Focus on Why Trump Says What He Says, Not on What

Richard Cherwitz, For the Express-News

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Communication scholars have documented that language does indeed matter. They also understand that rhetorical analyses often provide important insights into the current political landscape that may not be possible via more traditional historical, political, scientific or journalistic accounts.
Case in point: President Donald Trump’s ongoing and accelerated response to the Russia investigation and attack on the investigators, as well as his apparent choice to make the case less about potential legal indictments by taking his claims directly to the court of public opinion where the only issue may be impeachment.

Since being elected president of the United States, perhaps well before, Donald Trump has a track record of unethical behavior, racist discourse and disregard for the truth. Many Americans and much of the mainstream media remain perplexed that Trump gets away with this, wondering why the Republican-controlled Congress refuses to rebuke him. For those of us who study communication, the answer is obvious and more rhetorical than ideological.

Aristotle in his treatise “Rhetoric” wrote about “the available means of persuasion.” Say what you will about Trump’s incompetence as well as his despicable words and deeds. These may not matter when we have a chief executive, perhaps more than any other in history, who understands that survival and success may not depend on facts but often are linked to controlling what language infiltrates the public sphere.

Several years ago I published research introducing the concept of “language-in-use.” Using President Lyndon Johnson’s Gulf of Tonkin speeches which were intended to create a crisis, I argued that ascertaining the rhetorical effect of presidential discourse by analyzing public opinion poll data and votes may not always be the only or best metric.

Instead, I suggested we also need to know whether and how a president’s language is disseminated and utilized by others, including the media. After all, the use and internalization of even a few of a president’s carefully chosen code words and phrases may reflect the internalization and acceptance of his larger narratives and arguments. Just like Aristotle’s theory of argument, language-in-use enables analysts to observe how audiences fill in unspoken and missing premises, thus bolstering and amplifying a president’s message.

Not only is Trump astute about the power of language-in-use (what he calls branding), but he has mastered the art of utilizing that power to circumvents facts. His employment of phrases like “witch hunt” and “spygate”—along with their dissemination by Trump surrogates — seem to have had an impact, being
internalized and repeated by others, thus eroding confidence in the eventual outcome of the Russia investigation.

Until Trump’s critics understand this rhetorical source of his influence, they may not be capable of discerning the best available means of persuasion, hence enabling the president to escape accountability.

It’s time for the public and media to avoid getting ensnared in the daily Trump soap opera. In fact, the public and the media must avoid the irresistible tendency to repeat the president’s language in an endless news loop; given the research by communication scholars (including George Lakoff’s on metaphor and framing as well as my own addressing language-in-use), all that does is further reinforce his narrative — which of course is counterproductive.

The more pertinent news is exposing the underlying rhetorical strategy behind the deluge of Trump’s statements and tweets. Rather than focusing primarily on “what” Trump says, with the repeated claim that he is lying (which is true), the media and others should spend more time discussing “why” he may be saying what he does, namely, to take our eyes off the end goal of preserving his presidency by circumventing truth and undermining our democratic values and institutions.

That’s the real story, one that increasingly must be told to the media and public by scholars and less politically vested observers.

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