

The Art of “Jesse-Talk”: Speechwriting for Governor Jesse Ventura

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ABSTRACT

In 1998, former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura stunned the political world by winning the race for governor of Minnesota. As a candidate, Ventura created impressions of honesty with his straightforward, candid style; even his inaugural address was unscripted. As governor, however, Ventura came to rely on a team of speechwriters to help him meet his speaking demands. In this essay, I present an interview with one member of Ventura’s communications team, Steve LeBeau, who addresses the challenge of writing speeches for an unconventional client with a penchant for improvisation. As the essay reveals, LeBeau’s background in media and theater helped, as did a process of trial and error, through which speechwriters found ways to maintain a sense of “authentic Ventura” in the governor’s prepared remarks.

In 1998, Jesse Ventura, former professional wrestler, actor, and radio host, stunned the nation with his unexpected third-party victory in Minnesota’s gubernatorial election. At his inauguration, the straight-talking, always quotable Ventura spoke without a prepared manuscript, saying in the introduction of his address,

You know, I was down speaking in Austin, Minnesota, a week or so ago, a couple weeks ago, to the Austin High School, and I asked them, I said, “You know, I’m assuming this office, and all during the campaign I never used a note, I never had a prepared speech, ever,” and I asked those high school kids in Austin, “Should I change?” And they said, “Absolutely not.”

They told me we want to hear from your heart and we want to hear from your soul, so that’s what you’re going to get today. I’m not changing.

Ventura’s commitment to speaking without any preparation held fast during the campaign and at his inauguration, but as governor, he did change. Whereas candidate Ventura spoke completely off-the-cuff, Governor Ventura came to rely on a staff of speechwriters to help him meet the demands of his numerous and varied speaking engagements. The potential clash between Ventura’s larger-than-life personality and the political demands of the office constituted an interesting conundrum for speechwriters. How much of the “real” Ventura should be represented in speeches? Could speechwriters create a prepared text that portrayed Ventura’s heart and soul in the same manner as he did in his unprepared remarks? And perhaps most

importantly, how would the governor, an inveterate improviser, deal with such texts? As journalist Paul Gray remarked after the election, “The question is not whether he [Ventura] can learn on the job—say what needs to be said, do what needs to be done, make nice when political advantage and simple prudence dictate such a course—but whether doing so will put him at odds with his own freewheeling nature” (57).

In this essay, I explore the process of speechwriting for Jesse Ventura, focusing on one particular facet of that process: the art of characterization. Called *ethopoeia* (literally “character-making”) in the ancient world, characterization involves keen judgment about how best to represent another speaker in a text.¹ As Bernard Duffy and Mark Royden Winchell explain, speechwriters “must find a ‘voice’ which, though not precisely the voice with which the client ordinarily speaks, captures the essence of the person and creates the image the speaker intends. The process is not imitative, it is representational. The ghostwriter seeks to establish through language a persona that is both interesting and believable” (104). As noted in a number of speechwriting studies, writing in a suitable voice demands consideration of the client’s distinctive qualities as well as expectations regarding his or her role, with the aim of seemingly artless, “authentic” portrayal.² According to Duffy and Winchell, “The first criterion of the ghostwritten speech or book is that it sound like the person with whom it will be most intimately identified, the client” (104).

As with any rhetorical practice, there is no simple template for representing a client’s voice effectively in a text; the speaker, speechwriter, audience, and occasion all affect the writer’s choices. This particular study of writing-in-character highlights how one speechwriter in the Ventura administration, Steve LeBeau, managed the process of characterization with his unconventional celebrity client, a client whose flamboyant persona and love of off-the-cuff speaking presented both opportunities and challenges for speechwriters. On the one hand, Ventura’s dynamic and distinctive speaking style ensured that he would be, at the very least, an interesting speaker, particularly when speaking extemporaneously. In modern politics, this quality is essential. As former president Richard Nixon once observed, “the only thing worse in politics than being wrong is being boring” (Stone para. 6). Of course, Ventura’s engaging style during the campaign was unscripted and spontaneous. As governor, he would be speaking on many occasions from prepared texts—a potential threat to his lively character. One of the most persistent criticisms of speechwriting, in fact, has been that it hides the true character of the speaker, substituting instead a conservative, watered-down persona (Einhorn, “Ghosts Unmasked” 42). As speechwriting critic Ernest Bormann has asserted, “The ghost has a tendency to be discreet and careful. He weakens adjectives and tones down the strength of statements. He knows the punishment for a misstatement or a careless word. He weighs and ponders every expression, and, as a result, he dilutes the distinctiveness and strength and spontaneity of whatever writing talent he may have” (287). The challenge for LeBeau and his fellow speechwriters was to retain the distinctiveness and strength and spontaneity so central to Ventura’s appeal while keeping him on message.

