Commentaries on the state of journals in marketing

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What is This?
In June 2009, the annual publisher’s report for Marketing Theory was distributed to the members of the editorial board via email. Shortly after, the same members on the email list received a note from Evert Gummesson applauding the role Marketing Theory is playing in marketing literature. Gummesson’s note also included a ten-point insightful critique of the publishing game in the discipline and the role that such known premium journals and their editorial policies play, in his estimation, in holding back innovation and groundbreaking ideas.

This note from Gummesson incited a flurry of comments that mostly agreed with his ten points and provided further critique and ideas for overcoming the dominance of a few journals in the discipline’s discourse. Subsequently, it was proposed that these concerns ought to be heard in the discipline by having some of the contributors to the email discussions write brief commentaries that would be then combined into a collective piece. Possibly because I was not involved in the initial discussion, I was given the honor of editing this piece. The editors of Marketing Theory put out a call for short commentaries dialoguing with Gummesson’s original points, and a few scholars who are not on the editorial board and who were not privy to the initial discussions were also invited to contribute insights if they so desired. This resulting piece reflects the commentaries received, which have been edited for removal of repetitions. As the editor of this piece, I first and foremost wish to thank the contributors, but also the editors of Marketing Theory who encouraged and invited this piece to be developed.

Although we started with a strict limit to the commentaries, as the rounds of editing advanced, some of the contributors felt impelled to expand their contributions to be able to provide rounded ideas, and I was obliged to allow this in order to make sure that no idea was suppressed. The piece may be, as a result, longer than was originally envisioned, but I hope that it has the unity to flush out the concerns in our discipline regarding its future.
In the following commentaries there is a general agreement that not all ideas and study results from all perspectives and philosophies can get equally heard in some of the so called top journals of the discipline. This fact is generally received with some trepidation by those who would like to see ideas from more different perspectives and with greater innovation value. I also sense, and I may be wrong, a degree of astonishment that in a scholarly discipline there is so much exclusion of certain philosophies in established media. I think that as modern social scientists we may have expected more than what modern science could deliver – we should have realized that it is, after all, an institutionalized establishment of modern society.

Why did we ever think that science as an institution of modern society, arguably its key institution, would be any different from any other institution of modern society? There always seems to be a difference between espoused interests and roles of an institution and its actual roles and interests. The modern state is supposed to serve everyone in society equally and it doesn’t; the modern market is espoused to be for everyone’s benefit equally and it isn’t; so why do we expect that the modern institution of science would be different? As all institutions of any order, it will privilege some principles and ideologies and not others; it will promote certain relations of power and not others.

I find it also to be expected that philosophies that challenge a dominant philosophy will be put in a position of proving themselves and often based on the criteria of the dominant philosophy. When powerful media are controlled by a dominant philosophy, we find this to be historically the ‘normal’ consequence. For example today non-positivist philosophies are put in a position to struggle to defend against charges of invalidity according to how validity is defined by positivist philosophies. Being put in this defensive position results in faulting the dominant philosophy for suppressing others, but without much energy left for discussions of why the dominant philosophy’s principles are as much suspect of being ‘unscientific’ as are the principles of other philosophies.

Having some experience in the struggles of philosophies in the marketing discipline, I have seen that those who desire to break into the ‘premier journals’ more than any other scholarly goal often end up becoming players in the same institutional game and succumb to the same principles, becoming just as exclusionary and elitist. If we are unhappy with the institutions of the current order, it is better to remain the outsider even if that means less of an immediate impact. In the longer term those small impacts may have a greater chance of being remembered.

We begin with Gummesson’s original ten points, then other commentaries follow. At the end, I asked Gummesson to provide some final comments and any responses he felt necessary.

In support of creative and useful science

Evert Gummesson, Stockholm University School of Business, Sweden

Evaluating scientific work is no easy task. Those who claim they can provide a strict system are misled. They can’t; science as a reflection of ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ is too complex and varied. However, their advocacy is currently spreading like wildfire to journals, examiners, universities, grants committees and others. By denying the complexity and variety of science, a community of academic and political power-centers is reducing science to a bureaucratic and political system, a planned economy. No doubt guidelines and criteria can provide useful checklists for assessing journal articles but they are not sufficient; they only cater for certain aspects. Here are ten comments and objections.

1. We are victims of systems. I realize the necessity of getting ranked; that’s the way the system currently works. But I am deeply concerned about the direction in which the ranking and
‘quality’ measurements go. They are more quantity indicators assumed to be a proxy for quality, hidden behind anonymous reviewers with their idiosyncrasies, arbitrary ‘quality’ criteria, trendy politics and overly detailed metrics. The truth is a number and a decimal (or two or three ...) even if it is subjectively founded and only shows probabilities. These metrics lure and force young researchers into a behavior that does not support development for the future. We have a global financial crisis that seems deeper and longer than ever before. How does the ranking system give incentives to scholars to help us out of the crisis?

2. Ritual over relevance. A journal should not be allowed to claim it’s a top journal unless it supports pluralism: many ways of approaching a problem and many ways of selecting and defining it. *Marketing Theory* does so, and I hope it will in the future, too. Many ‘top’ journals are narrow and promote subjectively determined methodological ritual under the label of being rigorous and objective. In fact they are obsessively and subjectively stuck on technicalities. And yet they publish articles which do not even fulfill their own aggressively promoted ‘scientific’ criteria, as one article in *Marketing Theory* clearly showed: Collier, J.E. and Bienstock, C.C. (2007) ‘An Analysis of how Nonresponse Error is Assessed in Academic Marketing Research’, 7(2): 163–83. It is also rich in data in dimensions other than non-responses and presents the data for five years for *JM, JMR* and *JAMS*. It is not flattering. If you have not read it, do so.

