Cherwitz: Trump’s words won’t matter until painful results felt by all

opinion
By Richard Cherwitz - Special to the American-Statesman

David Ramos Demonstrators hold posters of Donald Trump during the Women’s March on Jan. 21 in Barcelona.

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Like many Americans, I am deeply concerned by the president’s lying and lack of accountability for his language.

It is disturbing to hear President Trump continue to offer false claims about the size of his inaugural audience in the face of overwhelming, incontrovertible data while at the same time his chief spokesperson’s defense is the absurd claim that there are “alternative facts.” And it is especially
troublesome that the president repeatedly asserts the existence of widespread election fraud without offering a shred of credible evidence in support.

In response to these lies — or at least untruthful statements — the refrain of many is that we as Americans and the media should practice vigilance, constantly being on guard against Trump's habitual pattern of lying and exposing without hesitation or fear of retribution each and every instance of his lies. Vigilance, to be sure, is a noble democratic exercise—and perhaps even required. But, as a professor of communication for nearly 40 years, I believe that effective vigilance is an enormous rhetorical challenge — one that may be difficult to meet. How would that occur? What would effective vigilance look like?

The problem is that, when the press continues to expose Trump's lying, thus far it seems to have had little impact. There are several reasons for this. First, Trump has successfully tapped into the public's lack of trust in the believability of the media; it is easy, therefore, to dismiss charges of lying as additional proof of media bias and distortion.

Second, we know from research in communication that the constant barrage of these charges may produce desensitization, inoculating the public and making lying seem more ordinary and normal — and hence not a problem. In addition, when Democrats and Trump detractors uncover additional instances of lying, too often it is portrayed as an unthoughtful, knee-jerk partisan attack — one that directly feeds into Trump's narrative about the unwillingness of those who lost the election to accept the outcome. This in turn allows the president to deflect attention from the act of lying and its unacceptability.

Third, there are many who willingly acknowledge that Trump is indeed lying but say they don’t care and appreciate his penchant for speaking boldly and decisively. That, after all, is one of the reasons why some voted for him.

So, what can be done in the face of these challenges? As a teacher and scholar of communication, I am at a loss to detail specific messages and techniques that might enable vigilance to be more productive.

However, I do know that perhaps the only way Trump's lying will resonate is if it can be demonstrated to those who support him and those open to persuasion that his lying has real consequences — that it negatively impacts their lives in particular and concrete ways.

Several pundits recently have argued that in the 2016 election the game changed and Trump's words don't matter. While I cannot accept such a strong assertion — one that ignores and contradicts what we know historically about communication and politics — sadly I am convinced Trump's words may never matter until people feel the tangible and painful results of those words.

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