

Speaker says less polarization needed in dialogues

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Words can be used to bring people together and divide them. Language can be a weapon or a comfort, depending on how we use it.

Today, as we are bombarded with information — and misinformation — less polarizing dialogue may help foster a true democracy.

Kathryn Ruud, a linguist who has studied the manipulative language used by fascists in Germany and communists in East Germany, spoke on the need for civility in language. We can differ in ideas, she said, but not by demeaning others or using the latest verbal clichés because they are fashionable.

“I’m not seeing neofascists or neo-Nazis,” Ruud told an audience at Hood College on Sunday. But she is seeing political commentators and politicians from both parties and various ideologies sniping at each other and failing to solve problems facing the nation today.

“Linguists look at language as meteorologists look at clouds,” Ruud said. “There are different kinds of clouds, and they are always changing.”

Most listeners have a “built-in baloney detector,” Ruud said, but so much information today is complex, and often politics and business and more are being blended into messages over the airwaves.

Ruud showed a clip of conservative commentator Glenn Beck, using an ad for a gold investment firm, seamlessly integrated into a talk on immigrants and how to keep gold as a way to ensure financial survival.

Ruud also showed liberal commentators ranting about conservatives, calling them names and demeaning them. Political pundits have become the “new pro wrestlers,” Ruud said, noting a recent article in *Talkers*, a trade magazine for commentators.

“It has become entertainment,” Ruud said, “the host must incite the listener, and then when something backfires, simply say it is just entertainment.”

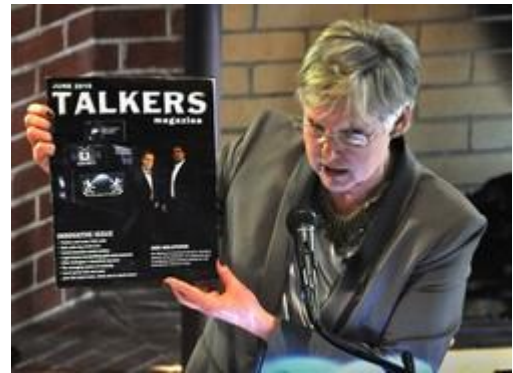


Photo by Sam Yu

Linguist Kathryn Ruud was the guest speaker at Hood College Sunday afternoon, talking on the subject of "Protecting our Democracy: Understanding American Political Talk in the Age of Infotainment." Here, Ruud holds up a trade publication for talk radio.

Fear of government has become a major issue for both liberals and conservatives, Ruud said. There is a fear of totalitarianism, either from the left or right.

Adolf Hitler remains the ultimate example of manipulation by words, Ruud said. Fluent in German, she has talked with Holocaust survivors and those in Germany who followed Hitler as youths. She noted that Hitler would change the tone of his voice when speaking to supporters or demeaning his enemies.

“Hitler was the first to use such words as ‘parasite’ and ‘vermin’ when speaking about Jews or the allies. Before that, those terms were only biologically used,” Ruud told the audience.

Hitler also twisted words to new meanings, she said. “Ruthless and fanatically loyal were once negative terms, but Hitler used them in a positive way to say his followers were strong in those ways. Words such as ‘kind’ and ‘caring’ were seen as weakness by Hitler, though they should have meant positive things.”

Ruud said she was an advocate of free speech and would not condone censorship. “We need to criticize our own party’s extreme voices,” Ruud said.

“America has some very pressing problems, and we need to work together to address them,” Ruud said. “We need to move forward, not more to the left or right.”

Political talk is arguing toward a solution, Ruud said. Tribal talk — dividing ourselves into specific groups — is only fighting with words.

“Free speech is the fearless expression of opinion, but it is important how we express that opinion,” Ruud said. For more information visit stoppolarizingtalk.org.

Comments extracted from web page of article, with comments from Kathryn identifying polarizing strategies:

March 28, 2011 @ 02:19 AM: **nwyrkghos**

Yes, the right wing loon tea bags have gotten down right nasty with their lies and falsehoods. Faux News has gone gutter and the uneducated trailer folk tea bags lap it up.

