Whose words are they?
The ethics of ghostwriting in the corporate world

Jessica Zimanske
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Dr. Wendy Wyatt

Introduction

It began as a routine check-in call with the marketing account manager, but it quickly turned into an ethical dilemma that I never expected to encounter as an intern in the field of public relations and communications. “I’m really busy this month and you know how I’m always behind with the CEO column for the newsletter,” the account manager said. “So would you mind writing it this time?” I was one year into my internship in the marketing and communications department at a health care system based in the Twin Cities and had never been asked to ghostwrite before. I had written numerous newsletter articles, press releases and web content that did not include a byline but never had someone else’s name been placed above my own words. I was forced to react quickly, and I turned to the director of the department for further direction. The situation did not end with me writing the piece, but it sparked within me a new fascination for the role of the ghostwriter in an organization. I wondered why someone else’s name could be placed above someone else’s words in a world where plagiarism is punished. I questioned if the audience, in this case the employees of the company, was deceived into thinking the CEO actually crafted his own monthly column. Most importantly, I wondered if I could ever accept the fact that ghostwriting would most likely be a part of my future career in public relations.

I came to learn that in company newsletters, op/ed pieces and executive speeches, one name appears in the byline, title page or first slide. But in the 21st century corporate world, this name often does not represent the true author – a ghostwriter. But what are the ethical issues associated with ghostwriting in the corporate world? Specifically, what do interviews with current ghostwriters reveal about the use of corporate ghostwriting and the ethical considerations that ghostwriters do or do not acknowledge? Finally, what ought to be the ethical standards of corporate ghostwriting?

Context

Ghostwriting—to write for and in the name of another—has existed for centuries. From the earliest biblical texts to today's presidential speeches, ghostwriting is a major part of our communication processes. The exact origination of ghostwriting is unknown, although rhetoric scholars believe that logography, or "wordsmithing," was common as early as the fifth century B.C. (Kennedy, 1963). Some scholars attribute its source to the early patronage system of scribes and benefactors, and other scholars suggest that ghostwriting started in England in the 1700s when publishers and printers began taking ownership of literary texts (Brandt, 2007, p. 553).

Today, ghostwriting is a common practice that is protected under U.S. copyright law's "Works Made for Hire" section. The current legal code reads, "In cases of works made for hire, the employer or commissioning party is considered the author" (Brandt, 2007, p. 553). This law allows public figures, CEOs, and medical companies to call other writers' works their own without plagiarizing. While ghostwriting has strong roots in history, some professionals believe that corporations are now relying too much on public relations professionals.

> There was a time not long ago when leaders of society were articulate, thoughtful individuals who had the capacity to inspire their followers with great ideas and ideals. George Washington may have had help from Thomas Jefferson for his famous farewell address, but there is plenty of evidence that he was expressing his own ideas. Unfortunately, many top corporate and government leaders have come to rely on their public relations experts not only to write their speeches and their public statements, but often to decide what the substance of those speeches and statements should be (Finn, 1993, ¶22-23).

While often disguised well, ghostwriting exists in numerous facets of our society. O.J. Simpson's controversial memoir, "If I Did It," was ghostwritten by writer Pablo Fenjves (Murr, 2008, p. 44). Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky's syndicated column is ghostwritten by *National Post* columnist Roy MacGregor (Mussenden, 2000). President Barack Obama's historic inaugural address in January 2009 was written by the young speech writer Jon Favreau (Philp,

2009). And in companies across the world, public relations and communications specialists write columns, speeches, letters, and other materials with the CEO's name in the byline.

With the rise of the Internet and the "Information Age," ghostwriting is becoming more prevalent and often lucrative. The July 2008 issue of *Writer* magazine reported that a 500-word article on the Internet can sell for as high as $30, while a 5,000-word article can sell for $800 (Power, 2008, p. 46). The same magazine says that ghostwriting is "like a deep well that never goes dry," which gives writers a unique creative opportunity. "Ever wish you were someone else? As a ghostwriter, you can live your dream vicariously—without having to get credentials or be reincarnated" (Power, 2008, p. 49).

The growing popularity of ghostwriting has affected nearly all forms of communication, but it has had an especially significant impact on the corporate world. From basic business ghostwriting and corporate speech writing to scientific ghostwriting for medical journals, ghostwriting– ethical or not—plays a crucial part in how our nation's companies do business. The dependence on ghostwriters in the corporate world raises clear ethical issues – is ghostwriting deceptive to the audience? Are public relations and communications specialists being used for their writing abilities? Is he or she just fulfilling one's job responsibilities? Are ghostwriters better suited to write CEO speeches and newsletter columns? Arguments from ghostwriters and executives exist on both sides of the debate.

Ghostwriting in business

General business ghostwriting has become commonplace because executives understand the value of the written word when communicating with their target audiences: consumers, businesses and employees. When effectively communicating with employees, one study found a 29.5 percent increase in market value for that company, as well as an increase in share value

(Doorley and Garcia, 2007, p. 133). “Companies with the highest levels of internal communication experienced a 26 percent return to shareholders from 1998 to 2002, compared to a 15 percent return experienced by firms that communicate least effectively” (Doorley and Garcia, 2007, p. 133). While business executives may value communication, they still turn to in-house public relations specialists or public relations agencies to craft their messages.

