

The decline of education in america



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“ The United States is the greatest country in the world” is a cliché asserted everywhere. One would reasonably expect the greatest country in the world to have the world’s most educated citizens-except just one thing: that simply is not true. Author Mark Bauerlein in his book *The Dumbest Generation* lays out a compelling argument backed with a dizzying number of statistics that America is on the decline educationally, threatening the future of our country. How can United States be the greatest country in the world when it is ranked 29th in math and science? Or when 53% of high school seniors scored “ below basic” in historical knowledge on an NAEP history exam (Bauerlein 17)? Think of what will happen when those high school seniors meet the real world. They will be the voting block and pool to draw from to become our elected officials who make life and death decisions for our country, and what will happen then? Bauerlein blames these seemingly terrifying statistics on the digital age millennials were born in, and how students today no longer feel the need to retain as much knowledge when they can just flip out their iPhones and go look it up online when they need to. This is a symptom of the declining social and political potency Neil Postman talks about in his book *Amusing Ourselves To Death* , and that the value of knowledge on the decline.

The generation of today does not care as much today about the Arts, Science, History, and Math; they are more interested in things like what Kim Kardashian is doing today, or when Beyonce’s new album is coming out. You can ask almost any millennial who the Kardashians are and they will almost always give you the correct answer, however when you ask serious questions such as what powers the executive branch holds-many will draw a

blank. This is because the millennial generation requires advanced stimuli due to our digital age. The human brain has plasticity in the sense that it will adapt to the environment it is placed in, and the millennial brain has molded to the instantaneous access of knowledge from our computers, televisions, and phones; because of that millennials demand that same level of stimulation everywhere else in their lives. In Steven Johnson's book *Everything Bad Is Good For You*, he argues for what he calls the "Sleeper Curve": that the digital age of popular culture and with it the internet, movies, tv, and video games are actually intellectually nutritional (9). The technological popular culture of today can be very beneficial, such as how videogames can improve problem solving, or how television dramas can improve critical thinking. That probably seems like it is in stark contrast to what was said previously, however the arguments of all three authors are not mutually exclusive. Bauerlein, Postman, and Johnson all ultimately represent extremes. They do however get a few things right; Bauerlein is correct in stating there is a growing overall knowledge deficit, Johnson is correct in saying popular culture has positive benefits, and Postman is right about our increasingly connected society diminishing the value of information. Reality is within a happy medium of all three. In short, the digital age is not necessarily bad for you; however, it is impossible deny the educational decline in our society.

In Mark Bauerlein's book *The Dumbest Generation*, one of his dominant pieces of evidence to show our decline in knowledge is how fewer people today read than ever before, and he is partially correct; according to Pew Research the percentage of Americans who read at least one book in the last

year fell from 79% in 2011, to 71% in 2015. Not only that, 27% of the people polled had not read a single book in the last year (Raine). These statistics seem troubling, book reading is declining, however overall reading is not, rather it has increased. Reading does not necessarily have to come from a book, and this is what Bauerlein misses. Young adults in 2015 spent twenty seven hours and thirty six minutes a week online a week on average, triple the mere ten hours and twenty four minutes a week recorded in 2005 (Anderson). To be a proficient user of the internet you have to be reading constantly; the main reason reading of traditional books is declining is because books are being supplemented by other forms of reading.

Mark Bauerlein is incorrect in stating reading as a whole is declining, however the fact people are steering away from books is in itself a serious concern. Even Steven Johnson, the author by far most supportive of digital media out of the three of them, says in his book *Everything Bad is Good For You* :

The very fact that I am presenting this argument to you in the form of a book and not a television drama or video game should make it clear that I believe the printed word remains the most powerful vehicle for conveying complicated information (21)

Johnson is one hundred percent correct; books are the best medium for conveying complex ideas, as well as strong detail and content. Not only that, the ease of access to books cannot be matched as of yet by any other form of media. For movies, television, video games, and the internet you need to buy all kinds of hardware and services which limits the potential recipients of

those forms of media. With books, all you need to know how to is read; even money is not necessary to read, anyone can go to their local library and check out a book for free. Books are still ultimately the heart and soul of culture, without them the other forms of media would not be possible; somebody had to write a book on how to make movies, television, video games, and how to code for the internet. While books are still the best medium for passing on information to the next generation, other mediums are getting more advanced to the point where they can be true fulfilling compliments to books, rather than a replacement for books, such as video games.

