“Why Trump's own dishonest words are his best weapon in the Russia investigation”

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Messaging matters. Since being elected President, perhaps well before, Donald Trump has a documented record of unethical behavior, racist discourse and disregard for the truth. Many Americans and much of the mainstream media remain perplexed that Trump gets away with this, wondering why the Republican controlled Congress refuses to rebuke him. For those of us who study communication, the answer is obvious and more rhetorical than ideological.

Aristotle in his treatise “Rhetoric” wrote about “the available means of persuasion.” Say what you will about Trump’s incompetence as well as his despicable words and deeds. That may not matter when we have a Chief Executive, arguably more than any other in history, who understands that survival and success may not be about facts but often are linked to controlling what language infiltrates the public sphere.

Several years ago I published research introducing the concept of “language-in-use.” I argued that ascertaining the rhetorical effect of presidential discourse by analyzing public opinion poll data and votes may not always be the only or best metric. Instead we also need to know whether and how a president’s language is disseminated and utilized by others, including the media. After all, the use and internalization of even a few of a president’s carefully chosen code words and phrases may reflect the internalization and acceptance of his larger narratives.

Not only is Trump astute about the power of language-in-use (what he calls branding), but he has mastered the art of utilizing that power. His employment of phrases like “witch hunt” and “spy-gate”—along with their dissemination by Trump surrogates—have had an impact, being internalized and repeated by others, thus eroding confidence in the eventual outcome of the Russia investigation. Until Trump’s critics understand this rhetorical source of his influence, he may continue to escape accountability.

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