On the Commodification of Marketing Knowledge: Opening Themes

Preamble

In 1988 Lord Young, then UK Minister for Trade and Industry, is reputed to have said that "Government policies are like cornflakes. If they are not marketed, they will not sell." As Franklin (1994) notes, this phrase expresses the growing commitment of government to the careful packaging and presentation of information about its policies and programmes as key elements of its public communications strategy. However, it also draws attention to the power of the media, not only in terms of providing communicators with access to a target audience, i.e. providing distribution channels, but in its capacity to re-package this information, and thus to exercise influence over what can be said; and, importantly, what might be achieved through those sayings. Consequently, how the media present and portray the issues and personalities is an important factor mediating the circulation of political information and ideas.

Recently the terms "spin-doctor", "one medium, one vote" and "sound bites" have been coined, providing a colourful vocabulary which helps give expression to ideas about how information can be manipulated and packaged by various intermediaries to achieve certain strategic effects. Indeed, you could argue that we have arrived at a point where it is widely recognized that information has become a commodity to be shaped, packaged, distributed and marketed, like any other. This process has itself been accelerated by the widespread availability of new forms of electronic media which offer the potential to widen our repertoire of information production and consumption activities. As a result, the pace of the circulation of information and ideas is greatly accelerating and, as Derrida (1978) argues, the traditional boundaries between knowledge, information, text and interpretation are breaking down: you might say that all that was previously solid about knowledge is now melting into air as new pliable and differentiated forms of knowledge and belief emerge (Berman 1982). Thus we may be entering an era in which we inhabit the unforeseen consequences of the post-industrial information society that Bell (1973) foresaw in outline over 20 years ago.

There seems to be little reason to believe that the contemporary pressures that operate in the domain of communicating information about political policies and programmes do not operate in the domain of communicating information about marketing. It strikes the editors that the metaphor of commodification can usefully be applied (after Baudrillard 1983) to the marketing academy itself in its efforts to examine what an AMA Task Force previously referred to as the development, dissemination and utilization of marketing knowledge (AMA 1988). In this special issue...
we seek to explore these ideas, and through doing so, to widen our appreciation of the contemporary communications environment that the marketing academy is itself a part of. But why should we bother?

**The Evolving Market for Marketing Knowledge**

In the last 40 years, a wealth of printed literature has been produced about marketing knowledge in academic texts and journals, as the provision of marketing education has expanded and with it, general interest in the area. This knowledge has been packaged, merchandised, promoted and distributed by academics, consultants, gurus, journalists and students into the wider managerial and public domain. Thus have the language and concepts of marketing permeated the vernacular, as Lord Young’s remark suggests. In the process the range of available sources of information about marketing has greatly expanded as has the range of consumers of such information. Furthermore, the circulation of the cognitive currency of marketing is accelerating to the point where the difference between knowledge and information about knowledge is itself becoming problematic. There seems to be no end in sight to the accelerating, post-industrial information culture that is emerging towards the turn of the century.

More recently, the marketing academics who have traditionally been one of the main sources of this knowledge are coming under greater pressure to produce, distribute and disseminate information about their knowledge. They are also under greater pressure to make this information accessible and relevant to the needs of various constituencies and to be held accountable for this by those constituencies.

Take a walk through any academic bookshop, or dally awhile in an airport bookstall or the publishers’ exhibition at any conference, and you will witness the torrent of competing publications now available, all providing information on many different areas of marketing. Indeed, the proliferation of journals and other publications on marketing seems likely to continue as a result of radical technological changes occurring in the publishing industry. Thus it is not surprising that the marketplace for such information is becoming increasingly crowded; that the life-cycles of ideas are shortening; and that it is becoming more difficult to cut through the *noise* by finding something new to say, so to differentiate your knowledge product; whilst much that is being said seems to drape old ideas in more fashionable clothing, or to disguise a poverty of ideas in the pyrotechnics of dazzling technical displays. In some ways, information has itself become a fashion product, with the cycle of repeat buying shortening, and style and presentation becoming just as important, if not more important, than content.

You might assume that with there being limited shelf space available for books and journals that this may serve to increase the influence the media have over what can be said and how it is said. This may be partly true, for the media are keenly attuned to the need to carefully market the information they trade in. However, as all good marketing students will know, in a crowded marketplace suppliers can pursue competitive advantage through developing innovative products and creating new retailing formats. Some evidence of product differentiation can already be found in the market for textbooks on marketing, where heavy packages of supporting materials are widely available to both students and teachers, as an
incentive to adopt. Proliferating forms of media provide the basis, not only of new formats for retailing information, but of innovative forms and styles of the information product: in other words they provide marketing opportunities. The early effects of some of these trends are already apparent in the publishing industry where the printed word is no longer seen as the only way to communicate information or to codify it; and new genres are emerging for writing about knowledge as in the book, Imagologies (Taylor and Saarinen 1994).