3. Technique over relevance: ‘survey-dominant logic’. Top journals keep publishing statistical surveys on very limited subjects and with little or no possibility to generalize and add to marketing knowledge. The survey technique is in itself shallow and used more for researcher convenience (for example a sample of ‘students on campus’!!!) and quick and safe publishing than for developing marketing understanding. I am constantly approached by PhD students around the world who say: ‘I can’t publish without doing a quantitative study. But I find it irrelevant.’ *Marketing Theory* could perhaps even more actively help change this perception.

4. More-of-the-same over development and innovation. Articles on theoretical development are judged harder than the mainstream repetition of what we already know. There is lack of theory generation in marketing both on a mid-range and grand level. *Marketing Theory* has been open here and I hope will continue to be so.

5. Name dropping over important references. Most of what is published is wasted except as a career step for the authors. To reach out with important developments and be picked up by others is now limited to ritual: search ‘top’ journals and the celebs of the field and trust the anonymous search engine programmers to be objective and wise. Some of these references are no doubt good, sometimes (but not often) excellent; but unknown journals and unknown authors can equally well be good, even better. So the system does not support accumulation of knowledge, new paradigms and other developments. Worse: the system feels snug and does not even try to handle the huge amount of knowledge development that is going on but can’t make itself visible. And all is limited to the English language and US values. US professors and journals are good at sales. I do not blame them for that. I rather blame the academic ‘buyers’ around the world and their insecurity, lack of courage and lack of scholarly integrity. Assessing scholarly contributions is risky and complex. It cannot be hidden behind quantitative measures of the brands of journals, the celebrity status of authors, and bibliometrics.

6. The established over entrepreneurship. JM is 74 years old, *Marketing Theory* is 10, and other journals are being started today. The new journal may be started because a new field is in the making. I have experienced some of it: services marketing starting to gain a critical mass of
researchers in the 1970s, and then relationship marketing, networks and currently a breakthrough for service-dominant logic and service science. The latter two are essentially syntheses and reconceptualization of extant knowledge, the scrapping of irrelevant mainstream claims, and adaptation to the contemporary marketing contexts. Complexity and context, shunned in the ‘survey-dominant logic’ and 4P approach, is getting on the agenda through network theory, systems thinking and deep-going cases. Publishing in a new journal addressing an important new area does not give any formal credits to the authors.

7. International – read: English-speaking journals, read: US journals. ‘International’ article publications have become the No. 1 criterion for academic promotion and this is supported by the US, governments, the EU and others. Books don’t count and reports with limited circulation don’t count. Whoever created this monstrous strategy? Dr Frankenstein? Other languages, even if spoken by tens or hundreds of million people, don’t count. We need pluralism and scholars (by that I mean architects, not technicians like plumbers). We do not need uniform tin soldiers. Note that the criteria used today are subjectively or inter-subjectively based; they often lack common sense and reflection and they lack objectivity. The European Marketing Academy (EMAC), which should support pluralism in Europe and its 35 or so languages and numerous business cultures, has succumbed to US ‘values’ and through its journal promotes these values. The EMAC journal should not be a clone of US journals. It should be a role model for European journals and a challenge and competitor to US journals. As marketers we believe in competition as a driving force of development, don’t we? But now ‘scientific’ publishing in social sciences is becoming a centrally planned economy.

8. Historical testing over continuous improvements. The best way of testing an established ‘truth’, a concept, theory and so on is to offer a better alternative. Hypothesis testing of old results and concepts is retrospective and engages brain capacity in non-productive work. Instead, continuous theory development should be in focus and be stimulated. Theory testing and theory generation are not enemies. They should walk hand in hand; they are not two different species of science.

9. Bureaucracy over entrepreneurship. The majority of academic faculty (not to talk about university administrations and politicians, both essentially ignorant of how knowledge and understanding is spawned) is conservative and bureaucratic; they are not innovators and entrepreneurs. They are workers at the assembly line of the educational factories. There is no balance today between ‘law and order’ (which is needed to some extent but is not the mission of science) and ‘breaking new ground’ (which is the mission of science). Science is risky as it is detecting the yet unknown and the future. The belief that this process can be organized through a rigid ‘quality’ system is a sign of ignorance.

10. Words of consolation. Fighting the system is a risky task, but systems, like epidemics, reach a sudden tipping point and can even fall overnight like the Berlin Wall. We may feel that we have to comply with systems out of fear for our careers and mortgage payments and peer disapproval. We should, however, be aware of systems’ shortcomings – more so as scholars than any other professional group. We should try to improve systems or replace them. Even if unfortunate and powerful systems can sustain for some time and harm one or several generations, academics have shown inventiveness in dodging systems and fooling the power elite.

These were some of my concerns and I am sure not everybody agrees. I don’t mind; show me a better way of thinking and I will be happy to ‘steal’ it from you. I would very much like Marketing
Theory to be a role model for publishing sound and useful research – based on content and relevance and not on appearances and political fads.

Imperfections of the current system

Sidney J. Levy, University of Arizona, Northwestern University (Emeritus), USA

The necessity to ‘publish or perish’ is used as a major pressure on tenure track assistant professors and as a severe means of evaluating the quality of faculty; and is often an abdication of sensible judgment by promotion and tenure committees as well as a slur on the judgment of the employees’ supervisors who know them best. When juniors cannot publish enough articles in A-rated journals they must find jobs in schools with lower standards. That has some value in serving the process of recruitment by lesser schools although it often means they are hiring people who had first to be stigmatized as having failed elsewhere.

At the same time, the journals’ process of selection is an imperfect one. Typically, the journals are fussy in the hurdles they set up. They have pages of requirements for the style to which the manuscripts must conform.

