

Mediated Rhetoric of Recent Conflicts

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Speechwriting in and beyond the White House: Selected international perspectives on aspects of speechwriting in government and business

Nie tylko Biały Dom: wybrane aspekty pisania przemówień w polityce i biznesie w ujęciu międzynarodowym

Abstract

Speechwriting is a recognized profession in politics and business, particularly in the English-speaking world where speeches are central to communication. Drawing on archival research into the Kennedy–Sorensen model of State of the Union writing and findings from the author’s survey on contemporary *Speechwriting in British and American politics and business: a study of the practice, profession, and speechwriting ethics*, this paper highlights how the close collaboration once exemplified by JFK and Ted Sorensen no longer reflects contemporary practice. Today speechwriters often lack access to leaders and policy deliberations, yet their communication expertise and media awareness remain vital to shaping and conveying policy.

W artykule zestawiono wnioski z badań archiwalnych dotyczące tworzenia przemówień deliberatywnych w trakcie prezydentury JFK z wnioskami z pilotażowego badania warsztatu pracy międzynarodowych pisarzy przemówień *Pisanie przemówień w brytyjskiej i amerykańskiej polityce i biznesie: studium praktyki, zawodu i etyki pisania przemówień*. Cieszący się zainteresowaniem współczesnych pisarzy model współpracy Teda Sorensena z prezydentem Johnem F. Kennedym nie jest częścią współczesnej rzeczywistości pisania przemówień. Ankietowani pisarze nie są ekspertami merytorycznymi i mają ograniczony dostęp do liderów, dla których piszą. Jednak ich wiedza w zakresie komunikacji może odgrywać istotną rolę w kształtowaniu i komunikowaniu decyzji politycznych.

Key words

survey, speechwriting, speechwriters, Sorensen, White House
ankieta, pisanie przemówień, pisarze przemówień, Sorensen, Biały Dom

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1. Introduction

Theodore Sorensen, Special Counsel and one of the most trusted advisers to president John F. Kennedy, is considered “the most successful and influential speechwriter in modern times” who “inspired his successors in that office, set the bar high for them and their bosses, and provided a model of how a president and a speechwriter can [...] influence the course of history” (Dallek 2009). Ted Sorensen is both a symbol of a speechwriter’s influence and a testament to an era when speechwriting was integrated into policymaking. And while some political leaders aspire to leave an Obama-like speech legacy¹, speechwriters look up to Sorensen for inspiration on managing “the speechwriting infrastructure” (Griffin 2003).

Institutional changes, evolving leadership styles, and the growth of mass and digital media have diminished the influence of individual speechwriters over time and shifted their work further from the center of decision-making. While the expansion of White House bureaucracy reflects a uniquely American development, the centralization of political power in the hands of chief executives has resulted in the “‘leader-centredness’ of electoral, executive, and party politics” (Helms 2008; Poguntke and Webb 2005; 2013) in democratic governments. As chief executives began to lead public opinion, the demand for public statements – and consequently, the number of advisers – grew.

In the early American republic, presidents relied on a few personal assistants and clerks (Humes 1997, 5). Article II, sec. 2 of the American Constitution provided the legal foundation for what would later become the Cabinet, a body of departmental advisers. The formation of an official White House staff began in the

1. As expressed by contemporary political speechwriters. The notion of Obama-like legacy is used here to mean a perception of President Barack Obama as a naturally gifted, charismatic speaker whose presence, intuition, intellect, voice and rapport, ability to grasp the public sentiment and communicate it to the audience made him one of the greatest speakers in history.

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As ghostwriting would be seen as an unacceptable delegation of presidential duties (Denton and Woodward 1998, 205), president Chester Arthur (1881–1885) quietly tasked Daniel Rollins with drafting messages.

The beginning of the twentieth century marks the beginning of the *rhetorical leadership*² – a shift “from a traditional, administrative, and unrhetorical [...] into a modern, expansive, and stridently rhetorical one in which incumbents routinely speak [...] to the public to lead and to govern” (Tulis 1987, 19). Theodore Roosevelt conceived of the presidency as the *bully pulpit* and appealed directly to the public regarding specific legislative matters. But it was Woodrow Wilson that would make popular rhetoric routine. In reviving the practice of a personally delivered address on the State of the Union for the first time since Thomas Jefferson, Wilson indicated that the formerly written policy rhetoric addressed principally to Congress would now be spoken and addressed principally to the people (Tulis 1987). Unlike his successors, however, Wilson never employed a speechwriter (Smith 1964).

