Listen Carefully to Hearings

May 16, 2020

Communication scholars know that what isn’t said is as important as what is. Case in point. After Tuesday’s Senate coronavirus hearing, it was clear that we shouldn’t expect public health officials explicitly to undermine President Donald Trump. While they didn’t lie, these experts deflected questions pertaining to the president’s performance. They know the president and understand the importance of remaining on his task force. Hence, the witnesses were rhetorically cautious.

Bracketing the question of whether they are Vichy scientists and should have been critical of the president, American citizens and the media should read between the lines, drawing inferences from what these experts didn’t say — inferences relevant to whether this administration will effectively deal with the pandemic going forward.

For example, consider the wording of their responses to questions about contact tracing (as opposed to testing alone), comparisons between the U.S. and other nations that have done a better job of reducing deaths from COVID-19 and whether President Barack Obama is responsible for the current predicament. Their answers to these
questions illustrated how inferences are an essential part of holding Trump’s feet to the fire.

A close reading of the hearing shows just how incapable and unwilling Trump has been to address the crisis, even if the public health officials don’t — perhaps can’t — use that language. We need to be smart in what we take away from this hearing and how that may impact the nation’s ability to reduce fatalities related to COVID-19.

*Richard Cherwitz, Austin*