As the first gate, editors decide if the manuscript is worthy enough to be sent out to reviewers. That means they predict criticisms the reviewers might make. Fair enough; after all, editors should edit. Do they ever decide that the paper will be published as is? Are they ever allowed to exercise that much judgment? Surely rarely, if ever. Then the paper may go off, typically, to three reviewers. The reviewers consider themselves important gatekeepers also, with the responsibility of intervening themselves between the author and the readers. But Lo!

A colleague and I recently received responses from the three reviewers plus the associate editor and the editor and two interns, certainly an overabundance of reviewing. Among these comments may of course be some valid helpful reactions. But among seven reviews there are likely to be disagreements, diverse criteria, or only degrees of understanding as well as some criticisms that are more usefully left to the readers to think. Sometimes, the paper is accepted after a revision or maybe two revisions, or three. Is this a striving for some sort of perfection or just a grand form of intellectual censorship?

As editors can publish only a small percentage of manuscripts they receive, they probably reject some articles that deserve publication. Their selections show preference for and reinforcement of the prevailing paradigms. Also, among the articles they do publish after all their fussy screening are many that are not successful, anyway, not ever being cited and/or by authors not heard from again. Even successful articles may be dissected and critiqued by readers and students in doctoral seminars. A rejected article may be published elsewhere and be recognized as an important contribution. I have had articles published that I know could not high jump the A journals’ hurdles but that reached appreciative audiences elsewhere.

I am not certain about solutions, except in the sense that asserting critiques such as this one and Gummeson’s points, and maybe programs that address the issues, would be useful. For example Brian Sternthal and I organized a workshop on 3 June 2010, titled Alternative Approaches to Consumer Research, to stir some debate or thinking. Yet, there are additional kinds of problems here. Why doesn’t more qualitative work get into JCR? One reason is that even qualitative reviewers are harsh on papers, I think. Maybe qualitative people need to discuss more about what is high quality work. But it is hard to believe that all the workers
represented in the book edited by Belk (*Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Elgar, 2006) for instance are not of good enough quality for JCR! Another ‘solution’ is alternative publishing, building up quality in other journals so that JCR does not seem to be the only summit to achieve.

Moving beyond paradigm and contextual parochialism in marketing theory

*Mark Tadajewski, School of Management, University of Leicester, UK*

In his reflection on the present state of the marketing discipline, Gummesson has outlined a variety of issues that many academics feel concerned about. One of these we might feel keenly relates to the institutional reward system that encourages a ‘publish or perish’ mentality. This compensates scholars for pursuing a research strategy that follows a logic of ‘incrementalism’ (Dholakia, 2009; Gummesson, this issue) and involves turning out ‘quick and dirty’ research that contributes little to our knowledge base (Willmott, 1993). The reason such tactics are employed is that they offer a ‘quick and safe’ route to career success (Gummesson, this issue). Of the many valid points he articulates, there are a number that I find troubling, especially those that touch upon paradigmatic pluralism, geographic myopia and racial bias in ‘international’ marketing journals (Burton, 2009).

All too frequently we find journal editors making vague gestures to their own intellectual pluralism and then very quickly opining that they will help research consistent with their own preferred perspective through the review system. Journal boards are stuffed with academic ‘stars’ (Churchill, Jr, 1988) that have a disproportionate influence on the structuring of knowledge in the academy, by virtue of the fact that they appear in two or more gate-keeping roles. These are all topics that others have discussed in some detail (e.g. Svensson, 2006). And yet, one cannot only feel more marginalized, especially if of a critical or macromarketing orientation, when reading comments such as those recently published in the *Journal of Marketing*. In their paper, Reibstein et al. (2009) point to ‘the growing balkanization of academic marketing into quantitative modeling and consumer behavior’ (Reibstein et al., 2009: 1). Later, they make reference to ‘the creeping bifurcation of academic marketing into two self-contained and self-referential areas – quantitative modeling and behavioral studies’ and ask ‘What can be done to reverse’ this?’

One response involves thinking about the discipline in broader terms, with us all refusing ‘to stay snug in a simplified world of statistics, shallow analysis, and outdated theory’ (Gummesson, 2009: 119). What we need to register is that the manipulation of advanced statistics and invocation of the behavioural sciences has not necessarily benefited the development of marketing theory and has arguably affected the ability of scholars to speak about important social issues and inform public policy (Baker, 2009). A way forward may be to encourage scholars to subscribe to a plurality of paradigms (Fırat, 2009). The implication of this is that we may disagree with each other when it comes to contentious social and moral issues. There is nothing essentially wrong here. After all, intellectual contestation is a good thing provided that each of us is willing to enter into dialogue with those offering alternative perspectives (Fırat, 2009; Gummesson, this issue; Habermas, 1973). As Gummesson says, ‘We do not need uniform tin [scholarly] soldiers’, and yet that is what we will get when we encourage the further diffusion of a US and ‘Eurocentric’ view throughout the world (cf. Sloterdijk, 1987) and demand that papers contain American case studies in the interest of ‘generalisability’ (Varman and Saha, 2009; Witkowski, 2005).
However, I would like to put aside the issue of ‘weak incommensurability’ (Anderson, 1986). Instead, I will transgress paradigmatic boundaries by arguing that much theorizing and theory development in marketing is fundamentally ethnocentric, parochial and racially biased (see Burton, 2009; Jack, 2008; Jack et al., 2008; Varman and Saha, 2009; Ward, 2009, 2010). So that I do not appear to be refusing to turn a critical lens on to research more consonant with my own worldview, we might focus our attention on some of the key concepts or tropes mobilized in interpretive or postmodern circles, especially the figure of the postmodern consumer who changes identities much like the mythical Proteus. When reading this literature, the underlying assumption appears to be that all consumers can engage in these forms of consumption behaviours (cf. Fırat and Tadajewski, 2010; Markus and Schwartz, forthcoming; Tadajewski, 2010b). In reality, of course, many people on this planet struggle to live on very modest incomes that leave them far removed from the affluent consumer that we find in our journals and whose conceptual basis reflects the US and affluent economic bias of our ‘pivotal’ publication and research institutions (see Burton, 2009; Reibstein et al., 2009: 3).