Ghostwriters are often not averse to letting another person’s name take over their own byline. Chicago-based ghostwriter Greg Beaubien believes that ghostwriting serves both the writer and the executive. He most recently helped a client write a 70,000-word book. “For ghostwriters and their clients, embracing differences lets you reach conclusions neither person would discover alone. And that, it would seem, is the whole point of collaboration” (Beaubien, 2007). To many, ghostwriting is far from an ethical dilemma. “If you are hired to do a job, then the work you do belongs to the person who hired you” (Parsons, 2008, p. 125).

Ghostwriting in business does bring into play ethical issues when the ghostwriter is outright deceptive. In 2004, the *Austin Chronicle* reported that the PR firm Potomac Communications Group was ghostwriting pro-nuclear op/ed columns for the Nuclear Energy Institute. The paper described the campaign as "a decades-long, centrally orchestrated plan to defraud the nation's newspaper readers by misrepresenting the propaganda of one hired atomic gun as the learned musings of disparate academics and other nuclear-industry 'experts'" (Farsetta, 2007). Ghostwriting has also become prevalent in new forms of communication associated with the Internet. Facebook and Twitter accounts, as well as blogs, are often maintained by a communications staff person under the name of an executive. In 2006, *Fortune* writer Marc Gunther discovered that writers from the Edelman public relations firm were authoring multiple blogs for Wal-Mart that told the story of a man and a woman who were traveling the country in

an RV and staying in Wal-Mart parking lots (Patterson, & Wilkins, 2008, p. 144). Edelman CEO Richard Edelman later acknowledged the issue saying it was their company's fault for not being transparent about the blogger's identity. The blogs did continue, however, with author bylines added under each new post.

Scientific ghostwriting

The ethics of ghostwriting has been debated and scrutinized the most in the medical world. Conflicts of interest and public skepticism of the motives and dealings within health care, pharmaceutical companies and academic research have led to very controversial cases and studies that have revealed the staggering amount of ghostwriting in this field (Guth, & Marsh, 2009, p. 333). Some academics believe that at least 50 percent of articles in major medical journals are ghostwritten, while a survey published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that at least 11 percent of articles in the top U.S. medical journals were ghostwritten (Guth, & Marsh, 2009, p. 333). Robert Califf, vice chancellor of clinical research at Duke University says, "Scientific research is not public relations. If you're a firm hired by a company trying to sell a product, it's an entirely different thing than having an open mind for scientific inquiry" (Guth, & Marsh, 2009, p. 333).

In 2009, the pharmaceutical company Merck was found to have paid three medication associations – the American College Health Association, the American Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology and the Society of Gynecologic Oncologists – to promote the company's Gardasil vaccine. The groups sponsored webcasts, sent e-mails to university students and encouraged doctors to support mandates for the use of Gardasil (Stein, 2009). Also in 2009, court documents showed that ghostwriters hired by the pharmaceutical company Wyeth wrote 26 scientific papers between 1998 and 2005 supporting the use of hormone replacement therapy in

women. The papers de-emphasized the risks of taking the hormones and sales of the drugs called Premarin and Prempo rose to nearly $2 billion in 2001 (Singer, 2009).

The concern of ghostwriting in medical literature deals mainly with the introduction of bias that may affect treatment decisions by doctors and lead to compromised patient care. Frederic Curtiss, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Managed Care Pharmacy*, is taking deliberate measures to eliminate ghostwriting in his publication and prevent that bias. He told *Reuters Health* that data attached to documents by Microsoft Word has allowed him to discover undisclosed contributors. "In one case, for instance, a revised manuscript arrived at his office with four named authors, but when he examined the metadata, he discovered an additional author was making substantial contributions" (Borrell, 2009).

Many academics are speaking out against these practices and shedding light on the ethical dilemma that ghostwriting presents.

> "Publishing biased literature is not simply 'getting the message out' for the pharmaceutical client of the medical education company. It injects bias and untruth into the scientific dialogue in order to enhance corporate profits. The fundamental conflict of interest is between having a balanced discussion of the evidence and the pharmaceutical company's responsibility to its shareholders to sell as many pills as possible" (Tierney, & Gerrity, 2005, p. 550).

Many recommendations have been made to ensure the honesty and accuracy of medial literature such as listing the contributions of all the authors, including a section about ghostwriting in the "instructions to authors" section of the journals, developing policies that consider ghostwriting to be "scientific misconduct," having authors keep drafts of articles for further investigation and not allowing ethical review committees and drug agencies to accept protocols that have no named authors (The *PLoS Medicine* Editors, 2009, pg. 123). Many believe

that these guidelines and overall transparency of communication in the medical world should be welcomed for the sake of all parties involved.

> "There is no need for secrecy, and there is certainly no need for medical writers to have the status of ghosts. Failing to acknowledge the role of the medical writer suggests that the authors or sponsoring companies have something to hide, and it is not surprising that some people have become suspicious of papers prepared by medical writers as a result. By openly acknowledging the role of the medical writer, authors and sponsors alike can show that they do not have anything to hide, and are committed to a transparent publication process. This approach is far more likely to engender trust in what they have to say" (Jacobs, 2004, p. 487).

