A Very Long Disengagement by Mark Bauerlein

LAST SPRING Nielsen Media Research reported that the average college student watches 3 hours 41 minutes of television each day. "It was a little more than I expected," a Nielsen executive told a reporter, and a little more than professors care to see. But the networks have complained for years that young-adult programs attract more viewers than the ratings have previously indicated. Nielsen traditionally bases its count on household viewing, but many students watch TV shows in a different way, and the trend is growing.

The Wall Street Journal described one example: "Every Thursday night at the University of Colorado-Boulder, Theta Xi fraternity brothers and their friends cram into a common room for their favorite television show. It can be a tight squeeze, with as many as 40 people watching at a time.

"The big attraction is 'The O.C.,' Fox's soapy drama about the lives of teens in upscale Orange County, Calif."

The ritual is a common one on campuses today, and it has precursors. I remember it back in college in 1980, when the Luke and Laura affair on General Hospital caught on, and in the 90s when Friends lured into the lounges undergrads and, surprisingly, grads, too. Now, female students gather for airings of Friends spinoff Joey, while ESPN's SportsCenter pulls in massive numbers of twentysomething men.

That is far from the customary image of a loner freshman zoning out in front of the screen in his dorm room. Ever since Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451 (1953), media critics have believed that watching the boob tube "atomizes" individuals, so that even when viewing the news they have no real social engagement. The college ritual of The O.C., March Madness, The Daily Show With Jon Stewart, and other favorites reverses the process, and television watching isn't the only leisure habit shifting from "isolationist" to collective.

Teenagers used to keep diaries under lock and key in their bedrooms, recording hopes and humiliations for the authors' eyes only. Today's teens have a different approach. This past spring the Perseus Development Corporation, a company that designs software for online surveys, counted 31.6 million blogs, and 58 percent of them were kept by 13-to-19-year-olds. Instead of opening a monogrammed notebook in the late hours to cogitate alone, such "juvenile Marcel Prousts gone wild" (as a story in The New York Times Magazine labeled them) arrive home from school, log on, and let go. They compose an entry on the day's happenings, respond to comments on yesterday's entry, search other blogs on which to comment, and then return to their own site for updates.

As with everything adolescent, the observations range from the poignantly self-effacing to the tiresomely self-involved. A student told me how his 17-year-old brother is obsessed with his own blog, where intemperate chatter vies with awkward confession. He doesn't do homework or his chores, and he doesn't exercise or volunteer. The thrill of a peer's reaction to his own adagios holds him in his room for five hours a day.

I don't know if such habits signal a widespread or long-term trend, but here and there one sees an odd paradox at work. Students don't gather often in one place to hang out and tell stories unless an outside focus — like a television show — demands it. They make contact with a few clicks, and their exchanges can take place with strangers as often as with friends.

As soon as students leave class, they flip open the cellphone to check for messages. One of my colleagues talks about how his son carries on six conversations at a time through instant messaging, with dialogue boxes from his "buddy list" cluttering the screen. Walk through any university library, and at each computer station you will see a cheery or intent sophomore pounding out e-mail messages at a rat-a-tat pace. Head up to the stacks, and the aisles are as quiet as a morgue. The students at the screen or on the cell appear just as solitary as a person reading a book, but, in fact, they are intensifying their connections, solidifying their identity among peers.

Such contacts form largely through campus resources, but they are completely independent of the professors and the curriculum. It is a young people's universe of social intercourse, a group behavior unaffected by studies. Indeed, there is no evidence that the intellectual life of the college influences their connectedness at all.

Surveys of undergraduates like "Your First College Year," conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles and the Policy Center on the First Year of College at Brevard College, show troublingly high levels of "academic disengagement." Students say that they feel bored in class, submit assignments that underexercise their talents, and do minimal homework. Last year the National Survey of Student Engagement found that 44 percent of first-year students never discuss ideas from their readings or classes with their professors outside of class. And Indiana University at Bloomington's 2005 "High School Survey of Student Engagement" found that as many as half of all students spend only four hours or less per week preparing for class.