It would seem, therefore, that we find it difficult to step away from positivistic styles of theorizing. Despite the much vaunted interpretive turn, we still prefer to leave implicit claims to generalizability peppered throughout our work,1 when in fact such claims are difficult to justify at all, in view of the context-dependent nature of social scientific research (Fırat, 2009; Gummesson, 2009; O’Shaughnessy, 2009). Accepting this point, does our paradigmatic parochialism and desire for law-like generalizations not thereby render our research irrelevant to most of the people on this planet? This becomes all the more problematic when recent commentaries (Baker, 2009; Dunne et al., 2008; Gummesson, 2009) demonstrate that much management and marketing research lacks any substantive engagement with serious political and economic issues.

Surely this should concern us all, irrespective of whether we have a preference for behavioural scientific, interpretive, critical marketing or macromarketing forms of research (Fırat, 2009; Tadajewski, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Nor is it likely that one paradigm will provide us with the intellectual means to think through the complex social and political issues with which marketing and consumption in all their many forms are connected (Shapiro et al., 2009; Zinkhan and Hirschheim, 1992). Intellectual monism and contextual ignorance is our problem; intellectual pluralism, critical scepticism when combined with appropriately ‘indigenous’ research suggests an answer to theoretical egotism (Varman and Saha, 2009). Such research can rigorously develop appropriate concepts and theory, subjecting ostensibly universal claims to knowledge to critique. The question remains whether journal editors will publish this material and whether marketing academics will be supportive of such studies. The evidence on both points is mixed at present, but outlets like Marketing Theory do offer opportunities to disseminate such research to the wider community.

Academic interface with marketing practice: Leading, following, and not losing its way in theory development

Roderick J. Brodie, University of Auckland Business School, New Zealand

The issue of the academic practice divide in marketing is not new. When I reflect on my academic experience over the last three decades it has been a recurring criticism of academics. Much of the email discourse triggered by Evert is underpinned by this issue. Across the Atlantic, Reibstein et al.
(2009) have also caused a buzz about this issue with their guest editorial in the *Journal of Marketing (JM)* entitled ‘Is Marketing Academia Losing its Way?’ They suggest there is an alarming and growing gap between the interests, standards, and priorities of academic marketers and the needs of marketing executives operating in an ambiguous, uncertain, fast-changing, and complex market-space. This leads them to conclude this has gone beyond the familiar dilemma of academic research pitted against practical relevance and is undermining the discipline.

A fundamental issue associated with the academic practice divide is the dilemma about the role that academic journals play. To what extent should research published in journals lead practice? To what extent should the role of journals be to follow and interpret practice? Should research published in journals also be motivated by curiosity that does not require immediate application?

The Reibstein et al. (2009) *JM* editorial focuses largely on the elite US journals and the inability of these journals to lead the theoretical development of the discipline in a way that is relevant to practice. The introduction of the concept of ‘engagement’ into mainstream academic marketing literature provides a good example of this. For the last decade, this concept has been used extensively in business practice and in other management disciplines. It has been adopted in practice because it more adequately reflects the nature of interactivity and experiences between organizations, their customers and their employees. Concepts, such then as satisfaction, involvement, participation, commitment and trust do not do this. In addition, the concept of engagement more fully reflects the nature of co-creation of value in relationships. However, the introduction in the concept of engagement to the academic discipline of marketing has not come from the elite journals but from other journals. My experience is that the prolonged and pedantic, often conservative, reviewing processes of the elite journals can inhibit innovation with new ideas and concepts. This view is supported in the recent papers by Yadav (2010) and Stewart and Zinkhan (2006). Of particular concern is the sharp decline in conceptual articles published in *JM* and the other ‘elite’ journals. In the period 2003–2007, only 6.7 per cent of the articles published in *JM* were conceptual compared with 34.5 per cent in the period 1988–1992.

As Evert observes, *Marketing Theory (MT)* is to be commended for breaking free from the constraints of the elite journals and pioneering theory development. A number of Special Issues in *MT* have broken new ground in the marketing discipline. Other journals such as *JSR, JBR, EJM, IMM,* and *JBIM* have also taken a lead with new innovative editorial policies that have paid more attention to the practitioner interface and used practice to inform theory development. Clearly they have *not* lost their way in their pursuit for both rigour and relevance. Now that most academics have immediate electronic access to all journals, I predict a change in order of the journals that will be driven by downloads and citations. There is no reason why *MT* could not rise to be ranked as an elite journal as this new order unfolds by leading, following, and not losing its way with theory development.

**Marketing journals and the liberal intellectual tradition**

*Chris Hackley, Royal Holloway University of London, UK*

The Philosopher, indeed, and the man of the world differ in their very notion, but the methods, by which they are respectively formed, are pretty much the same ... If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life,

The academic journals of our discipline communicate our intellectual values to the world. Yet there are many of us in marketing who, like Evert Gummesson, feel deeply antipathetic to the values of the very top ranked marketing journals. Their Gradgrindian pursuit of incremental problem solutions stands deeply at odds not only with the liberal intellectual ethos but also with their own stated aims of applied scientific inquiry. Typical articles rush to measure and generalize poorly conceived constructs with weak theoretical integration, obscure policy relevance, and selective and limited samples (note Gummesson’s comment on non-response error). Yet they wield influence over the academy – some universities, enslaved by the logic of journal rankings, police the research and writing of new career academics to ensure it is ideologically suited to the leading journals. Academics of some other disciplines feel that this is no more than we deserve in our roles as desk clerks of corporate ideology (Scott, 2007). Marketing studies stand accused of abandoning liberal intellectual values in favour of a barren instrumentalism, and it draws a resounding scorn from many quarters (Hackley, 2009a). For our part, we feel that we bring a scholarly integrity to what we do, even while we understand that we are among the sophists of university education (Tonks, 2002). Yet the sheer size and scale of the marketing studies field means that there are hives of liberal intellectual diversity which fall beyond the surveillance of the all-seeing instrumentalist marketing eye (examples in Hackley, 2009b).

