

BLAKE FONTENAY | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Why don't people trust media, colleges? NYT columnist Frank Bruni will tell you. | Opinion

Bruni plans to share his views on the subject as part of the Rappaport Speaker Series. He will give a talk March 25 at Temple Beit HaYam of Stuart.



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Key Points

Frank Bruni, a New York Times columnist and Duke University professor, will hold a March 25 talk as part of the Rappaport Speaker Series.

The talk will be held at Temple Beit HaYam of Stuart, 951 SE Monterey Commons Blvd., beginning at 7 p.m. that evening.

Bruni will discuss why public confidence in the media and higher education has eroded in our country.

As a New York Times columnist and a professor at Duke University, Frank Bruni can relate if people are a little bit leery about what he writes and says.

After all, he works in two industries that have trust issues. According to a 2023 Gallup poll, only 36% of Americans have confidence in higher education and only 31% expressed confidence in the media.

That's a big change from a half-century ago, Bruni noted in a recent interview, when more than 60% of Americans had a high degree of faith in the media.

The 1970s were the heyday of American journalism, when reporting by the Washington Post and other media about the Watergate scandal eventually led to President Richard Nixon's resignation.

Trust in colleges and universities was higher decades ago, too.

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[Gallup polling data from last year](#) actually shows a lack of public confidence in many American institutions. For example, only 36% of respondents report "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the medical system, only 32% have that level of confidence in organized religion, and only 29% have confidence in public schools.

At least in the case of the media and higher education, Bruni is hoping to reverse the downward trend.

"It's important to see if we can change that," he told me in an interview last week.

A basic issue of trust

More: [Rappaport Center series returns; authors Mitch Albom, David Ignatius to speak in 2024](#)

More: [Renowned author Mitch Albom shares message of hope and forgiveness with Stuart audience](#)

Bruni plans to share his views on that subject as part of the Rappaport Speaker Series. He will give a talk March 25 at Temple Beit HaYam of Stuart.

Jerome "Jerry" Rappaport founded the Rappaport Center at the temple in 2002. Since then, except for a hiatus due to COVID and the death of its founder, the center has recruited prestigious speakers from diverse fields to promote knowledge and understanding among Treasure Coast residents.

More: [Rappaport Center series returns; authors Mitch Albom, David Ignatius to speak in 2024](#)

TCPalm is one of the main sponsors of the speaker series.

Last month, [security consultant and commentator Juliette Kayyem](#) shared some observations from her her latest book, "[The Devil Never Sleeps: Learning to Live in](#)

an Age of Disasters.

Bruni, whose published books include "The Age of Grievance" and "The Beauty of Dusk," plans to look inward into the worlds where he makes his living.

Bruni said one of the reasons views about news coverage evolved is the media has itself been changing. Instead of a relatively few number of newspapers, television and radio stations to choose from, modern consumers can get their information from a variety of internet sources.

Trying to sort out which sources are credible and which are less so isn't always an easy task.

"There's more of a bedlam of voices and a competition for attention than there was 50 years ago," he said.

Part of the responsibility falls on media consumers to sort out the "good" information from the "bad."

"Of course people need to be better critical thinkers," he said.

Media, colleges can do better

However, Bruni said, there are also steps members of the media can do to win back trust.

For example, he said some media outlets can "turn down the temperature" by publishing or broadcasting reports that are less sensational. Stories geared toward generating lots of internet page views may be sacrificing substance.

Also, Bruni said journalists need to be less "self-congratulatory" and more humble about what we do and how we do it.

"We need to not come across as self-satisfied, which we sometimes do," he said.

"That can come across as elitist in an era that is anti-elitist."

With higher education, Bruni said part of the problem is so much attention is focused on Ivy League and other top-tier colleges and universities.

Many of those institutions are inaccessible to the majority of Americans due to costs, academic standards, or both.

Those who want more than a high-school education have to look at other options.

"That has made all of higher education seem like a shopping mall," Bruni said. "That has absolutely turned off a lot of Americans."

People who aren't able to get into the top-tier schools may develop feelings of envy or resentment toward those who do.

People with conservative views are also concerned about many schools leaning too heavily to the left politically. While colleges and universities have spent years promoting racial and gender diversity, Bruni said they have spent comparatively less time worrying about geographic, socioeconomic or political diversity.

"When it comes down to it, there is a sense that there is an enclave of education that is inaccessible to a large segment of the population," Bruni said.

Bruni said colleges and universities can make education more accessible by finding ways to reduce costs. Also, he said schools need to focus more on offering courses and hiring faculty and staff with more ideological diversity.

In general, Bruni said he perceives society as becoming more fragmented, with people interacting primarily within small groups of like-minded people.

Colleges and universities could become places that bridge those divides, if they can overcome their accessibility and social diversity issues, he said.

"There's a great opportunity for colleges and universities to counter that (tribalism) and be more of a public square," he said.

A good chance to learn something

I'll be moderating Bruni's talk, and I'm interested in hearing more about what he has to say. As a card-carrying member of the media, I think it's important to be aware of the public's perception and take whatever steps we can to improve that perception.

What he has to share may be hard (for people like me) to hear, but I'm sure it's going to be educational.

The talk is scheduled to beginning at 7 p.m. March 25 at the temple, 951 SE Monterey Commons Blvd. in Stuart. For information about tickets, please visit [the temple's website](#).

This column reflects the opinion of [Blake Fontenay](#). Contact him via email at bfontenay@gannett.com or at 772-232-5424.