Mueller’s Testimony is Most Persuasive in Small Bites

By Richard Cherwitz

July 27, 2019

For weeks the media and political pundits have asked: Will the movie be better than the book? We now have an answer: It depends on which version of Wednesday’s testimony by former special counsel Robert Mueller before the House Judiciary and Intelligence Committees the public viewed.

Admittedly, the rhetorical expectations set for Mueller were unreasonably high; he has never been a dynamic speaker, and at the age of 74 he is far from a physically animated performer. For whatever reason, he was a reluctant witness. Moreover, it would be difficult for any circumspect person to remember the details of a 400-page nuanced report prepared by a large staff — let alone to succeed in bringing the report to life.

Nevertheless, as someone who has spent more than 40 years studying and teaching political communication, I believe the rhetorical difference between viewing the entire Mueller hearing versus watching the short highlights reel assembled later in the day by nearly all media venues was profound. The former was tedious, frustrating and certainly not compelling. The latter was surprisingly revealing and extremely potent.

What now is clear is that, if they wish the public to pay attention to Mueller’s report, which is required to move the needle on the question of impeachment and influence
the outcome of the 2020 election, the Democrats should put together a 30- or 60-second video of Mueller’s most pointed and forceful statements on Wednesday.

After all, it has become increasingly clear that most Americans no longer get their news from the print media. Moreover, in the era of President Donald Trump, the facts don’t speak for themselves. What transpired Wednesday, therefore, reminds us about the enormous rhetorical challenge faced by both political parties: How most persuasively can a message be framed visually?

In my view, Republicans have done a better job of meeting this challenge. No doubt this is due, at least in part, to the fact that Trump and his surrogates — inappropriately including Attorney General William Barr — always seem to be one step ahead of the game, preempting and restricting the potential persuasion of messages by the opposition. On the other hand, Democratic messages appear scattered, uncoordinated and thus less effective.

The potential impact of this rhetorical state of affairs is frightening. Perhaps for one of the first times in our country’s history, the truth and the facts could be undermined and subverted permanently by message shrewdness, timing and strategy. And that should be worrisome to all of us who care about democratic deliberation, regardless of our political ideology and affiliation.

Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor in the Moody College of Communication and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), University of Texas at Austin.