Furthermore, derivative or so called second-generation marketing textbooks are now available whose declared USP is that they re-package the ideas of original authors, who typically wrote for a US audience, with the intention of making them more appealing to a European audience. We also live in an age where ghost writers, or zealous editors are employed to help sex-up, or un-pack the otherwise turgid and arcane texts of scholars. In some ways, the genre of academic writing is itself undergoing revisionary changes as authors, perhaps under the subtle guidance of their publishers, seek to confer greater accessibility on their writings, or communicability, and thus attain the prize of wider audiences — although this is less evident in the marketing journals where reviewers not only police ideas, but writing styles. However, the overall result is a slowly expanding repertoire of writing styles and narrative forms that often take as their raw material the ideas of others which can then be re-presented in various guises to suit the purpose at hand. Thus, we believe that marketing knowledge has itself become a commodity to be shaped, packaged, distributed and marketed, like the products and services it typically takes as the objects of its inquiry.

The Ends of Marketing Authors and Authority

Of course the re-packaging of the ideas of other authors is something that most marketing scholars have engaged in at some point in their career to varying degrees. A close inspection of many marketing journals and texts will reveal that, over the years, many ideas have been liberally borrowed from authors writing within other cognate disciplines and manipulated to bring new insights to, or to achieve authenticity and authority within the marketing academy. Sitting as it does in the shadows cast by the peaks of philosophy, anthropology, economics, sociology, geography, history and psychology, you could argue that as a discipline marketing has largely been built on the re-packaging of ideas originating elsewhere. In saying so, we recognize that this is a condition that not only applies to the discipline of marketing, for it is evident in many areas that fall within the ambit of management and business studies.

Recently, within the field of organization studies, authors such as Alvesson and Willmott (1992) and Morgan (1992), have taken a form of marketing knowledge as the object of their inquiry, at least as it is represented in leading textbooks. To do so they have had to translate, edit and re-package this knowledge; in a sense they strip-mine a seam of the marketing knowledge base in pursuit of their own alchemic ends. Irrespective of whether you agree with their analysis, or the emancipatory conclusions they seek to draw as a result of it, the strategy they use is worthy of comment. For them marketing knowledge is not a fixed set of irrefutable beliefs, but a body of provisional ideas which can be subjected to the scrutiny of analysis just as
much as any data set. They not only set out to interrogate the marketing knowledge base, but to disrupt the process in the marketing academy whereby doubt becomes inquiry becomes belief (Pierce 1877). In the process they subject the institutions of the marketing academy to penetrating critical scrutiny on the grounds of the effects those institutions have on what passes as knowledge in marketing; specifically that they perpetuate the fixation of marketing doubt, and thus inquiry and belief, into a very narrow terrain of endeavour. Backhouse's (1994) recent commentary on the fixation of beliefs in economics illustrates that this observation not only applies to the institutions of marketing.

Within the marketing academy itself, it is not unusual for the ideas of marketing authors to be re-packaged or consumed by other marketing authors in pursuit of their own publishing goals. Indeed this borrowing is a rite de passage which is institutionalized in the compulsory literature review demanded of authors by the reviewers of academic journals, books and research applications. The ritual obedience of marketing authors to the demands of such editors and reviewers ensures that this institutional effect will continue.

Moreover, as Sawchuck (1994) trenchantly observes, through our empirical studies, of whatever epistemological hue, we mine the opinions or observed behaviour of our respondents and essentially edit, translate or re-package them to suit our analytical purposes; i.e. we manipulate them to form a persuasive argument which helps advance our own publishing and, ultimately, career purposes. In many ways we marketing academics are not only producers of information about knowledge, but merchandisers, retailers and consumers of it too. We all rely on the commodity of information about marketing knowledge in order to ply our trade; and in the course of exercising our duties, as managers, authors, consultants, teachers or students, we use this information as a resource, wherever we find it, to pursue our own ends. So you could say that we marketing academics trade in fast moving current generalizations (FMCGs) which are marketed and consumed by various groups of people whose collective activity circulates information about marketing knowledge.