Political speech writing

Speechwriting has been a very visible component of politics since the presidencies of Washington, Johnson, Polk and Lincoln. Warren G. Harding was the first president to have a full-time speechwriter in 1921, and Calvin Coolidge was the only president after him to not have an aide (Schlesinger, 2008, p. 3). Political speechwriters are very involved in the political processes in order to accurately choose the president's words for speeches and other communications, which often makes them important policy changers as well. Theodore Sorensen, the principal speech writer for John F. Kennedy, was intricately involved in the Cuban Missile crisis, and he told a *National Journal* reporter ten years after the event that "the answer in the Cuban Missile crisis was not resolved until it…was…effectively worded" (Gelderman, 1997, p. 63). Richard Nixon, who was notorious for his image campaigns, had his own "PR group" of writers and researchers that drafted speeches, analyzed public opinion polls, drew up lists of remarks to use in public appearances, composed letters to the editor under real and assumed names and scripted the entire 1972 Republican convention (Gelderman, 1997, p. 80). When Michael Gerson, the speechwriter for George W. Bush, left his position in the summer of 2006, a *USA Today* article remarked on his role and said, "The man whose words helped steady

the nation after the 'deliberate and massive cruelty' of Sept. 11, 2001, is no longer at George Bush's side" (Schlesinger, 2008, p. 493).

Political speechwriters themselves have admitted the crucial role they have played in policy making despite not being publicly elected officials, which raises some ethical concerns. Craig Smith, former staff writer for former president Gerald Ford, former vice president George Bush and other political leaders, said that if a speechwriter can gain expertise in various areas, they will see that they can actually shape policy. "One of the joys of speechwriting is when you gain that kind of trust and can put new policy ideas into a speech and the president says, 'Yes, we'll go with that'" (Denton, 1991, p. 125). Smith did go on to state that ghostwriting is unethical if it is hidden from the audience or if the ghostwriter denies his or her role in the speechwriting. Critics of political ghostwriting point to bigger ethical issues that affect our entire political system.

> "Presidential relegation of speechwriting to wordsmiths who are not essentially involved in decision making, combined with reliance on polls, undermines the role of the president as educator and often creates a disconnection between words and actions. The greatest loss from the evolution of the rhetorical presidency has been a decrease in the integrity of the word" (Gelderman, 1997. p. 177).

Corporate speech writing

Ghostwriting is customary in most forms of corporate speech writing. Executives once again point to the speechwriter's better qualifications and skills to support the use of a speechwriter, although a larger norm does exist. "The main reason the system perpetuates itself is that clients and company executives want it to continue…It is the job of PR people to accommodate their clients' requests" (Marconi, 2004, p. 249). When working diligently on speeches and presentations for executives, ghostwriters must put their best work into the project while making sure that their role in the process goes unnoticed. "Speechwriters must remember

that the speech cannot sound as if it were the work of someone other than the speaker-and certainly not that it was the work of a professional writer" (Marconi, 2004, p. 247). When a ghostwriter is discovered, however, there can be severe backlash from the audiences who may not realize the real person behind the words. In 2007, William Meehan, the president of Jacksonville State University, was found to have taken columns from the Internet to appear as his own columns in *The Jacksonville News*. It was later revealed that the university publicist authored the columns and accepted blame for the mistake. Meehan went on in 2009 to be accused of plagiarizing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Alabama (Associated Press, 2009).

The "borrowing" and "lending" of words represents a powerful shift of authorship from the ghostwriter to the executive who is delivering the speech. The ghostwriter essentially gives up his or her words for the sake of another who is higher in the corporate structure, which may leave the ghostwriter feeling used and insignificant. "The prestige of authorship, especially expert authorship, is exactly what must be given away in the ghostwriting exchange and yet it seems inseparable from the experience of writing" (Brandt, 2007, p. 558). The overuse of speechwriters and public relations specialists in general may also have an effect on the overall leadership of an organization, which may in turn have immeasurable long-term repercussions.

> "When leaders begin to depend too heavily on their speech writers to do their thinking as well as choose their words, minds begin to stagnate and mental resources become diminished. It doesn't do society much good if, in the interests of helping our clients put on a good show, we substitute our ideas for their vision of where they are going and why, and deprive their constituents of the benefits which come from real leadership" (Finn, 1993, ¶30).

The ethical debate

Arguments have been made on both sides of the ghostwriting issue in all of its forms yet many questions still remain. Is an executive, politician or other prominent figure deceptive if he or she employs an outside party to craft a specific message? Does the general public knowingly assume that big-time CEOs and politicians lack the time and the skills to write their own speeches, columns and correspondences? And if a ghostwriter is being paid fairly for his or her work, is that just a part of his or her job?

