

Rhetorical Exchanges in Government: Yoho versus AOC

Kealani Smith

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Abstract

The evident shift in American political culture during the Trump presidency has produced various situations where damaging language has been used as an emblem of controversial behavior. Regardless of the issues that have presented themselves, opposing figures have set forth an example of maturity in the face of the aggressive bigotry that has occurred consistently through Trump's four years in office. My work follows a specific encounter between two political representatives that arose in July of 2020. Through scholars such as Krista Ratcliff, Jenny Edbauer, and Kevin Hubbard, I uncover how rhetoric shapes and often represents a group identity as an American society, and how this rhetoric takes its own shape and form as it travels through a rhetorical ecology. My work fills the gap for analysis of the effects of public rhetoric through the close evaluation of rhetorical artifacts within the context of congressional relations.

The year of 2020 has prompted a shift in the culture of American politics. Since the beginning of Donald J. Trump's presidency, it is clear professionalism is no longer a priority to certain political leaders. This is most evident in an exchange between Representative Ted Yoho and the New York Congresswoman, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (AOC), where a reporter from The Hill caught a heated exchange between the two, outside of the capital, in which AOC was going to place a vote. In the heat of the moment, Yoho had placed his finger in the Congresswoman's face, going on to state that she is disgusting for suggesting that poverty is linked to a spike in COVID-19 cases, as well as degrading her for actively advocating for police reform. Not only this, but as Yoho walked away, he cursed at AOC underneath his breath, referring to her in language historically used to diminish women. The report of their conversation thus prompted Yoho to apologize to AOC in the House of Representatives, in

which she later responded. Ultimately, my work will be rooted in the statements and rhetorical intentions of this initial exchange.

In the following analysis, there will be an emphasis on the use of Krista Ratcliff's book, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, as well as Jenny Edbauer's and Kevin Hubbard's writings on rhetorical ecology, regarding both Yoho's apology and AOC's response. Overall, there will be an identifiable connection to the concepts introduced by each scholar within every presented artifact. Moreover, my work underscores Ratcliff's rhetorical listening as it is regarded in her chapter, "Defining Rhetorical Listening" from the above-mentioned book, where she discusses the qualities in which rhetorical listening can enhance social interactions by introducing tactics such as promoting understanding, using accountability, identifying similarities and differences, as well as analyzing claims (26). These tactics are used for negotiation rather than stoking tension. Conjointly, it will be made clear that AOC and Yoho will exemplify different characteristics of rhetorical listening and how their separate uses of listening either contribute a positive or negative impact based on the already tense circumstances.

Additionally, my work will use Edbauer's rhetorical ecology as a guiding mechanism for identifying the influence of cultural rhetoric. Edbauer discusses this concept in the piece "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies" where she studies the issues of public rhetoric spreading and evolving in Austin, Texas. This essay will not only use Edbauer's analysis of rhetoric but also the work of supporting scholars such as Hubbard, where the discussion of public ecologies is further studied and extended into similar contexts of public turmoil.

Overall, each section of analysis will first present an artifact which will then be analyzed at length to identify the concepts discussed earlier. Lastly, this analysis will briefly underline how modern-day society has adopted AOC's rhetoric as an exemplification of rhetorical ecology. Through each artifact it will be made clear that Yoho's lack of professionalism and disrespect is evident in the rhetoric in which he chooses, while AOC shows self-awareness and responsibility through the purposeful speech with which she confronts Yoho. In sum, representatives AOC and Yoho will demonstrate how the use of rhetorical ecologies and rhetorical listening can empower people or adversely diminish and degrade them. The central claim I aim to prove is that through these rhetorical mechanisms, public figures hold the power to either strengthen their communities or continue to create adversity and harm them.

Yoho's Rhetoric as Virus: His Apology

On the floor of the House, Yoho made the following statement: "The offensive name-calling words attributed to me by the press were never spoken to my colleagues, and if they were construed that way, I apologize for their

misunderstanding...I cannot apologize for my passion, or for loving my God, or my country” (C-SPAN 2020).



Fig. 1. Representative Yoho and Hoyer on Incident with Representative Ocasio Cortez, C-SPAN.