THE TRENDS are not unrelated. The more 'young people gather to watch TV shows, transmit e-mail and text messages, and blog and chat and surf and download, the less they attend to their regular studies. What develops is an acute peer consciousness, a sense of themselves as a distinct group.

To be sure, the current crop of students is the most educated and affluent ever. Their enrollment rates in college surpass those of their baby-boomer parents and Generation X, and their purchasing power is so strong that it dominates the retail and entertainment sectors. Credit-card debt for 18-to-24-year-olds doubled from $1,500 in 1992 to $3,000 in 2001, much of it due to the new array of tools, such as BlackBerries, that keep them up to date with contemporaries and youth culture. Students have grown up in a society of increasing prosperity and education levels, and technology outfits them with instant access to news, music, sports, fashion, and one another. Their parents' experience — LP records, typewriters, the cold war — seems a far-gone reality. As drivers of consumer culture, mirrored constantly by mass entertainment, young adults understandably heed one another and ignore their seniors — including professors.

But what do they know? What have they learned from their classes and their privilege?

We can be certain that they have mastered the fare that fills their five hours per day with screens — TV, DVD, video games, computers for fun — leaving young adults with extraordinarily precise knowledge of popular music, celebrities, sports, and fashion. But when it comes to the traditional subjects of liberal education, the young mind goes nearly blank. In the last few years, an accumulation of survey research on civics, history, literature, the fine arts, geography, and politics reveals one dismal finding after another. The surveys vary in sample size and question design, and they tend to focus on basic facts, but they consistently draw the same general inference: Young people are cut off from the worlds beyond their social circuit. While the wealth and education of young Americans has increased, their knowledge levels have either dropped or remained flat in the following important areas:

History. Students entering college have passed through several years of social studies and history classes, but few of those students remember the significant events, figures, and texts. On the 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress history exam, the majority of high-school seniors, or 57 percent, scored "below basic," and only about one in nine reached "proficient" or better. Diane Ravitch, a professor of education at New York University and a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, called the results "truly abysmal," and worried about a new voting bloc coming of age with such a meager awareness of American history.
People who believe that college can remedy the history deficit should be dismayed at the findings of another study, commissioned by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, of the historical knowledge of seniors at the top 55 colleges in the country. Many of the questions were drawn from the NAEP high-school exam, and the results were astonishing. Only 19 percent of the subjects scored a grade of C or higher. According to the 2000 report, titled "Losing America's Memory," only 29 percent knew what "Reconstruction" refers to, only one-third recognized the American general at Yorktown, and less than one-fourth identified James Madison as the "father of the Constitution."

The consequences are dire. As Leslie Lenkowsky, the former head of the Corporation of National and Community Service, observed in response to the NAEP results, "If young people cannot construct a meaningful narrative of American history, then there is little hope that the nation can live up to the highest task of a pluralistic liberal democracy."

Civics. In 1999 the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement reported that more than two-thirds of ninth graders study the Constitution, Congress, or the presidency. Unfortunately, their course work hasn't sunk in. In a 2003 survey on the First Amendment commissioned by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, only one in 50 college students named the first right guaranteed in the amendment, and one out of four did not know any freedom protected by it.

In 2003 a project led by the National Conference of State Legislatures examined the civic awareness of young people age 15 to 26 compared with older Americans. Barely half of those surveyed said that "paying attention to government and politics" is important to good citizenship. While 64 percent knew the name of the latest "American Idol," only 10 percent could identify the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. The researchers concluded "that young people do not understand the ideals of citizenship, they are disengaged from the political process, [and] they lack the knowledge necessary for effective self-government."

