The Dumbest Generation  
By Mark Bauerlein  

The following is excerpted from a 2008 book about the effects of digital media on young people by Mark Bauerlein, an English professor and researcher at Emory University.

...Consider how many more opportunities youth today have for compiling knowledge, elevating taste, and cultivating skills.

First of all, they spend more time in school. According to the U.S. Department of Education, college enrollment rose 17 percent from 1984 to 1994, and in the following 10 years it jumped 21 percent...

Second, in terms of the number of cultural institutions available to young Americans, the milieu has flourished. The American Library Association counts 117,341 libraries in the United States, 9,200 of them public libraries... More museums are open now, too, and more galleries and bookstores... More community arts programs... To follow the news, young adults in every city can find free papers with a clear under-30-year-old appeal, or they can turn their eyes to screens perched in restaurants, airport gates, gyms, waiting rooms, and lobbies, all of them broadcasting the latest updates on CNN. And this is not to mention the Internet, which provides anyone with a user password, library card, or student ID a gateway to out-of-copyright books, periodicals, public documents, art images, maps, and the rising generation’s favorite info source, Wikipedia...

This is the paradox of the Dumbest Generation. For the young American, life has never been so yielding, goods so plentiful, schooling so accessible, diversion so easy and liberties so copious. The material gains are clear, and each year the traits of worldliness and autonomy seem to trickle down into ever-younger age groups. But it’s a shallow advent. As the survey research shows, knowledge and skills haven’t kept pace, and the intellectual habits that complement them are slipping. The advantages of twenty-first century teen life keep expanding, the eighties and nineties economy and the digital revolution providing miraculously quick and effortless contact with information, wares, amusements, and friends. The mind should profit alongside the youthful ego, the thirst for knowledge satisfied as much as the craving for fun and status. But the enlightenment hasn’t happened. Young Americans have much more access and education than their parents did, but in the 2007 Pew survey on “What Americans Know: 1989-2007,” 56 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds possessed low knowledge levels, while only 22 percent of 50- to 64-year-olds did. In other words, the advantages don’t show up in intellectual outcomes. The mental equipment of the young falls short of their media, money, e-gadgets, and career plans. The 18-year-old may have a Visa card, cell phone, MySpace page, part-time job, Playstation 2, and an admissions letter from State U., but ask this wired and on-the-go high school senior a few intellectual questions and the façade of in-the-know-ness crumbles.
The Dumbest Generation? Don’t Be Dumb
By Sharon Begley

The following is excerpted from an article by science columnist Sharon Begley that appeared in Newsweek in May 2010.

...A more fundamental problem is what Bauerlein has in mind by "dumbest." If it means "holding the least knowledge," then he has a case. Gen Y cares less about knowing information than knowing where to find information. (If you are reading this online, a few keystrokes would easily bring you, for the questions so far, vice president, former chief justice of the Supreme Court, North and South Korea, Lake Superior.) And it is a travesty that employers are spending $1.3 billion a year to teach basic writing skills, as a 2003 survey of managers found. But if dumb means lacking such fundamental cognitive capacities as the ability to think critically and logically, to analyze an argument, to learn and remember, to see analogies, to distinguish fact from opinion ... well, here Bauerlein is on shakier ground.

First, IQ scores in every country that measures them, including the United States, have been rising since the 1930s. Since the tests measure not knowledge but pure thinking capacity—what cognitive scientists call fluid intelligence, in that it can be applied to problems in any domain—then Gen Y's ignorance of facts (or of facts that older people think are important) reflects not dumbness but choice. And who's to say they are dumb because fewer of them than of their grandparents' generation care who wrote the oratorio "Messiah" (which 35 percent of college seniors knew in 2002, compared with 56 percent in 1955)? Similarly, we suspect that the decline in the percentage of college freshmen who say it's important to keep up with political affairs, from 60 percent in 1966 to 36 percent in 2005, reflects at least in part the fact that in 1966 politics determined whether you were going to get drafted and shipped to Vietnam. The apathy of 2005 is more a reflection of the world outside Gen-Yers' heads than inside, and one that we bet has changed tack with the historic candidacy of Barack Obama. Alienation is not dumbness.

Bauerlein is not the first scholar to pin the blame for a younger generation's intellectual shortcomings on new technology (television, anyone?), in this case indicting "the digital age." But there is no empirical evidence that being immersed in instant messaging, texting, iPods, videogames and all things online impairs thinking ability. "The jury is still out on whether these technologies are positive or negative" for cognition, says Ken Kosik of the University of California, Santa Barbara, codirector of the Neuroscience Research Institute there. "But they're definitely changing how people's brains process information." In fact, basic principles of neuroscience offer reasons to be optimistic. "We are gradually changing from a nation of callused hands to a nation of agile brains," says cognitive scientist Marcel Just of Carnegie Mellon University. "Insofar as new information technology exercises our minds and provides more information, it has to be improving thinking ability."