THINKING OUT LOUD

A PSA WHITEPAPER

What is a Speechwriter?

A Speechwriter's View from 30 Years Ago Reveals Timeless Truths About This Peculiar Occupation

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At the first World Conference of the Professional Speechwriters Association in May 2014, an argument broke out among the delegates.

“The term ‘speechwriter’ is limiting,” someone said, questioning the wisdom of the name of the new association.

Other speechwriters rose to the defense of the term, one saying it’s useful because “it fences me off from people who want me to do other stuff,” another saying “speechwriter” is a brand that “excites people,” as opposed to broader but blander descriptors, like “leadership communication.”

“Speechwriter” has always been a simultaneously evocative and misleading term. Speechwriters have always done far more than write speeches. And while their actual speechwriting work has become more publicly known over the last few decades, the rest of the work speechwriters do is still as much a secret as it ever was. Even to many speechwriting clients!

As the executive director of the PSA, it has occurred to me to put forth a kind of universal job description for a speechwriter, to broaden and deepen the understanding of this misunderstood job.

I recently found a novel way to do that.

I rediscovered *Writing Speeches*, an out-of-print collection of columns by a long-dead Mobil Oil speechwriter named Mike O'Malley.

O'Malley originally wrote the columns in the 1980s for Ragan Communications' now-defunct *Speechwriter's Newsletter*. A pseudonym, Q.E.D., allowed O'Malley to tell real stories about the realpolitik that was, is and will forever be, near the core of speechwriting in organizations.

I worked at Ragan early in my career and got to know Mike, who was certainly the quirkiest fellow in Mobil's PR department. Devoutly Catholic with monkish short-chopped gray bangs, Mike had a big Teddy Roosevelt mouth, through which emerged a sing-songy, effeminate voice that spoke eruditely about music, literature and world affairs. He knew just enough about popular culture to work casual references into speeches, and though he lived in Houston, he probably didn't know the Oilers from the Astros. He was a serious person, and because he had a job with absurdity built in—he was also a funny person.

And the company weirdo.

As many speechwriters are.

He died young—maybe he was 60—from brain cancer. And like most speechwriters, he slipped from obscurity in life to oblivion in death, all that outlived him being the work he did for the influential people.

But also like most speechwriters: What work he did for them!

Savoring Mike's columns over a couple dozen lunches over the last year, it struck me that any gains speechwriters have made in visibility in the three decades since Mike O'Malley wrote about his speechwriting life matter very little in the face of what has been a constant lack of acknowledgment of the sheer scope—at least in potential but often in actuality—of the speechwriter's role, then, now and forever.

I thought I'd use Mike O'Malley's testimony—and the time-test it has passed—to begin to answer for speechwriters, and for clients and prospects who do not fully comprehend what they could be getting and should be demanding from their speechwriter, or leadership communication professional, or executive communication director, or whatever they call him or her—"What Is a Speechwriter?"

A SPEECHWRITER IS A RESEARCHER AND AN INVESTIGATOR AND AN INTERVIEWER.

Before the Internet, speechwriters had vast personal collections of quotation books, and were on chummy terms with the corporate and municipal librarians. Many speechwriters also smoked pipes.

But then as now, the best speechwriters weren't just bookworms. They created value by making relationships with people who could lend uncommon perspective to the client and his or her speeches.

A speechwriter becomes acquainted with the brightest people inside the organization, and knows how to access the leading lights in the industry too.

"In doing research, always aim for the top," O'Malley recommends. "If your speech is about, say, industrial architecture, find out who's the top architect in that field and call him up. Ask for half an hour of his time and tell him why. I am invariably surprised at how easy it is to reach the best people on my topic."

And how much life another human being can breathe into a speech.

One aspect of speechwriting that O'Malley did not dwell on, curiously enough, is interviewing, whereby the speechwriter draws out the speaker's ideas and feelings and personal stories, in the speaker's own words. This is a fine skill, and one that can serve a speechwriter as well as any of the others mentioned in this report.

Perhaps O'Malley wasn't particularly good at interviewing his speakers; or perhaps interviewing came so naturally to him that he didn't see a way to teach it.

But this seems like the right moment to point out that no speechwriter will excel in every aspect of this job. The job simply demands too much of a single person. Mastering the combination of two or three of these skills may suffice to make you a valuable speechwriter.

A SPEECHWRITER IS A HISTORIAN.