High-school and college students shine in one area of civics: volunteerism. A recent study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement titled "The Civic and Political Health of the Nation" found that young people "trail their elders in attentiveness to public affairs and in electoral participation, but hold their own in community-related and volunteer activities." But the habit is a superficial one, most likely fueled by the emphasis that college admissions offices place on volunteer work. A study in April 2005 sponsored by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA reported that "engagement with the community declines sharply during the years immediately after students graduate from college," and the drop begins during the college years.

Literature and the arts. In 2004 the National Endowment for the Arts released two reports, the "2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts" and "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America." (I was the project director of the latter.) The surveys measured rates of involvement in different art forms — like attending, listening, and performing — and compared them with previous findings. In the performing arts, the involvement rates of 18-to-24-year-olds fell significantly in most activities from 1992 to 2002. For example, the numbers of students who listened to jazz and classical music fell from 37 percent to 22 percent, while those who visited a museum or attended a performing-arts event dropped from 29 percent to 24 percent and 33 percent to 26 percent, respectively. The literary reading rates plummeted as well. From 1992 to 2002 the portion of young people reading at least one poem, play, or work of fiction for pleasure in the preceding 12 months fell from 53 to 43 percent.

Meanwhile, it should be noted, young people have enjoyed greater access to literature and the arts than ever before. The Economic Census counted 9,353 performing-arts companies in 2002, up from 5,883 in 1997. During the same period the number of museums jumped from 3,860 to 4,535. From 2000 to 2002 the number of fiction titles published rose from 14,615 to 15,133. And yet, from 1998 to 2003, the portion of all books sold that were purchased by people under 25 years old declined from 5 percent to 3.9 percent.

The fact that involvement fell while access rose signals a new stance toward literature and the arts among the young. I don't know of any research that formally examines the trend, but a snippet of conversation that occurred during a National Public Radio interview with me last year illustrates the attitude that I'm describing:

Caller: "I'm a high-school student, and I don't read and my friends don't read because of all the boring stuff the teachers assign."

Host: "Such as?"

Caller: "Uh … that book about the guy. You know, that guy who was great."

Host: "Huh?"

Caller: "The great guy."

Host: "The Great Gatsby?"

Caller: "Yeah. Who wants to read about him?"

Geography. In 2002 the National Geographic Society issued the results of the Global Geographic Literacy Survey. Thirty-nine percent of American 18-to-24-year-olds surveyed failed the test, and in international comparisons Americans came in second to last out of nine nations tested. Only 13 percent of our country's participants could pinpoint Iraq, only 12 percent could identify Afghanistan. The rate rose to just 51 percent for those who could locate New York State. Moreover, the young American adults surveyed could identify an average of only 2.5 countries in Europe. Around 30 percent believed that this nation has one billion to two billion residents (young people in other countries scored higher in estimating U.S. population), and only 19 percent could name four nations that acknowledge having nuclear weapons. Remarkably, 29 percent could not identify the Pacific Ocean.

Politics. In the past few decades, higher education has undergone a revolution in curriculum, what conservatives have called "the politicization of the humanities." But while the curriculum has changed, the shift hasn't affected the students. Political interest among them couldn't be much lower.

The geography survey found that, despite the high Internet usage among young adults, only 11 percent of the respondents said they use the Internet to follow the news. Eighty-two percent stated that they keep up with events by watching television, but a growing proportion tune in to programs of dubious informational value. A January 2004 study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that comedy shows like Saturday Night Live and The Daily Show With Jon Stewart "are now mentioned almost as frequently as newspapers and evening network news programs as regular sources for election news." A story on the report in The Hollywood Reporter began, "To a young generation of Americans, Jon Stewart may as well be Walter Cronkite."

Indeed, newspaper circulation is down, in part because while 46 percent of people in their 20s read a newspaper every day in 1972, the rate now stands around the low 20s. The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's 2004 survey "The American Freshman" tabulated only 34 percent of new students thinking that it was "very important" to keep up with politics, a drastic slide from the 60 percent who thought so in 1966.

