

New York Times Columnist Frank Bruni Warns Audience to Avoid ‘Customized Cocoons’ of Technology

Lecture kicks off 2014-15 Helen Edison Lecture Series

What fuels Frank Bruni’s unflinching curiosity—and often, his *New York Times* opinion column—frequently comes down to his penchant for seeking out the strange over the familiar.

In a 45-minute presentation Oct. 29 at UC San Diego’s Mandeville Auditorium, Bruni delivered a well-crafted case for why he’s become wary of the all-too-convenient tools of personal technology.

His message: Avoid becoming encased in what he termed “these customized cocoons.”

“What this age has wrought is ... instead of taking advantage of the limitless options that are now available, some of us don’t go broad, we go narrow and narrower still,” he said. “[We] become increasingly invested in one way of thinking, increasingly addicted to one type of diversion and increasingly immersed in one type of experience.”

Nearly 400 people attended the event, co-presented by UC San Diego Extension with the UC San Diego Council of Provosts and the Dean’s Office of Social Sciences. It was the inaugural edition of the 2014-15 Helen Edison Lecture Series, part of Extension’s programs of public outreach made possible by private support.



*Bruni meets with UC San Diego students after his presentation.
Photo by John Freeman*

Students Attend Bruni Lecture as Part of New ‘First Year Experience’ Program

Several hundred UC San Diego students, participants in the university's new "First Year Experience" program, attended the Frank Bruni event.

Starting this academic year, the two-unit course offered by all six of UC San Diego's colleges features a series of on-campus events and lectures intended to help new students maximize their educational experience.

UC San Diego is one of a handful of U.S. universities taking part in a cooperative program with *The New York Times*, which includes following the newspaper's news coverage and analysis on a wide range of subjects.

"We're looking at not only what the students do in the classroom, but enhancing their co-curriculum experience, as well," said Marshall College Provost Allan Havis, one of the program's organizers.

"We've been reading Frank Bruni's columns, and here we had the opportunity to actually see and hear him speak in person. That makes for a much more vital, relevant experience."

Among Bruni's observations that related directly to the students:

- "The news landscape now, as compared to what it was when I was first entering the field (of journalism) is like me talking about the era when dinosaurs roamed the earth."
- "My advice is, as you move through your world and the campus, keep your eyes and ears open and be aware of the stories that are all around you."

While on a recent sojourn to China, Bruni had spent his first few days with "the same books, magazines and videos" he brought with him. To his intellectual dismay, he was "choosing the comfort of the utterly familiar over the challenge and enlightenment of the strange. ... I was shrinking my world instead of expanding it."

Why is such stratified behavior to be shunned? "It's important not only in terms of politics and public discourse," he said, "but in terms of personal fulfillment, in terms of real contentment."

To wit: "I bet if you all look hard and honestly at your own lives, you'll see that the greatest satisfactions and joys came because you pushed yourselves outside of your comfort zones. I know that's been the case for me."

To further his point, Bruni drew laughs citing a *New Yorker* magazine cartoon that portrayed a sophisticated traveler raving to her equally worldly companion: "We loved Tuscany! The cell reception was fantastic!"

"We're so connected that we're *dis*-connected," said Bruni. "We don't jettison the usual suspects to make room for some unusual things. We don't cut the cord. But it's not just about the cell reception or the Wi-Fi. It's about what we *do* with the cell reception and the Wi-Fi and touchscreens."

"Many of us take (only) the genre we like best," he added. "We marinate in it, we wallow in it—so that we taste the same flavor over and over again."

Moving deftly from foodie to politico to media junkie, Bruni said he still gets more questions about being the *Times*' restaurant critic than any other roles he's had—including White House correspondent, Rome-based essayist, and best-selling author.

“Even though it seems frivolous to some, (being a food critic) is taken very seriously by our readers, especially in New York City,” said Bruni. Five years in that role, dining out up to seven nights a week under literary pseudonyms like “M. Twain” to avoid detection, was not enough to fend off gout, but enough to eventually become “redundant.”

The next installment of the Edison Lecture Series will present acclaimed author/historian Kevin Starr, Dec. 2, at 7 p.m. in UC San Diego’s Price Center East Ballroom.

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