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# The More You Watch, the Worse You Feel



By Marty Kaplan

As if the triple whammy of the Japanese earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster weren't enough to enthral and terrify us, the war in Libya is now providing cable news viewers a fresh hell to follow 24/7.

But wait, as they say in the infomercials — there's more. In Bahrain, Saudi tanks and troops are violently cracking down on pro-democracy activists; in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is moving toward power; in Yemen, security forces, firing from the rooftops, have killed scores of demonstrators; in Syria, troops are shooting into crowds of protesting civilians; and last week's news from Israel and the Palestinian territories was enough to make anyone rage and wail.

Feeling overwhelmed yet? In Madison, Wisc. and other state capitals, Republicans are demonizing public employees, stripping workers of their rights and using deficits as an excuse to transfer wealth from the middle to the top. In Washington, D.C., every Republican on the environment subcommittee says that climate change is a hoax, and every Republican on the financial institutions subcommittee says banks are the victims, not the perpetrators, of the recession. Who has enough spare neurons to cope with that, let alone the defunding of NPR and Planned Parenthood? Do you have some mindshare left for a campaign finance system that's corrupting both political parties? For the obesity epidemic? For the worst youth unemployment in history?

These are the times that try men's souls. It's tough to know which is worse for us: keeping up with calamity, or tuning out the news. We are brought up to believe that good citizenship requires being informed, diligently following what's going on in the world. We are offered so many attention decoys — Charlie Sheen! William and Kate! Sarah Palin! — that we can use up all our bandwidth and still know next to nothing. With considerable will power, we might be able to avoid a lot of empty info-calories, but even a broccoli-heavy media diet can leave us feeling expert but impotent, knowledgeable but exhausted, good critical thinkers but frazzled basket cases.

Oh, did I forget to mention terrorism?

The temptation is to unplug, go on a media fast, declare a digital Sabbath, pull the covers over your head. Yet succumbing to this perfectly reasonable survival strategy is exactly what the bad guys want. Ignorance isn't bliss; it's slavery. The less you know, the easier it is to manipulate you, to fool you into undermining your own interests, to jerk your emotional chains.

Until about 20 minutes ago, the threat that ignorance poses to democracy could be sourced to hedonism, propaganda and the desire to make a buck. There's nothing like bread and circuses to stop discontent from boiling over; there's nothing like disinformation and paranoia to give science and journalism a bad name; there's nothing like an oligarch to make amnesia profitable.

What seems different today is that the virtuous desire to be well-informed is also the source of its own discontent. The more you know, the less you want to know. Maybe the unexamined life is not worth living, but is the examined life — the examined world — worth all of that Maalox and Ambien? Civic literacy seems to have become a kind of auto-immune disease; you want to attack the world's problems, but what you end up attacking is yourself.

Social media, of course, makes all of this more so. I'm always surprised by how often people ask me if I'm on Facebook and Twitter, and when I say yes, they say, "Well, I suppose you have to, because of what you do." They say it as though I'm running a risk, like an exterminator inhaling pesticide — in this case, the fumes of triviality: "Why would you want to know every time someone you know goes to the bathroom?"

I find it hard to convince people who don't use social media that what most characterizes it isn't its banality, it's its density. Sure, there's plenty of Justin Bieber clogging its arteries. But what I mainly get from Facebook and Twitter are links — a torrent of news and opinion only one click away, an exponential increase in the amount of information that I check out, skim, save, consume, forward. And a good deal of that information (the stuff I actually read) is useful and thoughtful. It's a global network of content that I've often missed, material that's curated and syndicated both by people I know and by people I don't know. It puts my news intake on steroids.

That's good news (I know even more), and bad news (I feel even worse). But as long as I'm addicted to following all the damn narratives going on in the world, I prefer that the headaches that the news gives me be as cosmopolitan as possible.

There's no comparison between the suffering the people of Japan are enduring, and the anguish of watching and reading about it. Here, Libya raises wrenching conflicts between our ideals and our interests; there, it's simpler: life or death. The risk isn't that we'll confuse our anxieties with their catastrophes; it's that we'll mistake being informed with being empowered, and being exhausted with being defeated. Citizenship is doing something, not watching something. The hundred thousand people who rallied in Madison the other weekend knew that; so did the protesters of Tahrir Square. The antidote to information sickness isn't less information. It's more politics.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*