Language can distort political views

Richard Cherwitz, For the Express-News
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Photo: RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY /NYT

In an image provided by the Russian Foreign Ministry, President Donald Trump has a joke with Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, while other Russian officials look on. The words used to describe the investigation into Russian meddling in the presidential election can affect how one views the controversy.
Let me acknowledge that I did not vote for Donald Trump and disagree with the majority of his policies and actions. Nevertheless, I take seriously the presumption that one is innocent until proven guilty — whether the charge is legal or political.

As a communication scholar who studies rhetoric, my interest is in the impact of language. Research shows that the choice of what to communicate and when, as well as how information is framed, can make an enormous difference. Often the public is not aware of these effects. Consider a timely example:

In describing the emerging information about Trump and Russia, what some call “Russiagate,” writers and political pundits frequently employ “drip, drip, drip” language and other Watergate metrics to understand what is happening, as well as to offer predictions. I contend this language may be inaccurate and the Watergate analogy might be misleading, having unintended consequences. The strong and persistent stream of stories about potential wrongdoing by the Trump administration is better described as an open fire hydrant.

Why is this linguistic difference noteworthy? Why might rhetorical choices affect the outcome of the investigation? Because the onslaught of stories normalizes and renders less salient inappropriate and perhaps illegal behavior. If every evening there is breaking news, won’t the public become, if they already aren’t, satiated — viewing accusations against Trump as ordinary rather than unusual, worthy of close scrutiny and perhaps an appropriate response?

Similarly, doesn’t the sheer quantity of news stories give the appearance that allegations are political calculations and hence part of a larger effort to attack and undermine the president?

I do not believe the latter characterization of journalists — whose credentials and track records are impeccable — is true. But I wonder if we are becoming so inoculated by media coverage — combined with the nation’s political polarization preventing many from acknowledging the truth — that Trump’s transgressions will be ignored or, worse, tolerated.

Is it possible, for example, that vigorous efforts by professionally astute journalists to do their job and discover the truth could backfire and have an opposite and unintended effect, subverting and hiding rather than exposing and revealing the truth? I hope this is an unfounded worry and we will remain a country committed to finding the truth, allowing the facts to appropriate and fitting conclusions.

This commitment, however, requires us to be aware of the effects of communication. Hence, whatever the outcome of the Russian investigation, we must all practice good rhetorical criticism, being sensitive to what is communicated and what language choices are made. Regardless of our political affiliations, it is incumbent upon us to become cognizant of how language, even when we are not immediately or consciously aware of it, makes a difference — perhaps influencing important national decisions.

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