Video games are the newest medium to enter our digital age, and what started as a simple a few pixels on the screen bouncing around in virtuality like in the game *Pong*, has blossomed into a full fledged new form of media capable of endowing knowledge, and cognitive benefits such as improving problem solving, attention, memory. This is the narrative Johnson supports; Bauerlein and Postman would balk at that assessment, saying video games infringe upon a proper education or that the information in games has no real world use and is a pseudo context. However, a study done by RMIT University lends a great amount of support to Johnson's claims. The results of the study indicate that online gaming can sharpen math, science, and reading skills amongst teenagers. RMIT Associate Professor Alberto Posso investigated the study results, stating:

Students who play online games almost every day score 15 points above the average in math and 17 points above the average in science ...When you play online games you're solving puzzles to move to the next level and that

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involves using some of the general knowledge and skills in math, reading and science that you've been taught during the day. (Science Daily)

Going even a step further, he said “ Teachers should consider incorporating popular video games into teaching – so long as they're not violent ones.” This is a rather stunning assessment which supports Johnson's “ Sleeper Curve” argument that television, movies, and video games are in fact good for you after all (9). Video games can stimulate the mind in similar ways books do, and perhaps in some ways far more than books. Video games tend to have a non linear structure in the sense that you can go from point A to point B however you want, unlike books you are fully immersed in the experience not just mentally, but audibly and visually as well, and you must make choices that affect the outcome of the game. This is the key as to why video games have all of these positive benefits.

Let us take a look at a strong example of a video game series that truly stimulates the mind: Metal Gear. The Metal Gear storyline is one of the most complicated in any game, rivaling many books, movies, and TV shows; the lore stretches from 1964 to 2014 taking place in a slightly alternate reality across nine canonical games, each of which take many hours to complete in addition to hours devoted to cutscenes explaining the story. One of the games, *Guns of the Patriots* , has a guinness world record breaking seventy hours of cutscenes and over 400, 000 words in the script, more words than some books; to fully comprehend the depth of the story, the characters, the factions and all the relationships between them, the player has to think very critically and very deeply. The games deal with complex and serious themes such as race, revenge, language, nuclear proliferation, genealogy, global

politics, etc. to name a few and the games pull off those themes in meaningful ways. Not only is the storyline mentally stimulating, so is the gameplay. In the newest iteration, *The Phantom Pain*, players are placed in an open world sandbox and are tasked with missions to complete, ranging to everything from collecting intelligence on the enemy, to rescuing prisoners of war. The open world nature and the plethora of weapons and tools gives the player freedom to conquer any objective as they see fit. Should the mission occur during the day or at night? Is going in silent with suppressed weapons and choosing a path of least resistance best, or is going in and out as fast as possible guns blazing preferable? These are all questions posed to the player. To achieve desirable outcomes the player must exercise his or her brain and think critically to employ an effective strategy. As Steven Johnson says in his book, this critical thinking exercises the brain similar to how algebra does and translates to reality in the form of improved planning skills, problem solving, attention, logic, and more (40).

It is clear that video games do offer meaningful benefits, though video games are not always totally beneficial in nature. To give an example, a hot topic of debate that has gone on for many years is whether or not violent video games contribute to violence, aggressive behavior, and desensitization to violence in the real world. The American Psychological Association came out with a report in 2015, stating:

The research demonstrates a consistent relation between violent video game use and increases in aggressive behavior, aggressive cognitions and aggressive affect, and decreases in prosocial behavior, empathy and sensitivity to aggression (Calvert)

