

Katherine Kersten: How can kids think amid all that buzz?

KATHERINE KERSTEN, Star Tribune

It's a typical evening at home with your teens. You're trying to get Junior to focus on his homework, but his eyes are glued to his PlayStation 3. Your daughter is texting her best friend, watching TV, listening to her iPod and doing her algebra -- all at the same time.

You're not alone. A Kaiser Family Foundation study released in January found that, on average, American youths 8 to 18 spend more than 7 1/2 hours a day with electronic media -- TV, computers, cell phones, iPods and the like. That's 53 hours a week -- more than the average adult devotes to a full-time job.

So maybe our kids can't get through "Tom Sawyer" or write a five-paragraph essay without grumbling. There's a tradeoff, we say. Immersed in an electronic world, they're becoming media-savvy, computer-literate multitaskers -- or so we tell ourselves. These skills will help them succeed in the coming Digital Age, when books take a back seat, right?

Increasingly, educators are warning us to stop deluding ourselves. One such voice is Thomas Bertonneau, a professor of English at a state university in New York. In a series of articles for the Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in North Carolina, Bertonneau maintains that our "post-literate" kids are not just substituting one set of literacy skills for another. They are actually losing habits of mind that are vital to making sense of the world, with serious consequences for the future.

Bertonneau writes that in his film studies courses, supposedly "media-savvy" students struggle to follow the plots of classic movies like "The Maltese Falcon," which audiences of 70 years ago easily understood and enjoyed. Many students, he says, are confused by a straightforward scene in that film in which Humphrey Bogart tricks a rival. Not only do the kids fail to understand the trick -- they can't even tell the good guys from the bad guys, or grasp the hero's motives.

"Today's post-literate students," he concludes, "don't read movies any better than they read books."

Why? As a group, today's young people have limited attention spans and poor memories. "They discern isolated situations, phrases and actions, but assemble these into mental wholes quite haphazardly," explains Bertonneau. Many students can't follow an argument, pick it apart logically, or justify their own opinions. Since they lack the intellectual tools to express their thoughts logically, they simply "emote."

Why? "The flashing screens of our techno-entertainments have grossly eroded the power of young people to pay attention with sufficient discipline to see such patterns," Bertonneau concludes.

It's our fault, of course. We created a culture centered on powerfully alluring electronic technologies and invited our kids to consume it. Twenty-five years ago, cultural critic Neil Postman warned of the consequences in a book entitled "Amusing Ourselves to Death." Television and electronic media, he said, have "called into being a new world -- a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes." It is not only a world "without much coherence or sense," but it is opposed to coherence and sense.

In the process, we've lost much of value. Consider the intellectual level at which Americans of an earlier, book-centered age were able to operate.

The famous Lincoln/Douglas debates of 1858 provide a good example. In these encounters, Abraham Lincoln and his rival Stephen Douglas met in seven Illinois towns to debate the political issues of the day before enthusiastic audiences of farmers, blacksmiths and housewives. One candidate spoke for an hour, the other replied for an hour and a half, then the first speaker delivered a half-hour rebuttal. Both orators used lengthy, sophisticated sentences to address complex topics such as the Supreme Court's 1857 Dred Scott decision, the Kansas-Nebraska Act's effect on slavery, and the meaning of equality in the Declaration of Independence.

Today, we marvel at how ordinary folks could understand these debates. What made it possible was the audience's book-based literacy and typographic habits of mind. Reading develops the ability to think deductively and sequentially. It encourages patience and fosters skills in comparing ideas, making inferences, and assessing cause and effect.

We can't return our kids to Lincoln's day, nor would we want to. But as parents, we can do a lot to protect them from the electronic tsunami that threatens them.

In the Kaiser Foundation media study, for example, two-thirds of young people reported that their parents set no time limits on their use of TV, video games or computers. But when parents do make consumption rules -- of any kind -- children on average consume nearly three hours less media per day than those with no rules. These fortunate kids do better on many measures, from grades to reports of happiness.

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