A study published in 1996 in the *Journal of Business Ethics* reported that in the case of the president of the United States using a speechwriter, 85.4 percent of people would not question his ethics. More than half of the respondents said that they doubt the president has time to write his own material and about a quarter of the respondents said that a ghostwriter would be better qualified to write the speeches (Riley and Brown, 1996, p. 718-719). Ernest Bohman, professor emeritus at University of Minnesota, believes that this is not always the case. "It does no good to argue that deception is not involved in ghostwriting because the speaker endorses the ideas by delivering them, or because everybody knows that the speeches are ghostwritten anyway. Everyone does not know…" (Parsons, 2008, p. 126).

Despite the logistics related to ghostwriting, the use of a ghostwriter can be deemed as deceptive. "Even in an era of sometimes shifting loyalties, there are some loyalties that should only be most reluctantly abandoned. We recommend you give further consideration to two of them: loyalty to humanity and loyalty to truth." (Patterson & Wilkins, 2008, p. 100). Greater concerns exist with relation to what ghostwriting really means, no matter if it is deemed ethical or not. "The problem is that writing forces people to think, and delegating writing means delegating thinking. Ghostwriting means ghost-thinking. A society which is managed by people

who don't take the time to think is leaderless" (Finn, 1993, ¶26). But does the use of a ghostwriter really matter? Is ghostwriting deceptive or just a logical use of a company's resources and talents? Additional research needs to be conducted with the corporate ghostwriters themselves to learn more about the ethical considerations they do or do not acknowledge with relation to ghostwriting and to learn if ghostwriting is an ethically sound practice.

Method

The secondary research on the ethics of ghostwriting revealed a wide spectrum of beliefs and views about the topic from public relations and communications professionals. While many actively spoke out against the practice, others claimed that ghostwriting can be ethical, if done correctly, and serve both the ghostwriter and the executive. To further understand the ethical issues related to ghostwriting, I conducted six in-depth interviews with active corporate ghostwriters to understand the ways in which ghostwriting is part of their jobs and how they feel about having another person's name in place of their byline. By speaking with these ghostwriters, I learned about the ethical considerations these professionals may or may not acknowledge as well as their views on the practice.

Between November 2 and November 13, 2009, I conducted e-mail, phone and in-person interviews with professionals who regularly ghostwrite in a variety of communication sectors to learn more about the types of ghostwriting they are asked to do in their positions and what kind of responsibility and/or ownership is given to them with these assignments. In each interview, I asked for the professional's overall opinion on the practice of ghostwriting while also asking questions about specific instances in which he or she has ghostwritten material that has caused him or her to question (or not question) the ethics of ghostwriting. I was able to learn what

expectations exist from senior leadership and how that shapes the role of a public relations or communications specialist in an organization or corporation.

All interview questions and consent forms were sent via e-mail, and the interviewee was given the choice of answering the questions via e-mail, by phone, or in-person. To view the full list of interview questions and consent form, see Appendix 2 and Appendix 3. If the interviewee chose a phone or in-person interview, a date and time was agreed upon. The interviewees included corporate ghostwriters from a variety of business sectors ranging from education and health care to professional sports. Eight people were initially e-mailed with a goal of six responses. The interviewees were asked to provide a substitute contact if they were unwilling or unable to participate in the study.

The following professionals participated in the study:

- Jane*, Senior Public Relations and Communications Specialist, local health care system (participant chose not to be identified)
- Jolene Goldade, Communications Manager, Edina Public Schools
- Chris Iles, Corporate Communications Manager, Minnesota Twins
- Tom Dewey, Owner, Dewey Communications, LLC
- Carol Kaemmerer, President and Owner, Kaemmerer Group, LLC
- Karen Leinberger, Communications Manager, Dow Water & Process Solutions

In-person interviews were conducted with Jane and Jolene Goldade, and phone interviews were conducted with Tom Dewey and Karen Leinberger. Because of scheduling conflicts, Chris Iles and Carol Kaemmerer answered the interview questions via e-mail. For information about the research participants, see Appendix 1.

Findings

Definition of ghostwriting is clear, frequency varies

To establish a clear understanding of the practice of ghostwriting, interviewees were asked to define the term "ghostwriting." All six participants defined ghostwriting as the practice

of writing material under the guise of someone else in the company or organization. Carol Kaemmerer, owner of Kaemmerer Group, defined ghostwriting as "any writing for hire where the author does not have a byline – especially work signed by, delivered verbally by, or attributed to, another person or entity." Two out of the six participants added that a ghostwriter is one who does not get credit for the work but is still the main voice of the material. Tom Dewey, president of Dewey Communications, said that a ghostwriter is "primarily and essentially responsible for the end result" of a communication piece. Each interviewee gave examples of ghostwriting that they do in their current position or have done in past jobs, including internal communication articles, PowerPoint presentations, executive speeches, memos and letters, opinion pieces and editorials, e-mails, case studies, press releases, and more. Each of these forms of ghostwriting appeared in various parts the secondary research.

