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The limits of media dream machines

A recent Associated Press dispatch – headlined “Gadget May Help Sleepers Choose Dreams” – told the story of a new product that “can be programmed to help sleepers choose what to dream.” Made in Japan, the 14-inch gizmo is called “Dream Workshop.”

After so much progress has been made to ravage the natural environment all around us (fulfilling Francis Bacon’s recommendation that we torture Mother Nature for her secrets), it stands to reason that technology should also besiege our inner nature. But like wild animals and flighty birds, our dreams are loath to be tamed.

“The dream reveals the reality which conception lags behind,” Franz Kafka said. Yet overall, dreams are not very marketable. Experienced during sleep, they’re one of the few human activities left that can’t be bought or sold.

Dreams are increasingly anomalies. You don’t need to buy special clothes for them. You aren’t charged extra if they’re organic. You can’t invest them wisely or buy insurance on them. There’s no upgraded software to purchase, and no extended full-service warranty is available.

Actual human dreams are so priceless that they’re worthless in the marketplace.

But dreams are a logical frontier for digital marketers. A product like “Dream Workshop” is an apt metaphor for the media dominating mass communications, routinely pumping out words and images that – reversing Kafka’s depiction of dreams – revel in dubious concepts that streak ahead of human realities.

Let’s say this much for the “Dream Workshop” gizmo: Presumably it’s better to try to choose our dreams than to have them selected for us. But in medialand, it’s difficult to tell the difference. Big profits are being made on our media-induced dreams all the time.

Constantly guiding us towards particular fantasies in our waking hours, media outlets keep pushing mass-produced visions of fulfillment – what’s most vital to eat, drink and own; how we could be admired, desired, touched. The most intensive forms of such propaganda are TV commercials, featuring impressively high production

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values and dismally low human values.

With the population constantly under such media assault, no wonder meditation has become so popular. Like trees struggling to flourish – while surrounded by concrete, air pollution and other such injury-producing insults – many people yearn to turn off the synthetic noise for a while.

Despite the appeal of something like "Dream Workshop," we don't need to gain control over our dreams; we need to discover what our dreams truly are. This is the last thing the network programmers want to encourage. They strive to maximize confusion between marketed means and ends. The advertisers they covet are working overtime to confuse our deeper desires with what's on the market, claiming to fulfill them.

Of course, provided we have the money to spend, it's far easier to buy products than actually attain what their ad-driven images say we'll gain. Prevalent advertising buzzwords pretty much sum up the mirage. Freedom. Sexy. Excitement. Satisfaction. What can't be bought is what's most frequently offered to the buyer.

In the corporate media zone, when it comes to the wakened world, some dreams don't rate very high. Powerful marketers aren't on any campaign for basic social justice along the lines of ending poverty.

How many digits would it take to quantify the ratio of recent media mentions of a "war on terrorism" compared to a "war on poverty"? And how often have you heard a newscaster on a television network – or, for that matter, a correspondent for NPR News – allude to the fact that poverty continues to kill vastly more people than "terrorism" ever has?

"There is something about poverty that smells like death," Zora Neale Hurston wrote. "Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in dry season and rotting around the feet; impulses smothered too long in the fetid air of underground caves. The soul lives in sickly air. People can be slaveships in shoes."

Hurston wrote those words a decade before Langston Hughes asked: "What happens to a dream deferred?"

Unfortunately, left to media devices, it often implodes.

Norman Solomon is co-author, with Reese Erlich, of "Target Iraq: What the News Media Didn't Tell You." This book is now available as a free download at www.coldtype.net.