Why President Trump Can’t Rhetorically Construct Reality—the Intrusion of Facts

Richard Cherwitz

January 1, 2019

NOTE: “Dialogue and Discourse is a refereed publication striving to aid its readers in developing informed opinions regarding current events and issues of great significance and to nurture thoughtful discussion on such issues, to aid in the creation of a dialogue between opponents of thought and belief in a time where our culture and media suffers from intense tribalism and partisanship.” Versions of this op-ed will be published by the San Antonio Express-News and several other newspapers.
Permit me to begin this op-ed with two observations that initially may seem unrelated.

First, putting aside our political leanings, perhaps we can all agree that at the heart of current disagreements about President Donald Trump is the lack of a shared understanding of what constitutes “truth” and “facts.” For example, our differing understandings might explain why some believe the President of the United States and others don’t—and why Americans place faith in very different media outlets.

Second, I suspect there are readers who view university faculty as too often sequestered in their ivory tower. These readers often accuse scholars of writing about obscure and obtuse theoretical issues; their complaint is that academics write about matters that provide little insight into the world of prudential conduct where concrete questions impact our daily lives.

How are these two observations connected?

The present frustration over divergent notions of truth and facts, I believe, may prove that such negative perceptions about faculty are overgeneralized if not inaccurate, documenting how there may be nothing more practical and useful than theory. Allow me to make this case, drawing upon a recent tangible political example.
For over forty years I have studied and taught courses in political communication and rhetoric. From 1977–2010 I engaged in a heated academic debate in my discipline about the “social construction of reality” thesis.

Drawing on Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman’s book, “The Social Construction of Reality,” many scholars in my field undertook research that argued vehemently how rhetoric—what one writes or speaks—has the power literally to create reality, especially when others agree with what is said. As an epistemological realist, I took issue with this claim.

In several books—including “Communication and Knowledge: An Investigation in Rhetorical Epistemology”—and dozens of journal articles I suggested that reality stands independent of our discourse, i.e., as separate from what we say or write; hence, reality eventually intrudes and cannot as a result be willed into existence or wished away just because we say so. Stated bluntly, I contended that reality per se cannot literally be socially constructed; only perceptions of reality can be created rhetorically.
So why is this theoretical debate more than a tedious argument about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?

On December 19, 2018 President Donald Trump offered us the ultimate empirical test of the social construction of reality hypothesis—and one with huge consequences.

Reminiscent of Vermont Senator George Aiken’s proposal in 1966 that the United States should exit the war in Vietnam simply by declaring the U.S. won, Trump decided to withdraw from Syria, claiming we have defeated ISIS.

Not surprisingly, military experts in the Pentagon have since questioned the veracity of Trump’s claim, as well as noted the dangerous implications of withdrawing from Syria. Along with many Republicans and Democrats, they have argued that the United States has not defeated ISIS merely because the President of the United States said so.

What they are suggesting is that facts are objectively instantiated—and not simply a rhetorical construct. Put simply, their prediction is that ISIS again will rear its ugly head, perhaps even emerging stronger and more threatening to our national security.

From a political standpoint I agree. Moreover, as a rhetorician I believe this argument offers persuasive evidence proving that reality eventually does impinge and therefore rhetoric, no matter how eloquent or how many it convinces, cannot socially construct reality.
If what I am saying is true, what lessons are to be learned?

First, the frustration Americans now experience about our nation’s divergent and apparent irreconcilable perspectives on what constitutes facts and truth may dissipate. For instance, as reality continues to intrude and the force of that intrusion is felt, we may begin to reach consensus about the Trump Presidency and how to go forward in a less polarized and more civilized manner.

Second, those who critique faculty for the seeming irrelevance of their scholarship may start to realize the importance and usefulness of theoretical research and its potential to help us address practical problems.

And, in the academic world where I live, this may have the positive effect of encouraging scholars to become more engaged, educating the public about how what we do truly matters and is of enormous value.

REFERENCES—For a more thorough discussion of my realist rhetorical epistemology, please see:

BOOKS:


JOURNAL ARTICLES:


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.