Newman felt that a university discipline conceived in narrow terms of practical utility was self-defeating. I would argue that marketing studies has failed utterly as a science and as a codified system of management education. The management world constituted by university business schools is utterly dominated by crude behavioural formulae applied in a myopic focus on short-term shareholder value. But marketing studies have been an unexpected success, in parts, as a field of free inquiry in the liberal tradition.

Early pioneers saw over 100 years ago the need for a university discipline of marketing (Wilkie and Moore, 2003). Even though it was conceived in a spirit of resistance against the economic notion of rational, homogenous consumers it was nonetheless cast in managerial terms Newman would recognize as narrowly utilitarian, a discipline designed to ‘teach us definitely how to advance our manufactures .... or to better our civil economy, and to lead to discoveries’. These values continue to meet with approval from university managers and funding bodies, and our top journals. Nevertheless, a fortunate few marketing academics are able to forge careers through outstanding and intellectually engaged research which falls far outside the instrumental mainstream, and far beyond the scope of the leading journals. This may be little comfort to those whose business schools impose a research agenda that is ideologically driven by the top journals, but the existence of some ghettos of critical intellectual space within the academy is a cause for hope.

So, the most pressing concern of the marketing academy is to use what power and influence we can to foster, support and promote intellectual (and thereby every other kind of) diversity, and to justify marketing’s place as a university discipline in the liberal intellectual tradition. The end of university education, for Newman, was good judgement. A discipline based on technical solutions rather than the development of judgement cannot properly serve academics, students or society at large, and the threadbare ethos of the top marketing journals deserves to be thoroughly exposed.
Are quality standards a restriction on academic freedom?

Nick Lee, Aston Business School, Birmingham, UK

There is much to admire in Prof. Gummesson’s treatise, and I agree that there are problems with the way research quality (and journal quality) is conceptualized and measured right now. It is certainly wrong that any single type of research, or any one set of journals, should be considered as the sole arbiter of ‘quality’. The quality of the research published should determine perceptions of journal quality, not vice versa. It is also unarguable that even in the so-called top journals there remain serious misconceptions and misuses of critical techniques.

However, it is somewhat disingenuous to conflate such genuine issues with a blanket criticism of quantitative research. Certainly, I agree that generalist journals should be pluralist in their approach. But this does not mean that, because they appear not to be, the work published in them is never insightful. Although I agree that there is room for improvement, it is simply not true to imply for example that surveys are uniformly shallow and used for convenience. Further, it is inconsistent to complain about the disregarding of one approach (e.g. qualitative), while doing exactly the same thing to another (the quantitative survey). Even so, I do agree that ritual and dogma replace the critical application of tools in many instances. Yet this is not new, and is not the fault of the method, or the system. As authors, reviewers and editors, we owe it to our discipline to be knowledgeable on the relevant issues, and to apply and evaluate our tools in a scholarly way.

Another interesting theme is the predominance of theory testing versus theory generation. Yet while I agree that there needs to be more theory generation in marketing research, I argue that it is appropriate that fewer theory generation articles are published. This is how science works. Most of science is to do with testing theories to breaking point, rather than with presenting radical new ideas. In fact, there is a good reason that radical new theories are held to a high standard and rarely published. They are more often than not wrong. It is seductive to point to high-profile paradigm shifts like Darwin’s theory of evolution.

However, for every one of these revolutions, there are a hundred other ideas that were not useful. The conservatism of science provides an important service, to force new ideas and theories to justify themselves as being better than the old – to be able to explain the world in a superior manner. Different, newer and ‘radical’ does not per se mean better, nor should special treatment be given to the new just because it is ‘new’. That said, of course it is the case that theory development should be stimulated, and sufficient reward should be apparent for such work.

Another point of interest is Prof. Gummesson’s argument about the dominance of US, English language, journals, and criticism of EMAC for following this model. Perhaps the subtext of this issue is that somehow the ‘US’ model is different from the European model. Yet I am not sure what these differences are; perhaps the idea is that US journals have a particular style and set of values? This I can agree with, and again I agree that the top-ranked generalist journals should not promote a single set of criteria as the sole arbiter of quality. However, again I am concerned that genuine criticism of the use of quality standards should not spill over into an erosion of the fundamental notion of quality in academic research. Unfortunately, it seems that a concern for ‘quality’ can sometimes be interpreted as an emphasis on quantitative research, when it should be nothing of the sort. Thus, work conducted from alternative perspectives should not by definition be considered as low quality. Yet researchers from these perspectives equally cannot abdicate themselves from a basic concern for quality in some manner – one cannot have one’s cake and eat it.

Quality in its broad sense implies the consideration of whether the procedure used in one’s work is appropriate to the knowledge claims being made – whichever procedure is used. Total rejection
of the idea of quality in research ultimately arrives at a point where it is one researcher’s word against another’s in terms of whether a conclusion is of any value. Without external quality standards, research is reduced to a pursuit carried out by individuals with no regard to the outside use of their findings – since to use them, one must take their validity on faith. Or perhaps evaluate them with regard to who the researcher was? Or whether one personally liked the conclusions? Such a position is ultimately nothing short of a return to dark ages ideals.