The participants agreed that the amount of ghostwriting they do per day, per week, or per month varies depending on what is going on in the organization and what outside issues the company may need to respond to. Half of the interviewees, including Kaemmerer, Dewey and Karen Leinberger, communications manager for Dow Water & Process Solutions, said that they ghostwrite material on a daily basis. One participant, Jolene Goldade, communications manager at Edina Public Schools, said that she ghostwrites on a weekly basis. The remaining two interviewees, Jane, senior public relations and communications specialist for a local health care system, and Chris Iles, corporate communications manager for the Minnesota Twins, said that they ghostwrite on a monthly basis. Jane and Goldade cited the current H1N1 flu pandemic as a reason for an increase in ghostwritten material, and they also said that other local and national events and issues can lead to a spike in their amount of ghostwriting. "I certainly ghostwrite on a monthly basis, but it varies depending on other events such as H1N1," Jane said. "It doesn't

mean that the content is going to appear in the public, however. It may just be an internal memo."

General understanding of ghostwriting exists in most organizations

The six participants were asked to comment on their beliefs about the awareness of ghostwriting on behalf of the employees in their respective companies and organizations. The responses varied, with two-thirds (four out of six) of the participants reporting that the vast majority of their internal audiences understand the role of the ghostwriter, while one participant said that about half of the employees recognize the use of a ghostwriter, and one participant believed that most employees do not realize that a ghostwriter is used in many communication pieces. This contradicts the information found in several secondary sources, which states that many audiences are unaware of the role of the ghostwriter, making the act deceptive to the audience (Parsons, 2008, p. 126). Leinberger and Dewey said that employees understand the use of a ghostwriter because it is so common in their respective organizations. Goldade said that half of her organization recognizes her role as a ghostwriter, while the other half assumes the name of the person in the byline is the sole author. Jane noted that marketing and communications professionals are usually the only members of the general public who truly understand the prevalence of ghostwriting in a company and in the media. "I think that if you were to pick up the newspaper and see an op/ed piece from Senator Amy Klobuchar, most people would assume that she wrote it," Jane said. "The same goes for an internal audience. I know how to do my job, but I don't know anything but the very basics on how a nurse does her job."

Always a collaborative process

To better understand the responsibilities of a corporate ghostwriter, the six participants were asked to describe the process they use when ghostwriting material. All six professionals

used the word "collaboration" or a synonym to describe the overall process. None of the participants described an instance when he or she alone completely developed content. This also contradicts information found in secondary sources, which stated that ghostwriters are often forced to do the true thinking and mental processing for the individual (Finn, 1993, ¶30). All six professionals said that they develop key messages and points from an initial meeting or conversation with the individual they are ghostwriting for, and then they develop the communication material from those ideas. "If it's a paper or presentation or speech, I try to sit down for 15 to 20 minutes with that person to get a feel for what they're talking about," Leinberger said. "At this point, I've already researched the target audience. I can get 10-15 bullet points if I'm lucky, and then I run with that." Dewey described his approach to ghostwriting as a partnership. "If I'm doing an article for the client, I would spend time talking with them in person, asking questions and getting detailed information and then come back to them with a first draft and more questions," he said. "They are closely involved with the process." Kaemmerer said that she only works with executives who support her collaborative approach. "We discuss the key messages that are to be conveyed, the tone, what we know about the audience for which the message is crafted, etc.," she said.

One out of the six participants, Jane, said that the ghostwriting process varies depending on who the ghostwriter is working with. She mentioned the importance of collaboration and research before developing any written communication, but she also said that the process is a function of longevity. "When you have known somebody five, six, seven years, you know how they talk and how they think," Jane said. She referred to her relationship with the Chief Medical Officer at another local hospital who she could ghostwrite for with little direction because of their lengthy, close working relationship. Because she worked for this organization for an

extended period of time, she understood the goals of the organization and the tone of those she was ghostwriting for.

Half of the participants (three out of six) referred to a set approval process that the ghostwriter must follow for each project. Jane said that her material must get final approval from the hospital's CEO, while Iles said that the "author" of the piece reviews each draft of the communications material and approves the final product. Goldade said that her ghostwriting process begins with her developing the content off of a few basic points of information and then her bringing the completed collateral to the person she is ghostwriting for. "I get information, change it, and if necessary, I give it back to say, 'Is this working for you?'" she said.

Writing skills make ghostwriters more qualified to craft messages

When asked why public relations and communications professionals are used as ghostwriters, all six participants answered that they have the necessary writing skills to deliver high-quality, concise messages to the appropriate audiences, while many CEOs and executives may not. This finding reaffirms the arguments made by ghostwriters and the general public in the secondary research (Riley and Brown, 1996, p. 718-719). Several participants said that writing is a difficult skill for many people. "I think we're on the cusp of a generation of very poor writers," Jane said. "I have seen executives write out their own memos with punctuation errors in them. Writing counts and writing matters." Half of the participants (three out of six), including Jane, pointed to the importance of quality communications in a company or an organization. "We are hired because we communicate clearly, accurately, and consistently, and because we are familiar with proper citation, form and protocol," Kaemmerer said. "It is in the interests of the client corporation to have all of their communications be polished and professional." Half of the professionals also cited the time constraints placed on high-level management, which leaves little

time to develop quality written communications. **"**I think it's an efficient and effective use of an organization, so you don't have a CEO sweating over a keyboard for four hours, and this is what I do for a living," Jane said. Iles said that having communications professionals handle the writing projects allows the executives to focus on larger issues. Dewey said that using a ghostwriter is similar to using an accountant during tax season. "There are some companies where some people are good writers, but they aren't given the time to do that work," he said. "It's funny because I've seen in some cases where that talent is perceived as valuable but they spend more money to have someone else do it."

