on March 25, 2009, his phone and e-mail inbox were clogged with texts. The day before, he had delivered a three-minute speech in the European Parliament, calling Gordon Brown,

"the devalued Prime Minister of a devalued government." The YouTube clip of his short remarks had attracted over 36,000 hits. It was the most watched video in Britain that day, and some three million people have watched his speech. Hannan is not the only speaker experiencing a speech going viral. Who can forget the eloquent attack that Australia's former Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, launched on her opponent Tony Abbott, accusing him for double standards, sexism, and misogyny? Some 2.5 million people have seen this speech on YouTube.

New media is not a threat to speechmaking but an opportunity. Internet and video are potential vehicles for the speechwriter's words, creating a renaissance of speechwriting. New forms of communication will not displace the good speech. The use of social media, big data, and IT-technology was unequaled during Obama's campaigns of 2008 and 2012 to any other campaign in history. During the 2016 presidential campaign, tweets of Donald Trump proved how much speakers need speechwriters in order to improve content, receptiveness, and overall effect. There is no doubt that new technology helped Senator Obama become president and some would argue that Trump's tweets were successful in his presidential quest. But without the oldest mode of communication—speechmaking—neither would have become president. When faced with growing criticism of less-than-effective speech, a rambling style and incomplete sentences, Trump agreed to deliver few key speeches that were prepared in advance and read from the teleprompter. These few prepared speeches increased in frequency during the last stretch of the campaign and proved that a planned and a well-prepared speech often is superior to one that is not.

Some have dismissed the value of speechmaking relative to the importance of social media. The Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street could not have happened without social media as a tool for disseminating information and organizing action.[2] It is certainly true that new media are excellent in creating and gathering a crowd. But, what do we do when the crowd has gathered? What did the thousands of people gathered in New York during Occupy Wall Street do? What did the massive crowd in Tahrir Square in Cairo do? They looked for a speaker, a spokesperson, a leader, someone able rhetorically to address the multitude, representing

[2] Cf. Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organization* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

their aspiration and eloquently generating support and followers so that clear objectives are set.

Every crowd needs a speaker. Because that is how unity is created and purpose and direction are stated. For rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke, the objective of identifying speaker and audience and making leader and followers consubstantial is key to rhetorical success. This objective is accomplished the way humans have done it for centuries, by giving speeches.

A Speech Is an Event

Speeches have an important place in human history and our time are not different from those preceding us. Several principles are important to contemplate. First and most, a basic thing to remember is that even though speeches are written, and many people read them; speeches are not texts. A speech is an event. It is a physical meeting where one person has undisputed access to many people's attention.

A Speech Is a Situational Event

Common for all speeches is the meeting between a speaker and an audience. A speech is not just a text, but a *physical and situational event unfolding in a specific sphere of time and space*. We distinguish between two main types of public speeches: The *traditional speech* whereby speaker and audience are united in time and space, and the speaker addresses the audience directly without any mediated variable separating them—except, of course for the use of microphones, loudspeakers, and similar technical aids. The *mediated speech* whereby the speaker and audience are separated in time and space. The speaker communicates through the use of mediated variables such as radio, television, or Internet, to address the physically absent audience and whose presence exists but is not visible to the speaker. For example, Ronald Reagan's address after the Challenger disaster in 1986 and Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous Fireside Chats, both transmitted live, were broadcast on radio and on television respectively to mass audiences. Likewise, Barack Obama implemented a weekly video address broadcast on www.whitehouse.gov. These two main types of speeches, of course, come in many different forms: a traditional speech broadcast on television or the Internet, and a mediated speech and an audience present, simultaneously functioning as

a traditional speech. Any speaker, and any speech, can now be broadcast and distributed online, enlarging significantly the size of their audience.

The fact that a speech is a physical and situational event is most obvious in the *traditional speech*, which is distinguished from mediated forms of communication by being an actual physical meeting: Speaker and audience share the same space. This allows the speaker not only to influence the audience, it also possible for audience members to influence each other as well as provide the speaker with an immediate feedback. Ironically, mediated technology put an end to mass communication.[3] Listeners and the viewers of broadcasting or online communication are not a mass; they are not part of a group or a crowd. Generally, they sit alone or with few people at home—often rather inattentively. With a *traditional speech*, however, we can make everybody in a crowd react in the same way and at the same time and as such, speeches unite people in a community that in turn is enacted by virtue of the speech that unifies its members.

Even though the traditional speech, like writing or broadcasting, unfolds in time, it is experienced as a continuous and instantaneous situation. An individual can bring the morning paper or an iPad on the bus, but one cannot put a speaker in your pocket. When the speech is done, the words are gone. This experience literally makes the traditional speech unique. The mediated speech can also be experienced as an event, especially when it is transmitted live, as in the case of Reagan's address to the nation after the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986. As other live transmissions in broadcasting, the live broadcasting of a speech has many of the qualities we find in a traditional speech: a sense of simultaneity and a shared experience of the here and now. Even though speaker and audience are separated in space, they are united in time and emotions.