Yet what standards should be applied to judge quality from various perspectives? It is difficult to develop a set of universal quality standards for all types of research, for the simple reason that various research traditions are predicated on completely different viewpoints. The first question one needs to answer in this instance is a general one – are the knowledge claims in the work justified in some way? If there is no attempt made to justify the knowledge claims, then the work cannot adhere to any external quality standard at all. However, the more difficult question is how I evaluate justification that is predicated on an alternative epistemological framework. It is my view that one needs to first attempt to understand the logic of justification from an internal-consistency standpoint; that is, within the framework that the research is conducted, does it stand up to scrutiny? This of course requires me to have at least a working knowledge of different perspectives. From here, I must evaluate the quality from an external standpoint, that is, within my view of what makes ‘good science’, how does this stack up? Even if the work is internally consistent within its own framework, one cannot avoid applying in some way one’s own standards in terms of the knowledge generated.

Ultimately though, despite differences in the detail regarding quality standards, the overall notion of quality in research should remain consistent. More specifically, has a given piece of empirical research been conducted in such a way that the reader is confident that the findings are justifiable given the data? Each perspective has a different way of coming to terms with this question, but it is important that a piece of research engages with this issue. When it comes to purely theoretical work, evaluations of quality are also important, and in this case the question is whether the conclusions are justified from the premises, and are they based on sound argument and evidence? If it is pure opinion, one must somehow judge whether it has any value over and above any other opinion, and why.

The notion of quality is not associated with one or another perspective on research or science. In fact, while Prof. Gummesson justifiably bemoans the hegemony of one all-powerful perspective on quality, abdication of quality standards would not result in a utopian meritocracy where the dominance of certain methods, tools and philosophies would disappear, leaving the way free for all to flourish. The opposite is in fact what it implies – dominance by those who shout loudest, or who are most powerful – the situation which many have argued we are already in. The answer is not to avoid engaging with the notion of quality standards. The answer is for those in gatekeeping roles – editors, reviewers and other scholarly leaders – to bear greater responsibility for understanding various perspectives on the quality issue. All of us are collectively responsible for the quality of our discipline’s work, and the inappropriate use of quality standards should not be confused with the notion of quality itself.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

Michael J. Baker, University of Strathclyde

In common with other professional subjects such as architecture, engineering and medicine, marketing is a discipline that seeks to synthesize and integrate concepts and theories from more
specialized and focused fields of inquiry into a holistic explanation of practice. Above all else then professional disciplines are meant to be practical in the sense that they are ‘functional, useful, utilitarian, serviceable, efficient, effective, working in action, etc., etc.’ (Webster’s thesaurus).

Unlike architecture, engineering and medicine, where practitioners turn to the results of academic research to inform their practice, most of what passes for research in marketing is studiously ignored by those who practice it. And why is this? Essentially, it is because the largely self-appointed custodians of what is regarded as the ‘best’ research published in the ‘top’ or ‘leading’ journals still adhere to a flawed model the origins of which are to be found in the paranoia of McCarthyism in the 1950s.

A significant by-product of the paranoia was the decision by the Ford and Carnegie foundations to fund business schools and business school academics to take a more ‘scientific’ approach to research by adopting quantitative methods seen to be more rigorous than the qualitative, observational and soft procedures typical of research in the social sciences. The major consequence of this decision was that large-scale sampling, statistical analysis and mathematical modelling became de rigueur, as did the need to provide copious references to earlier research even if much of this was largely irrelevant to the subject in hand. And so, in a matter of a couple of decades, articles in the leading/top Journal of Marketing changed from five or six page conceptualizations with few if any references to formulaic presentations with extensive literature reviews, substantial empirical data (often obtained from students) and dubious statistical and mathematical techniques with sufficient power to prove the world is flat. Little wonder that practitioners pay little or no attention to such tedious, arcane and impractical pronouncements.

Who then are the customers for the work of academics who profess the subject of marketing? The answer, of course, is students and prospective employers, many of whom are engaged in the practice of marketing. So the irony is that most of the funding that pays for the employment of marketing academics is in payment for teaching, not for research. But it is the minority who concentrate on research who largely determine the preferment and promotion of the majority whom they regard dismissively as ‘teaching drones’.

In common with most polemics, the argument here is exaggerated to make the point. And the point is that like any other competitive market only a small percentage can compete at the highest level in terms of publishing in the premier journals. However, unlike competitive sports where the top or premier division is determined on the basis of an objective criterion – who scores the most points – in academic journals style – a subjective measure – triumphs over substance. And so it will remain until an objective measure of impact, based on recognition and usage by practitioners, can be developed. If and when it does then a publication in journals outside of the premier league may receive recognition based on its intrinsic merits rather than the (artificial) reputation of the source.

In search of better questions

Jaqueline Pels, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Argentina

Last July, to be precise on 5 July 2009, Evert Gummesson wrote a provocative and inspiring email where he highlighted 10 personal concerns. Evert’s emails evolved into a fascinating virtual editorial debate . . . clearly his concerns were widely shared! In short, we seem to agree that we are in bad shape.

Let me draft a diagnosis.
We are in a crisis but the problems in the academy or in the economic crash are a manifestation of a deeper crisis. Actually, the origins of the current state of affairs could be traced back to the year 1600. From as long ago as Descartes, the focus seems to have been on how the world works and, linked to this view, the idea that the world could be known and, by extension, controlled (how pretentious!) to serve humanity ... leading down to the current state of affairs.

I feel that we have been asking the wrong type of questions! Though I agree with Evert’s point of view, most of his list of concerns reflects the either/or perspective: how should we do research, using qualitative or quantitative methods? How should we communicate our findings, through books or journals? ... In essence, how-related questions and how-related concerns usually lead to an either/or logic, never allowing us to address the core of the problem. Moreover, there is a clear link between Evert’s concerns that there is lack of theory generation in marketing (and that articles on theoretical development are judged harder) and the focus on how-issues.

