

The Dumbest Generation by Mark Bauerlein

By Kay Hymowitz

The Young & the Amnesiac

The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age
Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future
(Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under Thirty)
by Mark Bauerlein
Tarcher. 272 pp. \$24.95

Mark Bauerlein is well aware of the dangers of his chosen genre, instances of which are frequently and sometimes rightly shrugged off as so much alarmism. Unlike other authors of what's-the-matter-with-the-kids polemics, Bauerlein does not accuse the young of immorality, or slovenliness, or poor manners. Instead, as befits a professor of English at Emory and a former director of research at the National Endowment of the Arts, he targets the *intellectual* life of the cohort now commonly known as the Millennials.

Many observers have marveled at and cheered this group's creativity and technological know-how. Bauerlein thinks they're just plain dumb.

In support of his thesis, Bauerlein offers a torrent of evidence. He cites the segment on the *Tonight* show in which Jay Leno asks passersby, almost all of them young, questions of basic knowledge that most sentient Americans could answer. Where does the Pope live? Who made the first electric light bulb? (Answer to number one: Paris, England. To number two: Thomas Edison "with the kite.") Among the innumerable national surveys attesting to millennial dimness, he mentions, for example, one 2003 study that found fully 64 percent of fifteen-to-twenty-six-year-olds familiar with the name of the latest American Idol but only 10 percent capable of naming the Speaker of the House of Representatives. In a 2004 analysis, only 28 percent of a similar age group could correctly identify William Rehnquist as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, while a mere 15 percent knew who Vladimir Putin was. And so forth.

Skeptics object to complaints of this sort in two ways. First, they say that Americans have *never* been able to name the Chief Justice (or for that matter to explain basic chemistry). In reply, Bauerlein points to real signs of decline in the survey literature, adding that, in light of today's armies of popularizers, even stable levels of basic knowledge would be pitiful.

The second objection, which comes from educators and cognitive scientists, is that what matters is not factual knowledge but, in the words of the Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner, "the more generative capacity to 'do history' and to 'think historically.'" Bauerlein roundly rejects this as well. Gardner's "division of basic facts from higher-order thinking," he writes, is utterly fallacious: "If you

don't know which rights are enumerated in the First Amendment, you can't do very much 'critical thinking' about rights in the United States."

Besides, Bauerlein notes caustically, the Dumbest Generation appears to be expending precious little energy "thinking historically"—or civically, scientifically, or aesthetically. Today's students spend more time in school than did earlier generations; at their disposal are more museums, public libraries, and art galleries. They can pick up free newspapers at every corner, and can hang out at airy book stores with venti lattes and comfy chairs. Yet they do not seem terribly interested in any of these cultural resources. As opposed to the four hours of TV watched by the average college student every day, a 2003 survey shows Millennials reading a mere eight minutes a day. The Harry Potter craze? It was just that—a temporary phenomenon, like the Hula Hoop, that in no way signaled improvement in youthful reading habits.

Critics have an answer to all this, too, and Bauerlein addresses that answer in some detail. Young people may not be reading books, the argument goes, but they are reading their computer screens. In fact, the computer is a better teacher than books. According to some technophiles, the Internet, with its blogs and wikis and its "nonlinear strategies of thinking," has turned youngsters into interactive "content creators" and savvy—a favorite adjective—citizen reporters. Some enthusiasts, like Steven Johnson in *Everything Bad is Good for You*, believe that the computer makes it possible for children to learn even when they are playing, since video games "force you to make decisions" and to "create . . . order."

Bauerlein acknowledges the evidence, such as it is, behind such assertions, and in particular the recent jump in average IQ's. But he is not buying any of it. For one thing, tests of eye movement suggest that people "read" a computer screen differently from a book, scanning and jumping around and engaging the meaning of a text only superficially. For another, most of what youngsters read on the screen is at a sixth-grade level, and there is little sign that they are seeking out intellectual content; young people's familiarity with national and international affairs continues to rank below that of their less computer-savvy elders. When it comes to IQ's, moreover, the largest increase has occurred in the area of spatial reasoning among those at the lower percentiles, while scores in vocabulary, math skills, and cultural knowledge have not risen much at all.