Analyzing his words, it is clear that Yoho is not remorseful for his actions and wrongdoings, but rather for how they are perceived. Under Ratcliff’s view of rhetorical listening, defined as “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person” (17), Yoho’s response demonstrates his inability to fully understand the impact of his actions towards AOC. More importantly, his speech showcases his disregard for the power of his words. Retrospectively, rather than listening and reflecting to understand AOC in their conversation on police reform, he was only partially listening and responding as an attempt “to win” the conversation. Overall, stating “if [his words] were construed that way, [he] apologize[s] for their misunderstanding” exposing that he does not believe he is in the wrong, but the listener, AOC, is wrong for misunderstanding him. On the whole, it is clear that in passively addressing his wrongdoings, Yoho does not acknowledge whom he may have offended with his words. Yoho’s speech exposes that he was not listening to understand and create harmony, but he apologized for superficial means. Explicitly, he apologized as an attempt to repair his own reputation as a public figure, rather than to repair the harm he has inflicted through infectious rhetoric. In sum, Yoho is a definitive example

of passive listening that ultimately disempowers listeners by undermining the damage he has inflicted.

Moreover, Yoho's deflection and inability to acknowledge his violent language demonstrates Hubbard's idea of rhetoric within the social ecology as a "virus." Hubbard's piece on rhetorical ecologies summates how "[a] given rhetoric is not contained by the elements that comprise its rhetorical situation (exigence, rhetor, audience, constraints). Rather, the rhetoric that emerges has already infected by the viral intensities that are circulating in the social field" (14). Generally, the way that Yoho expressed his disdain was not only indicative of his character, but rather he has been "infected" by the rhetoric that openly insults women. As will be observable in the upcoming section on AOC, the "name-calling" aimed at the Congresswoman is indicative of a culture that has normalized dehumanizing language towards women. Overall, Yoho represents how degrading rhetoric towards women manifests itself within a political context. This manifestation of degradation showcases how rhetorical ecologies enable language to continually circulate, thus minimizing the social and political power of women at large.

Likewise, Yoho exemplifies how the casual manner of damaging language is symptomatic not only of a society that disrespects its women, but how an individual can be unaware of their contribution to misogynistic culture. Considering that Yoho is a public figure, his problematic behavior unfortunately serves as a model for members of our communities, meaning his disrespect towards women encourages others to disrespect women, and for women to then normalize this disrespect. Yoho actively shapes and fuels a culture that has historically discredited women in social and political contexts. As further noted by Hubbard, "Rhetoric does not merely occur: any number of seen and unseen hands actively create it" (26), and in perpetuating this violent language, Yoho actively shapes and fuels a culture that has historically leveled women within social and political contexts. Conjointly, Yoho illustrates how unknowingly one can become a "seen hand" in contributing to contagious rhetoric in both his original exchange with AOC at the capital, as well as through his shallow apology. Additionally, his inability to apologize when given an opportunity shows that Yoho feels no shame for his actions and sees no issue with the effects of his language. Therefore, Yoho does not only demonstrate that he has been infected by a culture that devalues women, but he actively encourages and validates misogynistic rhetoric.

AOC's Corrective Rhetoric: Her Response

It is not about one incident, it is cultural. It is a culture of lack of impunity, accepting of violent language against women, and an entire structure that supports that...I could not allow my nieces, ... the little girls I come home to, ... victims of verbal abuse and worse, to see that.

To see that excuse, and to see our congress accept it as legitimate, and to see our congress accept it as an apology and accept silence as a form of acceptance. I could not allow that to stand... and I do not need Representative Yoho to apologize to me; clearly he does not want to . . . (C-SPAN 2020)



Fig. 2. Rep. Alexandra Ocasio Cortez (D-NY) Responds to Ted Yoho (R-FL), C-SPAN.

Alternatively, AOC's speech demonstrates how to properly employ the tool of rhetorical listening, more specifically, the tool of understanding. As outlined by Ratcliff, AOC is "listening to discourses not for intent but with intent to understand not just the claims but the rhetorical negotiations" (28). Additionally, by stating that Yoho's apology was an "excuse," and underlining that "clearly, he does not want to," AOC exemplifies that she listened to Yoho's apology not for his intentions of apologizing, but for what he truly communicated through his shallow rhetoric. Furthermore, in highlighting this AOC acknowledges that while Yoho claims to apologize his rhetoric contains the contrary message of insincerity. Moreover, Yoho excused his behavior by choosing blindly patriotic rhetoric, stating "I cannot apologize... for loving my country." Overall, the Congresswoman demonstrates self-awareness by looking past the intent to identify the continuously misogynistic rhetoric veiled in Yoho's apology.