The speechwriting position in the White House coincided with the establishment of the first radio stations in the United States in the 1920s. Judson Welliver became the first speechwriter for president Warren Harding. Calvin Coolidge was the first to broadcast the SOTU live. In 1929, Herbert Hoover appointed George Akerson as the first Press Secretary (Walcott and Hult 2008, 594). These changes reshaped the perception of the president “whose fate was determined by the quality of his staff as well as his own efforts” (Denton and Woodward 1985, 206). But it was not until the Eisenhower presidency that Emmet J. Hughes became the first official White House speechwriter (Collins 2017, 7). By the 1930s, the president’s administrative support structure remained minimal.

The establishment of the Executive Office of the President (EOP) in 1939 under Franklin D. Roosevelt marked the beginning of the modern presidential staff structure, with the White House Office emerging as the vital component designed to assist the president with the tasks of his immediate office (E.O. 8248). Unlike Cabinet members, who require Senate confirmation, White House staff members are political appointees who serve at the president’s discretion, institutionalizing advisory roles such as speechwriters (Relyea 2008, 8; Hult and Walcott 1998; 1999). The expansion of advisory roles coincided with FDR’s live radio broadcasts of the State of the Union and fireside chats (Murphy 2008, 302).

Starting with Lyndon B. Johnson, full-time speechwriters became integral to the White House communication apparatus. Their presence, however, created challenges in integrating policy and strategy, as writers and decision-makers

2. Tulis uses the term *Rhetorical Presidency*. This term is too limiting in the context of the present paper, and thus, I prefer to use the term *rhetorical leadership*.

were “seldom the same people” (Hult and Walcott 2001, 463). Speechwriting was institutionalized in the Nixon White House (Collier 2018, 93) with the first recognition of speechwriters “on the organizational chart” (Hult and Walcott 2004) and has since become a permanent fixture of the White House. As a result, senior policy advisors would cease to play a dominant role in the speechwriting process. Instead, the task was entrusted to professional speechwriters who operate independently of policy deliberations. Speechwriting and communications are central to the modern White House (Patterson 2000, 38). Democratic leadership increasingly depends on rhetoric (Dorsey 2002, 252), as presidential power lies in persuasion, coalition-building, and mobilizing support (Neustadt 1960). Leaders are expected to engage, not command, and promote discourse that informs and persuades (Dorsey 2002, 252; Australian government). The complexity of modern governance has led to “a renaissance of speechwriting” (Kjeldsen et al. 2019, 9; Richardson 2017) to meet communicative demands.

The explosion of digital media has further transformed political communication – instead of relying solely on speeches broadcast through traditional media, leaders now connect directly with the public via social media. While speechwriters are now viewed as essential for crafting a public image (Tarver 1987; Riley and Brown 1996: 711; Collier 2018). White House staff, who work closely with the president but are not elected by the people, may face criticism for being “unaccountable, out of control, pushing their own agendas” (Patterson 2000, 4). But this is almost always a false view as “staff members have zero legal authority in their own right, yet 100 percent of presidential authority passes through their hands” (Patterson 2000, 2). While the White House staff has influence, the president remains responsible for final decisions.

Political communication today involves concerns that extend beyond the speechwriters’ democratic authority to influence public policy. The rise of AI tools like deepfakes and automated bots threaten the authenticity of political content. Although this research was conducted prior to the impact of generative AI, the rise of ChatGPT has spurred discussions in governments and EU institutions³ regarding its use in speechwriting. However, there is no evidence the White House has adopted ChatGPT. While AI can assist with drafting and editing, relying solely on it for high-level speeches raises concerns over sensitive information and national security. As a result, the need for human speechwriters may be more critical than ever.

Despite the influence of the White House speechwriting beyond the United States, scholars have yet to systematically address and evaluate the role and impact

3. The European Commission has not prevented any official from downloading ChatGPT and using it to improve speeches, but it has published internal guidelines “aimed at assisting staff in understanding the risks and limitations that online available tools can bring and support them in appropriate usage” (Apelblat, 2023).

of speechwriters. Yet, “in the parliamentary systems of many European countries, speechwriting has become increasingly valued” (Kjeldsen et al. 2019, 48). With exceptions of selected studies discussed by Kjeldsen et al. (2019, 43-53), literature on speechwriting is produced in the United States. The work of Charles J. G. Griffin (2003, 68) is particularly relevant for this study as it gives insight into what he called “the speech writing infrastructure,” that is, “the people and procedures which were responsible for coordinating [...] words and actions.” Although the speechwriting infrastructure is often ignored and poorly understood, it vividly demonstrates how others shape a leader’s fate and success.

