

Middletown author works to counter divisive political talk

Ruud will examine the consequences of words at Hood College on Sunday

by Katherine Heerbrandt | Staff Writer

Polarizing speech, purposely divisive and often antagonistic, and its consequences have been studied and debated among academics for years.

By bringing those lessons to light for the average person, linguist and German scholar Kathryn Ruud of Middletown hopes to foment a positive change in how people argue the issues and policies of the day.

"Information about polarizing talk and the strategies to resist it don't belong in the ivory tower, but rather they belong to all of us," she said in an interview. "It is important for the average citizen to have that knowledge, especially today."

Ruud contributed the first chapter, "Liberal Parasites and Other Creepers," to "At War with Words," a textbook she said is used in college classrooms.

She has since furthered her study and honed a speech she wrote 15 years ago on polarizing language. "Protecting Our Democracy; Understanding Political Talk in the Age of Infotainment" offers Ruud's take on trends in political dialogue and solutions for reviving civil and respectful debate.

She will give her talk in the Whitaker Campus Center at Hood College, 401 Rosemont Ave., Frederick, from 4-6 p.m. Sunday. The presentation is free.

Co-sponsored by Women in Black Frederick, Ruud's presentation is part of programming for the Season of Nonviolence 2011, which takes place from Jan. 30 to April 4.

Women in Black Frederick is part of an international grassroots movement of women united in a "commitment to peace, restorative justice, human rights and nonviolence," said co-coordinator Andrea Norouzi.

Norouzi said she recommended Ruud's presentation to Hood College after hearing her speak to the League of Women Voters in 2010. The speech, she said, is "a call to each of us to recognize the specific tactics being used, to understand their impact, and to hold our media and elected officials accountable for speech that manipulates, demonizes and polarizes. It also addresses the vital role each of us can play individually when we are confronted by polarizing speech."

Ruud said polarizing talk affects everyone, and that "the way it's being generated is fueled by the information age. We are bombarded with huge amounts of information ... and we can only hold so much."

One way people simplify is by stereotyping, a human impulse to make sense of things that is also problematic, she said.

She said her beliefs are not bound to partisan politics, and that she offers strategies to counter destructive politics for all people, regardless of political or ideological affiliation. "My antagonism [on this issue] comes from totalitarianism of the left and the right," she said.

She said extremists on both sides of issues, including radio talk show hosts Rush Limbaugh and Ken Hamblin, and former and current MSNBC political commentators Keith Olbermann and Ed Schultz, resort to the polarizing tactics of propaganda to drive their points home — and to earn a living.

The model for divisive political talk shows, she said, is a business model, not an ideological one. "The strategies of polarization are marketing strategies, but on the consumer end, people don't necessarily understand that," she said.

Regardless, the result is that extreme views on either side of the spectrum create "in-groups" and "out-groups."

The goal of such propaganda throughout history has been to inflate the "in-group's" credibility while demean the credibility of the "out-group."

"Critics are viewed as a threat to the in-group," Ruud said. "Opponents are made out to be despicable."

In conservative political talk radio hosted by Limbaugh and others, Ruud said, she is interested in not so much what is being discussed, but how.

The how of extreme political speech encompasses not just strategy but tone, with the resounding message being that "virtuous conservatives are locked in a battle with vice-ridden liberals," she said.

Certain left-leaning commentators, such as Olbermann and Schultz, convey the opposite message.

Ruud, who holds a master's degree in linguistics and German, believes that "assertive civility" and understanding that words have consequences is key to countering divisive tactics. Becoming more savvy consumers is a personal responsibility we need to take seriously, she said.

"We have to understand that this is a challenge to us," she said. "We have to understand that we can't just go along to get along, but have to raise our own voices ... because we are all parties on the side of democracy."

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