To explore how Ventura's speechwriters navigated this process, I interviewed LeBeau, who worked for Governor Ventura and Lieutenant Governor Mae Schunk for four years as a member of the Communications Office. This essay features excerpts from that interview, along with illustrative examples from several of Ventura's speeches, drawn primarily from Ventura's first year in office, when the learning curve was steepest for both the governor and his writers. As the essay reveals, LeBeau's approach to speechwriting, consistent with Ventura's philosophy of speaking, was oriented strongly toward showmanship; this alignment enabled LeBeau to produce appropriate prose for Ventura. Ventura proved unpredictable, however, when handling that prose. Sometimes he rehearsed a bit, but most times he did not. And in some instances, he simply jettisoned the prepared text and spoke off the cuff. "The question," said LeBeau, "especially in the first year, was whether he would actually read [the speeches]." Through trial and error, speechwriters learned how to capitalize on Ventura's strengths while keeping him on message, finding the talking point system particularly useful. In what follows, I first provide a snapshot of Jesse "The Candidate" Ventura, who spoke on the campaign trail without the aid of speechwriters. I then explore LeBeau's approach to creating "Jesse-talk" for Jesse "The Governor" Ventura.

Candidate Ventura: Unscripted

Jesse Ventura, currently a frequent guest on talk shows and author of books such as *American Conspiracies: Lies, Lies, and More Dirty Lies that the Government Tells Us* (2010), has been a pop culture figure for almost thirty years, rising to fame in the early 1980s as Jesse "The Body" Ventura, a flamboyant, trash talking professional wrestler. In a 1984 television interview with "Mean Gene" Okerlund of the World Wrestling Federation, the 6'4" Ventura, outfitted in a yellow tank top, matching cap, and dark sunglasses, foreshadowed the Jesse-talk that would become his trademark. Addressing Hulk Hogan, the reigning world champion of wrestling, Ventura bellowed: "Chump, somewhere, sometime, you're going to have to face down with Jesse, 'The Body'—275 pounds. And you won't be poundin' on no Sylvester Stallone no more!" Mean Gene interjected: "That isn't going to happen overnight, Jesse Ventura. You very well know you're going to have to work your way to the top to be in that number one contender's position." Ventura responded, "And you, Mean Gene, tell the truth. The chump'll run. The chump'll hide, and I'll have to chase him down! THAT's what you can tell the people out there!" ("Jesse 'The Body' Ventura")

In 1998, Ventura brought the same kind of bluster to a very different kind of contest, the race for governor of Minnesota. Ventura's name recognition was high at the time, thanks to his experience as a professional wrestler and commentator as well as roles in movies such as *Predator* and his job as a radio personality on KFAN in Minneapolis. His political resume, however, was slim, featuring only a four-year term as mayor of Brooklyn Park, a Minneapolis suburb. The summer before the election, the race was shaping up to be a conventional two-party affair between two well-known and experienced politicians, Republican Norm Coleman, mayor

of St. Paul, and Democrat Hubert “Skip” Humphrey III, the state’s attorney general. Then Ventura entered the race as the Reform Party candidate, and everything changed. Initially, Ventura was not taken seriously as a candidate, trailing considerably behind the other two candidates in early polls. An October 14 poll showed Humphrey with a comfortable lead at 44%, Coleman following at 31%, and Ventura bringing up the rear with 15%. But just under two weeks later, Ventura had closed the gap, with his support rising to 23% (“Polls”). As he had done in the world of professional wrestling, Ventura worked his way up, using his larger-than-life personality to his advantage. By the end of October, the straight-talking, colorful Ventura had become a real threat.

Ventura’s momentum was due in no small measure to his performances in a series of debates, broadcast statewide on television and radio, which underscored his populist, “man-of-the-people” appeal. During the debates, Ventura took every opportunity to characterize his opponents, Humphrey and Coleman, as “career politicians,” portraying himself, in contrast, as a private citizen in touch with average Minnesotans. In response to a question about taxes in the first debate, for instance, Ventura stated:

I’ve earned my entire living basically in the private sector. My two opponents have been cashing government checks their entire life. They are career politicians, so it’s imperative for them to make government bigger, better, and stronger because that’s where they’ve been working their entire lives is in the government. I’ve been out working in the private sector, paying those taxes, and frankly, I’ve had enough. (“Gubernatorial Debate”)

Ventura showed himself to be quick witted, as well. In one memorable exchange in the same debate, Humphrey and Coleman, who did their best to ignore Ventura, were arguing heatedly about Coleman’s knowledge of farm families, at which point the moderator interjected: “Mr. Ventura deserves a chance to get in on this match.” Ventura, eliciting the first hearty laughs of the debate, responded in his authoritative baritone, “Well, I think it shows obviously who’s above all this, doesn’t it?” After a brief pause, Ventura added, “I’m embarrassed as a United States citizen and as a veteran to what both of these two premier parties, the Democrats and Republicans, are sinking to today.” Ventura continued in this vein throughout the debates, reinforcing his plain-talking, anti-establishment persona. As Jon Jeter of the *Washington Post* reported, “In the theater that is politics, the big man with the cleanshaven head and the deep voice has a clear advantage over Humphrey and Coleman, both of whom are regarded as more cautious than charismatic” (para. 9).

Ventura clearly set himself apart from the other candidates during the debates, but his colorful personality was particularly evident on the campaign trail. In the last few days before the election, Ventura traveled throughout Minnesota in an RV on what he called his “Victory Tour.” Reporter Tom Hauser, who covered Ventura during the campaign and as governor, was along for the ride. A typical scene, as described by Hauser:

Ventura steps out the door of his RV, twirling his fist above his head and whipping hundreds of cheering students into a frenzy at Gustavus Adolphus College.

