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When junk interrupts junk

Once in a while, mass media outlets give a fair hearing to radical ideas that make sense. But those ideas have little chance to take hold – mainly because followup is scant. Instead of bouncing around the national media echo chamber, the offending concept falls like a tossed rock.

That's what happened a few weeks ago when Parade magazine featured an essay directly challenging the nation's TV commercials.

"With the advent of television, the nature of concentration was altered," Norman Mailer wrote in the magazine's Jan. 23 edition. "Yet children could still develop such powers by watching TV. Video and books had a common denominator then – narrative." But television did not long retain the continuity of "uninterrupted narratives." Before long, for viewers, "there were constant interruptions to programs – the commercials."

Year after year, the situation has worsened. "On the major networks, the amount of time given to commercials and other promotional messages increased by 36 percent from 1991 to 2003," Mailer noted. "Each of the four major networks now offers 52 minutes of commercials in the three hours from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. every day."

Young people are not spared. "It is as bad for most children's shows," Mailer lamented. "Soon enough, children develop a fail-safe. Since the child knows that any interesting story will soon be amputated by a kaleidoscope of toys, food, dolls, clowns, new colors and the clutter of six or seven wholly different products all following one another in 10-, 20- and 30-second spots all the way through a three-minute break, the child also comes to recognize that concentration is not one's friend but is treacherous. For soon enough, attention will be turned inside out."

Hence, Norman Mailer's conclusion: "If we want to have the best of all possible worlds, we had better recognize that we cannot have all the worlds. I believe that television commercials have got to go. Let us pay directly for what we enjoy on television rather than pass the spiritual cost on to our children and their children."

Confronting present-day television would also require addressing other key points.

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Here are two: The content of commercials is routinely corrosive if not toxic. And the programs being interrupted are, themselves, commonly junk that rots people's minds.

Are such descriptions too polemical? I don't think so.

Seen out of corners of our eyes, TV commercials maintain much of their power because we don't think about them very much, even while we absorb them. However, if we set out to consciously scrutinize a random sample of commercials for a while, we're liable to be jolted by just how awful they are. A wide range of netherworld adjectives apply. For instance: nauseating, insulting, degrading, idiotic, insipid, asinine, numbing, mind-warping, stultifying . . .

And how about the programs that the commercials interrupt? The other night, I clicked from the celebrity-and-crime fare now dominating CNN's prime-time lineup to an episode of the much-hyped ABC show "The Bachelorette." With breathtaking acculturated stupidity, the show was so painfully dehumanizing that any interruption from a barrage of mindless commercials was actually a relief.

The fact that tens of millions of viewers, including young people, watch such insidious programming is cause for despair. Overall, the United States is heavily socialized by the likes of what dominates TV screens. Mailer is quite correct. In recent decades, gradually and profoundly, corporate programmers have cut up the televised tales an inch at a time as commercials splice and dice continuity into fragmentation. And everything moves faster. On the evening news, sound bites are now often sound nibbles or mere crumbs. Entertainment shows flash images for split seconds. Thoughts and emotions are not communicated or portrayed so much as suggested, truncated and dispatched with inarticulate pseudo-sophistication.

It's true that not all the shows on commercial television are in the range of mediocre-to-atrocious. And on PBS affiliates, the programs often go uninterrupted, though the "enhanced underwriter credits" that bracket them are increasingly lengthy pitches aiming at affluent demographics (commercials by any other name). Yet certain messages – fixations on money, glitz and appearances – dominate. The distances from public television's "Nightly Business Report" to "Entertainment Tonight" to "The Bachelorette" are short leaps. Televised representations of life become distinctly more apparent than real. In the inorganic fog that wet-blankets televisionland, a pernicious smog of thinly veiled befuddlement is the best we're supposed to hope for.

Norman Solomon's next book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer by Wiley. His columns and other writings can be found at www.normansolomon.com.