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In all fairness, the report does not link video games to criminal behavior, and does not include outside factors such as pre-existing psychological conditions and the environment the person playing the game lives in, all of which may have been influential to the outcome of the report. However, it establishes a link between violent video games and aggressive behavior, though indirect at best. Another important factor not included in the study is the age of the player. Children are very easily influenced; a child growing up is learning important skills like how to determine right from wrong, empathy, and moral values. It is fairly easy to see how incredibly violent games like *Grand Theft Auto* where a player can go carjacking and run over as many pedestrians as possible in a crowded city on a whim can have a negative effect on a child growing up. To reduce this effect, young children should not play video games, and video game developers should be careful in how they utilize violence. That being said, violence can have a positive impact on a storyline if there is a good reason for it to be there, such as to make the death of an allied character more impactful; unlike games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Mortal Kombat* which have violence for the sake of violence with no real purpose to it other than for pure shock value. The deciding factor as to how video games will benefit society depends on how they are utilized, the medium in itself is not foredoomed.

One of the mediums that preceded video gaming was television, and it provides many of the same benefits video games do such as improved planning skills, problem solving, attention, logic etc.. Television engages the viewer to think with it's programming with everything from documentaries, to dramas. In talking about the television drama *24*, Steven Johnson argues

in his book “ you have to focus to follow the plot, and in focusing you are exercising the part of the brain that maps social networks” (115). Again, this is much like algebra in a sense; most people will never need to know things like the quadratic formula in their lifetime, however those things are still required material in high school because they are a mental exercise, improving reasoning skills, problem solving, and more. It isn’t so much about the content of these shows as it is about the cognitive exercises involved in watching them. Mark Bauerlein does not acknowledge these benefits, arguing essentially that television is merely a distraction from real educational subject matter. Neil Postman has a similar view, stating in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* :

...television’s way of knowing is uncompromisingly hostile to typography’s way of knowing; that television’s conversations promote incoherence and triviality; that the phrase “ serious television” is a contradiction in terms; and that television speaks with only one persistent voice-the voice of entertainment. (80)

Perhaps this is a correct assessment regarding some televised media like reality shows and cable news, though the blanket assessment that all television is incoherent and trivial is wrong. Sure it is true one of television’s goals is to entertain, however so are literary works of fiction that have been around for millennia. What makes novels sold for profit not incoherent and trivial? For the most part, excluding programming like news and sports, television is just literature put on the screen. Think of how many shows and movies you could rewrite as a book; in fact, many of the greatest works of television originated from books. For example, the 1962 novel *The Man in*

The High Castle by Philip K. Dick was adapted as a television drama by Amazon's streaming service in 2015, and it is far from being incoherent or trivial. The show takes place in alternate reality 1962, where the Germans and Japanese win World War Two and conquer the United States, with the victorious axis powers splitting up the country between the Greater Nazi Reich and the Japanese Pacific States. The show goes to great lengths to display the brutality of the Germans and Japanese people have come to expect with no political or personal freedoms, torture, summary executions, persecution of minorities, etc. brilliantly showing the struggle for everyday Americans to survive. It punches the viewer right in the gut reminding people of what could have been, and the harrowing path fascism leads us by drawing out our emotions. Sure all of it is done for entertainment, however the messages are nutritional, positive, and even educational. The underlying message is coherent and never trivial: be grateful for the world we live in, even with all it's problems.

Television can be an incredible tool to provide people with knowledge, though it can just as easily be a poor influence. The entertaining tint of television can have negative effects depending on the content, Neil Postman was not entirely wrong in his assessments. Take for instance reality television with shows like *Keeping Up with The Kardashians*, these shows are marketed as being reality unlike shows such as *24* which any viewer knows is entirely fictional. An article from Scholastic Scope had this to say about some of the false stereotypes propagated by reality television:

And then there are the stereotypes. Are all girls obsessed with clothes and spray tans? Are all boys obsessed with getting toned abs? That's what many

of the most popular shows would have you think. Plus, some experts say these shows send a dangerous message: that being stupid and selfish is fun. It can make you rich and famous! (Scholastic Scope)

This is the “reality” of reality television. Now what happens when your average teenage girl sees the plastic surgery laden figures of the Kardashian sisters? They can get the false ideas on how the female body is normally supposed to look, contributing to things like eating disorders and other psychological issues: the very same issue modeling magazines have struggled with for years. This is just one of many examples of how television can be dangerous and send the wrong messages when used improperly, especially to our youth.