Typically, the process of composing a speech aligns with the classical canons of *inventio* (invention), *dispositio* (arrangement), *elocutio* (expression), *memoria* (memory), and *actio* (delivery), as outlined by Cicero (Herrick 2017), as well as the more contemporary composition process described by Donald Murray (2005): “research, organize, focus, draft, and edit.” In the past, “the responsibility for discovering (*inventio*), structuring (*dispositio*), and expressing argument in apt language (*elocutio*) resided more centrally with the speaker than now does” (Jamieson 1988, 204). Today, “[s]peechwriters write speeches but politicians own them” (Watson 2002).

This paper aims to contribute to research on speechwriting by examining selected speechwriting infrastructures and comparing them to the Kennedy-Sorensen model.⁴ A survey⁵ was conducted to gather insights on speechwriting in politics and business. Initially, this study targeted a small group of speechwriters in the USA and Great Britain, where the author collected her research material. Ultimately, responses were collected from speechwriters for European Prime Ministers and governments of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Great Britain; a European Commissioner, a WTO official; governments of Australia and Canada; the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (USA), the Clinton Foundation, the Vice-Chancellor at the University of Cambridge, and several American business speechwriters. Out of the twenty respondents, twelve were government speechwriters, five were business speechwriters (USA, France), one worked for a non-profit organization (USA), one was a freelance speechwriter (Finland), and one was an academic speechwriter (Great Britain).

Speechwriters were invited to voluntarily complete either a printed version of the survey or an online version hosted on SurveyMonkey. The survey included both open- and closed-ended questions, addressing: (1) the speechwriter’s professional

4. This research was possible thanks to the Theodore C. Sorensen Fellowship awarded by the John F. Kennedy Foundation in Boston, MA.

5. Two survey versions were distributed: a 10-question form for American speechwriters and a 20-question version for non-Americans. Both covered the same issues, though with varying depth. I thank David Murray, Executive Director of the Professional Speechwriters Association, for advising that American respondents might prefer a shorter survey.

background; (2) the nature of the speechwriting role, including access, influence, and constraints; (3) typical patterns of drafting a speech; (4) the nature and extent of the speaker's involvement in the writing process; (5) ethical considerations; and (6) strategies for achieving the speaker's authenticity. This paper addresses topics (1) through (4); the remaining questions are discussed elsewhere (Świątczak-Wasilewska 2024). The paper opens with a concise historical account of the Kennedy-Sorensen model of speechwriting based on the textual analysis of the State of the Union-related (hereafter referred to as SOTU, plural SOTUs) archival materials deposited in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston.

In the USA, the annual SOTU is a constitutional obligation (Art. 2, sec. 3) as old as the American republic. Generically, it is a combination of both deliberative and ceremonial rhetoric. The process of crafting the SOTUs under Sorensen is relevant for two reasons. First, the SOTU is a communication tool that helps leaders incite action, exert influence, and exercise their power – to assess information and issues, recommend policies that follow from the assessments, and rehearse common values (Campbell and Jamieson 2008, 139). The SOTU is, in fact, a variation of the genre of governance used globally by political, business, academic, state and local leaders known as the *State of the European Union*⁶ (European Commission), *The Speech from the Throne* (Great Britain, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, Norway), *The Opening Address* (Denmark), *the State of the Business/ Organization address*, *the State of the State/ City/ University Address*, which makes the present paper potentially relevant to a broad audience (Ferguson 2006; Van Horn 1996; Kjeldsen et al. 2019).⁷ The Kennedy-Sorensen model of crafting speeches reveals a great deal about “the people and the procedures” (Griffin 2003; Collier 2018; Medhurst 2003), including the speechwriter's influence and access to the leader. The author's invitation to speak on this model at the European Commission Speechwriters' Network meeting underscores its continued relevance at the highest level of European political life.

2. Speechwriting operations under Ted Sorensen

Although Sorensen never bore the title of a speechwriter, he was “the single most important figure in the speechwriting efforts of the administration” (Windt Jr. 2003, 101). In addition to serving as Kennedy's chief domestic advisor,

6. *The Framework Agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the European Commission* instituted the *State of the European Union* (or *SOTEU*) in 2010.

7. All USA state constitutions require governors to deliver a State of the State Address. University presidents present annual State of the University addresses in the USA and the UK. In constitutional monarchies, it is customary for the head of government, e.g., PM (Denmark), the governor (Canada and Australia), or the monarch (UK, the Netherlands, and Norway) to deliver an address at the opening of each new parliamentary session (Kjeldsen et al. 2019). The annual review of achievements and plans has also been adopted in the business sector, where it is known as the State of the Organization/Business/Company Address.

Sorensen oversaw the development and presentation of the legislative program throughout the Kennedy presidency. Speechwriting in the Kennedy White House “became a direct adjunct to policy-making” (Windt Jr. 2003, 94). Sorensen’s role incorporated the critical components of successful speechwriting: rhetorical skills, policy knowledge and skillful coordination of the speech-production process. Sorensen also enjoyed an unfettered access to the president. Under Sorensen, the SOTU process included (1) soliciting submissions, (2) managing and analyzing submissions, (3) drafting, and (4) review, clearance, and redrafting.