“This is a lot like National Lampoon’s Animal House,” Ventura says, joking about his raucous campaign road trip. “In fact, you can just call us the Deltas!” He climbs into the back of a pickup to address the crowd. “It’s kind of like going up to that top rope again,” he says, alluding to his wrestling days. “It’s been awhile since I did that.” (24)

Ventura’s message resonated with voters along the tour. On election day, 61% of Minnesota voters—the highest turnout in the country—cast their votes and elected Jesse “The Body” Ventura as governor. Ventura, who won 37% of the votes to Coleman’s 35% and Humphrey’s 28%, became the biggest political story in the country (“Minnesota Race Summary”). In post-election analyses, commentators attributed Ventura’s electoral success to a variety of factors, including voter dissatisfaction with the major parties, clever advertising (e.g., TV ads featuring a Jesse Ventura action figure taking on “Evil Special Interest Man”), shrewd targeting of demographic groups (e.g. young voters; the working class), and Minnesota election laws (which allow for same-day voter registration), but all agreed that Ventura’s colorful character played a major role. Political scientist Steven Schier asserted that Ventura’s greatest opportunity in the election was, in fact, his style, arguing that the “button-down” Humphrey and Coleman “provided a nice gray backdrop for Jesse’s campaign antics. Every act needs a straight man, and Jesse had two of them” (9). In comparison to his opponents, Ventura seemed not only more colorful but more honest. After the election, reporter Micah Sifry talked to a shuttle driver who voted for Ventura based on his honest, anti-establishment character. The driver explained, “If you had a choice between a guy who kept his childhood nickname, Skip, a turncoat who switched parties from Democrat to Republican, and someone who spoke honestly, who would you pick?” (40).

The spontaneous talk that earned Ventura a reputation for honesty continued through the night of his inaugural address, which he delivered without a prepared manuscript. The address lacked the polish of carefully crafted political oratory, marked instead by redundant wording (“I will do the best job I can possibly do to the best of my ability”), switches in verb tense (“I know when I coached football at Champlin Park High School, the young men that I worked with there, I always tell them. . .”), and incorrect usage (“I also want to thank many of my teammates, many of who are here”), but it was unmistakably Ventura. He promised to speak from the heart, just as he had on the campaign trail. In his book *I Ain’t Got Time to Bleed*, Ventura underscored the importance his unscripted campaign character, saying, “I’m very proud of the fact that throughout all the debates, I never used a single note. I never read from a prewritten speech. I spoke from the heart. . . . The people saw honesty in me; in the other two candidates they saw political rhetoric, the same shit they’d been having shoved down their throats for years upon years” (166).

Ventura's unscripted Jesse-talk was highly effective during the campaign, when he played the role of entertaining truth teller on the outside looking in. With the election, his role changed. As Paul Gray pointed out, Ventura was "poised to take command of the very power structure he so vividly and colorfully ran against" (57). Put differently, Ventura was about to become part of the system, and in so doing, would have to speak as a representative of a governmental office, not as an individual citizen. As a candidate, Ventura repeated the same core messages over and over in an effort to persuade voters to elect him. His subject was himself: his background, his experiences, and his opinions about topics such as taxes, education, and the other candidates. As governor, Ventura's speaking demands changed. In his first year, Ventura gave addresses ranging from the State of the State to remarks at the Asian Minnesota Business Summit to testimony on milk pricing. Ventura was expected to speak often, addressing diverse topics, audiences, and occasions; these demands necessitated the use of speechwriters. Furthermore, Ventura's celebrity profile attracted a great deal of media scrutiny, which reinforced the need for careful attention to the governor's speeches.³ During his early tenure, Ventura learned to work with speechwriters, and the speechwriters, including Steve LeBeau, learned how to produce texts for their atypical client, who was gifted at speaking off the cuff and eager to take every opportunity to do so.

Writing Lines for Jesse "The Governor" Ventura

When Steve LeBeau started his job with the Ventura administration, he had never written a speech for anyone. He became a speechwriter shortly after meeting Mae Schunk, who had just been elected Lieutenant Governor, at a local Hmong celebration. "I said, 'Hey, I want to work for you guys!' And she says, 'Well, do you write speeches?' And I said, 'I sure do!' [*laughing*], although I never had." LeBeau sent in a resume, and he was hired. As a member of the communications staff in the Ventura administration, LeBeau wrote speeches for the governor and lieutenant governor and also "Jesse-ized" speeches prepared by various state agencies, such as Transportation and Agriculture. Although various people contributed to the speeches, LeBeau noted that there "was a core of about four of us that wrote the vast bulk." LeBeau's speeches were at times reviewed by the Communications Director or Chief of Staff, or checked for factual accuracy by an agency in the administration, but generally, he said, he "didn't have too much oversight" and was able to give speeches right to Ventura.

