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REVIEWS

The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30), by Mark Bauerlein. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008, $24.95 hardbound.

No Child Left Offline

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During the question and answer portion of the 2007 Miss Teen USA pageant, Lauren Caitlin Upton—then Miss South Carolina, now a college student and fashion model—was asked to comment on Americans' geographic ignorance: "Recent polls have shown a fifth of Americans can't locate the U.S. on a world map. Why do you think this is?" Upton's answer made her into a celebrity overnight.

"I personally believe that U.S. Americans are unable to do so because, uh, some, people out there in our nation don't have maps," Upton declared, "and, uh, I believe that our, uh, education like such as, uh, South Africa and, uh, the Iraq, everywhere like such as, and, I believe that they should, our education over here in the U.S. should help the U.S., uh, or, uh, should help South Africa and should help the Iraq and the Asian countries, so we will be able to build up our future, for our…" Upton concluded in mid-sentence when her time ran out, substituting a forced grin for the object of her final prepositional phrase.

The Associated Press, MSNBC, Fox News, *USA Today,* and others covered Upton's flub and her subsequent effort to redeem herself—via a practiced "do over"—on *The Today Show*. Jimmy Kimmel parsed her phrasing on his comedy show. Viewed more than thirty-five million times on YouTube, Miss South Carolina's garbled response has inspired spin-off parodies (Upton even spoofed herself at the 2007 MTV Video Music Awards) as well as serious analysis of American education—and beauty pageants. (One of the more interesting revelations of Upton-inspired exegesis was that the pageant's question was no better informed than its flustered contestant: According to a 2006 National Geographic survey, 94 percent of young Americans can, in fact, find the United States on a map.)

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Funny and frightening by turns, Upton's inarticulate moment was an apt, if inadvertent, piece of performance art. How better to underscore mass cluelessness than by displaying one's own? What better forum for staging our cultural institutions' role in propagating that cluelessness than the beauty pageant, with its seductive equation of gorgeousness with more substantial qualities such as intelligence and character? What better mechanism for both than a flawed question requiring its recipient to comment knowledgeably on a false statistic about mass cluelessness? And what better medium for disseminating the whole highly expressive happening than a video segment that could be downloaded, emailed, IMed, edited, embedded, and otherwise accessed, endlessly and exponentially, for free? After all, the video's viral circulation and accompanying instant status as an Internet cult classic are symptomatic of the cognitive impairment it records.

In *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future,* Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein traces a disturbing correlation between the rise of mass digital technology and the documented educational deficits of young Americans. Synthesizing an astonishing array of studies on the intellectual and leisure habits of contemporary American youth, Bauerlein outlines what is arguably the defining truth—and damning paradox—of the under-thirty generation: that even as technology gives young people greater access to knowledge, information, and enrichment than any previous generation, it has become their means of sealing themselves off from those very things. In Bauerlein's words, "technology has contracted their horizon to themselves."

Studies show that young people today can't read and understand complex documents, write grammatically correct prose, or calculate such simple things as the cost of office supplies. They don't know how to balance a checkbook or pay a bill. If they can find the United States on the map, they can't locate Egypt or Iraq. They can't name their elected officials, or list the freedoms protected by the First Amendment. They don't read for pleasure and they spend next to no time on homework (90 percent of high school students spend less than an hour a day on homework, college students not much more than that).

Meanwhile, members of the Millennial Generation spend an average of 295 minutes—just under five hours—every day in front of various screens, surfing, texting, emailing, instant messaging, Twittering, Facebooking, MySpacing, gaming,

and watching television. That's just about thirty-five hours a week—or the equivalent of a full-time job. Creatures of the digital world, Millennials are more comfortable with consoles and keyboards than with books and papers. But, Bauerlein contends, their screen savvy conceals a deplorable lack of knowledge and skill—so effectively, in fact, that they have fooled their comparatively technophobic elders into complacency. Mistaking superficial ease for substantial expertise, we have been seduced into believing that young people know more than they do.

The conventional wisdom is that more and better technology equals more and better education. Hence our expensive and idealistic emphasis on access, our romantic, rarely contested goals of ensuring that there is a computer in every classroom, a laptop for every child. For many educators, parents, and scholars, no child left behind means no child left offline. We cast technology as the ultimate educational elixir, a cure-all for failing schools and falling test scores, an antidote to low student engagement and abysmal student achievement. We see the screen as a pixilated window of opportunity—through it, children can enter new worlds, access vast stores of knowledge, examine art, read literature, study history, follow current events, and track the latest trends in policy analysis. At the end of the day, they will surface from their technological immersions enriched, inspired, deepened, broadened, and diversified; their imaginations will have been sparked, their knowledge extended, their skills refined.

The pedagogical fantasies of the digital age have had quite an impact on educational policy and spending. But they are fantasies all the same. The reality, Bauerlein shows, is that more and better technology equals declining skills and less knowledge. Noting that integrating technology into the curriculum has done next to nothing to improve students' academic achievement, Bauerlein argues persuasively that technology may, in fact, actively work against it. He acknowledges that visual media may "cultivate a type of spatial intelligence," but any gains there are more than offset by the devastating manner in which visual media "minimize verbal intelligence."

