



Is Stupid Making Us Google?

James Bowman

“Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.” Sound familiar? Describing, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, his own struggles to keep his attention span from contracting like the wild ass’s skin in Balzac’s novel, Nicholas Carr cites a British study of research habits among visitors to two serious scholarly websites which suggests a more general problem: that “users are not reading online in the traditional sense; indeed there

are signs that new forms of ‘reading’ are emerging as users ‘power browse’ horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins. It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense.”

Almost seems? I don’t know about Mr. Carr, but I have no doubt that I go

online to avoid reading in the traditional sense. The question is, how guilty do I need to feel about this? In his view, presumably, quite a lot guilty, since by reading online as

much as I do I am depriving myself of the ability to read offline. He takes this insight to an even more alarming conclusion in the end, writing that “as we come to rely on computers to mediate our understanding of the world, it is our own intelligence that flattens into artificial intelligence.” And if that’s the case for veteran readers, think how much worse it must be for the *jeunesse dorée*

*The Dumbest Generation:
How the Digital Age
Stupefies Young Americans and
Jeopardizes Our Future
(Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)*

By Mark Bauerlein
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of the information age, if they never developed the habits that accompany “deep reading” in the first place.

It is these poor cultural orphans, for whom “information retrieval” online is the only kind of reading they know, who are the main concern of Mark Bauerlein in his new book, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*. One would think that a whole future in jeopardy would be too serious a matter for the flippancy of the rest of the subtitle: *Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30*. But Professor Bauerlein, who teaches English at Emory University and is a former director of research and analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts, is not always sure just how much a matter of mirth “the dumbest generation” is, or isn't. After all, it is not really their fault if, as he says, they have been “betrayed” by the mentors who should have taught them better. Yet he seems to agree with Nicholas Carr that what we are witnessing is not just an educational breakdown but a deformation of the very idea of intelligence.

This, in his view, is at least part of what is responsible for the so-called “Flynn Effect,” whereby the aggregate of human intelligence appears to increase with each generation.

The more tests emphasize “learned content” such as vocabulary, math techniques, and cultural knowledge, the less the Flynn

Effect shows up. The more they involve “culturally reduced” material, puzzles and pictures that require no historical or verbal context, the more the gains surface. Moreover, the significance of those gains apart from the test itself diminishes. “We know people solve problems on IQ tests; we suspect those problems are so detached, or so abstracted from reality,” Flynn remarked, “that the ability to solve them can diverge over time from the real-world problem-solving ability called intelligence.”

Elsewhere, Bauerlein also echoes Carr by citing a study of online reading habits which has discovered something called the “F-Shaped Pattern for Reading Web Content.” This is the technique of reading horizontally across the first few lines of text, then halfway across for a few more, and finally vertically the rest of the way down the page. There can be few of us who do not feel a twinge of guilty recognition at this description. Busted! Even those who have come to the Web late in life are not so very different, then, from the fifth-graders who, as an elementary school principal told Bauerlein, proceed as follows when they are assigned a research project: “go to Google, type keywords, download three relevant sites, cut and paste passages into a new document, add transitions of their own, print it up, and turn it in.”

As *The Dumbest Generation* rightly notes, “the model is information retrieval, not knowledge formation, and the material passes from Web to homework paper without lodging in the minds of the students.” Generally speaking, even those who are most gung-ho about new ways of learning probably tend to cling to a belief that education has, or ought to have, at least *something* to do with making things lodge in the minds of students—this even though the disparagement of the role of memory in education by professional educators now goes back at least three generations, long before computers were ever thought of as educational tools. That, by the way, should lessen our astonishment, if not our dismay, at the extent to which the educational establishment, instead of viewing these developments with alarm, is adapting its understanding of what education is to the new realities of how the new generation of “netizens” actually learn (and don’t learn) rather than trying to adapt the kids to unchanging standards of scholarship and learning.

Obviously, as all we inveterate googlers already know, it’s much easier that way. So what if the kids aren’t reading properly (by their grandparents’ lights) or learning the more difficult skills of logic and analysis that come from that kind of reading? The answer is to downgrade verbal and numerical abilities to “lower-order skills” in comparison with the spatial, information-gathering, and

pattern-recognition skills fostered by hours at the computer screen. That will doubtless be just the first step in a series of dumbings-down that will follow our youthful cybernauts all the way through high school, college, and graduate school until, in the future, everybody will come out at the end of the educational process with a Ph.D. in googling. Why should we necessarily suppose that they need anything more?

Indeed, there are those—such as Larissa MacFarquhar, whose 1997 essay in *Slate*, “Who Cares If Johnny Can’t Read? The value of books is overstated,” is cited by Professor Bauerlein—who think (or pretend to think) that the alarmists are guilty of “the sentimentalization of books.” He also quotes a professor of Renaissance literature who once told him: “Look, I don’t care if everybody stops reading literature.... Yeah, it’s my bread and butter, but cultures change. People do different things.” He is appropriately outraged at such unashamed philistinism:

What to say about a hypereducated, highly paid teacher, a steward of literary tradition entrusted to impart the value of literature to students, who shows so little regard for her field? I can’t imagine a mathematician saying the same thing about math, or a biologist about biology, yet, sad to say, scholars, journalists, and other guardians of culture accept

the deterioration of their province without much regret.

