

Precarious Dreams

Defending our Imagination from hi-tech Takeover

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Just as obtaining job-related income is being made more precarious every day by automation, our sleeping hours are now increasingly under siege by the forces of techno-capitalism. In order to more fully understand the growing vulnerability of our dreams to corporate manipulation, the recent phenomenon of “dream incubation”, which involves the implantation of marketable dreams in our heads, is worthy of further investigation.

The avowed commercial intent of “dream incubation” is not only to manipulate what we dream about by means of strategic “product placement” cues addressed to us as we fall asleep, but ultimately to predict and influence our purchasing behavior when awake.

In one sense, this is nothing new. Almost a century ago Sigmund Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays used his illustrious uncle’s psychological theories on the nature of dreams and the unconscious for propaganda purposes in an advertising/public relations context that has always attempted to link our desires with positive product associations (a typical contemporary example being the linking of car ownership with freedom).

Pursuing the Bernays approach to its logical conclusion, in the mid-twentieth century, there was a brief vogue for “subliminal” advertising that experimented with targeting waking subjects by using messaging flashed below their perceptual threshold that was intended to create consumer desire for products and services.

Faced with mixed claims for its effectiveness and a popular backlash, this clandestine approach soon fell out of favor. However, corporate penetration of the more intimate realm of sleep is now being publicly-touted by marketers as a new scientific frontier. Consequently, today, the colonization of the dream world employs the latest technological developments to catapult corporate invasiveness to the next level of mindfuckery.

Take the Apple Watch or that company’s iPhone sleep app, or else the Google Fitbit or the same corporation’s Nesthub. Tech companies now make watches, wearables, and apps that are capable of monitoring our sleeping states and mining our dreams.

Since these extractivist techniques are presently being researched and developed within the logical assumptions of surveillance capitalism, it is only a matter of time before technocapitalists gain the capacity to not only sell any acquired sleep data obtained for profit but to actively breach the porous walls of our untrammelled dream worlds with their own implanted desires. And, even worse, the sleeper, probably will not even remember having their dreams hacked upon awakening. This is not a paranoid fantasy to be realized in some distant dystopian future.

The technical research on the use of implantation devices for communicating with sleeping subjects is openly being shaped and refined right now, and its full implementation is not an “if” but a “when” proposition. Not content to control us in our waking hours of wage slavery, corporate “dream engineers” today seek to pierce the veil of our slumber with their enslaving consumer messages.

But why would we consent to such a blatant commercialization of our dreamscape? Well, why do we consent to any of the personal indignities and violations of privacy that participating in high-tech civilization increasingly entails?

While some may consciously choose not to own the monitoring devices that make this corporate snooping and infiltration possible, all those who do or will own them, are either so addicted to the technological platforms on which they appear, so convinced of other seemingly more positive applications available there, or so pressured to do so by their employers, that they are willing to accept the quid pro quo bargain of looking the other way and hoping for the best.

No worries, the promotional image of “dream incubation” research portrays it as potentially having beneficial uses when it comes to treating such medical problems as chronic sleep-deprivation, recurrent nightmares or even Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, for most who consent, the buy-in would merely involve something as mundane as a wish to improve irregular sleep patterns, and many would automatically acquiesce without much thought, knowledge or understanding of the consequences.

Even those more reluctant to be participants may simply submit to the corporate conquest of their dreams because they feel that they have no choice other than to do so in a runaway world of unstoppable technological determinism.

As an example of one of the more intoxicating incentives to participate in Targeted Dream Incubation (TDI) experiments; on the night before the 2021 Super Bowl, the Molson-Coors brewing company kicked off its TDI campaign by promising free beer to volunteers in what they dubbed in grandiose terms as “the world’s largest dream study.”

They hired a Harvard psychologist to design enticing “dream incubation” stimuli which mixed images of Coors beer cans and refreshing alpine streams, and even brought international pop star Zayn Malik on board as celebrity marketing bait by contracting with him to be featured asleep on Instagram Live while subjecting himself to an implanted Coors dream.

Technologically-speaking, the Coors TDI experimentation was made possible by such wearable “dream incubation” devices as the newly-minted, “Dormio”, developed at MIT It pairs 3 sleep sensors with a computer or smartphone in the process of prompting users to think about the stimulating images that are presented to them before sleep which are later to be surreptitiously reinforced by hacking them directly into the participants’ dreams.

Big deal you say, nothing more than a can of beer is at stake here, so what’s the problem? However, what if such a “dream incubation” gambit was not merely about selling piss water beer, but about injecting nocturnal messages aimed at selling a President or reinforcing the behavioral norms of consensus reality that make voting for Presidents seem like the limits of political action? Will the next step in this Orwellian saga be learning to love Big Brother?

At the American Marketing Association’s New York 2021 Future of Marketing conference, a study was presented which found that of 400 US marketing firms, 77% aimed to use dream-tech advertising in the next 3 years. In regard to the sleep data obtained in such situations, TDI researchers Adam Haar Horowitz and Robert Stickgold (both of whom worked on the team that developed “Dormio”) and fellow dream researcher, Antonio Zadra, offer us the following ultra-creepy interactive consumer data exploitation scenario:

“Imagine this data being sold to corporations selling sleeping aids, so that, after a particularly restless night, the ads that appear during your Internet searches are for Benadryl, Ambien or Tylenol PM, even though you might not remember how poorly you slept. Since sleep loss is known to cause risk-taking behavior, one might expect to be hit with targeted ads for online gambling. As there is evidence linking sleep loss to sugar intake as well, ads for candy might pop up.

Going further and taking a cue from their research on changing candy preferences during naps, one can easily imagine a musician collaborating with a manufacturer of Skittles to offer an hour-long nap soundtrack that incubates psychedelic candy dreams. Consumers could get half off on candy just for listening to a relaxing nap soundtrack, and there might be no legal requirement for clear informed consent about how the incubation could drive purchasing behavior. Candy in hand, perhaps you would want to watch a show while you snack.

A promotion with Netflix could mean your subscription comes with dream incubation stimuli as well, enabling dreams related to a new show after you binge-watch until bedtime, all while measures of sleep quality—including changes in your breathing and heartrate during dreams—tell advertisers whether these stimuli were well received and how to target and tailor future advertisements.”

And no doubt there are those in government positions that are watching the development of TDI research with bated breath and an eye toward putting it to repressive use in a statist context.

It is said that proto-surrealist French poet Saint-Paul Roux used to place a sign on his bedroom door before going to sleep each night which read, "Poet at Work."

For Surrealists, the dream is a source of poetic illumination and revelation. It suggests a higher form of reality. In this expansive sense, dreaming can be considered a political threat because of its subversive potential as a seedbed for imagining and manifesting a life worth living.

Dreams can be disruptive to the authoritarian status quo because they are potentially a source of critical utopian visions that can challenge the miserabilism of an increasingly dystopian reality which characteristically insists that it is the only possible reality. Rather than acquiescing to the domestication of our dreams via the techno-pathology of "dream incubation", why not seek to carve out a more rebellious oneiric path?

— Resist the dream-snatchers!

— Defend the Marvelous!

Ron Sakolsky's latest book is *Dreams of Anarchy and the Anarchy of Dreams: Adventures at the Crossroads of Anarchy and Surrealism* (Autonomedia, 2021)

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