Words Matter, Especially Mixed with Lies, Exaggerations

Richard Cherwitz

March 15, 2020

Ever since Donald Trump took the reins of the presidency, he has been accused of incessant lying. This has prompted the news media, pundits and everyday citizens to ask: How can we trust the president of the United States on important issues when the occupant of the White House has a meticulously documented record of ignoring facts and failing to tell the truth?

The significance of this question is now more apparent than ever.

With the coronavirus threat, now classified by the World Health Organization as a pandemic, the United States is starting to feel the tangible and severe impact of not having done massive testing like other countries. In contrast to the United States, South Korea swiftly performed thousands of tests. Unfortunately, from day one President Trump failed to portray this health threat as a crisis; moreover, he did not immediately enact plans for handling the crisis.

Thursday evening Donald Trump spoke to the nation. The hope was that he would finally display an understanding of the facts and reassure us that the threat is being addressed. Instead, what again became clear is that Trump at best can only read dispassionately the words of others from a teleprompter.
Those words cannot change reality. They cannot will away the enormous problem confronting our country. For example, when the president suddenly and dramatically changes the tone and content of his message from what he has been saying for the past couple of weeks — including that some infected individuals can probably still go to work — Americans cannot possibly know if the nation is prepared and the commander in chief is now telling the truth.

It is reasonable to ask: How can the nation be confident the problem is being resolved effectively and quickly when, literally minutes after the president’s national address, White House and federal health officials are busily retracting and modifying the very measures Trump outlined. Among these corrected points: foreign travel restrictions and whether products would actually be barred from entering the United States?

In short, the president’s speech left Americans confused and far from reassured. Make no mistake about it. Not having a credible and trusted leader who can be believed by more than half the nation will continue to have disastrous consequences. Sadly, we are only now starting to comprehend the magnitude of those outcomes.

We should be worried and frightened by the fact that the president did nothing in his televised address to persuade the country we have the necessary facilities, personnel and equipment to treat the large numbers who inevitably will be diagnosed with the coronavirus — a warning that public health officials have been making since inception of the COVID-19 threat.

If any of us are not concerned, we should be. Some public health officials are beginning to wonder at what point the confusing and late response by Trump might translate into a quarantine for all citizens. Put bluntly, reality is impinging and words won’t change that — not even for a president who for his entire life, including his tenure in the White
House, has used rhetoric to undermine, avoid and deny reality. What’s happening no longer can be dismissed as fake news.

Words do indeed matter — and if that wasn’t obvious, it certainly is now.

Richard Cherwitz is Ernest A. Sharpe Centennial Professor Emeritus, Moody College of Communication, University of Texas in Austin, and founding director of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium.