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Radical Change Through Rigorous Review? A Commentary on the Commodification of Marketing Knowledge

The chance to comment in this edition is a great delight for someone researching ecology or environmental issues and their impact on business and marketing theory. In such a fringe area you find no easy answers, and due to the nature of the research issues, there is a need to consider the case for the radical and assess its potential through research techniques not widely popular with other marketing academics.

In many ways in choosing to exist in this manner within the marketing discipline, you can be made to feel like a rebellious child at the dinner table who, through curious questioning of the menu, has somehow implied that a revolution is needed and that the cook should be beheaded. The common response might be to be a good child and eat your marketing cake and you might be allowed another “P” to play with! The child, as is mostly the case, when faced with such guidance is likely to grumble about the fact that the world doesn’t just revolve around marketing cake, it’s everybody’s cake; and children are notorious for wanting it all anyway in the conspicuous consumption society (Bocock 1993). So this commentary considers the debate on the commodification of marketing knowledge from the infantile and naive perspective of a rebellious child new to the game.

Marketing Knowledge as a Victim

Interestingly, when reading Brownlie and Saren’s article (this issue), one is reminded of Sorlin’s (1994) explanation of the power of our chosen media and how it is used in formulating our opinion of contemporary society. This applies whether we contextualize our reality through watching MTV, or reading marketing journals (or in the odd case both). But just as Sorlin attributes the power of the media in contributing to the infamous LA riots, so too are the marketing journals responsible for the lack of marketing riots. Perhaps we need just such a process so that in its wake we can freshen up our ideas a bit more.

As Brownlie and Saren note, this heightened process of commodification of marketing knowledge has come at a time of increased electronic capacity to communicate. So it might well be that the marketing academy, like the driver of an advanced motor vehicle, is on the road to nowhere, going faster and faster, but still getting lost only over a wider area than was previously the case. Brownlie and Saren

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ask why they should bother. My response is "well if you don't, no-one else will be trusted to help highlight why we haven't got much further since the AMA Task Force in 1988". But come on folks "Are you really that surprised?" — given the well-known fact that most powerful marketing academics, i.e. the gurus, professors and reviewers, instrumental in the depiction and communication of the commodity are predominantly logical empiricists. Is it not time for changing this? Change, not by revolt and removing a few heads, but by adding a few people to the academy in the name of pluralism.

When Baker (this issue) fears a new temple toppling because of poor foundations, is this necessarily a bad thing, or is this the voice of an over-protective parent? We know it's natural for children to rebel against what their parents believe. So let the marketing children not just examine marketing classics, but all classics, and new ideas which haven't been around long enough to become classics. In doing this they can truly try to re-define what is happening in their synthetic society. Is it really possible to have intellectual rigour if we are restricted to a philosophy of "if it doesn't work or, if we can't measure it, then it's not worth debating"? What happens to our ideals or the ideals of people with different opinions to those of many of the reviewers or editors then?

**Marketing Academics as the Criminals**

It's interesting to think about who does create new knowledge in marketing and how this is different from new knowledge in general? As someone interested in how ecology impacts on marketing communications, it would appear that no new knowledge is capable of being produced in the short term. The reason for this is remarkably simple — the review process has spoken. Now it might seem strange, but not everything in life can be fully understood from a marketing perspective alone.

If we are to try to widen the debate on some of the very complex issues in society, then Baker is right — he suggests we break away from the traditional ways of seeing the research issues we examine using marketing techniques alone. However, in order to achieve this, reviewers in marketing need to open their eyes to other disciplines. The current review process has led us into an incestuous state of self-congratulatory knowledge creation. Surely the role of all journal editors in such a time is pivotal in bringing about meaningful change. Our possibility for improving the review process is to actively recruit reviewers from other disciplines asking them to comment upon the submissions from those in the academy. This can help complement the views of the marketing reviewers.

**Marketing Knowledge and the Murder Weapon — Our Review Process**

Rather than fearing the toppling of foundations, we should fear having nothing new to say! By adopting similar techniques in producing, distributing and disseminating the commodity of marketing, we have no platforms on which to say new and different things; indeed this process almost guarantees that new and exciting things are excluded from conferences, journals and doctoral works. Fortunately, the
issues in which myself and others who are researching new areas, or using different research methods, are interested can’t be so easily fitted into the marketing techniques which are acceptable to mainly logical empiricist reviewers. But surely that doesn’t make them any less important.

Is the marketing academy in danger of perpetuating a system whereby reviewers mould the debate into very eloquent mathematical solutions dealing with the reputed reality of marketing? By reviewers operating in this manner, we run the danger of the reality of marketing being depicted through a very restricted reading of what is happening in society. In the future, we could all work not in universities, but in happier “Kotlerian Kommodification Klinics” where the review process is equivalent to medication time for Kesey’s (1962) inmates. These poor souls are unable to see or interpret the marketing commodity, or world, in the correct way.

A frightening danger with this sort of self-determination occurs to me: this is that the future development of marketing knowledge becomes the sole jurisdiction of those presently in positions of influence in marketing. In this way, marketing remains to be solely what these people think it should be. Many well-known theoreticians when seeking to change the business world aim to make “marketing work in your organization” rather than being more interested in discovering what form of marketing exists in an organization and why. Surely the academy has to debate the many faces of marketing and go beyond the one-dimensional marketing manager (Brownlie and Saren 1995b). Just as those in marketing, as Baker notes, are rediscovering human resource management (HRM) through internal marketing, we also have those in HRM studying the use of marketing rhetoric in the change process, in the NHS for example (McNulty et al. 1994). So, as Brownlie and Saren infer, it is no longer clear as to where the legitimate study of the marketing knowledge industry starts or stops.

It strikes me that there are two risks associated with the continuation of the present review system and its narrow ontological view. Firstly, the marketing academy will be in danger of being hijacked as the legitimate source as to what marketing is in society. This may occur because of the lack of meaning in the debates of the academy found by those studying similar issues in other disciplines. Secondly, those academics outside the academy may come up with more creative and innovative studies as to the meaning of marketing in contemporary society. In the latter scenario, the marketing academy loses credibility to speak on its own behalf. What we need in the academy is much more support for the cause of epistemological pluralism. In this way we can generate the creative and innovative, rather than respond, in a dull and routinized manner, to the works of folks mainly outside the academy.

New Perspectives: Ways Forward for the Future Marketing Knowledge Industry: “Crime; Together we’ll Crack it?”

There are presently several under-explored research paradigms into which future marketing knowledge development might enter. These are the interpretive paradigm, radical structuralism and radical humanism. The last offers one of the freshest discussions, which my students and I have enjoyed in the recent literature. That is Alvesson’s (1994) discussion of critical theory (CT) and consumer marketing. As
Geuss (1981) informs us, a critical theory might be facilitated if people can be shown how to discover that their ideological delusion has developed because their beliefs have been “determined” by factors of which they were unaware. In this respect it induces self-reflection and as O’Neill (1989) urges, critical theory must begin to work wherever the opportunity affords in the ordinary world of social science.

Alvesson offers two new metaphors for marketing in a bid to show how CT can inspire marketing theory. Firstly, as mystification where marketing management is a question of myth-making and creating smoke screens for consumers who are evaluating their needs and wants in an over-indulgent world; while at one and the same time marketing offers temporary solutions through expression of self-esteem and identity. Secondly, as cultural doping since when marketers influence the demand for products, they are also affecting the personalities and life developments by creating people whose identities are closely linked to what they own and consume.

Critical theory is exciting for someone with my world-view and an interest in ecology because it allows me to challenge and revise existing theories, in the light of major global change factors. Indeed one can even project a radical alternative as ideal and use interpretive methods to assess its potential development. So if you are prepared to tackle the unfamiliar literature you can develop interesting and innovative contributions for marketing knowledge creation.

Likewise the discussion of postmodernism and its impact on marketing theory (Brown 1993; Fırat et al. 1995) are signs of hope for new perspectives from within the academy. This is so because there has been considerable work undertaken outside the academy on issues which are central to marketing. Many of these perspectives are more reflective and allow us to challenge the naiveté of our discipline.

In order to move forward with our ideas and improve upon the way we see the world, we all should welcome the comment of those who are prepared to read beyond the marketing literature and report back. This should occur on a regular basis and not be restricted to the occasional special edition which, as well as being over-subscribed because of their popularity, can only begin to scratch the surface of these interesting new ideas.

Neighbourhood Watch: New Theories, New Methods...New Reviewers, New Journals?

One of the issues which this edition might shed some light upon is the rejection of new theories and research methods by the current review process (with the exception of special issues and the occasional token article). Despite the suggestion by Baker that the marketing academy should encourage the controversial and the new, reviewers are more likely to comment on readability, or grammatical errors of a submission when a paper doesn’t fit in with their opinions, or view of the world, or they don’t understand the “jargon”. Surely they should tackle the more important issues of the subject matter.

Among the comments on papers returned from review that I’ve personally faced are “there is no real information in the paper” or that “environmental issues means something different in marketing”. In my view editors should be prepared to bite the bullet and publish more critical works as they seek change — but who do you get
to review an article which usurps both the standpoint of the reviewer and the editor? One possible approach might be to make use of reviewers from outside the marketing academy. Or, perhaps the time is ripe for some new marketing journals where we can open out a more pluralistic debate on all the relevant theories. If we don’t encourage this pluralism, then people new to the publishing games of the marketing academy will continue to play those games according to the rules as they are told. This is the only way they will be successful in the marketing academy as we know it. So the debate will just continue to fester and marketing will remain a one-sided discipline which is continually criticized not only by those in other academic disciplines but also by marketing practitioners themselves.

References


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