Additionally, this portion of the Congresswoman's response illustrates

her awareness of a rhetorical ecology and impact of rhetoric within society. This quote clarifies AOC's awareness that her response is demonstrating Yoho's apology should be tolerated and accepted. In "It Takes a Rhetorical Village: Reconstructing the Penn State Student Protests of 2001," Hubbard presents a similar idea that "rhetoric is infected by surrounding context, exposed to circumstances and contingencies from which it was created, and in return infects the audience and develops a new and unique form" (26). Specifically, AOC understands that her audience is other women and young girls who will look to her response as a form of guidance for dealing with sexist and insincere behavior. She uses her rhetoric as a corrective response and as a demonstration of self-respect and awareness in the face of Yoho's disingenuous speech.

Adding upon this idea of AOC giving a "corrective response," it is also clear that she intentionally uses her speech to empower women. In combining both her skills of rhetorical listening as well as knowledge of the rhetorical ecology, she recognizes her role as a public figure. This is clearly stated in her words, "To see that excuse, and to see our congress accept it as legitimate . . . I could not allow that to stand . . . and I do not need Representative Yoho to apologize to me" (C-SPAN). The Congresswoman models the ways that women could speak for themselves in times of injustice and in the face of dehumanizing language. Therefore, AOC uses her rhetoric as a catalyst to empower the portions of society that often face this discriminatory language. She uses her speech and her actions as a public figure as a demonstration of strength and bravery by not allowing disrespect. In analyzing AOC's tactful use of rhetorical ecologies and rhetorical listening, it is clear that the counter statements she gives intentionally strengthen a portion of society often subjected to name-calling and societal limitation by derogatory language. Not only this, but by simply putting forth the effort to highlight the problems of misogynistic American culture she sets forth a display of courage, noting that her incident with Yoho is not independent, but rather a common experience amongst communities of women. It is this courage that prompts communities of women to feel empowered by her strength and create further social change.

The Rhetorical Ecology: A Brief Glimpse at AOC's Impact

While throughout this analysis it has been made clear that AOC's response shows an awareness of the rhetorical ecology, it is important to recognize that her statements are influential beyond her rhetoric. The rhetorical ecology has been cited as a "virus" that "evolves" with every piece of rhetoric it touches (Edbauer 14). Quickly following her response, many people have adopted her words, wearing them as stickers (*see fig. 3 and 4*), t-shirts, and various memorabilia. Hubbard states in his discussion of a rhetorical ecology and the protests at Penn State that "developing ritualized behaviors in oneself, and in others was Confucius's preferred method of gradual, but dramatic, social change" (29).

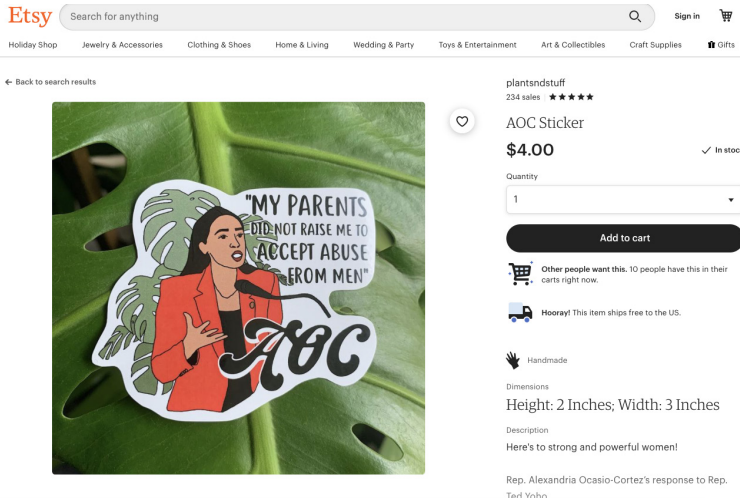


Fig. 3. “AOC Sticker.” Plantsandstuff,



Fig. 4. “Citizen Ruth Stickers 2.0.” The Wildflower.

