The Rhetorical Power of the President’s Daily COVID-19 Briefings

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Following almost all of President Donald Trump’s daily coronavirus briefings, journalists consume precious time and space highlighting and then harshly critiquing his unprecedented ad hominem attacks against respected news reporters.

Consider the two most recent examples of this. On Sunday Trump slammed and insulted the career of PBS's Yamiche Alcindor when she fairly questioned the President about his statement that he did not believe that governors actually need all the equipment they claimed they did. The President also denounced CNN White House Correspondent Jeremy Diamond when he noted that Trump had said he wanted governors to be "appreciative" of him, and that "if they don't
treat you right, I don't call." Rather than responding to the reporter’s question, the President asserted that CNN is fake news and that their ratings are low—both claims being non sequitur, factually untrue and ridiculous.

While few if any can doubt that these attacks are unprofessional, unbecoming of the Office of the Presidency and unacceptable, from a political communication perspective stories about the assault on reporters play to Trump’s strengths, giving him a rhetorical advantage. In addition, like it or not we must acknowledge that Trump supporters interpret such attacks as putting journalists in their proper place; they also view this as more evidence of why the news media are untrustworthy—a consistent theme of Trump’s discourse since he campaigned for the presidency.

Worse yet, these stories distract from more important stories that directly impact the lives of all citizens, such as the President threatening to cut off help to millions of people in two states (Washington and Michigan) because their governors aren’t deferential. It would be more prudent, therefore, to place attention on issues such as Trump speaking about tens of thousands of people dying in a callous and irreverent manner, as well as his inconsistent and untruthful messages pertaining to quarantines and ventilator production—both of which have tangible consequences for people of all political stripes.

While many have argued—and I agree—that the news networks should stop covering the President’s daily briefings, it is doubtful that will happen. However, as someone who has studied political rhetoric for
over 40 years, there is another alternative. My advice to the media and political pundits is: Following the airing of Trump’s press conferences (aka his new campaign rallies), write and broadcast stories focusing on the health of Americans, not politics. Why? Because people care deeply about the former and are turned off and alienated by the latter. In fact, Trump supporters become more emboldened and entrenched when they see such political coverage of the pandemic. In short, focusing on the politics of COVID-19 isn’t newsworthy and rhetorically is counterproductive to the goal of effectively addressing the health threat posed by the pandemic.

The time has come to remember an important rhetorical principle I often shared with my students, namely, that not communicating sometimes is more effective than communicating. By spending too much time talking about something we find undesirable, the more voice and power it is given.

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