I want to extend an invitation to open a dialogue on the issue of relevance; on why we are in the state we are in. I ask myself, what was our role (dare I say responsibility) in generating it? What should we have said? Questioned? I not only invite us to take responsibility for the past, I also look ahead. What are the questions, as intellectual elite and as critical analysts, that we should be asking now?

Let me draft an answer.

Let’s change the question! Maybe we should be asking what for questions, thus associating the knowledge acquired with the responsibility of what we do with it.

At the ontological–epistemological level I’m a pluralist, hence the way I see it is as follows: (1) if this crisis is the result of a social construction then we need to de-construct it; and (2) if it is the result of having misinterpreted ‘reality’, then we need to modify the questions we are asking in order to read it correctly. But in both cases the problems are not the nature of the answer but the essence of the question.

In short, as we well know, answers (the academic, economic, institutional, political crisis) are just the doors to future (better) questions.

Why not more democracy in our field?

Frank Alpert, University of Queensland, Australia

In response to Gummesson and others who have provided philosophical critiques of the current state of the field, this comment offers an alternative approach – focusing on action through structural change. Concerns such as those about the apparent significant control of at least two of the ‘Big 4’ journals (JMR and Marketing Science and to some degree even JM) by modellers are difficult to resolve by simply critiquing the mainstream paradigm or calling for more pluralism, and it may be that alterations to the power structure are necessary for real change to occur.

Democracy, the marketing concept, and leadership: how would these concepts apply to governance of the leading marketing research journals?

A first step may be consciousness raising to the effect that all published research inescapably represents values, coupled with acknowledgement that research politics are real and that marketers embrace different values and ideologies. Then a key question becomes how to choose the underlying values for selecting articles for publication in the top journals.
One way a group with mixed values can determine fairly the weighting of different values (here, the degree to which those values may appear in the top journals) is through democratic action. Suggesting a democratic approach, however, immediately raises the issues of what should be voted on and who should be eligible to vote. While our academic associations typically already engage in voting for board of director roles, any issues regarding values underlying the research tend to be considered editorial issues. Therefore, a vote involving research values might be achieved through a direct vote on journal editors or a direct vote on the journal’s editorial objectives, mission, and perhaps also values. Such a mechanism would charge the editor and reviewers with implementing democratically selected values rather than only their own.

Who should vote? In membership organizations, all qualified subscriber members should vote, perhaps with ‘qualified’ extending only to members with a PhD when voting on research-related issues that only they would understand. A related matter is whether an elite composed of current powerful editor and editorial review board positions could to some degree be requiring the majority of academics to do a particular type of research (for example, method-driven research) that the majority of the membership does not believe should be the required approach for publication in the journal. Although this elite might maintain that the average academic can’t be trusted with a vote on important matters, an observation by Winston Churchill serves as a response: ‘Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.’

Most of our Big 4 journals, left to themselves, have adopted a product orientation rather than a market orientation. However, we advocate the marketing concept as fundamental to our field; why not apply it to ourselves? A democratic approach would require editors to publish what members wanted to read or risk losing re-election to their posts.

Democracy would also compel appropriate leadership. A characteristic of true leadership is an ability to persuade, in contrast to simply imposing a view. If the values of those in editorial power are clearly appropriate, let the editors persuade us in a free and fair election. In sum, if the majority of academics want meaningful ideological pluralism in our top journals, why shouldn’t we have it?

**Comments on the current state and role of marketing scholarship**

*Richard J. Varey, Waikato Management School, New Zealand*

Once again, Professor Gummesson’s incisive critique cuts through surface gloss to the heart and soul of the marketing academy. It is purpose, and not only technique that matters. Professor Gummesson raises issues about the mass production of scholarship that remain largely unspoken, even if they are recognized.

Professor Gummesson points out worrying (and disappointing) facets of the prevailing culture in business and management scholarship and education: obsessive measuring and its associated technicizing for the purpose of competitive positioning for personal gain. The goals of researchers can only too easily and self-defeatingly close down what is studied and with what consequences. We are rewarding narrow sedimentation of ‘information’ and the refinement of technique within a narrow conception of an industrialized discipline, even as humanity faces, for the first time, the prospect of declining quality of life and real limits in a crisis of the human-nature relationship.

Much of the problem highlighted in the train of discussion that has followed Professor Gummesson’s concerned re-view is the consequence of the ever increasing delusional obsession
with competitive advancement played out in the clamour for ownership and ostentatious display of wealth and status. What I see in this dialogue is crucial acknowledgement of the consequences of the influence of an outmoded dominant worldview: anthropocentric, egocentric, materialistic, contempocentric, reductionistic, rationalistic, and nationalistic. In the academic tribe’s way of life, this progressively outmoded modernist/industrial value system manifests in the hegemonic institutions and rituals of department, journal, association, and ‘worldview’ affiliations and competitive rankings, and the attendant self-referential discourses. Such ‘in-breeding’ is always pathological.

I don’t see the fundamental problem as one of scholarly quality, relevance, proficiency, or profitability. Whilst tilting at windmills, applauding gurus, name-dropping, or succeeding/failing to publish in supposed Tier 1 journals, we don’t even have our eyes on the goal but only on the multitude of balls, pucks, and hoops in various games that have different objectives and rules. We may be ‘playing the game’ – some unwillingly, some unwittingly, and many tactically or strategically – but we don’t see the looming tragedy. So many are not asking why marketing? and why marketing scholarship? Other disciplines have not so plainly ideologically avoided self-counselling and self-coaching in pursuit of wisdom. Discipline scholarship is a massive resource user, yet we may be doing little more than digging more efficiently, getting deeper and deeper into the creation of a life-threatening crisis of over-consumption and loss of happiness.