2.1 Soliciting submissions

Sorensen initiated the annual SOTU process by consulting department heads for “appropriate language” (*Memo, Sorensen to McNamara, Jan. 23, 1961*) and seeking their help to summarize accomplishments and policies (*Memo, Departments and Agencies, Dec. 22, 1961*). He felt “sufficiently prepared on the legislative, budgetary and other program” (*Memo, Departments and Agencies, Dec. 22, 1961*). He preferred one-page submissions per subject, involving all relevant agencies, and controlled the process by requesting late submissions and imposing tight deadlines (*Memo, W. W. Wirtz to Theodore C. Sorensen, Dec. 17, 1962*).

2.2 Managing and analyzing submissions

After submissions arrived at the White House, Sorensen’s assistants, Myer ‘Mike’ Feldman, and Lee C. White, analyzed them. Feldman recalled that they reviewed task force reports, departmental submissions, and their own analysis of the president’s program before Sorensen shaped the address (Feldman, 369–370). Sorensen influenced presidential decisions through draft messages and frequent private conversations with JFK (Bell, 63; Sorensen 2008, 131). Key aides in policymaking included Kenneth O’Donnell, Ralph Dungan, and Lawrence O’Brien, while Walter Heller, John Galbraith, Arthur Schlesinger, and Walt W. Rostow contributed to specific policy sections. For example, Rostow drafted the foreign affairs section (*State Department Draft, Dec. 21, 1961*), with comments submitted to him (*Memo, Harlan Cleveland to W. W. Rostow, Jan. 2, 1962*), and Galbraith wrote the economic portion (*Draft#1, Draft#2, and Draft S of U Last Draft of 1961 SOTU*). Sorensen also worked closely with Budget Director David E. Bell and his successor Kermit Gordon on the president’s legislative program (*Memo, Wilbur J. Cohen to David E. Bell, Nov. 13, 1961*).

2.3 Sorensen’s pattern of drafting

Sorensen led the speechwriting process by holding meetings to discuss key issues submitted by the departments and agencies, and quickly producing a draft

for the president's review and approval (Bell, 16). Sorensen's involvement in these meetings enabled him to capture and convey the president's reasoning and sometimes the specific language JFK had used (Sorensen 1965, 58). While ideas came from various sources, Sorensen believed drafting was a solitary process, as group authorship would hinder the continuity and precision of style he sought (Bell, 17-21). To coordinate the huge amount of material, Sorensen structured the address into the Introduction, two main parts (Part I for domestic issues, Part II for foreign affairs), and Conclusions, with specific issues and an estimated number of pages outlined under each section (*Draft, 1962*). Drafting required both rhetorical skill and policy knowledge, with senior advisors drafting sections on the economy, foreign policy, and defense. Sorensen's role was to integrate their policy inputs into the SOTU and develop the domestic portion, including budget and fiscal policy. His involvement in fiscal policy was extensive, and he played a leading role, like in other policy areas, though he shared foreign policy duties with Bundy (Bell, 63). It typically took up to four drafts to finalize the SOTU; the drafts were often double-spaced for inserting new language (*Draft #2, Master Copy, Jan. 8, 1962*).

2.4 Review, clearance, and redrafting

After Sorensen drafted an initial version, he asked Bundy, Gordon, and Schlesinger to review "the whole basic scope and approach, improving the style and punch, and recommending specific changes, which should go into the first draft to be shown the President" (*Memo, Theodore C. Sorensen to McGeorge Bundy, Jan. 6, 1963*). Sorensen emphasized balancing additions with cuts, reducing jargon, and instructed editors to underline key sections in red. If the draft was too long (*Memorandum to Departments and Agencies Jan. 8, 1962*), Sorensen expected the editors to reduce the size by 50% and verify the accuracy of statistics and statements as well as suggest "specific changes in wording, not general comments" (*Note, TCS to Arthur Chet, Jan. 8, 1962*). Also, each department or agency was expected to coordinate "all of its suggestions in one version" (*Memo, Theodore C. Sorensen to Kermit Gordon, Jan. 9, 1963*).

