What we can all learn from how AOC questioned Cohen

By Richard A. Cherwitz

MAR 01, 2019

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), pictured left, questions Michael Cohen, former attorney and fixer for President Donald Trump, during his testimony before the House Oversight Committee on Capitol Hill Wednesday in Washington, DC. (Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images)
As a communication scholar, I watched with interest Wednesday’s congressional hearing and Michael Cohen’s testimony. From a nonpartisan perspective, I was impressed by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s performance; she did a masterful job interrogating Cohen.

For over 40 years, I have taught a course in argumentation at the University of Texas. One of the major distinctions discussed in this class is the difference between argument as “advocacy” and argument as “inquiry” — the former focusing primarily on explicit appeals to persuade and the latter emphasizing discovery.

This distinction is especially useful when evaluating congressional hearings. For example, I have observed that more often than not members of Congress do not know how to — or won’t — ask genuine and useful questions. Their penchant is to practice argument as advocacy. Rather than engaging in inquiry, members spend their questioning time making speeches and asking rhetorical questions designed to lead to a predetermined political claim. They posture and dramatically draw attention to themselves — which, of course, is why the media is titillated and hence spends an inordinate amount of time including their questioning in a seemingly endless news loop.

On Wednesday, Ocasio-Cortez and perhaps a few others were the exceptions to the rule. The Bronx freshman practiced argument as inquiry. Her questions were probative and focused on discovery, setting up future lines of inquiry, obtaining new information and additional witnesses; unlike others, hers was not an exercise in self-promotion. I was delighted, therefore, to see that the rhetorical uniqueness of Ocasio-Cortez’s questioning was noted by the media and political pundits.

The larger point to be made, extending well beyond Wednesday’s Cohen hearing, is that too often members of Congress — Republicans and Democrats — don’t know how to or won’t informatively interview expert witnesses and persons with relevant personal experience. Whether the subject is environmental, social welfare or other important issues, senators and representatives engage in argument as advocacy; they handpick witnesses who reflect members’ partisan conclusions, cherry-pick answers, and generally substitute posturing, self-promotion and speechmaking for questioning.
This might explain why many of our public policies are not grounded in sufficient knowledge of the problems being addressed. Just imagine what these hearings would look like if their primary objective was inquiry rather than advocacy — if witnesses were allowed to testify and interact for the purpose of discovery. As my students learn, this rhetorical format for questioning leads to genuine persuasion and compromise — and that is the ultimate objective of argument and the basis for informed and reasoned decision making.

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