The ethics of ghostwriting is rarely questioned, deemed a fair practice for all

None of the six professional said that they ever felt uncomfortable with their role as a ghostwriter, although several of the respondents described instances in which they wished they had more information or direction from upper-level management. Iles said that he was once asked to ghostwrite an op/ed article for a Ph.D. medical researcher when he was an intern. "That was uncomfortable because of the obvious difference in education level, but not for ethical reasons," he said. "As an intern, I thought it was funny that I was writing for a Ph.D." Goldade said that it can be frustrating when the ghostwriter is forced to expand upon a complicated subject like policies or budget issues with little information. "I don't always have enough information to communicate these subjects, but you just do the best that you can," she said. "I don't know if it's uncomfortable or more just stressful."

When asked if the professional has ever questioned whether ghostwriting is deceptive to the audience, five out of the six participants said no, while one responded "sometimes." Those same five participants noted that the final product is essentially the byline author's information, only fine-tuned by the ghostwriter, and that they represent the voice of the organization. "No one

I work with would just take my first draft and sign their name to it without thinking," Kaemmerer said. "By the time we've worked our way through multiple drafts, the client has contributed substantially to the final product." Goldade agreed that the collaborative process makes the ghostwriting ethically defensible. "I never think we're being deceptive," she said. "I just think that I'm playing the role of a filter and strengthening the message and making it as clear and as good as it can possibly be." Jane responded "sometimes" to this question, saying that she overall agrees with the process of ghostwriting but that certain situations make her question the practice. "I do struggle with that from time-to-time like when you open up the *Star Tribune* Op/Ed page, and you see Dr. Mary Doe and Dr. Joe Doe, and every single one of those words is mine," Jane said. "Part of you wanted the credit."

All six professionals agreed that, overall, ghostwriting is a fair practice for all those involved, including the writer, the bylined author and the audience. "It's definitely somebody else's work, but it's the voice of the organization," Jane said. Kaemmerer agreed. "I am well paid for my expertise; the person who is the content expert can inform the writing process, and the reader is the beneficiary because they get the best we can offer together: clear writing with meaningful content."

Analysis and Conclusions

Secondary research has explored the ethical issues associated with ghostwriting in various facets of communication, and primary research in the form of interviews showed that current ghostwriters see ghostwriting as a collaborative process in which they serve as the voice of the organization. Secondary and primary research has also shown that ghostwriting is prevalent in most sectors of the corporate world. If ghostwriting is a common practice in communication and business, what ought to be the ethical standards for ghostwriting in the

corporate world? I believe that the practice of ghostwriting is ethically justifiable, but strict ethical standards should be upheld and the process must always be collaborative. Professionals in the world of communication work for a higher purpose than just themselves – to meet the goals of an organization, to further the mission of a non-profit, or to tell the story that the public needs to hear. Public relations professionals in particular represent an agency or a company, not themselves as individuals as a freelance writer would do, for example. A collaborative process, in which a communications professional works with another and takes his or her ideas to create a final piece of writing, was cited by all six professionals that were interviewed. This is a key distinction in the moral argument for the ethics of ghostwriting. Only through a collaborative process in which both parties work together to serve as the voice of an organization is ghostwriting ethically justifiable.

Legally, ghostwriting is protected by U.S. copyright right law, but the collaborative practice of ghostwriting is also supported by the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Code of Ethics (Brandt, 2007, p. 553). The code states that public relations professionals should "adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public" (Public Relations Society of America, 2000, ¶9). When a communications professional works with another person in an organization to develop collateral, he or she is not just developing material and then placing an executive's name at the top. The professional is using specific ideas and concepts that the executive has developed and then presenting the ideas and concepts in a clear and concise way, which advances the interests of the executive and better serves the target publics. When the ideas and concepts directly come from the person whose name is in the byline, the content can still be considered accurate and truthful because it accurately represents the bylined author's beliefs.

The code also states that public relations professionals are "faithful to those we represent," while also "honoring our obligation to serve the public interest" (Public Relations Society of America, 2000, ¶12). This concept of loyalty is achieved through the collaborative use of a ghostwriter. Research has proven that high levels of internal communication lead to greater profitability, which may be attributed to the loyalty and trust that is built between upper management and mainstream employees (Doorley and Garcia, 2007, p. 133). When a ghostwriter assists another professional with succinctly expressing his or her ideas in a speech, PowerPoint presentation or internal memo, the ghostwriter is helping that professional honor his or her commitment to those they represent and serve the public interest, which includes the free flow of information. The PRSA Code of Ethics states that the free flow of communications preserves "the integrity of the process of communication." The use of a ghostwriter often ensures that the line of effective and efficient communication stays open, especially since the bylined author may not have the skills to deliver technically-sound communication pieces.

