The Rhetorical Significance of Witness Testimony in the Senate Coronavirus Hearing

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Communication scholars have long since known that what isn’t said may be as if not more important than what actually is said. Case in point.

After watching Tuesday’s Senate hearing on the administration’s coronavirus response, it is clear that we shouldn’t have expected any of the public health officials explicitly and directly to undermine the President.

While they are highly qualified, didn’t lie and were cooperative, these experts carefully chose their words and deflected, just as they have done regularly in the past couple of months, questions pertaining to the President’s performance which is a political matter.

After all, as members of the President’s task force they have watched closely Donald Trump’s behavior and know well who he is; they understand the importance of their remaining on his task force. Hence, these scientists continued to walk a fine line, being rhetorically cautious.

Let us bracket for a moment the ethical question of whether these officials are Vichy scientists and should have been more critical of the
President. Given the witnesses’ knowledge of the facts and the potential consequences of those facts for the health of the nation, this is a legitimate question.

My argument here, however, is that American citizens and the media have the responsibility and obligation to read closely between the lines, drawing reasonable inferences from what these experts didn’t or wouldn’t say. Those inferences are pertinent and vitally germane to the nonpolitical issue of whether this administration will effectively deal with the pandemic going forward.

For example, consider the wording of the experts’ responses to questions pertaining to:

- The country’s capacity to undertake contact tracing, as opposed to testing which alone will be insufficient to mitigate the pandemic.
- Comparisons between the U.S and other nations that have done a better job of reducing deaths from COVID-19, while at the same time avoiding economic collapse.
- Whether President Obama is responsible for the current predicament and failure by President Trump to respond quickly and adequately to the coronavirus outbreak.
- Whether the pandemic is “contained” or “under control” as President Trump declared when he confidently asserted: “We have met the moment and prevailed.”
- The precise health consequences of President Trump’s decision to rush the reopening of the country.
- The issue of the COVID-19 death rate and if it is higher than what has been reported officially.

The wording of the four witnesses’ answers to these questions illustrated the rhetorical significance of language choice and therefore
how inferences are an essential part of holding Trump's feet to the fire and making sure as few lives as possible are lost. As someone who for more than 40 years studied political communication, I believe a close reading of the hearing exposes just how incapable and/or unwilling President Trump has been in addressing the crisis.

This is a plausible conclusion even if the public health officials who testified on Tuesday didn’t—perhaps couldn’t—say so explicitly. The lesson for the rest of us: we all need to be smart and perceptive in what we take away from the Senate hearing and how that may impact the nation’s ability to minimize COVID-19 related fatalities.

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