Language acquisition is stunted by the electronic environment, which cannot compare to books as a means of improving vocabulary, and which encourages a kind of "reading" that is not worthy of the name. Screen reading, as Web-based advertisers and content-providers know, is fragmented, partial, and superficial; scanning, skimming, jumping, skipping, clicking away, and clicking through are its

principal features. There is nothing sustained about it—and for this reason, Bauerlein writes, screen reading "conditions the mind against quiet, concerted study, against imagination unassisted by visuals, against linear, sequential analysis of texts."

Investing in a prospective dream that is fast becoming a proven nightmare, our educational system continues to throw money at technology "without judging the quality of the outcomes." Meanwhile, employers complain loudly that their young hires can't read, write, or calculate—and spend over three billion dollars every year on remedial training to bring them up to speed. With complaints come pointing fingers, as corporate America, policy analysts, parents, taxpayers, and education reformers blame the schools for failing to prepare young people for the responsibilities of citizenship and the challenges of the twenty-first-century workplace.

But—and this is the most interesting and original aspect of *The Dumbest Generation*—schools are not single-handedly responsible for the problem. Indeed, Bauerlein argues, schools are in some ways totally extraneous to it. According to Bauerlein, the a-literacy, innumeracy, ignorance, and know-nothingism of contemporary youth do not arise in the classroom, where school-age kids only spend about 9 percent of their daily lives. Rather, he notes, "they stem from the home, social, and leisure lives of young Americans…in their games, their socializing, and their spending." While it's theoretically possible for young people to treat the Internet and associated digital innovations as a vast library that can enrich and deepen their developing minds, that's not what most of them do with their 295 daily minutes of screen time. And those 295 minutes, Bauerlein argues, make all the difference.

For nearly five hours every day, for nearly thirty-five hours every week, with the commitment most would devote to a full-time job, Millennials use technology to concentrate their attention on themselves. Bauerlein calls this "peer absorption," noting that far from using screen media and the Web to enlarge their perceptions and expand their understanding, "young Americans prefer to learn about one another." Social networking is central to this impulse, and dominates young people's online activities. Studies and polls show that tweens, teens, and college students rate social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace as their preferred Web destinations. One study of college students revealed

that while 78.1 percent named Facebook as their favorite website, only 5 percent routinely read policy- or politics-oriented blogs or similar online discussions.

The result is narrowed perception, constricted perspective, and an expansive indulgence of adolescent affects, interests, and concerns. The insular online world of the youthful social network is an egocentric echo chamber, self-reinforcing and self-referential. Over time, it has become a fertile electronic breeding ground for a generational narcissism that, Bauerlein contends, is ultimately far more worrisome, and more dangerous, than the ignorance it yields.

For it's not just that Millennials don't know anything. *It's that they don't care that they don't know anything.* In Bauerlein's words, they are not just "uninterested in world realities. They are actively cut off from them." Indeed, the most frightening thing about the youth culture Bauerlein describes is Millennials' almost total lack of concern about their epic ignorance. With more access to information than any other generation in history, Millennials are using technology to retreat into a self-enclosed, self-absorbed, immature milieu that disregards and even disavows the wider world. Plugging in to tune out, young Americans have turned technological access into a means of rendering self-righteous, aggressive ignorance "a common, shame-free condition."

We betray them—and ourselves, and the future—when we make excuses for them. And make excuses we do. Bauerlein is eloquent on the subject of our sophisticated, rhetorically slippery rationales for the disaster we are witnessing. We define away young people's disgraceful academic performance with astonishing ease. We blame testing rather than dealing with the deficits tests reveal. To excuse knowledge gaps, we discount the importance of facts and demonize rote memorization as a pedagogical tool. To deflect responsibility, we argue that young Americans have never known much about history, civics, and other subjects. Along the way, we glorify youth and discount tradition, elevating adolescent solipsism to a virtue and forgetting—as solipsists do—that we lose everything when we lose perspective.

Intellectuals are setting the standard for this colossal collective denial, dismissing evidence of catastrophe as inconsequential, celebrating "e-literacy" and alternative styles of screen-centered intelligence, and discrediting their critics as ideologues who are fashioning apocalyptic

accounts of cultural decline in order to advance their own agendas. It's in this context that Bauerlein's title acquires its deepest resonance.

The phrase "the dumbest generation" comes from Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000), and Bauerlein uses it as Roth does, to describe—in the words of Roth's protagonist, a classics professor whose career is destroyed by a scurrilous student complaint—a generational cohort that is "abysmally ignorant. Their lives are intellectually barren. They arrive knowing nothing and most of them leave knowing nothing." But we might well ask whether the dumbest ones are actually those who should know better than to accommodate, excuse, and even honor the intellectual apathy of the people who will inherit the future. After all, it's in our power to acknowledge the problem and to address it. If we don't, we'll reap what we have sown—or, to borrow Forrest Gump's more apt expression, we'll learn the hard way that "stupid is as stupid does."