All the same, it does seem passing strange that he regards this as a matter of neglect or inadvertence and has not noticed that professors of arts, languages, and humanities stopped being, or even wanting to be, “guardians of culture” a long time ago. Their *grand refus* in rejecting that traditional role had nothing to do with the advent of computers.

What it did have to do with is of course politics, and Bauerlein’s book—perhaps for diplomatic reasons and to avoid being pigeonholed as “right wing”—has too little to say about this. Literature is, so far from being the property of “guardians of culture,” now that of the politically motivated despoilers of traditional culture. Most of his fellow professors have no interest in the “great” works of the Western tradition—indeed, they reject the very idea of “greatness”—except to “deconstruct” it, along with the works to which it has been attributed, showing how their unexamined political assumptions have tended to reinforce the patriarchal, imperialist, racist, and homophobic foundation on which traditional societies have been built. Only now, in the work of our most advanced theorists, have these assumptions finally been brought to light and exposed for what they are.

In other words, the “mentors” have not only betrayed their pupils, they

have denounced the very idea of mentorship in anything but the tools of deconstruction which allow them to set themselves up as superior to—rather than the humble acolytes of—the culture they study. So far from being invited to contemplate “the best that has been said and thought in the world,” knowledge of which is what that Victorian patriarchal apologist, Matthew Arnold, once called culture, students today are taught to sneer at its implicit racism, sexism, and so on. They learn about the past only to confirm their natural contempt for it. Like redefining education as the acquisition of information-retrieval skills, this is to go with the flow of youth culture, which begins by throwing off the yoke of the past and rejecting the sort of self-denial necessary to acquire the more difficult sort of educational accomplishments.

Is Professor Bauerlein being disingenuous, then, when he asks: “If 81 percent of freshmen in ’03 read four books or fewer in a full year’s time and seniors lowered that dreary figure to only 74 percent, one wonders why college courses didn’t inspire them to pick up books at a faster rate”? He must know that that’s simply not what most college courses are meant to do any more. If our young people are toiling their way through their educational careers while reading less than ever before for their own pleasure or enlightenment, why be surprised? No one has ever taught

them that books *can* be read for pleasure or enlightenment—or for any other purpose than to be exposed as the coded rationalization for the illegitimate powers of the ruling classes that they really are. Why would you willingly read a single line of literature if that is all you supposed it to consist of?

It is, therefore, no accident that young people are being cut off from tradition, as Bauerlein laments that they are. The bad habits engendered by an over-reliance on computers and Internet search engines may be another matter, but it is hard to regard it as *merely* coincidental if we find that American education is being hollowed out from within by social and cultural forces that appear to many to be benign or harmless—or, in some cases, actually philo-educational. Surely he is right to stress the importance among these forces of an unthinking technophilia of the kind that leads Steven Johnson, author of the 2005 book provocatively titled *Everything Bad is Good for You*, to an uncritical admiration of the amusements of the information age. But while Bauerlein takes Johnson to task on several points, he seems to suggest that all our educators have to do is expose their charges to some superior alternative to “the ordinary stuff of youth culture”—that is, “puerile dramas, verbal clichés, and screen psychodelia,” not to mention “MySpace, YouTube, teen blogs, and

Xbox added to Tupac and Britney, *Titanic* and *Idol*.”

True enough, “there is no better reprieve from the bombardment than reading a book,” though Bauerlein unfortunately doesn’t differentiate between books of “popular literature” and “the classics.” It may be that “books afford young readers a place to slow down and reflect, to find role models, to observe their own turbulent feelings well expressed, or to discover moral convictions missing from their real situations,” but what makes him think that most kids want to do any of these things? And if they don’t, are they to be forced? How does he propose that their consumption of junk culture of the sort mentioned here should be curtailed in order that they should spend more time with books? In other words, isn’t this a problem of discipline? And where there is no discipline, how does he propose to introduce it?

“Young people,” he rightly notes, “need mentors not to go with the youth flow, but to stand staunchly against it, to represent something smarter and finer than the cacophony of social life.” He’s also right that they need more time away from the computer in order to acquire the skills of “deep reading” recommended by Nicholas Carr. But they are not likely to get either one so long as so many educators cling as they do now to the axiomatic belief not just that “learning can be fun” but that it *must* be fun, and the equally axiomatic

rejection of that which may cause pain and humiliation, even if these are productive of real learning. This is the real threat to the transmission of culture between the generations. Professor Bauerlein seems at times to recognize this but fails to emphasize it enough, or to relate it to the self-esteem movement, which has its own reasons for promoting the idea of painless learning.

Likewise, although he sees and spends quite a lot of time on the denigration of tradition, he doesn't see that it is part of a larger ahistoricism that not only denies the relevance of the past but, effectively, teaches that the past never existed except as an imperfect version of the present. What Herbert Butterfield called "the Whig interpretation of history," taken to its extreme, is now revealed as what it always was: a denial of

history. That is a very big subject, and this is not a very big book. Yet what it does do it does well, which is to serve as an essential if difficult and depressing guide through the increasing profusion of survey data which suggest an affirmative answer to the question of Nicholas Carr's title in *The Atlantic*, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?"—and to show that it is our children and grandchildren who are preceding us in stupidity. But once that process is complete, presumably we won't care any more that culture and tradition are not being transmitted to the next generation.

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