

Frosh, Jocks, Dopes, and the Web

If you're a Factor regular, you know I've had some spirited debates recently with Mary Katharine Ham, John Stossel, and others. They generally view the Internet and social media as wonderful things that make our lives immeasurably better. They say that the machines enable us to look up information in an instant. True, but on the other side there are some cold, hard facts. Very cold and very hard.

The Centers for Behavioral and Preventive Medicine in Rhode Island just did a study of female college freshmen. The findings are beyond disturbing. These young women spend, on average, 12 hours a day engrossed in some form of media – often texting and perusing Facebook. 12 hours! Half a day! Can anyone tell me that's a good thing?

The students apparently weren't using the web to read James Joyce or to solve complex chemical equations. The researchers found some simple correlations: The more social networking, the lower the grades. The more social networking, the more classes skipped and the shoddier the homework assignments.

Why focus on college freshmen? Because today's teens are the first generation to grow up with the ability to be on line all the time, and the lives of younger Americans have changed drastically from back in the day.

It used to be that you'd see kids playing sports in the streets and on the playgrounds. I don't see too much of that anymore. Instead, many kids are playing sports games on the net, where they can experience the thrill of victory without the agony of getting sweaty. They are playing a game, but not the game.

This is personal because growing up on Long Island, sports

saved me. In my neighborhood, there were the jocks and the hoods. I had friends in both camps. The hoods hung around the shopping center smoking cigarettes and weed. I found that kind of stuff boring and hit the ball fields.

Many of the hoods bottomed out and some even died, while most of the jocks became prosperous. Competition builds discipline and perseverance. Smoking and getting high builds nothing. I was lucky to have made the right choice.

Today's fantasy world of the Internet is like a high-tech narcotic, for boys and girls, men and women. Highly motivated people still venture out to conquer the world, but many folks are retreating into an artificial world that is just a click away.

People often tell me they fear for America, that is has become a place of individual pursuits and selfish short-term desires. They say there is little sense of patriotism or civic responsibility.

That fear is worth thinking about as machines become more and more vital to our lives. Succeeding in the real world requires a lot more skill and determination than just flipping a switch.

When Miller and I were in San Diego last weekend for a Bolder & Fresher show, a man in the audience asked what I consider the greatest danger confronting our nation. I didn't hesitate. It's the apathy that is definitely made worse by the Internet and social media. Don't believe me? Take another look at that study of college freshmen. It's sobering. And it's tragic.