

The New Criterion

Books

October 2008

iPods & nimrods

by [Liam Julian](#)

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

Mark Bauerlein

The Dumbest Generation.

Tarcher, 272 pages, \$24.95

Paeans to the new batch of Millennial workers appear, it seems, in every other edition of the Sunday paper, detailing the sharp aptitudes, habits, likes, and dislikes of “Generation Y.” But these articles mean little to Mark Bauerlein. Author of *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)* and a professor of English at Emory University, Bauerlein believes that behind the supposed worldliness and tech-savvy of today's twenty-somethings and teens is mostly air. Millennials, he thinks, possess little substantive knowledge and, therefore, even less wisdom.

That young people are uninformed about a great many things is old hat. The ancient Greeks engaged in generational spats between devotees of Sophocles and younger, rowdier, *surely* irresponsible fans of Aristophanes. More recently, Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Diane Ravitch published in 1987 *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*—a critical review of the scores achieved by 8,000 seventeen-year-olds on tests of history and literature—and answered their eponymous question thusly: Not much. In their last chapter, “A Generation at Risk,” Finn and Ravitch wrote, “We do not contend that the ‘younger generation’ is going to the dogs. We merely conclude that it is ignorant of important things that it should know, and that it and generations to follow are at risk of being gravely handicapped by that ignorance upon entry into adulthood, citizenship, and parenthood.”

Twenty-one years later, Bauerlein is writing much the same thing but putting some edge on it. Whereas *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* began with a question, *The Dumbest Generation* starts things off with an accusation. Even Bauerlein's imperative sub-title is biting: “Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30.” But Bauerlein himself isn't suspicious of all under-thirties; his book is far more nuanced than its explosive title and subheads indicate. American teens and young adults, he writes, live in an age of abundance, “have grown up with more knowledge and information readily at hand, taken more classes, built their own websites, [and] enjoyed more libraries, bookstores, and museums in their towns and cities,” but nonetheless remain woefully ignorant. “They don't know any more history or civics, economics or science, literature or current events.” Why?

The Dumbest Generation points to technology. Today, young Americans' “talents and interests and money thrust them not into books and ideas and history and civics, but into a whole other realm and other consciousness.” The internet and social networking and cellular phones that double as global

positioning devices promised that as their users became more interconnected they would also become more aware, more excited by the array of people and thoughts to which they could easily link. A broken promise, Bauerlein believes. According to him, these technologies have simply made it easy for people to stay connected to those most like them, and teenagers are especially prone to the seductiveness of remaining in this way *disconnected*, behind locked bedroom doors only engaging in interlocutions within their own niche. Writes Bauerlein, “The autonomy has a cost: the more they [teens and twenty-somethings] attend to themselves, the less they remember the past and envision a future.”

Thus, the disheartening facts: All Americans, but especially the young, turn to books more infrequently than they once did. The fall has been steep, too. Between 1982 and 2002, the rate of literary reading of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds declined by 28 percent. And fewer young people understand history. In 2006, two-thirds of high-school seniors could not explain the meaning of a 1950s-era photograph of a sign that read, “Colored Entrance.”

But while Bauerlein conclusively shows that large swaths of the Dumbest Generation are strikingly ignorant, his impugnation of technology is less solid, largely because little evidence exists to show a strong, causal connection between iPods and nimrods. The major custodians of young peoples’ ignorance are, of course, adults who allow them to remain ignorant. That’s not an original or innovative observation, but it’s true. *The Dumbest Generation* would be more convincing if its pages contained less about online learning and podcasts and more about what students *aren’t* taught in their K-12 literature and history classes and at university.

Victor Davis Hanson, among others, has poignantly noted that older Americans, who were privileged to receive in their classes rigorous instruction in important subjects, have actively deprived today’s young people of similar opportunities. Humanities courses on college campuses more often than not offer flimsy training in flimsy topics, and K-12 public education has been progressively dumbed down and sterilized. Perhaps this is why young Americans can seem disinterested, selfish, and flippant. Most of them have gone without a serious education in the core liberal arts, which leaves them, as Hanson writes, without “any notion of magnitude.” If teenagers and twenty-somethings appear satisfied to nurture only their own ephemeral diversions, it could be because they’ve never been *taught* about the events, the struggles, the art, the literature, the genius that preceded them. For this, Bauerlein has only his own generation to blame.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 27 October 2008, on page 74

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