In our interview, LeBeau noted that he was not responsible for major addresses such as the State of the State speeches, which are oriented more toward policy than personality. He acknowledged that speechwriters did produce a more "toned-down" Ventura for his most formal speeches. On those occasions, explained LeBeau, "you get a teleprompter, and you rehearse, and every word means something, and if you get it wrong—you're laying out your intentions, your aims, your goals that you want to accomplish in the next year or so, and you're not only letting lawmakers know what your priorities are, but you're letting the people know why it should be *their* priority." As attested by the texts of Ventura's State of the State addresses, the governor

was clearly speaking more as the voice of his administration than as himself on those occasions. The speeches included occasional Ventura-esque comments (e.g., “to paraphrase my good friend Arnold Schwarzenegger: ‘Unicameral will be back’”), but much of the material had a very conventional quality. In his 2001 State of the State address, for example, Ventura remarked that the state of the state “requires us to look bravely at the status quo, raise questions and challenge the complicated system we have today. As we work together to challenge this system, let us do it without mis information [*sic*] and mischaracterization of what this plan is really about” (11). Speaking a bit later on the topic of education, Ventura observed, “It is a different world today and will be a much different world tomorrow. And in education, as in business, it is the tomorrow that we must prepare for” (14). One would be hard-pressed to find the autobiographical Ventura uttering such statements, or calling for “constructive dialogue” (5), as he did in his 2001 State of the State address, but the speech was not about him; it was clearly a team effort designed to showcase policy, not personality.

If Ventura’s highly formal addresses, such as the State of the State, were the only evidence of the impact of speechwriters on his speeches, one might conclude that the practice of ghosting does, in fact, water down the character of the speaker. Although this may hold true with formal speeches, it does not necessarily apply in all speaking situations, as LeBeau’s experiences confirm. In the speeches that he worked on for Ventura, which ranged from a welcome for Vaclav Havel to a keynote speech for the Society of Professional Journalists, LeBeau found ways to capitalize on the governor’s distinctive style. One major advantage for LeBeau was his background in entertainment. Despite never having written speeches, LeBeau transitioned to his new job smoothly, thanks to a valuable set of skills and insights gained from his extensive experience in radio and his participation in community theater and comedy improvisation. LeBeau’s philosophy of “speechwriting as entertainment” enabled him, on a general level, to create an engaging voice in his speeches, and more specifically, to “Jesse-ize” those speeches appropriately.

General Approach to Characterization: Speechwriting as Theater

Peggy Noonan, former speechwriter for another celebrity politician, Ronald Reagan, once observed that “a speech is part theater and part political declaration” (68). In his interview, LeBeau articulated a similar perspective, drawing numerous parallels between speechwriting and theater when describing the general strategies he found valuable when writing for Ventura. An important aim, LeBeau said, was to create an entertaining world for listeners, much as a playwright creates a world for theatergoers. He explained:

There’s that sense in writing a speech that’s the same as theater in that you have to grab these people and carry them with you, whether it’s a play or whether it’s a speech. Unless you engage them, they’ll never be persuaded. People aren’t primarily logical. Logic is built on afterwards. I write with logic, but I grab with emotions and feelings and images. So what the theater does is it creates a little

world that you're in for awhile. What a movie does is create a little world. So you're all in the process of world-making, and I think there's a lot that those things have in common.

Part of the playwright's task in creating a captivating little world is to create engaging characters. Here, too, LeBeau noted a parallel to speechwriting, stating, "That's how I see the speaker, as a character in a play. Basically, you're writing a script, or a play, a theatrical piece for them." When LeBeau was in that "groove," he said, his writing flowed. "I don't know why, but speechwriting is the easiest thing in the world for me. Any other kind of writing is difficult—to turn in an assignment in school, or a commentary—but for speechwriting it would just flow because I could get into character and write."

LeBeau's theater experience, which included small parts in plays as well as arts coverage for the radio, helped him develop and refine his sense of how to engage an audience. He noted:

There was a period of five years where I saw two or three things a week, pretty much anything that happened in town. You just develop an ear. If you watch enough baseball you get a sense of the game. If you watch enough people delivering entertainment to an audience, you get a sense of it. . . . When you perform, or even when you're on radio or TV—whenever you're talking to an audience, there's something that clicks in that you get it.

What LeBeau "got" about audiences is that they want to be engaged by a speech and by the speaker. As he noted, "You don't want to be dominated by the audience. You don't want to just say what you think they want you to say. It's got to be genuine; you've got to express yourself. But they've got to like it. It's got to be one of these things that goes back and forth. It's got to circulate. It's got to be an interaction."

An essential strategy for creating this sense of interaction and putting listeners in the "little world" of the speech, according to LeBeau, is to write for the ear, which he learned to do by writing for radio. In his early days in radio, LeBeau quickly found that his style was not at all well-suited to the medium. He recalled:

When I first started I had no idea what I was doing, so I would write basically philosophical, graduate-style sentences, and the anchors and reporters would come to read the stuff and they'd say [*laughing*], "I can't read this. It's too long." And they would start marking things up, splitting the long sentences, first of all, and then using diacritical marks to point out where they would need to emphasize things as they read, which also I later used in diagramming speeches for people as a speech coach. I went to the library and got several books on writing for broadcast, and whenever they all agreed on the same thing, I followed that.

Books on broadcast newswriting (see, e.g. Block; Hewlitt; Thompson) offer the same basic advice on oral language: Use active voice. Place emphatic words at the ends of sentences. Avoid subordinate clauses. Avoid negative constructions. Include only one idea per sentence. In LeBeau's words, such language is "grabbable." News items must be constructed from "simple language—simple words, and vivid words," said LeBeau. "Radio is the medium of the mind,

because you're listening, and you supply the image with your imagination. It's the same thing when giving a speech, so you have to use vivid, clear, simple language to grab people."