Three key findings emerge from the archival analysis of the speechwriting process. First, Sorensen only sent relevant portions of the draft to specific departments and agencies for comments, with Feldman and White determining who received which sections (*Memo to Messrs. Feldman and White, January 8, 1962*). For example, the domestic portion of the 1962 SOTU went to the Council of Economic Advisers, while the foreign affairs portion was sent to a broader group, including Dean Rusk, Walt W. Rostow, and Robert McNamara (*Draft of SOTU Foreign Affairs section, undated*). Relevant sections of the foreign policy portion were sent to James Webb (NASA), Ed Welsh (Space Council),

Jerome Weisner (Science Advisor), Walter Heller (CEA), and Edward Gudeman (Commerce). Second, following departmental reviews, Sorensen would either incorporate or reject the suggested changes, demonstrating that White House staff, not the Cabinet, were the main policy drivers. Third, there is little evidence JFK contributed substantial handwritten input or rehearsed his SOTUs (*Tape 69*). Although Kennedy's advisers noted that the president "took pains to have a hand in every major presidential paper" and was "very much involved" in their development (Windt Jr., 95), participated in Legislative Program meetings (*Memo, Sorensen to the President, Dec. 18, 1962*) and "the intellectual process that led to a decision" (Bell, 34), he rarely had time to draft his own speeches (Schlesinger Jr. 1965, 689–691). Kennedy and Sorensen "communicated effectively with a minimum of conversation" (Giglio 1991, 30), with Kennedy thinking aloud and Sorensen quickly incorporating his ideas and changes into drafts (Bell, 34).

3. Aspects of contemporary speechwriting in selected international settings

Although professional speechwriting is "a niche profession" (SW for British PM), "lonely and uncommon" (Danish government), "neither very well-known nor respected" (Norwegian government), "speeches are a critical part of communicating" (European Commission). Survey respondents identified themselves as *speechwriters* (17), *ghostwriters* (5), *wordsmiths* (4), and/ or *policy advisers* (3). Typically, the activities of ghostwriters are concealed (Campbell and Jamieson 1990, 29) and the main area of wordsmiths' expertise is the art of persuasion (Tulis 1987). The breakdown of roles suggests that some individuals assume multiple functions, e.g., a speechwriter and policy adviser. The fact that only three respondents identified themselves as *policy advisers* suggests that speechwriting prioritizes effective communication and engagement over policy deliberation. Although, professional speechwriters tend to agree that "[b]eing in the shadow is part of the job," and that "the words speechwriter drafts belong to the speaker" (University of Cambridge), the presence of ghostwriters implies that political or corporate figures rely on unseen professionals to craft their messages and that some of the speechwriting work is done behind the scenes and without credit.

Politicians or businesspeople do not view "writing as their 'core competency,' it's a skill they farm out to a professional writer" (USA). The survey supplies evidence that "[p]eople become speechwriters by accident" and that "[t]here is no formal education for a speechwriter" (Tarver 1987; Kjeldsen et al. 2019). Speechwriters come from diverse educational and professional backgrounds. While fields like

political science, law, public administration, and international relations may provide policy-related knowledge, other disciplines listed in the survey—such as journalism, rhetoric, voice production, campaign management, communication consultancy, music, and theology – focus more on communication, storytelling, and persuasion.

Unlike Sorensen, a professional speechwriter “is not an expert at any of the subjects [they] write about” (SW for Dutch PM). Their expertise, as the survey illustrates, lies in their ability to think creatively, critically, and persuasively; ability to make abstract concepts concrete for a variety of audiences; framing; ability to recognize how organizational content, political developments, media commentary, and public sentiments are interconnected; their knowledge of rhetoric, writing, speaking, as well as the knowledge of emotions and how to create them in others.

A contemporary speechwriter is primarily “the main composer of the speech in cooperation with the speaker (politicians), the bureaucrats (policy) – and the mediator between politics, policy and the speaker’s audience” (Norwegian government). Their role is “to turn a ‘brief’ into a full-blown speech by working with subject matter experts” (business SW, France); “discuss with the speaker what he wants to say, develop the content, tailor it to an audience and make it relevant to [their] institution” (University of Cambridge). And “[w]hile the policy determines what it is people are to be persuaded of, the speechwriter determines the means of persuasion. They look for a way to connect with the ideas of the speaker” (European Commission). Speechwriting also “involves learning the speaker’s ‘voice’ for all employee communications and external communications” (business SW, France). These findings support Kjeldsen’s (2019, 178) argument that a speechwriter is “a primary advisor to a leader in the communication arena” who has a deep understanding of how to engage, persuade, and influence through strategic messaging. A speechwriter is also responsible for creating a product—a text, which requires a focused approach to accommodate “all the varied, often competing, views expressed within an institution” (WTO). A speechwriter’s role is to “do all they can in the drafting process to be aware of issues/sensitivities/potential errors” (Australian government).

