If Ignorance Is Bliss, We Sure Must Have a Lot of Happy People!: The Startling Decline in Cultural Literacy

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Recommended Citation
Bird, John and Teaching and Learning Center, "If Ignorance Is Bliss, We Sure Must Have a Lot of Happy People!: The Startling Decline in Cultural Literacy" (2016). The Weekly Reader. 86.
https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/weeklyreader/86

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If Ignorance Is Bliss, We Sure Must Have a Lot of Happy People!: The Startling Decline in Cultural Literacy

Ever since I was a kid, I have been an avid watcher of *Jeopardy*. I go all the way back, to “Lakes and Rivers for $20, Art.” One of my life goals is to be a contestant on the show. (I am taking the online test once again next week, so please wish me luck. And somebody please help me with geography!) On last night’s show, a very rare event occurred: nobody won! All three contestants bet all their money, but none of them knew the Final Jeopardy question. (I did: “What is Little Rock?” So I consider myself a one-day champion, at least in my mind.) These were three very smart people, but the answer eluded them. (Then again, none of them knew the name of the artist whose 70s album was “All Things Must Pass.” Please!)

The event was so extraordinary that Charlie Rose talked about it this morning on the CBS Morning News. Either he or Nora O’Donnell or Gayle King later mentioned results of a survey in which 13% of Americans think Judge Judy is a Supreme Court justice. Jaw-dropping, but it gets worse: 10% of college graduates think so, too. Oh my!

I was so astonished that I looked up the study online. The study is from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, conducted in August 2015, based on 1,000 nationwide interviews. In addition to the questions above, a third of college graduates could not identify the Bill of Rights as part of the amendments to the Constitution, a third could not name a single one of the rights mentioned in the First Amendment, 46% did not know the election cycle of the Senate and House of Representatives, and 40% do not know that the Constitution gives Congress the right to declare war (perhaps understandable, since that has not happened in such a long time).

At that time, 32% believed John Boehner was the President of the Senate. Alaramingly, 11% of respondents aged 25-34 believe the Constitution must be reauthorized every four years. (Can you imagine what a food fight that would be?)

Perhaps these findings will not be shocking to our colleagues in the Department of Political Science, who encounter and test the limits of our students’ knowledge every day. But such general lack of knowledge about information most of us think should be common to all of us, especially college graduates, cuts across disciplines. I learned long ago not to be surprised at what my students don’t know about literature and literary history (although I was taken more than a bit aback when not a single graduate student in my seminar last semester could explain why the Restoration was called the Restoration. When prodded further, they could not come up with the Puritans or Oliver Cromwell during the period just before.)

Many factors explain this...
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decline in general cultural literacy, including but not limited to the internet. (Although some might argue that the internet has made the need for such knowledge obsolete—if you don’t know something, you can look it up in an instant by looking on your phone, which is really a library. As José Antonio Bowen, author of the excellent book, Teaching Naked, wrote, “Students come to our classes bored and with an encyclopedia in their pockets.”)

But I think most of us would agree that it really does matter that our students, especially by the time they graduate, should have command of a certain amount of knowledge in areas across the curriculum. That is why we, like most universities, have general education. That is why we were all so invested in the changes we made to our general education program two years ago. That is why so many of us devote ourselves to the education of students who are not our majors.

(An aside: when I Googled the author of Teaching Naked just now, because I can never remember his name, I landed on his excellent website, which contains several videos and resources and handouts. I want to study those more fully, and I will probably devote a future column to his ideas.) Here is the link: http://teachingnaked.com/

I went to the Donald Trump rally that was held recently on our campus. I went out of curiosity, wanting to see and experience a phenomenon in person that I have been watching on television and the internet and reading about in the press. I will try not to inject politics into this column, but I will say that I was more interested in the reaction of the crowd than in what Mr. Trump had to say. To say it felt like a mob is to do disservice to the concept of a mob. I left our coliseum shaken and frightened for our country and for my fellow citizens. I know polls tell us that most of The Donald’s support comes from people without a college education, but those survey results from ACTA don’t exactly give me much comfort about the knowledge and reasoning of the college educated.

The good old internet also brought me to a 2012 New York Review of Books opinion piece, “Age of Ignorance,” by Charles Simic, who writes these words that certainly apply to today’s climate: “An educated, well-informed population, the kind that a functioning democracy requires, would be difficult to lie to, and could not be led by the nose by the various vested interests running amok in this country. Most of our politicians and their political advisers and lobbyists would find themselves unemployed, and so would the gasbags who pass themselves off as our opinion makers. Luckily for them, nothing so catastrophic, even though perfectly well-deserved and widely-welcome, has a remote chance of occurring any time soon.”

Rather than despair, which might be a natural reaction, I feel even more invigorated by the challenge all this poses to do my little part in helping to form “an educated, well-informed population.” I realize that is my, and I suspect your, life work. As the Carolina Panthers say, “Keep pounding!”

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See you there!

Thought For the Week

“I would rather have my ignorance than another man’s knowledge, because I have so much more of it.”
--Mark Twain

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