**Unintended Consequences**

It strikes us that there are two inevitable, if unintended, consequences of the growing commodification of marketing knowledge: first, that the privileged position of marketing academics in the knowledge creation chain is being decentralised and dehierarchized; and second, that the shelf-life of marketing knowledge will continue to decline.

On the first, the simple linear view of the flow of knowledge from the marketing academy to its main consumer constituencies may no longer be tenable. It privileges the position of academics in the circulation of marketing knowledge at a time when proliferating forms of media and information make it difficult to locate the original beginnings and final ends of truth claims in the voice of any one particular author. Indeed, we believe that the authority to speak on the marketing world no longer lies solely in marketing academia, if indeed it ever did. As Bauman (1987) puts it, academics no longer legislate, they just interpret. Furthermore, the boundaries between the sub-fields of management and business subjects are themselves
breaking down and new intermediaries are emerging who can rapidly circulate
information between these formerly sealed-off areas of knowledge development
(Bourdieu 1984). Featherstone (1988) notes that many other previously differentiated
areas of academic knowledge are also experiencing those changes.

The important point here is that marketing academics are seen as only one of
many different voices whose truth claims, or opinions on what should be believed,
may be listened to. In some respects their authority may have been eroded as an
effect of the emergence of more effective communicators who better understand the
contemporary communications culture and its insatiable need for information of
various sorts in a variety of media contexts. For as Taylor and Saarinen (1994) note,
with new forms of media and the accelerating circulation of information comes the
emergence of a new armoury of persuasion technologies which must be mastered by
those who wish their voice to be heard. You could say that the so-called high-profile
Gurus in our field are early examples of those who have successfully mastered and
exploited the available range of persuasion technologies; and that in the process
their ideas have been consumed and commodified by readers and other authors.
However, we are not arguing that marketing academics no longer have authority to
speak, just that the conditions which establish the legitimacy of their claims to
authority have changed; they can no longer automatically assume final authority
and may have to compete to assert their voice and have it heard above the noise of
other competing voices.

As long ago as 1988, the AMA Task Force on Developing, Disseminating and
Utilizing Marketing Knowledge (1988) observed not only that many marketing ideas
have a short shelf-life, but that many marketing academics have a short productive
research and writing career. As well as suggesting in some detail what could be done
about this by the AMA, the Task Force also theorized the link between the career
structures of US marketing academics and the knowledge development then
occurring within the US marketing academy. It was argued that on attaining the
prize of tenure, many marketing academics were seduced away from the research
stream that established their reputation by the distractions of textbook writing,
consultancy, administration and teaching. Moreover, it was observed that the
combination of poor funding sources for research and an adversarial review process
tended to have a demoralizing effect on the research aspirations of academics. In
summary, the short shelf-life of marketing knowledge was thought to be largely
attributable to the effects of the institutions of the marketing academy itself.

The marketing literature is littered with the discarded carcasses of previously
fashionable topics which now languish for the want of some creativity and
imagination. Yet it is interesting that 1995 marks 25 years of writing and research in
the area of organizational buying behaviour, a field that seems only to have made
modest conceptual progress in the light of more recent developments in actor-
network theory (Law 1994). So in some broad areas of marketing, research and
writing, a line of continuity does seem to have been maintained. However, we
believe the rather easy observation about the shelf-life of marketing knowledge
assumes some importance when set against the related observation concerning the
lack of innovative, and by definition different and even heretical thinking, currently
finding its way into the most prestigious marketing literature.

Once again this is a pernicious condition that not only affects marketing. Snowdon
(1995) writes how Rober Clower, the previous Editor of the American Economic
Review, noted that from something like a 1000 manuscripts a year, few if any new ideas emerged. Furthermore, as Backhouse (1994) claims is the case in economics, there does seem to be some room for innovative and dissenting voices in the lesser marketing journals. But that this is so in marketing suggests that despite the efforts of the AMA Task Force, little has changed since 1988. Extant knowledge can continue to be re-packaged and re-cycled in a more contemporary vein, but we wonder if this strategy is sufficient to ensure that the voice of the marketing academy will be heard above the clutter of competing voices all asserting the legitimacy of their knowledge claims.

Consequently, we feel that now is the time to revisit the concerns raised by the AMA Task Force in 1988. Clearly we seek to build on the ideas of the Task Force. But, we also seek to extend them, for despite its apparent critical intent, it strikes us that the Task Force remained subtly ensnared in the web of the US marketing institutions and thought-world it sought to review. We hope to provide a broader consumer and consumption-oriented perspective that sets the marketing institutions in the context of the accelerating information society of which they are a part. In this way we hope to comment on the dynamics of the contemporary production and consumption of funds of marketing knowledge.