The five patterns of drafting that emerge from the survey illustrate that, like Sorensen, most writers clearly prefer solitude over collaboration during the initial drafting stage:

- (1) “Alone. I like the solitude and the creative process.” (SW for British PM),
- (2) “Alone, but the first draft written based on the meeting with the speaker.” (USA, business SW)

- (3) Starting in committee, completing alone: “I like to start by bouncing ideas and concepts around with others, but after a good brainstorming period, I prefer to be the lone writer.” (USA, business SW)
- (4) Starting alone and completing with others: “I prefer writing a draft alone and then working together to revise before submitting to the principal, and then working collaboratively with the principal and having other writers as a resource in that stage.” (USA, business SW)
- (5) Teamwork: “Team. You learn from others” (SW for Dutch PM).

These findings substantiate earlier studies (Jamieson 1988) that speechwriters have started to play an active role in the process of ideational creation (*inventio*) as well as structuring (*dispositio*) and expressing argument (*elocutio*). The speechwriter “has a strategic role in the process of speechwriting” and ideally, he or she “should lead both the process and the writing” (Danish government). Speeches delivered to large audiences are quite complex,

First, I create a message map and agree that with my client. This outlines what the 3 key messages are, and what would be the supporting facts/statistics/quotes I should use to support them – and we also agree on who will need to sign it off (legal, marketing etc.). Then I do the first draft on my own and identify the gaps where I need more information. Then I reach out to subject matter experts to fill in the gaps. Once I have my second draft, I craft opening and ending, and ensure I am using effective rhetorical devices to give the speech impact. Once I have my third draft, I am ready to share with my speaker to get some input. I create the fourth draft, integrating the speaker’s comments (we may go back and forth a few times) and then am ready to send for legal and marketing review. If I am lucky, I can finalise on the fifth draft. But to be honest it isn’t always that simple, and we can go up to 10 or even 13 drafts!!!! That includes time to rehearse with the speaker (USA business speechwriter).

Speechwriting is, thus, a time-intensive, structured, and iterative process involving drafting, multiple stages of revision and expert input. Collaboration, approval, and continuous refinement through fact and sensitivity checks are essential, and the process is sometimes followed by rehearsals, transcription for accuracy, and support for final publication (Australian government).

4. Access, influence, constraints

Martin J. Medhurst (2003, 217) identified three enduring issues in presidential speechwriting; the first concerns access – who has it, how it is used, and with what consequences – an issue that extends beyond the USA to other governments and organizations. Direct access is needed, Medhurst argues (2003, 217)

at three crucial moments: the moment of ideational conception when the principal decides what he wants to say, the moment of compositional cloture when the speechwriter is close to producing

what she or he considers to be a “final” draft, and the moment of administrative imprimatur when the other involved parties—cabinet secretaries, agencies, bureaus, and the president’s inner circle – “vet” the speech as drafted.

American business speechwriters emphasize that collaboration with the speaker is critical especially during “the moment of ideational conception:”

- (1) “The speaker needs to set direction and be available to answer questions, tell stories, or check in to ensure the writer is headed in the right direction.”
- (2) “There should be at least one opportunity for the two parties to discuss the intent of the message and allow the speaker to weigh in. Then, the speechwriter should be present to hear the speaker’s feedback and make adjustments.”
- (3) “I believe there should be a meeting before the speech is drafted, that the speechwriter should draft the speech alone, and then have a back-and-forth dialogue with the speaker during the revision process.”
- (4) “An integrated, collaborative process, with the speechwriter taking the lead, and the speaker providing input and direction.”

For effective speechwriting, speaker engagement is necessary at multiples stages (excerpt 1). The degree of involvement may differ and range from minimal interaction (excerpt 2) to ongoing collaboration (excerpts 3 and 4).

Survey respondents agree that access “to the principal or, if not possible, a key advisor who knows his/her style” (Canadian government) is critical; “a major advantage for the quality of his/her speeches,” (Australian government), “a necessity” (SW for Dutch PM), it is “essential” (SW for British PM) and “important to have contact with the speaker, and to be able to represent their character” (business SW, France), “to build empathy and trust” (WTO) and “to ascertain the desired direction/guidance from the primary source [...], a sense of what makes the speaker ‘tick’” (Australian government).

The reality of contemporary political and business speechwriting is that speechwriters have only “occasional meetings where speeches and political messages are among the topics and discussed in general” (Norwegian government). As a result, they often rely on indirect sources to capture the speaker’s voice – for example, by “watching her/him live performing speeches I have written and/or on YouTube or other sources” (Norwegian government), by “[l]isten[ing] hard, review[ing] previous work, [and] try[ing] to capture the language appropriate to the place and time [...] writ[ing] short, declarative sentences that the speaker can adapt to his/her own style” (US business speechwriter), or by “record[ing] all conversations with the speaker,” or “referenc[ing] previous speeches and writings

to find phrases and wording that can be reused in order to convey a consistent message.” Thus, in terms of access to the speaker, a speechwriter’s work is more research-driven than personal.

