



**THE BLOG** 05/27/2013 03:42 pm ET | Updated Jul 27, 2013

## Diagnosis: Informed Citizen Disorder



By Marty Kaplan



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I guess I shouldn't be surprised that one of the great pleasures of my life — reading the *New York Times* — is also bad for my health.

After all, lamb chops are luscious, but it turns out that red meat, not to mention a perfect side of salty fries, can kill you. Just because you enjoy something doesn't mean that it's good for you.

But being informed about what's going on in the world is supposed to be a virtue, the civic equivalent of exercise. You have to find the time for it, and it's not exactly fun to work your muscles to failure and your heart to 80 percent of 220 minus your age. Still, you're glad you did it, and it actually makes you feel better.

Keeping up with the news should be like that. An informed citizen ought to get a nice buzz from following what's happening. It's part of patriotism. Loving your country requires knowing your country, and knowing about the world it's part of.

But boy can it be depressing. Infuriating, too. Here are some of my *Times* spit-takes from just the last couple of weeks:

- Nearly six million Americans below the poverty line in 25 states [won't get the health insurance](#) that the Affordable Care Act gives them because their Republican governors or state legislators are refusing to accept federal money to expand Medicaid.

- Bank lobbyists — big contributors to both Republicans and Democrats on the House Financial Services Committee — basically [wrote the bill](#) the committee passed exempting Wall Street from what's left of the Dodd-Frank financial overhaul.
- [Apple avoided paying taxes](#) on \$74 billion between 2009 and 2012 by creating a subsidiary in Ireland with no physical presence and no employees — “It is not a shell company,” Apple said — that hasn't filed a tax return in Ireland, the United States or anywhere else.
- More active duty American [troops committed suicide](#) over the past 12 years than were killed in Afghanistan.

In Sunday's *Times*, Nathaniel Rich said that the X-rays emitted by full body scanners used in airports by the Transportation Security Administration were so hazardous that he took to calling them cancer machines. His piece is part a series called “Anxiety,” which the *Times* has been running since the start of last year. I don't know why they confine that label there; they might as well put the whole paper under that masthead.

I got hooked on the *Times* habit when Mr. Drew, my English and social studies teacher at Burnet Junior High School, told us we could subscribe for something like a nickel a day, and yes, its content would be on our current events quizzes. We were required to know stuff like what cabinet positions Anthony Celebrezze and Willard Wirtz held, and the *Times* was a good way to keep track of that.

Today, of course, the best journalism in the world, from plenty of sources, is available online, often for no cents a day, and we can access it in video and audio as well, and from anywhere at any time. I realize how much dangerous propaganda and addictive infojunk is also out there; I recognize the risks of confirmation bias, living in the bubble, inhabiting an echo chamber; I know that prestige outlets can sometimes be inaccurate, elitist, partisan, obtuse and hamstrung by archaic professional practices. But informed citizens aren't puppets; they're critical thinkers. Civic literacy is not inherently impossible.

But it can cause such outrage, panic, helplessness, bewilderment — there really should be a consumer warning on the news.

What a downer for democracy. You do your best to keep up, and what you get in return for your effort is something that the American Psychiatric Association ought to have put in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Informed Citizen Disorder: the damage you do to your mood and your blood pressure by watching Bill Moyers or Jon Stewart, listening to Kevin Phillips or Bruce Bartlett and reading the *Guardian* or the *New York Times*.

Every so often, I detox from the news. I find that a week of media-free hiking in the high desert provides a pretty decent cleanse. But that doesn't help with the rest of the year. Even if my work didn't require me to drink from the information firehose, I can't quit. Ever since Mr. Drew, it's been drilled into my conscience that it's my responsibility as an American — as a voter — to know what's going on.

Of course no one has to pass a current events quiz in order to qualify for a ballot. If I suffered from Dumb Voter Disability instead of Informed Citizen Disorder, I'd still get to pick the president. Which, come to think of it, is just one more reason to panic.

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

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