The speeches and op/eds and other communications speechwriters write often wind up being the substantive total of an organization's legacy. O'Malley:

> Most CEOs don't write very much. They talk their companies through crises, disasters and great corporate coups; no one takes minutes. And when they retire, few ever sit down to write a memoir. They are men of the moment, it seems; believers in the present, in the act, not in the past, not in memory. Whatever their greatness, it is written on the wind.

Except, of course, when it is written in a speech—or unearthed for a speech, by a speechwriter.

> Who was the first marketing manager on the West Coast? No one knows. There is no file on such matters. You dig up an old-timer and ask her. She thinks it was John Brown. Why did John Brown refuse to do business in Oregon until 1938? No one knows. Once John retired his files were thrown into the trash. There is hardly any history in corporations—even corporations that are bigger than most nations. There are, in contrast, 34 million documents in the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas. The comparison is extraordinary. Who can explain it?

Whether or not a speechwriter can explain the corporation's disinterest in its history, the speechwriter is often the leading curator by default. The speechwriter's job is to help the organization explain itself, justify its existence, achieve broader permission to operate. How does it do so without an educated nod to its origin and a solid sense of its story?

A SPEECHWRITER IS A FINE ARTIST OF A UNIQUE SITUATION.

Because a speech is essentially a social enterprise, infinite circumstantial factors influence how it should be executed. The speechwriter's art must be precise; and its full genius will rarely be appreciated.

O'Malley illustrates this truth by pointing out that it is terribly difficult to assess the merits of a speech that you did not write yourself:

> We look at the title. Lousy title, we say. Why didn't they put a bright, provocative title on it? Well, maybe they didn't want to, or need to. The speech arrives as a boy named John in a world of Shawns and Cliffs and Calvins and Lances. Maybe we should admire that, the simple and forthright John, not start casting shinier monikers.
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> As a text, how shall we judge it? Shall we judge it in the dissecting style of another writer? Is it a good opening? Are these transitions smooth and effective? Is the language clear, precise, evocative of concrete images that advance comprehension? Is the selection of words thoughtful, careful, clever, neat? But to provide material for writers' analyses was in no way, ever, a purpose of this text.
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> Shall we judge it then as people in business, as pragmatists: how well did this speech accomplish its putative goals? This is another kind of judgment, what the professors would call evaluative rather than analytic. We must concede that a speech that accomplishes all of its purposes is a good and effective speech, even if, as writers, we despise it. Or mustn't we?

The only ones who can answer those questions are the speechwriter and the speaker, making the speechwriter a lonely artist. (And the moment the speaker leaves the organization, a vulnerable one.)

A SPEECHWRITER IS A MAKER OF MUFFLED MUMBLINGS FOR POWERFUL PEOPLE WHO COMMUNICATE RELUCTANTLY.

Often, writing well isn't the most difficult work a speechwriter does. Writing badly is.

"You may see it as your business to write great speeches and so, in pressing these executives hard for coherent argument," O'Malley writes. But many executives don't wish to make a coherent argument:

> Some senior executives have such a low opinion of themselves that they cannot imagine opening their mouths and, with what they utter, changing an industry, changing the times, changing the world. They seem to feel that if they pronounce some new and important truth head-on with a polished, perfect, highly rehearsed approach, they will have erected a tower from which there may be no escape. They may, in other words, be unsure of the truth even when they know it (unlike writers, who tend to hold and proclaim truths about which they may know very little). These executives like to come at things sideways, round about, up the wind, in what appears to be a rough shamble, a clumsy circumlocution, an irrational leap. All such approaches leave many avenues of retreat; a perfect speech does not.

If a leader wants to shamble through a speech, you need to write a shambling speech. "You may not be able to write such a speech, not at all, no matter how hard you try," O'Malley writes. If so, your speaker will soon sense that "you cannot write roughly enough to meet his needs," and you'd better find another client.

A SPEECHWRITER IS A PUBLICIST AND SOCIAL MEDIA SPECIALIST FOR A CLIENT.

Ideally every speech—or op/ed or other major communication—will touch every relevant constituent the speaker has.

Social media makes it much quicker and easier to distribute excerpts or full texts, videos or blog posts on the theme. But the first part of the speechwriter's distribution job is the same today as it ever was: Tell the speaker why you want to distribute a particular communication to particular audiences, O'Malley writes, "even if the idea is only to let people know that the company is standing by its traditional position on some stormy issue."

Of course, not all leaders want to distribute their words beyond the room in which they're spoken. "Some execs will go for the public, some for the storm cellar," O'Malley observes. "I'm not always clear on why they choose the path they take."