(KR: "loon" = mental illness/disease, dehumanization, "uneducated trailer folk" = stereotyping, "tea bags" = vulgar, degrading label, invites revulsion)

March 28, 2011 @ 06:50 AM: **mtairycitizen**

I guess it is OK for Time magazine to post on their cover "Dead Man Walker. That sure is civil. Once again the libs talk a big story and expect others to be civil. -- Funny the lawmakers in Wis were getting death threats and the libs just laugh it off. (KR: poster is right to point out that mean-spirited characterizations come from both sides. My impression is that no one was "laughing off" death threats.)

March 28, 2011 @ 06:51 AM: **mtairycitizen**

Wow calling Fox news Faux news again. It is your goal to say at least one a hour for the rest of your life.

March 28, 2011 @ 06:53 AM: **mtairycitizen**

Another liberal wrapping herself in the non partisan label. Funny how she forgot to mention the president saying, "Republicans have to sit in the back". or "If you bring a knife we bring a gun". Or how about Obama saying "Bitter people clinging to guns a religion."

(KR: The first is a metaphor that is unwise for any president to use, I think. The second statement is stereotyping, and was seen, understandably, as an insult to many rural Americans.)

March 28, 2011 @ 08:13 AM: **ratbird66**

libtards need compassion, m'kay.

(KR: The use of terms like "Libtard" or "Conservatard" is demeaning and hurtful to those who are genuinely intellectually challenged. Its use is also hurtful to their families and friends. I think of my friend Penny, at the Y, a Special Olympics swimmer.)

March 28, 2011 @ 12:06 PM: **man_on_thestreet**

nwyrkghos ~~ Can you provide us specific examples of these lies, etc. please? Thanks

March 28, 2011 @ 12:17 PM: **boycerensberger**

Ratbird66 should have been at Ruud's talk. She specifically cited the use of "Libtard" as an example of polarizing talk, right along with "Rethugs," for Republicans. Neither of these ugly words moves the debate forward. There are two main ways to carry out political debates. We can bash each other with insults, which persuades nobody to change and, in fact, hardens positions. Or we can discuss the genuine problems that face our society, using verified facts and respect for all parties and stakeholders. Anyone interested in learning how to move forward is invited to a workshop Ruud is holding on April 10 at the downtown Frederick library, from 1:30 to 4:30.

(KR: This is accurate. I discuss both derogatory terms in my talk, and many others, used by both the left and the right. See my video, part I.)

March 28, 2011 @ 12:32 PM: **thebensonfamily**

"I'm not seeing neofacists or neonazi's". Must not read the comments here or heard of the BOCC. **Neofacist is exactly what they are.** Give the government to private business as they know best. Not the people who they promised to serve.

(KR: These loaded labels such as "fascist" and "Marxist" are being thrown around way too carelessly. I spent years studying these concepts, and I lived in Germany and spoke with many who experienced both totalitarian systems. Fascism is not the same as privatization.)

March 28, 2011 @ 12:47 PM: **ratbird66**

Dan, since when would you want anyone from the gummint to come fix anything around your house? Privatization is the American Way, m'kay.

March 28, 2011 @ 12:52 PM: **winstonsmithy**

I see nwyrkghos took a bit of time from his job at Media Matters to express his opinion.

Advertisement deleted (KR)

March 28, 2011 @ 12:59 PM: **ratbird66**

boycerensberger did she happen to explain the left leaning appeal for the usage of "ditto head" & "teabagger"? I bet not, m'kay

(KR: "Ditto-heads" is a term I have heard Limbaugh listeners use. Again, "teabagger" is a derogatory, vulgar term. See "Urban dictionary". I tend to use "TP" just as I use "GOP".)

March 28, 2011 @ 04:13 PM: **man_on_thestreet**

thebensonfamily ~~ Then you must think all government at all levels must be Neofacist. They ALL sub out to private industry. Nobody has suggested subbing out legislative, executive, or judicial duties to private industry. Just the work to those who can do it more efficiently. Will you really be able to tell if the lawn gets mowed by a landscaper? Do government plumbers and electricians do anything different than a privately employed counterpart? Can you tell which roads get plowed by county trucks versus private contractor trucks? You read way too much into the concept of privatization.