

The Facebook Effect: Fact or Fiction?

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As social networks, smartphones, and other technology become more prevalent, advertisers have been battling for advertising space in any forms possible. A theory coined “the Facebook effect” contends that advertisers, marketers, politicians, and anyone else looking to put their message into the forefront of the public’s eye can buy advertising space on Facebook and other social media platforms. The theory holds that this is where all ads, “sponsored” activity, trending activity, etc. derives from. In his article entitled “How Facebook Warps Our Worlds,” Frank Bruni argues that Facebook ads are generated by what the user does on the internet rather than allowing ads to be generated by advertisers. He discounts “the Facebook effect” and opines that each user determines what is shown on their own social media newsfeeds by adding friends, commenting on or liking posts or pages, and clicking on various articles that are available through Facebook.

Bruni uses logical and ethical appeals to bolster his argument. Although he takes the road less traveled, or at least the journalistic equivalent, Bruni’s use of ethical appeals, logical appeals, and his combination of the two provides an incredibly convincing argument that his is the position that should be believed.

Frank Bruni graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1986. He has written for several newspapers and has covered a wide variety of topics. He currently writes for the New York Times, which is where “How Facebook Warps Our Worlds” reached publication. He writes pieces covering politics, social issues, education, and culture. Bruni likely became interested in this topic because “the Facebook effect” has recently surfaced again due to the United States Presidential race. People in the United States (and likely elsewhere) are growing

increasingly frustrated at seeing liberal or conservative messages appear in their feeds, thinking that those messages have appeared due to each party's purchase of advertisement space.

A veteran journalist, Bruni assumedly has extensive experience reaching out to his audience in a way that he knows will appeal to them. His audience for this piece is primarily the readership of the New York Times, which is quite extensive, but also extends to anyone who might search for "the Facebook effect" or anything similar. New York Times readers are typically more educated, white collar employees or retirees. They likely have access to smart phones, computers, or some other portal to access social networks like Facebook, and have political and other opinions that they would research, discuss, and comment about on their social media pages.

The New York Times is considered to be one of the most reliable and authoritative newspapers in the United States of America. As a journalist for the New York Times, especially one with as many years under his belt as he has, Bruni's work is implied to have been extensively researched and fact-checked. This contributes to his seeming very authoritative on the subject of social media, advertisement, and how the two work together. He interviewed experts and authors, which also adds to the authoritativeness of his article. At first glance, his article appears to be one that should be taken seriously. Actually reading the article and considering his arguments and appeals solidifies his authoritativeness of the topic.

Bruni uses a logical appeal when he quotes Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and author of "The Righteous Mind," a 2012 best seller. "...[O]ne of the things we want is to spend more time people who think like us and less with people who are different...[t]he Facebook effect isn't trivial. But it's catalyzing or amplifying a tendency that was already there." This

logical appeal is directed at the New York's Times readers who are looking for professionals or specialists to chime in on what the journalist says before believing the journalist's point of view. It is a contributor to back-up Bruni's main argument and helps make his argument with a more authoritative voice. The reader is more likely to believe what Bruni is saying if an expert agrees with Bruni's position.

Later in his article, Mr. Bruni combines a logical appeal (a personal experience) with an ethical appeal (establishing common ground with the reader) when he shares the story of buying Jo Malone shower gel and then having Jo Malone ads "stalk" him, "always on [his] digital heels, forever in a corner of [his] screen..." He definitely had his audience in mind when he chose to share the story with the purpose of using it to build common ground with the reader. It is an experience that most, if not all, readers would be able to relate to. He goes on to really push his point home that advertisers were not buying their way onto his screen: "Sure, I could choose from woody, citrus, floral and even fruity, but there was no Aramis in my aromatic ecosphere, and I was steered clear of Old Spice." At this point of the article, a combined logical and ethical appeal does a lot to create a feeling of common ground and trust between the audience and Bruni. Most readers, if not all, have some kind of personal experience that is similar to Bruni's. His story is also humorous and light-hearted, which keeps the reader interested in his argument and keeps them reading.

At the end of his piece, Mr. Bruni again quotes Jonathan Haidt. "Haidt noted that [Facebook] often discourages dissent within a cluster of friends by accelerating shaming. 'Facebook allows people to react to each other so quickly that they are really afraid to step out of line.'" Bruni uses this logical appeal as a final support to his theory with the words of a specialist. As the closing point of his article, he definitely had his audience in mind when he

chose to make this point, and put it into the article at a point where it could make one big, final push to get the readers to accept his (through Jonathan Haidt's) authority.

Since Bruni's article appeared in the New York Times, he did not use style and design in his argument the way he would have been able to had he been writing for a different platform. The single image that is used, however, is extremely effective in assisting Bruni make his argument.

The only image used in the piece is of a man, clearly reminiscent of a Facebook image, who is trapped inside of several boxes. The image seems to be of a man trapped inside of Facebook, or at least inside of the box that Facebook creates around him. This image takes the reader to the crux of Bruni's argument right from the get-go – Facebook users, and other social media users, are so caught up in the things that they are interested in that they create boxes around themselves. Boxes of friends, who they will unfriend if the friend says something upsetting or outside of the users comfort zone. Boxes of pages or articles that back up the opinions that user already has – because any opinion can find evidence as back-up somewhere on the internet. The boxes that users create multiply into boxes that are placed by advertisers, groups, etc. until the user is so boxed in that they have no possible way to see outside of their own opinions to something that might challenge what they are thinking.

The author is ultimately successful in getting his readers to agree with his assessment of “the Facebook effect.” He crafts a very well-written, well-researched, and excellently shaped article. When he combines his own thoughts and ideas with words of experts and personal experiences, he is able to reach his audience and help them truly understand his position and ultimately agree with him.

### Reference

Bruni, F. (2008, May 21). How Facebook Warps Our Words. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/opinion/sunday/how-facebook-warps-our-worlds.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/opinion/sunday/how-facebook-warps-our-worlds.html?_r=0)