So if technology is ultimately not the cause of our downhill spiral in knowledge, what is? The answer is our millennial generation is so seemingly dumb because they feel they can afford to be dumb. Neil Postman, Mark Bauerlein, and Steven Johnson all miss the larger historical context; they focus too heavily on immediate societal trends. Our decline in knowledge and education is merely a small part of a generational cycle of societal moods in what is called The Strauss-Howe Generational Theory; a theory of generational phases called “turnings” in American history outlined in the book *The Fourth Turning* by William Strauss and Neil Howe. According to the authors, there are four turnings each lasting an average of twenty years; the high, the awakening, the unraveling, and finally the crisis, after which the cycle is reset and an enlightened “high” generation is born. To see how this ties into our educational decline, let us go back in American history to The Great Depression and World War Two. Due to a series of poor political

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decisions building on themselves and outright ignorance to the issues of the world, The Great Depression and World War Two came to be; life was tough with people crowding soup kitchens, shortly followed by men going off to Europe and the South Pacific to fight and die- a crisis. The generation who lived through those hardships vowed “ never again”, and valued knowledge and culture as a means of never repeating the mistakes of the past- a high . Next, the baby boomers were born, and they were raised having not experiencing just how terrible life can be like their parents did; this ended up becoming an era of peace and enlightenment. We know this generation best for the hippie movement, John Lennon, Woodstock, the civil rights movement, etc.- an awakening; “ a time of spiritual exploration and rebellion against the now-established order” (Hines). These baby boomers had children, whom we now call generation x. An unraveling began, with “ an increasingly troubled era in which individualism triumphs over crumbling institutions” (Hines). The very foundations of our culture were questioned with ignorance and political extremism on the rise. Today with the millennial generation, Strauss and Howe claim we are now entering the fourth turning- the crisis, a time of turmoil and uncertainty. We saw a glimpse of this play out most recently in the 2016 presidential elections, one of the most hotly contested elections in American history; both sides of the political aisle spewed ignorance, and extremism with the result dividing our nation further apart to an almost unprecedented level. In short, hard times create strong people, strong people create good times, good times create weak people, and weak people create hard times; and perhaps Bauerlein would agree that the millennial generation is weak. The strength and educational ethic of every society in the world is directly tied to the hardships that society has

had to endure, and the lessons learned from them. There may be no better example of this than with the Jewish People; a people that have quite possibly endured more hardship than any other culture over the course of thousands of years. Today less than .02% of the global population is Jewish, yet 22% of Nobel Prize winners are Jewish (Schuster), and the tiny country of Israel puts out more engineers and scientists per capita than any other country in the world (Florida). As a Jewish person myself, I was taught from a young age that education and respect for the past is ingrained in our culture because if it weren't, the consequences could be catastrophic. History shows us that education is essential for the continuity of any society.

Perhaps Strauss and Howe's ideas are somewhat simplistic; however they do show an unmistakable pattern in history, and how these cultural and educational declines form. Bauerlein was correct when he said in his book "If you ignore the traditions that ground and ennoble our society, you are an incomplete person and a negligent citizen"(233). Respect for history and culture is an integral part of any healthy society, and we are ignoring the past and the cultural traditions that grounded our United States. As the hardships of history seem more and more distant, we end up feeling entitled, and with that sense of entitlement the drive to do better and learn more decreases. Ultimately our digital age is not the cause of our decline in knowledge, as the cycle will manifest itself in any way it sees fit. That is not to say our downward spiral in knowledge is uncorrectable; Neil Howe when asked of the implications of the turnings on education, offered his solution as to how education should change for the millennial generation:

The answer lies in getting away from at-risk and damage control in education, and moving to a new model based on confidence and teamwork and mastery of the future. That's what young Millennials want. That's where we all should want to go. (Howe)

Perhaps this is the basis for our happy medium between Bauerlein, Postman, and Johnson. An educational system tailored for the specific needs of the millennial generation, in which basic academics such as the arts, math, science, and history are sustained and taught while keeping in mind the technologies of today so we can be the masters of our future. One thing however, is clear: if we do nothing, our societal knowledge deficit will only increase, and therefore our hopes and dreams for a prosperous future will decrease.

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