Overall, it is clear by the branding of her rhetoric, that AOC’s speech which critiqued misogyny and the cultural perpetuation of disrespecting women, has now been introduced into the rhetorical ecology of modern society. In continuation with this, in reclaiming the words of the derogatory language she was confronted with, AOC has taken a part in the “reshaping” of rhetoric, as discussed in previous sections. Today’s rhetorical ecology has taken the name-calling as used by Yoho and reshaped its meaning to empower her community, as

evidenced by the branded sticker below. While creating that steady social change, AOC has served as inspiration for those confronting disrespect and sexism.

Rhetorical Exchange in Government: Conclusions on Listening and Ecologies

Ultimately, the discussion on Yoho and AOC showcases two different communication approaches and two components of rhetoric: rhetorical listening and rhetorical ecologies. Reviewing the use of rhetorical listening, Representative Yoho does not demonstrate a genuine interest in understanding the power of his rhetoric, particularly the woman-slandering words he accosted AOC with, nor does he leave space for negotiation or understanding to reach common ground. Rather, he continually makes excuses, and appeals to an American idealization, by arguing for his “passion” and “for loving my God, or my country.” This empty rhetoric showcases a lack of responsibility and remorse. Alternatively, AOC utilizes Ratcliff’s definition of understanding as a means to analyze not the intent of Yoho’s words, but to analyze the core message he is delivering. The understanding that AOC implements allowed her to correctly identify Yoho’s insincerity; therefore, she knew how to respond appropriately.

Secondly, the role of the rhetorical ecology is present in two distinct ways. Primarily, Yoho’s use of words that purposely diminish women is an example of how rhetoric continues to circulate with purposes of diminishing women in Western society. Adversely, AOC presents the awareness that her words send a message to other women, and that standing in response to Yoho demonstrates how to call out misogyny. Moreover, her rhetoric demonstrates that words can spread through an ecology, gaining a new meaning along the way. In reference to the final section concerning the branding of AOC’s rhetoric, her awareness of her words’ power has supported other people in refusing the discrediting of women. Conclusively, this exchange between Representative Yoho and Congresswoman AOC establishes the negative and positive consequences of employing rhetorical listening and the presence of rhetorical ecologies.

Further Implications and Research

While I have studied the interaction between Yoho and AOC, further research can be done to include other responses from congress members reacting to this incident. Analysis of responses from Representative Ihlan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, or the many other women that stood in support of AOC would extend the examples of rhetorical ecology. Similarly, further research can also be done to see how AOC’s rhetoric has circulated throughout social media, most notably on Twitter and TikTok. AOC has continually set forth an example of confidence and excellence when meeting with the Republican party, which has repeatedly shown her blatant disrespect. Alternatively, other research can be done to present

the opposite effects of negative rhetoric trickling down through phrases such as “stand back and stand by” from former President Trump, which he used when referring to white supremacist groups during the 2020 presidential debate. Regardless, the work that I presented showcases the use of positive rhetoric as spread by AOC, but further studies can continue to deepen understanding of rhetoric within government and culture.

In summation, the rhetoric that our political leaders choose to speak with is indicative of our identity as a society. Whether a state representative speaks slurs under his breath, or another stands for the rights of women, our leaders’ words exemplify our cumulative identity as a community. Since we as American people vote our leaders into office, these leaders represent our values, our hopes, and our culture. Understanding the impact of rhetorical mechanisms such as rhetorical ecology and listening can help identify potential leaders who use these tools as means to empower society. Overall, it is crucial to vote for those who act as the catalyst for social change, rather than those who harbor rhetoric that disempowers communities. As members of society, we must consider not only a leader’s political values, but how these potential leaders conduct themselves in social situations. Most important is how they contribute to social movements that encourage respect for the differences of others and foster an environment of inclusivity.

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Kealani Smith is a senior undergraduate student majoring in Film as well as Writing and Rhetoric. Her academic interests include film editing as well as copyediting. She hopes to combine her enthusiasm for both film and writing through a digital platform, once graduating. In her free time, Kealani enjoys taking dance classes and walking her two dogs.