If vivid, simple language grabs people, stories and strong thematic logic, which LeBeau associated with the "flow" of a speech, keep them inside the little world of the speech. According to LeBeau, stories are an essential element for engaging listeners. "You have to tell stories. You have to conjure up an image in the audience's mind in order to take them with you. If they're just there, they're going to daydream, or think about something else, or finish their dessert, or play with their shoe, or something. You have to engage them, first thing." Le Beau stated that after an audience is hooked, they need to be carried along by a clear thematic element. "A lot of people say, 'Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them.' You know, I don't do that exactly, but there is a certain mode of repetition that does work. I would go for a thematic repetition rather than literal repetition. I'm big on flow and logic, so that when you move on to the next thing it's seamless."

For LeBeau, creating a little world demands this sort of flow. The converse is true, as well: if anything breaks the flow, the world (i.e., the engaging experience of the speech) is shattered. This observation is particularly salient with respect to ghostwriting, which demands careful concealment of the speechwriter's presence. According to LeBeau, if a speech sounds ghosted, it draws attention to itself, and therein lies the problem. Drawing another analogy to theater, LeBeau observed, "If the lighting is so striking that you're paying attention to the lighting, that's bad. If the set is so outstanding that you keep paying attention to the set, that's bad. Everything has to mesh so that the story goes through. If an actor is overacting, if there's anything that dominates more than it should, it's bad." The individual elements of a production should not be noticeable but rather blend seamlessly together. "That's why if a person sounds like he's reading, that's bad." Well-rehearsed, extemporaneous-sounding speech is the ideal, LeBeau said, "because you don't want anything to interrupt the flow of creating this little world. It's got to be immediate, it's got to be there, and if anything jars it—oops!"

If listeners are distracted by the apparent mismatch between the speaker and his or her lines, their attention is momentarily lost, and it may be hard to regain. Drawing on his experiences in both radio and as a disc jockey in a club ("in the days when it was record-to-record"), LeBeau explained: "When you play records, while one is ending, you've got to start cueing the other one up, so that the sound overlaps, and there's not this pause. When there's silence, when there's a break, you leave the world. . . . Being in a world is being in a mood. If you break the world, you break the mood. And people, given the chance, will go on to the next thing." Put in the context of speechwriting, if the ghost makes a noticeable entrance into the world, listeners may well exit. If they do, one might conclude that they no longer find the world of the speech, nor the character at its center, compelling. As LeBeau pointed out, a great speech must, first and foremost, serve its purpose, "but to do that, it's got to be entertaining, it's got to get people engaged, and it's got to be given well"—a philosophy very much in keeping with the style of LeBeau's celebrity client, Jesse Ventura.

Specific Strategies: Characterizing Ventura

LeBeau's entertainment-oriented approach to speechwriting was certainly an advantage in his position, but adapting to the Ventura's delivery style took some effort. The governor's penchant for generating much of his speech material on the spot is attested by his collection of speeches, available on the Web site of the Minnesota Historical Society. Many of the "speeches" listed are simply talking points, and, as noted in explanatory remarks on the collection, prepared texts "often served only to guide Ventura's words" (*Governor Ventura Speeches Collection*). LeBeau confirmed that many prepared texts got jettisoned in the early days of Ventura's tenure.

At first, he [Ventura] didn't know any of the policies, he just knew what he believed, and that's why he threw so many speeches away, because it was better to just say what he knew rather than try to quickly absorb some new policy. But by the end of three years, he knew the stuff, so you didn't have to write it out. You'd have to write a bullet point and then put, "Talk about related incident when you were in the SEALs," and then he would just wing it.

According to LeBeau, Ventura became increasingly easy to write for as the speechwriters figured out what worked best for him, but the process was marked by considerable trial and error. Ventura's tendency to improvise introduced an air of unpredictability in his speechmaking. As noted above, the governor rejected some speeches entirely, opting instead to speak spontaneously. LeBeau recalled, for example, a speech prepared by Communications Director John Wodele for Ventura's appearance on the National Press Club. The speech went through major revisions, but Ventura never used it. "We were watching on C-Span, and he never got to it. Just did his Jesse-talk. Other times I've seen him walk into a place and one of his advisors would come up and say, 'What are you talking about?' 'Well, I'm going to this group.' 'Let me look at that. Oh, don't read this. Just wing it.'" Then Ventura would speak off the cuff, which LeBeau said was often better than reading the prepared speech.

To illustrate, LeBeau pointed to an address he wrote for Ventura to deliver to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a pro-Israel lobby. LeBeau did his homework, talking to Jewish friends and others whom they recommended as resources, and he found a number of ways to connect Ventura and Minnesota to Israel. In the text LeBeau prepared, Ventura was to draw a military connection between himself and Ehud Barak, stating, "I have not yet had a chance to meet Israel's new Prime Minister—A-HUDE BARAK. But I think I might like this guy. He's a warrior, the most decorated soldier in Israeli history, but his big fight now is for peace. Rest assured, nobody appreciates peace more than a soldier" (points 5 and 6). The text then pointed out the important business relationship between Minnesota and Israel, noting that trade and investment may be the best way to promote peace in Israel. Finally, the text addressed the Jewish community in Minnesota, mentioning prominent Jewish politicians and organizations. LeBeau ran the speech by his contacts, and they approved.

