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'Democracy Now!' host to discuss media, dissent in America

By Amber Lester amber@rocktownmail.com

Some of Amy Goodman's best compliments have come from world leaders. Former President Bill Clinton called her "hostile, combative and even disrespectful." The Indonesian military called her "a threat to national security." Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich told her he warned his mother to avoid reporters "because of people like you." Needless to say, Goodman interprets praise a little differently than most people. Goodman, host of "Democracy Now!," will speak at the Community Mennonite Church at 7:30 p.m. on Friday as part of a fundraiser for WEMC, the public radio



Amy Goodman will discuss the media and changing social climate Friday night.

Courtesy photo

station owned by Eastern Mennonite University. She launched "Democracy Now!" for Pacifica Radio in 1996. Since then, she has covered the aftermath of oil spills in Nigeria, traveled to Peru to interview political prisoner Lori Berenson and remained at her radio station, a restored firehouse, for days after Sept. 11 to

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Goodman's talk Friday will focus on the importance of independent media in a time of war. "Corporate-sponsored media has reached an all-time low," she said during a telephone interview from her office in New York on Tuesday. "They have acted as mouthpieces of the government, which defeats the purpose of the media. It is the media's responsibility to hold government accountable."

She will speak in support of WEMC, a station purchased by alumni for EMU 51 years ago. Officials at EMU are discussing the possibility of licensing WEMC's frequency to WMRA, James Madison University's NPR station. New management could cause programming changes, including the possible removal of "Democracy Now!" from the schedule, according to Christine Reimer Wagler, a graduate student at EMU who was once a volunteer at WEMC. Goodman says WEMC's unique voice should be preserved.

"I think it's always important to have stations expressing the voices of the community with national, international and local programs," Goodman said.

History of support

This isn't the first time that Goodman has visited Harrisonburg in support of WEMC. "Democracy Now!" was pulled from WEMC's schedule in 2004, prompting her to deliver a speech at Community Mennonite Church that September. Wagler invited Goodman both years. "In my personal opinion, this station at EMU represents a very diverse group that are not heard on NPR or anywhere else in the Valley," Wagler said Monday. "EMU is part of this community, and has such a distinct and important voice to offer and they also have a lot to learn from the community they're in."

In 2004, Goodman spoke about the importance of freedom of speech through media outlets and across party lines.

Now, she says the focus will reflect changes since then, as outlined in her second book, "Static: Government Liars, Media Cheerleaders, and the People Who Fight Back."

"The new book talks about how we live in a high-tech age and yet all the media gives is static," she says. "The dictionary definition of static is 'showing little or no change.' "

She will discuss new developments in the past two years, including the revelations about government wire-tapping, crackdowns on dissent and analysis of recent news coverage.

"There are huge crackdowns on dissent," she says. "There is a growing movement of returning soldiers who oppose the war — a big, untold number. I'll talk about many of those examples, and about the rising casualty figures, and the number of disabled veterans."

Although "Democracy Now!" has been dropped from the Harrisonburg market before and could be lost again, Goodman doesn't think her show is polarizing listeners. "I've had the opposite experience," she said. "Our audience is growing — we're on 500 stations now. People are watching the show on television, and listening on the radio and online. The positive response is overwhelming."

She says her show reaches across boundaries, including party lines. "The response, across the spectrum, whether Democrat or Republican

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or Independent or whatever, is amazing," she said. "People are concerned about war, about privacy. We are not the tired set of the same old voices that know so little about so much. People really respect that."

For more information about Goodman's talk, contact Christine Wagler at 421-5419. A free-will donation will be taken for WEMC. To listen, watch or read transcripts of "Democracy Now!," go to www.democracynow.org.

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