This Special Edition

This special edition is not about what stands for marketing knowledge. There is no shortage of heated philosophical debates about this which seem to add little but additional verbal clutter. Indeed, those pugilistic epistemological exchanges can be understood as attempts to re-assert the importance of one set of beliefs and values over another, whilst also re-asserting one author’s right to speak on those issues over another’s. We prefer to take the view that there is a host of different forms of marketing knowledge, each produced by a variety of distinct signifying practices; and that the marketing world is not only big enough to accommodate all of them, but rightly deserves a more open and plural approach to the development and communication of ideas and thought about marketing knowledge.

It is also not the point of this special edition to pass judgement on the observation that knowledge is used by marketing academics and others to pursue their career goals. It strikes us that this is an operating condition within which we all have to work. Furthermore, we believe that this is a condition that not only affects marketing academics. In a recent commentary on the contemporary writing and research culture in economics Snowdon (1995) observed that:

"a great deal of scholarship is careerist and represents a rational response to the incentive structures in academia where strong pressures exist to publish and differentiate one’s product from others.”

However, we are concerned to throw some light on why it might be that, as the AMA Task Force observed so presciently in 1988, so few innovative papers appear in the top marketing journals; and why it might be that, as Shelby Hunt (1994) observed, marketing research and writing has made so little impact on other disciplines and on marketing practice. We are also concerned about what can be
done to encourage more creative thinking in the discipline and to see this represented in more imaginative ways of writing about marketing. We believe this is a timely and important matter to consider because in the marketing knowledge industry, as in any other, new intellectual capital must be continually created. We wonder whether we are in danger of running down our stock of intellectual capital as we seek to feed the immediate needs of the information production process we currently find ourselves a part of. We also worry that by passively conspiring to perpetuate what the AMA (1993, p. 14) referred to as an adversarial, sadomasochistic and ultimately demoralizing editorial review process, we are not set to repress the creativity that renewal and survival depends on. For if such an approach continues, how can we hope to attract tomorrow's creative minds to the discipline?

It is a curious observation that the marketing discipline, which tenaciously lays claim to the territory of innovation and change, in both markets and organizations, can stand accused of not practising what it preaches, perhaps through the repressive effects of a myopic writing and research culture. This special issue of JMM is a modest attempt to further provoke such curiosity, building on the work of the AMA Task Force which identified the adversarial editorial review process as one of the key impediments to creativity and innovation in the discipline. We believe this casts the efficacy of the traditional editorial review process into some doubt. You might broadly agree that change is needed, as the AMA Task Force argued. But, what should be changed and how this change should occur is not so clear.

Contributions

This paper has raised a number of issues organized around the broad theme of the commodification of marketing knowledge. To help position the discussion of those issues, it calls upon the following broad observations:

— Over the last decade there has been a rapid expansion in the provision of education, training and development initiatives in marketing.
— Public interest in marketing has grown and new well-informed audiences for information about it have emerged.
— Publishers of various hues have successfully tapped into those audiences, offering a wide variety of treatments of issues to suit the needs of each group.
— As publishers take advantage of technological change, new forms of media are becoming available for communicating and consuming information about marketing.
— All this is happening at a time when academics are under greater pressure to publish.

We elaborate on the consequences of all this in the paper which sets out our position. For the purposes of this special edition, a copy of this paper was circulated as an extended call for papers to a number of key players in the marketing knowledge industry:

— Journal editors and reviewers of research proposals, who were invited to comment on the poverty of new ideas coming forward in marketing.
— Reviewers of papers and books, who were invited to comment on genres of writing and representation in the marketing literature.

— Senior and junior marketing academics, who were invited to comment on the rules and forms of marketing scholarship which are required to attain acceptance within marketing and by other academic disciplines.

Those key players were invited to develop a commentary which recorded their reactions to the issues raised and any others that they thought should be given wider consideration among the community of marketing scholars. Since we were keen to encourage a creative exchange of views which might suggest a more detailed agenda of issues for further study, we invited commentary in different forms. The result is that the papers which follow offer a widely varying mix of reactions to the issues raised in the position paper. You will find that some take the form of short commentaries, or think-pieces, whilst others provide a more elaborate account of reactions to the issues raised.

However, we hope you will find something of interest in the papers, and that your curiosity will be sufficiently stoked to want to add your voice to the on-going discussion and debate which the AMA Task Force set in motion almost 10 years ago.

References