When Ventura delivered the speech, however, he created a very different "little world" than the one LeBeau created on paper. According to LeBeau, Ventura did not even see the

speech until he was enroute to the event. “He’s looking through it, and he says, ‘I don’t know anything about *Israel*.’ So he’s scratching all these parts out, and then gets into one part talking about Jewish Minnesotans, a few prominent ones.” As it turns out, the bit about prominent Jewish Minnesotans was about the only part of LeBeau’s text that survived. “When he gets there, instead of following the speech, he just does his Jesse-talk, just something that he pulls out of his hat that’s extemporaneous. Everybody loves it. And then he gets around finally to the little—‘Oh, and these Jewish people in Minnesota’—and then talks about them a little bit. And everybody applauded and sat down.” Listeners may have enjoyed the speech, but the reporters who covered it noticed something amiss. After the event, LeBeau said, “the local Jewish paper came out and said, ‘Ventura Addresses AIPAC; Doesn’t Mention Israel’ [*laughs*]. And so, I talked to the reporter: ‘Why didn’t he talk about Israel?’ ‘Well he didn’t read the damn speech. That’s why he didn’t mention Israel!’”

Although some of LeBeau’s work was for naught, he said that Ventura read most of the speeches he prepared for him during his first year in office. Some of those speeches were submitted by other agencies and needed to be revised to sound like Ventura. As LeBeau explained:

The way his speeches worked, usually it would be one of the agencies, like Transportation, or Education, or Administration, or Tourism—they’d always be competing to have him come and talk about their thing. [*Referring to a speech on housing*]: Housing got him to come and talk. That was tough, because their people would write the speech and send it to us, and then we’d Jesse-ize it, turn it into something that, first of all, people can bear listening to, and then make it sound like him. A lot of the speeches that came in were just terrible; they were not good speeches for anybody. Whenever they’d try to do rhetoric, get rid of that, point blank. Get the content, and then transform that into the speech that you wrote—a lot of transformation. That’s how a lot of Jesse’s worked.

LeBeau’s approach to writing in an engaging voice, described earlier, helped to turn Ventura’s texts into something “people can bear listening to.” As for making those speeches sound like Ventura, LeBeau had the good fortune of writing for a client with an easily replicable style. As humorist Garrison Keillor observed right after the 1998 gubernatorial election, “everybody in Minnesota can do a pretty good Jesse imitation” (which he illustrated by describing Ventura as “THIS GREAT BIG HONKING BULLET-HEADED SHOVEL-FACED MUTHA WHO TALKS IN A STEROID GROWL AND DOESN’T STOP”) (57).

LeBeau found another resource valuable in imitating the governor’s style: *I Ain’t Got Time to Bleed*, Ventura’s first book. “That was important in forming my style,” said LeBeau. He noted that the book, which Ventura described as being “mostly about me, about where I stand, and about where I came from” (4), was written for the ear, not the eye, and as such, it reinforced everything LeBeau had been hearing from Ventura. Consider Ventura’s thoughts on crime, as expressed in the book: “Shouldn’t criminals be expected to behave in prison? I think they should set it up so that if your sentence is three years and you misbehave, you’ll do five! That’s the

mindset we need!” (28). Or on gun control: “Do you know who was the last political leader to insist that every gun owner be registered? Hitler!” (31). Or on welfare: “Do you know what welfare is? It’s taking money from someone who is working to give to someone who’s not!” (33). LeBeau wasn’t impressed by the book initially. He recalled: “When I sat down to read it, I thought, ‘This is terrible. This is just terribly written.’ But then I thought, ‘Well, he’s just talking into a tape recorder,’ so then, if I imagined him saying it, it sounded like him, and I was able to finish as if listening to him.”

LeBeau’s art of Jesse-talk is well-illustrated by one of the first speeches he wrote for Ventura, a welcome for Czech President Vaclav Havel, who visited Minnesota in the spring of 1999. In preparing the speech, LeBeau did not meet with the governor until the last minute, which he said was typical. Instead, after receiving the assignment, he conducted the necessary research on Havel, drew on what he knew about Ventura, and found ways to integrate the two. LeBeau also looked to current events for inspiration. “Jesse was always in the news, and it was already pronounced by that time that he didn’t get along with the media, so I made a big deal about the First Amendment. It can go both ways.” In the speech text, LeBeau described Havel’s struggle to express himself in the absence of First Amendment protections, contrasting that with Ventura’s experience in Minnesota. He wrote, “Let me tell you President Havel that the freedom of the press is alive and well here in Minnesota. They might be a pain in the butt sometimes but they sure as hell are alive and well. I can tell you that much” (para. 5). Throughout the speech, LeBeau mimicked Jesse-talk through short sentences, simple subject-verb-object constructions, fragments, and rhetorical questions, adding colloquial expressions (“pain in the butt”; “sure as hell”) and sarcasm (“Imagine that, an intellectual who wants results!”) for good measure. The description of Havel’s situation in the Czech Republic reflected Ventura’s no-nonsense style of dispensing wisdom:

Yes sir, Vaclav Havel was a rebel, a “Truly Dangerous man,” an enemy of the state. An enemy of big government.