The second, related issue is “the relationship of speechwriting to policy-making” (Medhurst 2003; 2018). Access to a speaker/leader and a speechwriter’s participation in the decision- and/or policymaking process are measures of a speechwriter’s influence. In the White House, since the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson (1964–1969) speechwriting has been “delegated to professional speechwriters who are often weakly connected to the 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). This divide was institutionalized under Nixon with the creation of the White House Editorial Department in 1973 (Nelson 2010), which may have contributed to the decline of presidential rhetoric (Lim 2008).

As language shapes policy, the involvement of speechwriters in policymaking can enhance the rhetorical power of presidential communication. Most surveyed speechwriters are separated from the policymaking process, however. Only three respondents identified themselves as policy advisers and only two respondents enjoyed the level of power which involved “access to information and executives at the highest level of the company,” being “part of the inner circle” (business SW, France), and a sense of “that role in the backseat of power” (SW for Dutch PM). Relegating speechwriters to “the back room,” as Kjeldsen (2019, 179) argues, leads to speeches being “finalized by non-experts, which ultimately diminishes the quality of the speeches.” The presence of professional speechwriters in governments today demonstrates that the institutionalization of speechwriting (Collier 2018) has also become a fact beyond the White House.

The third issue involves “constraints that attend the speechwriting process” and “influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience” (Bitzer 1968; Medhurst 2003; 2018). Constraints may be internal or external.⁸ Surveyed speechwriters emphasized internal constraints. These include deadlines, organizational structure, blurred lines of responsibility; the role of the speaker in the process; a speechwriter’s character—their self-aggrandizement and self-importance; inability to respond to changing circumstances, and most importantly, the vetting or clearance process – “the ‘other people’ around the speaker” (SW for Dutch PM) “thinking they know better because they know the policy” (European Commission), the “interference speechwriters receive from other quarters where the speechwriter loses an editorial licence” (Australian government), or “too many people in the approval process who don’t know what needs to be said,

8. External constraints are situational and may include national crises, accidents, deaths, or national disasters.

just what they want to say (corporate messaging)” (Canadian government). The differing priorities and perspectives in the speechwriting process create a tension, and at times a power struggle, between speechwriters and policy experts. While speechwriters may develop a sense of personal investment in their work, policy experts often view themselves as the primary authority in determining the content of a speech. The vetting process exacerbates this dynamic.

Speechwriters in large organizations must “juggle a high volume of speeches” (WTO) and group authorship makes the process only more bureaucratic. As one American respondent pointed out, “the group setting can quickly create a ‘too many cooks in the kitchen’ situation [...] having too many distinctive voices in the room does not lend itself to creating a cohesive, unified message” (USA) and “the thread gets lost” (business SW, France). Similarly, “the conflict between the speechwriter’s desire for creativity and clarity and the demands of the occasion/speaker/event/subject matter to include certain information in a certain way” (SW for British PM) potentially restricts the speechwriter’s creative freedom. Also, a specific organizational setting may not allow professional speechwriters to function to the fullest. This means “being taken seriously, that others appreciate their work and allow them the necessary access to the leadership entrusted with the public speeches” (Kjeldsen et al. 2019, 179).

Time is a key constraint in speechwriting, with limited opportunities for preparation, reflection, and practice, especially in today’s fast-paced, information-driven environment (Australian government). Brief interactions with a speaker demand clarity and focus, making speeches “a luxury [the speaker] can work with if there are no pressing matters” (Norwegian government). Also, speechwriters are expected “to be inventive and say something new every time” (Norwegian government). Yet the visibility of their work can make them “self-conscious to expose [their] work to so many people” – “[c]ompromising and getting speeches cleared is part of the job [...] I work for the organisation, not my ego” (European Commission).

5. Assessment and conclusions

The evolution of speechwriting reflects broader transformations in political communication, institutional structures, and media dynamics. While Ted Sorensen’s close collaboration with president John F. Kennedy epitomized an era when speechwriters played a direct role in shaping both rhetoric and policy, the increasing complexity of governance and the shifts in media platforms have necessitated larger, more structured communication teams, and reduced the prominence of individual speechwriters.

