Mueller’s Testimony—the Rhetorical Power of Visual Messaging

By Richard Cherwitz

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For weeks the media and political pundits have asked: Will the movie be better than the book? We now have an answer: It depends on which version of Wednesday’s testimony by former special counsel Robert Mueller before the House Judiciary and Intelligence Committees the public viewed.
Admittedly, the rhetorical expectations set for Mueller were unreasonably high; he has never been a dynamic speaker, and at the age of 74 he is far from a physically animated performer. For whatever reason, he was a reluctant witness. Moreover, it would be difficult for any circumspect person to remember the details of a 400-page nuanced report prepared by a large staff — let alone to succeed in bringing the report to life.

The Impact of the Highlight Reel

Nevertheless, as someone who has spent his 40-plus year career studying and teaching political communication, I believe the rhetorical difference between viewing the entire Mueller hearing versus watching the short highlights reel assembled later in the day by nearly all media venues was profound. The former was tedious, frustrating and certainly not compelling. The latter was surprisingly revealing and extremely potent.

What is clear now is that, if Democrats wish the public to pay attention to Mueller’s report, which is required to move the needle on the question of impeachment and influence the outcome of the 2020 election, they should put together a 30- or 60-second video of his most pointed and forceful statements on Wednesday.

After all, it has become increasingly clear that most Americans no longer get their news from the print media. Moreover, in the era of President Donald Trump, the facts don’t speak for themselves. What transpired Wednesday, therefore, reminds us about the enormous rhetorical challenge faced by both political parties: How most persuasively can a message be framed visually?

Politicians as Marketers

Republicans have done a better job of meeting this challenge. No doubt this at least in part is due to the fact that Trump, as a longtime marketer, as well as his supporters, always seem to be one step ahead of the game, preempting and constraining potential messages of the opposition. On the other hand, Democratic messages appear scattered, uncoordinated and thus less effective.

The potential impact of this rhetorical state of affairs is frightening. Perhaps for one of the first times in our country’s history, the truth and the facts could permanently be undermined and subverted by message sophistication and strategy. And that should be worrisome to all of us who care about democratic deliberation, regardless of our political ideology and affiliation.
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