

Title:

Nitwit Nation: Is America Too Dumb for Democracy?

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Summary:

Studies show that over 96 percent of America's adults exhibit such limited literacies that democracy in any meaningful sense of the word is impossible. U.S. citizens need to start thinking and acting like citizens by turning off their TVs and engaging their minds.

Keywords:

democracy, literacy, reading, ochlocracy, books, television, republic, competent, intelligence, voters, citizen, citizenship

Article Body:

Most Americans are enthusiastic supporters of their own civic rights, but few bother to meet any would-be democrat's (or any would-be republican's, if you prefer) number-one responsibility: that of keeping oneself sufficiently literate and well informed to be able to vote rationally and knowledgeably. Mountains of too-long ignored evidence show that the vast majority of our nation's citizens cannot possibly meet that responsibility -- that their functional literacies are so limited that our form of government can't accurately be called a "democracy." The word, rather, is "ochlocracy": government based on the uninformed passions and whims of the mob.

In 1988, the United States Congress mandated a massive study on adult literacy in America. Some of the nation's most highly esteemed testing and evaluation specialists fanned out across the country, interviewing and testing literally thousands of citizens, young and old, rich and poor, educated and not. The result, published in 1993 as "Adult Literacy in America," showed that at least 96 percent of America's adults were unlikely to be able to perform tasks that one might think preposterously simple. Specifically, the study showed that only tiny percentages of us can dependably do such things as (1) read and demonstrate basic comprehension of a 1-page juror information sheet; (2) peruse and explain essential elements presented on a 1-page printed table such as one might receive at a school board meeting; or (3) explain how to solve a simple consumer arithmetic problem.

Subsequent studies (such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development 's "Literacy in the Information Age," published in 2000), tend to confirm the general impression one is left with after a close reading of "Adult Literacy in America": that we as a people simply don't have the kinds of tool knowledge and basic skills necessary to sustain any democracy worthy of the name. In other words, as citizens, the vast majority of Americans are functionally illiterate.

"If you don't use it, you lose it," the saying goes, and that's a major reason we've come to this sorry pass: we're too busy doing other things to keep our minds from atrophying -- and one of those "other things" overshadows all the rest as our most villainous time thief. Let's do a little arithmetic. From the 24-hour day we all start with, we'll subtract seven hours for the abbreviated night's sleep that most of us get. Our workdays may be eight hours in theory, but they often go longer, and then there's the commute, work-related errands, etc., so subtract another nine hours. A day's meals, personal hygiene, and household chores will consume about two more hours -- more if meals (including preparation, consumption, and cleanup) are permitted to last longer than 30 minutes each. A million other unpredictables (answering emails or phone calls from friends or family, soccer practice, car problems, surfing the Net, card club, a talkative neighbor -- whatever) will inevitably conspire to relieve us of a couple more. That leaves about four available hours, give or take, per weekday.

Care to guess how much TV Americans watch, on average, every day? Could it be ... four hours? Yep. In 1961, FCC Chairman Newton Minnow famously called TV a "vast wasteland." Maybe it was, maybe it is, maybe not. But let's leave questions of quality aside for the moment. Whether one's TV viewing choices are ridiculous or sublime, the arithmetic is the same: the vast quantity of television Americans watch leaves virtually no time (at least during the workweek) for anything else -- no time to read, write, or cipher anything unrelated to our jobs or maybe a favorite hobby or two. And so we become a nitwit nation, with most of its citizens comfortable operating within their own little worlds of work, family, TV, familiar social activities, and errands, but self-deprived of the time necessary to practice the art of thinking and acting like a citizen.

One wonders what our republic might be like if its constituents suddenly saw fit to struggle by on only, say, three hours of TV time per day, and gave the remaining hour to something more enlightening. If the unthinkable were to happen and we were to disengage from our tubes once in awhile, how might we best hone and exercise the essential skills we need to cast responsible ballots?

How about reading some mind-stretching books? Those who like to sentimentalize

books in general tend to gush naive nonsense, and the old saying that it doesn't matter what you read as long as you read something is the purest idiocy. It couldn't possibly matter more. Americans are tremendous buyers and readers of books (on weekends, perhaps) but the dominant varieties are genre fiction and self-help books. Those may be fine for what they are, but how they'll strengthen the Union -- or their readers' basic literacies -- is beyond me.

So what "should" a citizen of the republic be reading? A little bit of everything -- because in a democracy, one needs to know at least a little bit about pretty much everything. We need to read that which might make us more mentally agile and better informed about our world, be it works of science, history, economics, quality literature ... the choices are endless, and we need to say yes to as many of them as possible, as often as we possibly can. In a democracy, functional literacy demands promiscuous reading, including but certainly not limited to books.

Apart from the fact that books can disseminate essential information (which TV or the Net can, arguably, do more efficiently), there's another aspect of reading them that makes our doing so essential to the health of the republic. Reading well-written books, unlike watching most TV shows or cruising through a succession of websites, demands sustained and nuanced thought. It's easy to spend countless hours in front of the television or on the Internet without ever having to examine an idea of any consequence for more than a few seconds, if at all. When democracy's working its hardest and best, it's a deeply involved and profoundly complicated enterprise. It requires that its practitioners focus on vexing problems, see many sides and shadings of a given question, and find creative and satisfying solutions: precisely the kinds of mental processes one is led through over the course of most well-crafted, demanding books. Reading worthwhile books is a form of democratic calisthenics for the mind.

Simply turning off our TVs and reading the best books we can find won't necessarily strengthen the republic or heal the world. But it couldn't hurt, and our continued failure to do so is causing incalculable harm. Democracy may be what we want, but until we as a people acquire the habit of stretching our minds a whole lot further than we presently do, ochlocracy is most assuredly what we shall have.