Do you want to know what happens when you think government can solve every problem? When government takes over the role of the parent? When government tries to tell you what to think and how to behave?

President Havel saw what happens. He also saw tanks rolling through the streets of his hometown, rolling over his neighbors and friends. (pars. 8-10)

Ventura had little advance time with the Havel speech, but he delivered it well, and it was well-received, leading LeBeau to speculate that, for this speech, Ventura may have rehearsed a bit.

LeBeau was not as satisfied with the outcome of another speech that he penned for Ventura, a keynote address to the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). The speech, “When I Hate the News Media,” was written in edgy Ventura style. Unlike the cautious ghosts that Ernest Bormann described, LeBeau opted for intensity, using the word “hate” (instead of weaker alternatives such as “dislike,” “am disappointed by,” and “find objectionable”) repeatedly in the introduction to describe Ventura’s relationship with journalists. In the text, Ventura described the process of finding a title for his talk, identifying a number of alternatives, including “I Hate the

News Media,” “*How I Hate the News Media*,” “How Do I Hate Thee? Let Me Count the Ways,” and finally, “*When I Hate the News Media*.” LeBeau said that Ventura himself was concerned that the speech might be a bit too edgy, but LeBeau, having just left the Board of Directors of SPJ, assured him that it was fine. The text featured short, punchy statements, humorous lines (e.g., “So tonight I’m going to talk about when it is that I hate the media. I should be finished in about three hours”), and rhetorical questions—eighteen of them. Despite the suitability of the style and subject matter, the speech was not as effective as it could have been (although it was quoted in the paper, which always pleases LeBeau). The problem, said LeBeau, was that Ventura did not rehearse the speech and thus failed to deliver it fluently.

An audiotaped version of the speech confirms LeBeau’s assessment. Fluency was indeed a problem, not because Ventura misread or stumbled over his words, but because the scripted quality of the speech was so obvious. The manuscript became particularly noticeable when Ventura began inserting ad-libbed comments, the first of which occurred during his introduction. Ventura initially got big laughs when he announced his original idea for the title of his speech: “I Hate the News Media.” He continued, “It’s simple, direct, it expresses how I feel. But then I thought, it’s not fully accurate, it was somehow incomplete. So then I thought about this title: *How I Hate the Media*.” Ventura received the expected laughs with this line, but by the time he got to the actual title, “*When I Hate the News Media*,” there was little response from the audience. Ventura then improvised and said, “It’s okay. I’ll tell you guys you can laugh, okay? This is light. This is fun tonight. But there’s also a message.” This line got the desired response but left Ventura with no smooth way back into the text, which resumed with the line, “That’s it, I thought, that says it.” The line, of course, followed from the title of the speech, not from Ventura’s spontaneous comment, thus interrupting that all-important sense of flow that LeBeau worked so hard to create. Although the speech was written in Ventura’s style, his ad-libbed remarks did not mesh well with the prepared material.

Ventura also broke one of the cardinal rules of speechwriting with this performance by explicitly drawing attention to his speechwriter. About midway through the speech, Ventura listed eight instances in which he hates the news media. The final item, “when you question my singing ability” (an allusion to an earlier dust-up with journalists over Ventura’s performance with Warren Zevon), drew laughter from the crowd. Departing from his script, Ventura remarked, “Pretty good writer, isn’t it? I liked it. That’s why I’m going with it.” With this unconventional move, Ventura defied the expectation that speechwriters should remain hidden, and in so doing, he jarred listeners out of the “little world” of the speech. This off-the-cuff remark, like the others in the speech, may have detracted from the flow of the speech as it was originally planned, yet at the same time, it contributed to the authenticity of the performance, conveying a sense of “genuine Jesse” to listeners. In calling attention to his speechwriter, Ventura effectively dissociated himself from his prepared text (the performance of which was falling a bit flat) while confirming that he had control over the lines he was speaking: “I liked it. That’s why I’m going with it.” The authentic Ventura thus put his stamp on the script while

suggesting that the less-than-stellar performance was attributable to a method of delivery demanded by the office but not ideal for him.

One final speech example highlights the challenge of working with the unpredictable Ventura. As illustrated by the Havel welcome speech and the SPJ keynote, LeBeau was never concerned about toning down the intensity of Ventura's character. Rather, he said, "the challenge was to keep him on message." LeBeau illustrated this point with a speech written by staff in the Department of Agriculture, which he had "Jesse-ized." On the way to the speech, Ventura, who was stuck in traffic, called LeBeau, who was waiting at the venue, with questions about the speech. LeBeau recalled, "I put a joke in there. There was this bumper sticker, 'My Governor Can Beat Up Your Governor.' For the first time in my knowledge he was going to be appearing with another governor, so I thought I'd put in a joke about that. He was questioning that, and I said, 'No, no, it'll be fine.' Actually, it went over well." LeBeau had to be a bit more resourceful in dealing with Ventura's next concern. Although the speech addressed agricultural policy, Ventura told LeBeau that what he really wanted to talk about was then-Mayor Norm Coleman's plan to raise taxes for a new stadium in St. Paul. "Of course, Jesse was against public funding for a stadium. So he says, 'Well, I thought I'd use this opportunity to do that.' And it was very hard to tell Jesse—to confront him, because he enjoyed battling you and wouldn't listen to you, generally. All I could do is say, 'If you could weave that into a soundbite that talks about your agricultural trade stuff so that they don't edit it out, then fine. But otherwise, that'll become the soundbite, and they'll ignore your agricultural trade stuff.'" LeBeau's strategy worked. Ventura delivered the speech as written, without inserting any comments about the stadium or Coleman. "You never know what he's going to do until he's up there, so I didn't say, 'Don't do it,' I said, 'If you do it.' I gave him an 'if-then,' and that seemed to work."

