

The Dumbest Generation



Here's a pop quiz: *Who is the U.S. Secretary of State?* The answer, as we prepared this report in the summer of 2008, was Condoleezza Rice. If you knew the answer, you're smarter than 74 percent of the 18- to 29-year-olds in a Pew Research Center study who recently answered incorrectly.¹

Moreover, 70 percent of them do not know what the Reconstruction was, and they were six times more likely to be able to identify the latest winner of the

American Idol reality television show than the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Another study found that nearly 60 percent of 17-year-olds don't know that the Civil War took place in the second half of the 19th century. And yet another survey found that 25 percent of 17-year-olds think that Christopher Columbus discovered America after 1750.

Could the vast majority of teens and adults under the age of 30 really be so clueless? As a matter of fact, *yes*. This is a generation of young people who grew up reading blogs instead of books. They read updates about their friends' parties on MySpace instead of reading about world events in newspapers. They know more about video games like *World of Warcraft* than they do about World War II.

They look up information on Wikipedia instead of Encyclopedia Britannica. They get their political information from Comedy Central's "The Daily Show," hosted by comedian Jon Stewart. When they do read news online, it is filtered through RSS feeds that only send them stories about subjects that interest them — a list that could be as brief as celebrity weddings, panda bears, Paris Hilton, and new games for the Wii video game console. They don't want to read about subjects of which they know little or nothing.

Ironically, the generation that is most comfortable with digital technology, which gives them unprecedented access to all of the world's knowledge, knows less than the previous generations that lacked this advantage. Instead of using the Internet to improve their understanding of the world, young people are

using it to stay in touch with their friends.

Mark Bauerlein, an English professor at Emory University, has seen this first-hand in his classrooms. He has found that today's college students know little about science, history, or politics, and consequently they aren't ready to enter the workforce. He also noticed that students huddled over Internet terminals in the college library were checking their e-mail and each other's Facebook pages rather than doing research.

College students typically aren't producing term papers filled with logic, rhetorical flourishes, or even proper grammar. Instead, they're communicating with a minimum of effort, a minimum of words, and a minimum of impact. In other words, the generation whose thumbs do most of their talking can't express themselves beyond the level of a text message.

Bauerlein expressed his concerns in his book, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)*.²

He is the former research director for the National Endowment for the Arts, where he oversaw a national survey that found that 18- to 24-year-olds today are

reading less than people in that age group read 10 years ago. He also found that 15- to 17-year-olds read only seven minutes per day, down from 18 minutes a day in 1981.

According to *The Economist*,³ U.S. government statistics reveal that U.S. high school seniors' proficiency scores for science, math, reading, and writing dropped from 1992 to 2005. Further, just one-third graduated from high school with the ability to read proficiently, and just one-fourth could write a basic paragraph.

The problem is that young people are too busy with digital media — including cell phones, text messages, the Internet, e-mail, and video game systems — to read an old-fashioned printed book or newspaper. Moreover, they are using technology to communicate rather than to learn.

And, while most people improve their literacy skills through practice as they read and write, today's young people are communicating in a shorthand "texting" language in which there is no place for correct spelling, punctuation, syntax, and grammar. In essence, they are reinforcing their own illiteracy every time they send and receive a text message in which the letter "U"

stands for the word “you,” the letter “R” substitutes for the word “are,” and so on.

Based on our analysis of this trend, the *Trends* editors offer the following three forecasts:

First, educators will have to change the ways in which they present information in order to reach a generation of students that has become used to having information personalized for them. Static classroom lectures, dry textbooks, and the classic works of literature just don’t have the ability to reach this audience. Professors will have to partner with Web site designers to create coursework pages online that combine splashy graphics, streaming video, and plenty of links to other sites. As a result, learning will migrate away from the campus and the classroom to the student’s laptop and cell phone, with lessons taught online and constant interaction, in the form of message boards like those on MySpace pages, involving teachers and other students.

Second, in a world of scarce talent, employers will transform themselves to make effective use of a generation that isn’t ready to contribute to the *traditional* workplace. Lacking basic skills in reading, writing, math, and science, many

of the new employees won’t be ready to step into the jobs vacated by retiring Baby Boomers, who were relatively well-educated and had acquired sophisticated skills. As a result, companies will have to invest in training programs that offer a “crash course” in the basic skills these workers lack. However, these programs must be tailored so that they are relevant to the actual work the employee will perform. For example, lessons in reading won’t require students to analyze *Moby Dick*; instead, the lessons will help students learn to read and understand a training manual, a product spec sheet, or a company’s annual report. Similarly, a course for new employees at an insurance firm who lack math skills would simply teach them how to use their calculators to add, subtract, divide, multiply, and find percentages; there’s no need for them to learn advanced algebra, trigonometry, or calculus. When the training is relevant to the individual’s needs, there will be a better chance that he or she will absorb the lesson and be able to apply it.

Third, the small percentage of well-educated, high-achieving college students will have their choice of employers and competition for them will be fierce. Of course, it’s always been true that the top graduates

are in high demand by the best corporations, law firms, and consulting firms. What’s different now is that the drop-off between the “best and the brightest” and the “average” graduate is steeper. Employers that calculate the return on investment from a star performer versus the costs involved in employing mediocre workers who can’t read, write, or add will conclude that it is a “no-brainer” to hire an employee who uses his or her brain. Expect companies to compete fiercely to attract the best candidates by offering large signing bonuses, big salaries, and lavish benefits.

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July 2008 Trend #2 Resource List:

1. *To access the Pew Research Center report on their survey, “Online Papers Modestly Boost Newspaper Readership,” visit their website at:*
<http://people-press.org/report/282/online-papers-modestly-boost-newspapers-readership>
2. *THE DUMBEST GENERATION: HOW THE DIGITAL AGE STUPEFIES YOUNG AMERICANS AND JEOPARDIZES OUR FUTURE (OR, DON’T TRUST ANYONE UNDER 30)* by Mark Bauerlein is published by Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. © Copyright 2008 by Mark Bauerlein. All rights reserved.
3. *THE ECONOMIST*, May 16, 2008, “Will Reading and Writing Remain Important?” © Copyright 2008 by The Economist Newspaper Limited, London. All rights reserved.



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