Based on the PRSA code, however, ghostwriters and those they write for should be transparent about their communication processes when asked. Four out of the six interviewees said that they believe that the majority of their audiences understand that much collateral is ghostwritten, but individuals may inquire about this process, and it is crucial that the public relations professional deals fairly with those individuals. A portion of the PRSA Code of Ethics refers to disclosure of information, which is "to build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making" (Public Relations Society of America, 2000, ¶19). If an individual inquires about the true writer, all parties involved should be transparent about the collaborative process and be open to explaining the motive and reasoning behind the practice.

A collaborative approach to the practice of ghostwriting represents the greatest good, which was illustrated by the philosopher John Stuart Mill. As I learned through my primary research, the use of a ghostwriter's skills is invaluable to any non-communications professional in the corporate world. These professionals, who are likely not trained in communication, have little time and resources to devote to quality communication, while a public relations professional is, by trade, prepared to serve in that role. The use of a ghostwriter not only serves the interests of the professional, but it also serves the target publics who deserve quality communication pieces with important information. Whether the target public is an internal or external group, the audience only benefits from clear and concise messages, and it often takes a ghostwriter to make that happen. The ghostwriter also benefits from this collaborative process because he or she is able to directly work with others in the organization that truly needs their expertise to communicate. The ghostwriter is able to use his or her skills to the fullest and represent the voice of the organization. All parties, including the bylined author, ghostwriter, and audience, benefit from this collaborative process.

The collaborative approach to corporate ghostwriting is also ethically justifiable based on Immanuel Kant's theory of pure motivations. While my secondary research posed conflicting arguments on the motives of the bylined authors, my interviews with active corporate ghostwriters did not elicit any feelings of being used for their talents or being overworked because of assisting others. The ghostwriters said that they value their role in the communication process and that it makes sense based on their skill set. As Jane said, **"**I think it's an efficient and effective use of an organization, so you don't have a CEO sweating over a keyboard for four hours, and this is what I do for a living." The ghostwriters said that they work directly with the bylined author, whose intention is to better communicate with important audiences. Strategic,

clear communication was a main point made in each of the interviews with corporate ghostwriters, and it was clear that they felt valued and appreciated in the collaborative process of ghostwriting. All six interviewees deemed the process "fair," which suggests the presence of pure motivations on behalf of all parties involved. In reality, there is likely to be executives in the corporate world whose purpose in using a ghostwriter is to only exploit his or her talents and push their own work onto the communications professional, but the secondary and primary research suggested that this is not the case the vast majority of the time. Upper-level management and communications professionals know the value of communication, and it appears that both ghostwriters and their bylined authors have pure motivations aimed at communicating more effectively with their publics.

The PRSA Code of Ethics along with the ethical theories of philosophizers John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant support a collaborative approach to ghostwriting in the corporate world, but specific recommendations need to be made to uphold the ethical standards of corporate ghostwriting. A virtuous public relations professional is loyal, honest, accurate and fair. The recommendations for how a corporate ghostwriter ought to act support these characteristics, which will enhance and build trust in the profession.

As stated previously, the most important ethical obligation for corporate ghostwriters is to maintain a collaborative working relationship with those they are writing for. If a ghostwriter is forced to develop content organically and then place an executives name in the byline, the ideas and thinking is done by the ghostwriter and not the bylined author, which makes the content deceiving. Five out of the six participants in the primary research said that they do not see ghostwriting as deceptive and one answered "sometimes" – all because of the collaborative process they use. When a ghostwriter serves as a "filter" for higher quality communication, the

audience still receives messages directly from the bylined author and that preserves the integrity of the communication.

It is also a public relations professional's ethical obligation to fight for this collaborative process. Each interviewee spoke about the concept of collaboration, but just like in my own personal situation, I question if ghostwriters are often forced into "ghost-thinking" when upper-management faces tight deadlines. The concept of collaboration is ideal, but I wonder if this is actually the reality in most organizations. As stated in the context section, **"**It doesn't do society much good if, in the interests of helping our clients put on a good show, we substitute our ideas for their vision of where they are going and why, and deprive their constituents of the benefits which come from real leadership" (Finn, 1993, ¶30). A ghostwriter is a writer, not a business executive, and a public relations professional needs to stand up for his or herself and be clear about his or her role in the organization. A ghostwriter should never be used just for his or her words. A ghostwriter ought to work with the bylined author in order to achieve the company's goals and not to serve as a last-minute fill-in when an executive's calendar is overbooked.

It is also a ghostwriter's moral responsibility to avoid conflicts of interests. The secondary research examined multiple cases in which ghostwriters wrote on behalf of one group while claiming to be a neutral party, like in the case of the Merck pharmaceutical company scandal. As Robert Califf, vice chancellor of clinical research at Duke University said, "Scientific research is not public relations," and ghostwriters should never claim to be unbiased parties when they serve the interests of a specific client (Guth, & Marsh, 2009, p. 333). A ghostwriter should always write with the mindset that his or her identify could be exposed, and they should feel secure in their moral intuition when accepting a ghostwriting project. All public

relations professionals ought to be loyal to their company or organization, but ghostwriters have to be particularly conscious of their role as a filter between the bylined author and the audience.