Although Ventura's unpredictability created challenges for speechwriters, LeBeau saw it as an asset, maintaining that the best parts of the governor's speeches tended to be the ones he generated himself. For that reason, speechwriters worked to develop a system that would present Ventura at his most authentic and allow them to make the unpredictable a bit more predictable. From LeBeau's perspective, the best approach was the talking-point speech, which he described as a sort of glorified outline that provided some structure yet allowed Ventura ample opportunities to talk off the top of his head.

As soon as we figured out how it worked, that he would spend half the time ad-libbing, then we would write it at the proper length. If he was supposed to talk for half-an-hour, you don't write a half-hour speech. You write a fifteen-minute speech and let him ad lib for fifteen; otherwise you'd go way long. And still, the most interesting part was the ad lib. You'd set up ad lib is basically what you'd do—give him the information to use and let him go from there.

In short, the talking point system allowed for much of the Jesse-talk to be generated by Ventura himself. Summarizing Ventura's strengths, LeBeau noted that he "was very good at playing to audiences in general. Maybe he didn't always get it right, but that's what he was a master at. He

became a professional wrestler because he knew what he was doing as far as reaching people. So we would never second-guess him about what would work.”

Conclusion

Shortly after his election as governor, Jesse Ventura appeared on *Meet the Press* with two of his fellow governors, Gray Davis of California and Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey. Ventura was his outspoken self, talking candidly with moderator Tim Russert about tax cuts and concealed weapons permits. After the show, Governor Whitman commented to reporters about Ventura’s willingness to speak his mind, saying, “He has a freedom of expression that many other politicians don’t enjoy to the same degree” (Hauser 107). That freedom of expression, unusual among high-profile politicians, is precisely what makes Ventura so interesting as a speechwriting client. As this study has shown, Ventura’s freedom to speak his mind allowed his speechwriters more freedom, as well. As indicated by interview comments and speech texts, Steve LeBeau was not at all the timid, character-muting ghost described by Bormann; rather, he had considerable latitude in penning engaging lines for his colorful client. Although Ventura’s character was toned down in some of his most formal policy-oriented addresses, other speeches clearly reflected his trademark Jesse-talk, thanks to carefully scripted lines or judiciously chosen talking points, which allowed Ventura to be himself while staying on message.

The interview with LeBeau does not tell the whole story of speechwriting in the Ventura administration, for he was not the only person who wrote speeches for Ventura. LeBeau simply offers one perspective on that process, a perspective that draws attention to the ethopoetic art of maintaining a sense of authentic character in a ghosted text. Impressions of authenticity depend, in large measure, on the degree to which a speaker appears to be speaking from the heart, something Ventura understood well. Recall his observation about the campaign: “I never read from a pre-written speech. I spoke from the heart. . . . The people saw honesty in me; in the other two candidates they saw political rhetoric” (166). As governor, Ventura could no longer make the claim about not using prepared speeches, yet people still saw honesty in him. His prepared speeches may not have featured his most provocative opinions (e.g., that “organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people,” as reported in a 1999 *Playboy* interview), but they nevertheless maintained a sense of “authentic Jesse” by mimicking the governor’s candid style and allowing for improvisation.

Granted, the process of characterization described here may offer limited guidance for speechwriters whose clients lack colorful personalities and improvisational skills, but the general principles of speechwriting that LeBeau emphasized throughout his interview are broadly applicable. LeBeau’s observations, for examples about writing for the ear, storytelling, the importance of practice, and the effectiveness of extemporaneous speaking provide powerful “real world” reinforcement of principles typically emphasized in public speaking classrooms. Such principles are audience-centered, to be sure, but as this study shows, they are also essential for the expression of interesting and believable character, a quality desirable not only in flamboyant celebrity politicians but in all types of speakers.

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Endnotes

¹ *Ethopoeia* is discussed as a virtue of speechwriting in Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s *Lysias*. Additional descriptions of *ethopoeia* can be found in the *progymnasmata* (composition exercises of ancient Greek teachers; see Kennedy for examples).

² See, for example, interview studies including Chapel, “Humor”; Chapel, “Speechwriting”; Einhorn, “Ghosts”; Einhorn, “Ghostwriting”; Medhurst and Dreibelbis, “Ghost”; Medhurst and Dreibelbis, “Building”; Smith.

³ Ventura developed an antagonistic relationship with the media early in his term as governor. For Ventura’s perspective on that relationship, see his book *Do I Stand Alone*, especially chapter 3, “Our Irresponsible Media.” For the opinions of journalists, see Coffman.