A SPEECHWRITER IS AN IMPORTANT AIDE TO AN IMPORTANT PERSON.

O'Malley compares leading an organization to conducting a symphony. "The major projects in business are more difficult than conducting Mendlssohn: no one has the score, no one knows the path, the perils are more abounding and more various. Much more—in the human sense—is at stake."

The speechwriter, to the extent that he or she has access, sees, and helps, the CEO in many dramatic moments, O'Malley writes:

> We see him at a small meeting: where a central player is called to his office, prepared, soothed, and sold. Every word and gesture is precisely on point. The next day there is a larger session, perhaps in that office, perhaps in a small conference room or hotel suite. Again the conductor: some get a smile, some a frown, some nothing; some are cajoled, some are probed, some are directed; the theme is introduced, the subtle variations sounded. The exploratory statement is presented like a canon. Futures are made or destroyed. Spirits are conjured up. Arguments are settled or evaded. There will be a hundred sessions like this before the great corporate coup is accomplished. It is individual people, not instruments, that are being played upon; and the assemble sound they make is economic progress. Seen close, the conducting, the playing, is among the most fascinating dramas on earth: a music not many hear. But surely it is there.

And what does a speechwriter do? A job just as tough, in its way:

> There seems to be very little in the corporation more complex, more fascinating, or more difficult in the intellectual sense than writing well. Why should we want [our leaders'] jobs? They can't do ours—and the good ones know this. To go into a room alone with a great untidy mess of data and opinion and notes and background, with some vague amorphous description of a goal, and to plunge silently in—with ten decisions at least to be made on every line, the best word to be found, the best place for it, the best mate to stand with it, and all of these forming as you work into larger shapes, taking on a unique life and force, and becoming eventually one thing, as lean and efficient as an ice-pick; and you made it.

A SPEECHWRITER IS SELF-STYLED, AND ADVENTUROUS.

"Everything about our occupation is uncertain," O'Malley writes. In his pre-Internet days, speechwriters had a hard time finding one another for a simple chat. O'Malley complained that it had been "several months since I had had lunch with a speechwriter."

And as we do today—though the Professional Speechwriters Association plans a kind of speechwriting census—O'Malley wonders how many fulltime speechwriters there are.

Whatever the total, O'Malley knows it could change dramatically with a shift in economic weather. "A business that is booming tends to be extroverted and speechmaking," he writes. "Optimism is loquacious, writers flourish. In tough times, that same company will tend toward silence. And if there is nothing to be said, what does it matter who doesn't get to write it?"

And with a combination of clarity and contempt, he concludes:

> In most corporations, speechwriting is a part-time job. The press officer writes speeches, the PR staff, the ad manager, the editors of company publications, senior managers for their boss. Many of these speeches are written in dribs and drabs, because other duties—phone calls, meetings, trips, fires to fight—intervene. At the end the secretary, or someone who "has a flair with words," is called in to smooth the assemblage of bits, insert bridges and transitions, homogenize the style. Then off it goes, and the boss delivers it, and thereby proves that anybody can write a speech.

Job security? Not for speechwriters.

But adventure, yes. And at times, joy.

IN THE END

The last essay in O'Malley's book quotes a William Gass novel, *Omensetter's Luck*. In it, a preacher prepares for a sermon, confident in the knowledge that "there'd be land in the shape of his syllables, a sea singing, a sky like an echo, plants in bloom burning with speech."

O'Malley writes that speechwriters make "hard ideas in hard words, easy ways out in soft words, clarion calls in trumpets of words: the ideas are as real as cliffs rising out of the sea.

> We plant them here and there, at times scattered widely, at times a paragraph as laced with quiet bloom as a floral centerpiece. We are at once the garden, the resident, the passerby: we string a verbal landscape with occasional jewels.
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> No one is recording these speeches. There are no books of them that readers save and treasure. Our files will be tossed on the scrap heap when we leave or retire.
>
> But we have been sitting at a typewriter making land, a sea, a sky, burning words. That's enough. It is more than most have.

And we now have more than we did then.

In a column, O'Malley complained that speechwriters, like "mistresses … don't have a trade association."

The one major development in professional speechwriting in the last 30 years is the creation of a number of regional associations of speechwriters, and now one global one, the Professional Speechwriters Association.

In Mike O'Malley's spirit of the speechwriting life-examined, let's go forth and enjoy this peculiar work to the very maximum.

And let's enjoy it together.