

Publishing Editor's column

A RECENT article in *Newsweek* magazine contained some interesting information about the ignorance of young people in the USA of basic facts about their country, as disclosed in various surveys taken over the years. For example, over half identified America's main ally in the Second World War as one of the three main powers allied against America—Germany, Italy and Japan. The article concerned a book, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardises our Future*, by Mark Bauerlin, professor of English at Emory University. Similar results would no doubt be obtained in Britain and elsewhere.

As the title indicates, Professor Bauerlin's concern is that the ability of young minds to take on all the necessary tasks involved in keeping a country running is being impaired by constant exposure to electronic technology in all its myriad forms. The authors of the *Newsweek* article, while admitting the truth of some of what Bauerlin says, dispute his basic thesis, arguing that there is no need to know facts because they are instantly available on the Internet, and that computer games develop brain skills in different ways.

Linking with this, I recently read a newspaper article which referred to the constant barrage of information that many people receive during their daily lives: text messages, phone calls, emails and instant news, often accompanied by background music. The article points out that this leaves people no time to consider anything in any depth, and they end up becoming unwilling, or even unable, to do so, even if they have time. Researchers have concluded that this multi-tasking, as it is termed, impairs the ability of the brain to cope with complex tasks requiring concentration.

People may debate these issues, but clearly there are dangers in the way digital technology is affecting our lives, especially those of young people, when it comes to matters to do with the Bible. For instance, the Internet is not necessarily a reliable source of information. There is concern in schools and colleges at students cobbling together information from Internet sources without any thought being put into what they are putting together. Similarly, addresses for our meetings can be put together in such a way. The growing use of PowerPoint adds to the problem; information can be transferred readily into a presentation without considering its accuracy and relevance.

We ask, Is it really the case that we do not need to retain information in our heads because it is so easily available online? Although the Bible is its own interpreter, considerable knowledge of things outside the Bible is necessary to understand it well, for its various books were written against particular backgrounds and at particular times, and its prophecies regarding what would happen to the nations, stretching to our own times, need a knowledge of history and current events to become meaningful. The mind cannot be kept blank of information, and if it is not full of useful information, what is it full of? There is much information available in the media regarding trivial matters, to do with, for example, those in the entertainment and sporting worlds, and many people's minds are full of these rather than the more important things that have less appeal to the flesh. Modern technology in fact tends to make people mentally lazy and to concentrate the mind on things that appeal to the flesh.

Constantly switching one's attention from one thing to another also brings its problems. Proper Bible study needs concentration and application, as does reading the many Christadelphian publications about the Bible. In Victorian times poorly educated brethren educated themselves in Biblical matters by reading books that are now considered too difficult for any but the most studious to read. When it comes to addresses, in order to expound a Biblical subject properly, time is needed, but keeping the attention of an audience not used to listening for any length of time is a problem. Visual aids help but can prevent people from actually looking at the text of Scripture.

We cannot go back to how things were in a past age when things were so different, but we can be aware of the problems technology has brought and try to counteract them, both in ourselves and in bringing up our children. Furthermore, there is a question mark over the future of digital technology. I heard an American academic say recently on the radio that there is a danger that the Internet will become so overloaded that it will collapse. Then there is the possibility that a nuclear explosion or extreme sunspot activity will severely damage satellite communication systems. We may yet be forced back to using the printed page more than we have been used to doing, so let us not lose the necessary skills to do this.

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