The lack of curiosity among college students is reflected in their knowledge. In the 2004 National Election Study, a mere 28 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds correctly identified William H. Rehnquist as the chief justice of the United States. Only 39 percent knew which party had the most members in Congress, and one-quarter of them could not identify Dick Cheney as vice president.

Educators usually denigrate such surveys as ideologically slanted and narrowly conceived. They test "rote learning" and "mere facts," the argument goes. In 2004 the president of the Organization of American Historians stated, "Using such surveys as a starting point for debate diverts us from the real challenge at hand: how to use what students do know — the ideas and identities they glean from family stories, museums, historic sites, films, television, and the like — to engage them in the life-changing process of learning to think historically."

In spite of the naïveté of that parenthesis, we see the operative contrast: a knowledge of historical data versus thinking historically. The one amounts to a storage of facts, the other to a mode of reflection. But do we have any evidence that the latter is possible without a fair measure of the former? "Thinking historically" is one of those higher-order critical-thinking skills that educators favor, but how one can achieve it without first delving into the details of another time and place is a mystery. The facts are not an end in themselves, of course, but are a starting point for deeper understanding, and the ignorance of them is a fair gauge of deeper deficiencies.

Moreover, if critics of such surveys consider them ideologically slanted — because the knowledge they test is ideologically slanted — they should develop knowledge measures in other, less partisan areas. But it seems that they don't like any kind of

metric, that measurable knowledge is itself a problem. If students pick up that attitude, they are primed for ignorance and failure.

Reading through those reports, and given the advantages that college students enjoy today, one recalls the professor in Philip Roth's The Human Stain, who declares: "Our students are abysmally ignorant… far and away the dumbest generation in American history." They aren't less intelligent than their precursors — as IQ scores show — and earlier generations, too, struggled with traditional subjects. But they've taken more courses than previous cohorts, and they have more money and access than ever before. Why hasn't their knowledge level kept pace?

In part, because of the new leisure habits of teens and young adults. To repeat, the more time young adults devote to activities like sending e-mail messages, the less time they devote to books, the arts, politics, and their studies. Time has proved the formula. In the 1990s the gurus and cheerleaders of technology promised that the horizon of users would expand to take in a global village, and that a digital era would herald a more active, engaged, and knowledgeable citizenry, with young adults leading the way. It hasn't happened. Instead, youth discourse has intensified, its grip on adolescence becoming ever tighter, and the walls between young adults and larger realities have grown higher and thicker.

College professors complain about the result, noting the disaffection of students from their course work and the puny reserves of knowledge they bring into the classroom. But they hesitate to take a stand against mass culture and youth culture, fearful of the "dinosaur" or "conservative" tag. The disengagement of students from the liberal-arts curriculum is reaching a critical point, however. And the popular strategy of trying to bridge youth culture and serious study — of, say, using hip-hop to help students understand literary classics, as described in a June 19 article in the Los Angeles Times — hasn't worked. All too often, the outcome is that important works are dumbed down to trivia, and the leap into serious study never happens. The middle ground between adolescent life and intellectual life is disappearing, leaving professors with ever more stark options.

One can accept the decline, and respond as a distinguished professor of literature did at a regional Modern Language Association panel last year after I presented the findings of "Reading at Risk." "Look, I don't care if everybody stops reading literature," she blurted. "Yeah, it's my bread and butter, but cultures change. People do different things."

Or one can accept the political philosopher Leo Strauss's formula that "liberal education is the counter-poison to mass culture," and stand forthrightly against the tide. TV shows, blogs, hand-helds, wireless … they emit a blooming, buzzing confusion of adolescent stimuli. All too eagerly, colleges augment the trend, handing out iPods and dignifying video games like Grand Theft Auto as worthy of study.

That is not a benign appeal for relevance. It is cooperation in the prolonged immaturity of our students, and if it continues, the alienation of student from teacher will only get worse.

The middle ground between adolescent life and intellectual life is disappearing, leaving professors with ever more stark options.