We also note that even speeches broadcasted long after their delivery can create the sense of the speech as an event. When we watch videos of mediated traditional speeches, such as Martin Luther King's "I have a dream," given in Washington 1963, we can imagine the experience and

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[3] Anders Johansen, "Credibility and Media Development," in *Television and Common Knowledge*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (London: Routledge, 1999), 159–172; cf. Anders Johansen, *Talerens troverdighet: Tekniske og kulturelle betingelser for politisk retorikk* (The Credibility of the Speaker: Technical and Cultural Conditions for Political Rhetoric) (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2002).

perhaps even contemplate it as though we were there ourselves. In spite of such speeches being mediated, the moving images allow for a "here and now" experience. We know from historical accounts that Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* entered the annals of great speeches about forty years after its delivery once it was incorporated in high school curriculum. A more recent assessment of this speech is that it continues to speak to different generations and though transformed relative to the circumstances of a given period, it is relived and impacting different generations despite the passage of time.

A Speech Is Oral and Physical

As a form of communication, a speech is first and foremost an embodied oral and physical performance. Even though most speeches are created initially as written text and read from a script, as an embodied performance, it suggests an act that is completely different from its initial textual formation. Indeed, there are fundamental differences between oral and written communication that need to be fleshed out. In contrast to written texts, a speech will always be dependent on the character and use of the speaker's voice. The character of a voice is constituted by its inherent qualities, such as a harsh voice, a tense voice, a modal voice, a breathy voice, a whispery voice, a lax voice, a falsetto, or a creaky voice. Active use of the voice includes features such as intonation, volume, tempo, tempo variations, pausing, tone, and articulation. An audience's physical experience of a speaker's vocal qualities and use of voice contributes to a sense of presence and experience of the speaker's character and an underscoring of the important elements and claims in a speech.

Another important trait of the speech as an oral genre is the instantaneousness and immediacy of the spoken word. The moment the speaker utters a word, it is gone. The aural room is time limited and determined by the moment. We may be cognitively immersed in a written text, but the spoken word literally surrounds us. And though a rebroadcasted speech can give listeners an impression or a sense of the original, older speeches that exist only in text form can be relived but in an imagined and interpretive way. We emphasize this point because some speakers will often cite lines from previous great speeches and as such a different interpretation situated in a different context is introduced to a new audience. Note for example the repetitive use of Franklin D. Roosevelt's line,

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." This famous line has been used quoted repeatedly in different times and by different speakers and in different contexts, each seeking the line to strengthen or support a stance and in a context different from the original use.

The fleeting character of the spoken word makes it rhetorically important that a speech is clearly organized, has memorable formulations, makes an impression, and sticks in memory. Speechmaking invites communication that is vivid and graphic. Oral societies have always used stories, examples, contrasts as well as rhetorical tropes and figures to grab attention and make an impression. These oral traits are no longer very prevalent in most contemporary speechmaking given the fact that speeches are first written down and then read aloud. When speakers and speechwriters write speeches, there is always a risk that norms of written communication, such as abstraction, hierarchical structures, and strict logical consistency, can overshadow the qualities of natural orality.

The quality and sound of words provide a physical experience which is characteristic of speechmaking, though conditioned by the size of the audience and on whether the speech is traditional or mediated. A traditional speech with a small audience is normally best delivered without a microphone and the audience physically close to the speaker. Even small variations in the use of the voice are noticeable and can leave a great impression. Before larger audiences, a microphone can help preserve a certain specter of smaller variations and modulations; however, large crowds would still expect a speech that sacrifices the small variations in order to use a higher volume and a more varied specter of voice qualities.

Crowds—especially outdoors—are often restless, inattentive, or involved in mutual conversation, which invites speaker to use body and voice more actively and loud. Television or online videos bring the audience close to the speaker both visually and auditorily, and here again small variations in gestures, facial expressions, and voice become more salient and important. The energetic and intense delivery that may be expedient in a traditional speech will often appear exaggerated and theatrical when viewed on television and mobile screens.

In summary, any speechwriter that seeks to utilize the special qualities of the speech as a physical and situational event needs to be aware of these issues.

A Speech Is a Hierarchical Organization
of Speaker and Audience

Compared to other kinds of communication, speechmaking is characterized by a hierarchical structure: The speaker stands alone, facing the audience, often placed on a raised platform. The members of the audience are gathered in a group, united in physical unity, with their joint attention directed toward the speaker. The roles are clearly defined: The speaker has the right to the word; the audience is intended to listen, without the chance of truly getting the word themselves. This is a fundamental difference from everyday conversation (cf. Atkinson), when the interlocutors continuously pay attention to each other, as they operate within social rules of conversational turn-taking, which not only gives an individual the opportunity, but also the obligation to take the word as well as be expected to respond.[4]

This is not the case in speechmaking, which makes it necessary for a speaker to actively use rhetorical devices that grabs and sustains the attention of an audience. Speakers typically use devices such as rhetorical questions, contrasts, three-point-lists, and directly addressing an audience.[5] These rhetorical devices invite audiences to react as a group in unison, responding jointly with applause, laughter, cheering, or physical forms of approval or rejection.

Speakers Create Community

No other form of oral communication can create community and unity the way a speech does. Whereas media audiences are normally at home or at work, scattered in different parts of the company, the city, or even the country, an audience is physically present as a group in front of the speaker. The very gathering in one place for the occasion of a speech constitutes the audience. Leaders can send out a report, an e-mail, or any kind of text. But it does not afford them the opportunity to look the audience in the eyes as when they speak. Of course, they can make a video, look into the camera, and address viewers as "we," but it is very hard to constitute an audience that truly feels as a "we" when a speaker

[4] Cf. Max Atkinson, *Our Master's Voices: The Language and Body Language of Politics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984).

[5] Atkinson, *Our Masters*.