Decreasing the Spread of the Coronavirus is a Rhetorical Problem

July 5, 2020

As a communication scholar, I believe that Senator Chris Murphy hit the nail on the head at Tuesday’s Senate Coronavirus Hearing. He explained why slowing the spread of COVID-19 is in large part a rhetorical problem.

As Murphy noted, we have “two parallel messaging operations”—leading to confusion and lack of compliance with CDC guidelines. President Trump refuses to wear a mask and overtly discourages people from doing so. His behavior and discourse directly contradict the message sent by the public health community.

Murphy suggested what exacerbates this problem is that the agencies represented by the experts have a social media following of 5 million people while Trump has an audience of over 82 million. The obvious questions, therefore, are: (1) Why aren’t Republican members of
Congress standing up and demanding the President to stop encouraging behavior that threatens the health of the population? They could enforce their demand by refusing to do business with Trump if he refuses to comply. (2) Why don’t the medical experts on the Senate panel and members of the President’s task force, like Drs. Fauci and Redfield, explicitly state that Trump’s political rhetoric undermines the health of the nation?

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