Exposed to a carnival of multimedia input from infancy, young people may be "mentally agile," Bauerlein writes, but they remain "culturally ignorant." Still, are computers the main culprit here? Only to some extent, according to Bauerlein, who regards them less as a cause than as an enabler. The real guilty party is a society that has willfully forfeited its commitment to acculturating the next generation. Young people are no longer asked by their elders, as they once were, to "mute the voices inside them and heed instead the voices of distant greatness." Instead we empower their own natural egotism.

The worst offenders of all are our educators and intellectuals. Bauerlein quotes a distinguished professor of Renaissance literature:

Look, I don't care if everybody stops reading literature. Yeah, it's my bread and butter, but cultures change. People do different things.

Despite the one-third dropout rate of freshmen who have gone straight to college out of high school, and the presence of remedial-learning centers on every campus and in the offices of corporate

America, even the president of the National Council of Teachers of English has insouciantly aped the notion that today's illiterate young are really "expert users of many and varied forms and technologies of literacy."

The consequence of this "betrayal of the mentors," concludes Bauerlein, is not simply a generation of nincompoops who cannot name the Chief Justice. It is a depleted public life, a diminished democracy, and an all but lost cultural heritage.

The Dumbest Generation suffers from some of the familiar faults of the jeremiad. It can be repetitive in both tone and substance. In its zeal, it sometimes asks more of the evidence than the evidence can bear. And, though Bauerlein persuades us that the Millennials are indeed dumb, his argument that they are setting records on that score is less convincing: after all, American anti-intellectualism and the baleful effects of the media have been perennial targets of complaint. Finally, many readers will find themselves thinking of young friends or family members whose intelligence and curiosity defy Bauerlein's gloom; even if the actual number of such bright-eyed youngsters may be small, it is surely not insignificant.

That said, however, *The Dumbest Generation* presents an elegantly written and important challenge to the techno-evangelism now seeping into American culture and education. If anything, Bauerlein understates the claims of the futurists, technologists, and pie-eyed educational consultants. Many of these are more than advocates of computer learning; they are utopians, for whom the Internet portends a new age of unprecedented innovation, creativity, and civic energy, perhaps even a new human type.

Clay Shirky, author of the recent *Here Comes Everybody*, contends that the turn from television (passive) to the Internet (active) is yielding a "cognitive surplus," a superfluity of hitherto untapped collective brain power. So many busy minds, other techno-utopians conclude, will inevitably lead to breakthrough solutions to the problems of pollution, famine, or AIDS.

As if all this mass cleverness weren't enough, the Internet also promises "social transformation," enabling citizens to bypass conventional power structures and undermine the influence of the corporate media not only by exposing distortions and omissions but by substituting a pure outsider journalism uncontaminated by elite bias. Douglas Rushkoff prophesies the coming of "open-source democracy," on the model of software, like Wikipedia, developed by networks of motivated individuals. The globalized collectivity and interdependency thereby engendered will eventually go so far as to overthrow "competitive individualism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and particularism."

The kernel of truth in all this web-spinning is enough to keep the seers in business. But the vital insight of *The Dumbest Generation*—and one completely forgotten by technophiles—is that competent citizens are made, not born. An empowered mob of ill-educated cultural amnesiacs—even, or especially, those capable of encoding software—is exactly the sort of danger the founders sought to counter when they created the institutions of our republic. Maintaining a vibrant democracy is not the same as writing a Wikipedia entry; it is not even the same as voting. It requires actually engaging the tradition that created the freedom and prosperity we enjoy every time we click onto our Internet browsers.

That engagement is what, with cause, Bauerlein worries will become lost in our computer-dominated, youth empowered, attention-deficit-disordered culture. If this sounds alarming, it is.

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