A ghostwriter ought to also understand his or her role as a public relations professional versus a journalist. A journalist is a reporter who strives to maintain objectivity, and his or her story carries a byline. A public relations professional ghostwrites with the company's mission and objectives in mind. He or she represents an entire organization, along with the individual person whose byline appears above the collaborative work. It would be easy for a ghostwriter to be frustrated with the lack of recognition, but a public relations professional should not be concerned with individual accolades for specific collateral like a journalist would. A journalist may win a Pulitzer Prize for a story, but a public relations professional wins awards for entire campaigns. All ghostwriters must understand that their responsibility is to serve the bylined author and the intended audience, not his or her own personal goals.

The ethical issues related to ghostwriting in the corporate world are complex and multi-faceted. Some argue that ghostwriting is outright deceptive, while others cannot imagine a corporate world without the role of the ghostwriter. Through in-depth secondary research and personal interviews with current ghostwriters, I have determined that ghostwriting is ethically defensible when both the ghostwriter and bylined author collaborate to create a piece of communication to meet the goals of an organization. A collaborative process serves the needs of the executive who may have top-notch ideas but sub-par writing skills, as well as the needs of the ghostwriter who has the superior writing skills and the drive to serve the organization. The role of the ghostwriter can be abused, which can take a toll on the integrity of the public relations industry, but if conducted in the right manner, corporate ghostwriting can improve the communication process across all sectors – a worthy goal for all public relations professionals.

Appendix 1: Biographies of study participants

Jane, Senior Public Relations and Communications Specialist, local health care organization*

*Participant did not wish to be named

Jolene Goldade, Communications Manager, Edina Public Schools

Goldade has seven years of experience in communications, including three years at Edina Public Schools. She is responsible for all things communications, include Web materials, design, photography, video, writing, editing, proofing, overseeing the communications staff, strategizing, branding, PR writing and general marketing efforts. Prior to Edina Public Schools, Goldade worked as the public relations/advertising director at KVSC 88.1 FM, as the media relations/advertising intern at From Bags to Riches, as an advertising specialist at SCD, Inc. and as an inside sales representative at Forum Communications.

Chris Iles, Corporate Communications Manager, Minnesota Twins

Iles has worked for the Minnesota Twins since August 2008 and oversees all business-related public relations and content for www.twinsbaseball.com. Before joining the Twins organization, Iles worked as a senior communications specialist at HealthPartners and an assistant account executive at Padilla Speer Beardsley.

Tom Dewey, Owner, Dewey Communications, LLC

Dewey has worked in communications since 1976 and currently ghostwrites material for 3M. He previously served on the staff of the National Security Agency and has a strong background in trade magazine writing.

Carol Kaemmerer, President and Owner, Kaemmerer Group, LLC

Kaemmerer has spent five years as president of Kaemmerer Group, and she has been a communications consultant for 23 years. Currently her primary client is Medtronic, and she assists clients in communicating clearly through print and electronic media. She also assists in new therapy launches by writing materials for physicians, physicians' office staff, payers, sales force and patient audiences.

Karen Leinberger, Communications Manager, Dow Water & Process Solutions

Leinberger leads the public relations and marketing efforts for Dow Water & Process Solutions in North America through media relations, advertising, community relations and employee communications. Prior to joining Dow, Leinberger worked for Padilla Speer Beardsley, and she has represented many companies in the areas of media relations and crisis communications, including Carlson Companies and U.S. Bancorp.

Appendix 2: Interview questions

1. What are your job responsibilities at (HealthEast, Edina Public Schools, etc.)?

2. What is your definition of ghostwriting?

3. Do you regularly ghostwrite material for a supervisor or executive? If so, what kind of material and how often?

4. When you ghostwrite, do you receive any guidance or direction from the person you are ghostwriting for?

5. Why do you feel public relations and communications professionals are often asked to serve as ghostwriters?

6. Has there ever been a time in which you were uncomfortable ghostwriting for someone? If so, please elaborate.

7. Do you ever question if ghostwriting is deceptive to the receiving audience? Why or why not?

8. Is it a well-known fact in your company or organization that ghostwriters may contribute columns, articles and ideas to publications and other collateral?

9. Do you consider ghostwriting to be a fair practice to all those involved?

Appendix 3: Consent form

Consent Form
University of St. Thomas

Ghostwriting in the Corporate World

I am conducting a study about ghostwriting in the corporate world. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a professional in the public relations and communications field. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to find out more about the practice of ghostwriting in the corporate world and the potential ethical implications of that practice.

Procedures:

If you agree to be interviewed, I will contact you via e-mail or telephone to discuss your role as a ghostwriter and your personal thoughts and beliefs about the practice.

Confidentiality:

If you agree to be interviewed for this portion of the study I would like to attribute your thoughts and experiences to you. Your name would be included in my final conclusions. If you would not like your name included, but would still like to participate, please say so.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with any cooperating institutions or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Jessica Zimanske. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at (952) 994-7091. If you have any further concerns, please feel free to contact my professor Dr. Wendy Wyatt at wnwyatt@stthomas.edu.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study.

_____ _____

Signature of Study Participant **Date**

_____ _____

Signature of Researcher **Date**

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