Of course marketing – almost all of which is now the biased tool of liberalistic capitalist corporatism – is in distress: modern capitalism is in distress because it doesn’t deliver on the promise of limitless happiness. Witness the financial crisis and the attendant insecurity in our societies. Capitalist society is reaching a redefining turning point. Indeed, I would not be the first to suggest that we are on the brink of a new socio-economic order, resulting from sociocultural evolutionary forces that will show globalization and free markets to be ultimately uneconomic and transitory. Yet, just as social sciences and humanities have progressively been committing to recognizing the pathology and transience of industrial values, our academy and our business schools are industrializing!

This is not merely an economic problem, and is absolutely not to be resolved through further growth. It is resolutely a political problem, specifically a problem of governance – about how we decide what use to make of limited resources and finite sinks for waste and pollution; how we co-negotiate valuations of people, nature, community, intellectual and cultural accomplishment. Our consumer society has already passed into affluence, bringing the purpose of marketing into question. Growth-driven consuming may even undermine all of this pursuit of contentment. Not only are the costs of consumption much greater than orthodox economics recognizes, as is now widely acknowledged, but the benefits are also much less than we expect. More is not always better, it’s often worse. The last thing we need is to attempt fixes by pushing further the very thinking with which we created our problems. A reformist (at best) conservative and totalitarian assertion of superiority effectively undermines and degrades our very raison d’être – to learn together. I see the discipline modelled as a man-made machine as fundamentally self-destructive. I see a scholarly academy understood as a natural ecosystem as capable of flourishing in a panorama of wisdom.

Professor Gummesson proffers a strong diagnosis, and this dialogue is part of the treatment. Those with the ‘long view’ – many sociologists, philosophers, futurists, some scientists, and some economists – have anticipated this value shift for decades. Marketing will evolve, as in its industrial/modernist form it is way past its ‘use by’ date.
Concluding comments
Evert Gummesson, Stockholm University School of Business, Sweden

It has been a joy reading all your insightful comments. Many of you have put my points into a broader context and I have learnt a lot from them. The comments show that science is no simple thing; we never reach the ultimate understanding of science but we may continue to develop and we need support from each other in the process. But it is clear to me that the one who claims to be in possession of the Holy Grail of Science must be a disguised alien with extraterrestrial talents that allow him or her to feel predestined to dictate the one and only scientific quality standard to others.

Of course my brief list of concerns could not include all the subtleties and nuances that a 20-page article or a 200-page book could do. There is no space to comment on everything here but I want to clear up some misconceptions of what I wrote.

Although an objective fact is not often self-evident, to be pragmatic we call something that works in a specific context a fact. If I am one minute late I miss my train and I know my home address; these are facts. Objectivity (unshakeable facts), paradigmatic assumptions (subjective and qualitative springboards for science), intersubjectivity (‘democratic’ consensus among an elite that has usurped voting rights), and subjectivity, all influence science. In my view the researcher’s persona is his or her biggest scientific resource. If individual personality were irrelevant in science and the scientist just a standardized puppet in a totalitarian and (almost) perfect system, we are redundant. ‘External quality standards’ can be used as guidelines but not as laws; they are no more reliable than the thoughts of one reflective and committed scholar who conducts an outer dialog with others and an inner dialog with himself or herself. Nothing becomes scientifically meaningful or true just because 100 or 1,000,000 people say so.

No more than I am against the hammer because I use a saw when I want to divide a plank am I against quantitative techniques. I am against their dominating market share, pushing them in as the panacea and giving them the status of superior science. I never praised qualitative methodology as the solution – but I want it to have a reasonable market share and not be classified as second-rate. I actually disapprove of the arbitrary and subjective categorization in ‘numbers languages’ and ‘words languages’. For example most equations are a mix of numbers and letters, and even the most rigorous quantitative technique is based on unproven assumptions. The categorization is flawed. When I then learn that the Ford and Carnegie Foundations demanded that business studies be more ‘scientific’ by changing over to quantitative techniques (taken from old physics, not from modern natural sciences), misgivings about the integrity of business schools and ‘top’ journals arose. For example the huge PIMS (Profit Impact of Marketing Strategy) project was started in that very spirit 50 years ago (by General Electric and later linked to Harvard). It was hailed for its scientific rigor and it claimed that it would unambiguously chart the cause and effect links between marketing strategies and profits. It didn’t; it only proved that marketing is complex and not amenable to such approaches. It became an exercise of co-variation and definitions but not of causality.

Another flawed divide is between natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities. Where do medicine and psychology belong? It is about superficially derived categories that foster tension rather than knowledge development. When social scientists refer to natural sciences it is not to the physics and mathematics of the most recent 10 or 100 years but to incrementally upgraded versions of centuries old science. Modern physics is not just about controlled experiments and unidirectional causality. It is full of arbitrary paradigmatic assumptions, judgment calls and philosophical speculation.

The ‘publish or perish’ slogan can at least be traced back to the 1940s. Not surprisingly, as scientists must communicate their work. But is it different now? Some power group (legitimized
how?) dictates that only articles written in English and published in high-ranking blind peer reviewed journals count; the rest is rubbish. Previously you could publish in books, reports, and internal papers at universities; and you could do it in your own language. And you got credit for it in the academic career apparatus. No more so. Only what pleases the tiny group of the world’s population that was born English-speaking counts. The remaining 90–95 percent doesn’t count. About the EMAC journal: there is of course no single European model. I said the opposite. The EMAC journal should take on the mission to represent and encourage the cultural and academic diversity of European thinking and not impersonate US journals. The many languages of Europe hide knowledge that does not come out.

To conclude, I am delighted that so many of the Editorial Board members and a few other scholars of Marketing Theory first took part in an internal discussion and then were willing to share their thoughts with the readers. Thank you so much. My hope is that the dialog will expand, that stale marketing theories and methodologies will disappear, and that marketing will prove its scientific status by better contributing to the functioning of markets and the welfare of society.

Notes
1. This brief paper is obviously no exception.

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