Although often operating behind the scenes, speechwriters play a vital role in articulating leadership visions, persuading audiences, and shaping public discourse. Sorensen's approach to coordinating the process and the writing often serves as a benchmark for effective and efficient speechwriting across various cultural and institutional contexts. However, the Sorensen-Kennedy model, which centralizes speechwriting efforts in one person, is no longer viable. Unlike the majority of the surveyed speechwriters, Sorensen was a trusted confidant with constant access to the president and combined political insight with skilled writing. Senior advisors drafted only relevant portions of the SOTU. Sorensen's role involved coordinating the SOTU efforts, soliciting material for the speech, participating in meetings, developing the domestic part, including budget and fiscal policy (*inventio*), incorporating, and arranging senior advisors' policy feeds into the SOTUs (*disposition*), producing a cohesive style of the speech (*elocution*), participating in pre-delivery speech rehearsals (*memoria*). As SOTUs carried the weight of a presidential decision, crafting these speeches required time, precision, and a deep understanding of the president's thinking – something only achievable through close, continuous engagement.

Sorensen's position in the White House and his highly regarded speechwriting, advisory, and managerial skills, allowed him to effectively deal with typical institutional constraints, such as group authorship, access to the president, time pressures, and deadlines. Instead of merely requesting comments on the drafts, Sorensen urged specific changes in wording incorporated into the draft. He would also ensure that the editor precisely indicated what to cut and what to retain in the draft. Of no less importance was that he would distribute only the relevant portions of the speech among respective departments for review, with only selected departments receiving the entire draft. Following the departmental reviews, Sorensen would either introduce the changes suggested by the departments or reject them. The White House would, thus, have the final word on the content of Kennedy's SOTU.

As speechwriting professionalized, the act of crafting a speech has separated from the process of conceiving it. In the contemporary political and business settings, most speechwriters do not feel empowered by their bosses. The surveyed speechwriters were not responsible for supervising all the critical components of the smooth speech production process: collaborating with the speaker, generating ideas, drafting, coordination, and policy input. Majority of surveyed speechwriters were not involved in policy advisory roles or circles of political power and influence. They did not serve as trusted advisors; they rarely, if ever, met the leaders for whom they wrote. Although the fundamental stages of speech drafting in the White House closely align with those in other settings, a key difference is Sorensen's central role in the process.

Sorensen's role remains distinctive even in the history of the White House speechwriting and could not be easily replicated in other institutional settings for at least two reasons. First, successful speechwriting involves more than writing skills or policy expertise. It is the combination of mutually acknowledged relationship, policy expertise, rhetorical and managerial skills that help build a bond and trust between a speechwriter and the speaker. Contemporary professional speechwriters, however, work on the peripheries of decision-making. Second, the evolving nature of political communication and leadership has made speechwriting a more transactional role focused primarily on the completion of a task, often with little personal connection with the speaker. The writing is shaped by institutional priorities, policy objectives, and extensive review processes. A speechwriter's creative freedom and direct influence on a speech are constrained by the necessity of balancing multiple perspectives while maintaining a consistent political message.

Although professional speechwriting tends to be more fragmented, with various individuals responsible for distinct aspects of the process, leaders who seek to drive change through deliberative, persuasive rhetoric must engage in the intellectual process leading to decisions and make those decisions. Although speechwriting under JFK centralized multiple roles in one person—Ted Sorensen—the president alone was responsible for every decision that lay at the heart of his speeches.

While this study has examined aspects of political and business speechwriting in different countries, future research should explore how unique historical, cultural, institutional factors shape speechwriting practices and the quality of rhetoric. Another area which was not given enough attention in this paper is the distinction between the roles and responsibilities of speechwriters who work for private clients versus those who work in governments. Based on the present research, one might expect that government speechwriters operate within a more rigid and bureaucratic framework than business speechwriters. A closely related issue that merits examination is the structure of speechwriter hierarchies in business and governments, as well as their impact on the writing process, collaboration with the speaker, and access to leadership. A layered approach may influence how speeches are shaped and constrain the extent to which speechwriters can engage directly with a leader to capture their authentic voice and vision. Investigating these dynamics will provide deeper insights into how leadership communication is constructed and how institutional structures shape rhetorical decision-making.

As political communication continues to evolve, innovative technologies pose both challenges and opportunities for speechwriting. While AI tools can assist in drafting, the complexity and sensitivity of government speechwriting necessitates human expertise. Whether AI will enhance or undermine the authenticity and quality

of speeches remains to be seen. However, well-informed rhetoric is essential to the survival of democracy, as it ensures an informed electorate and accountable leadership. Speechwriting remains an indispensable function of leadership, adapting to changes in political strategy, media dynamics, and institutional structures. Although professional speechwriters may no longer enjoy the same level of direct influence as Sorensen once did, their ability to craft compelling messages, navigate institutional constraints, and support leaders in engaging diverse audiences ensures their continued relevance. Rhetoric remains a vital tool of leadership. And the study of speechwriting is essential to understanding the intersection of politics and persuasion both in and beyond the United States and the White House.

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Tape 69: Congo; Cuba; Latin America; Vietnam; State of the Union Address; Joint Chiefs of Staff.
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