

# Ethical Perspectives on the Postmodern Communications Leviathan

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**ABSTRACT.** Advertising and other forms of promotional activity have proliferated to such an extent that they may constitute a form of social pollution (Kitchen, 1994). The quantity and tone of communications to which consumers are exposed may have a subtle but pervasive effect on the social ecology of the developed world. Not only are Marketing Communications delivered in unprecedented quantities (Kitchen, 1994); but their tone is increasingly difficult to categorise in the Postmodern Marketing era (Brown, 1994). Notably, there has been very little research conducted on this seeming “Leviathan” (Kitchen, 1994, after Hobbes, 1651) effect. Ethical concerns of professional marketing bodies such as the MRS and CIM are focussed on the conduct of professionals with regard to law and notions of moral decency in human exchange relationships (see MRS code of conduct, ASA and IBA guidelines). There is

less emphasis on the ethical implications for society of the totality of Marketing Communication activities. This paper examines the distinctively Postmodern concept of the Communications Leviathan and discusses contemporary ethical issues, drawing perspectives where possible from Postmodern critical theory, Enlightenment philosophy, cognitive psychology and classical ethical works of Plato and Aristotle.

## **Introduction: The nature of the marketing communications “Leviathan”**

Kitchen (1994) argued the case for an emergent “Communications Leviathan”, an entity of colossal size made up of a multiplicity of marketing communications messages and which may constitute a form of social pollution through the potentially damaging and unintended effects it may have on consumer decision making (see Pollay, 1986). The concept of the Leviathan as applied to contemporary marketing culture draws on the Hobbesian (Hobbes, 1651, pp. 46–48) notion of a political and ideological construct which reaches into the lives and minds of the population. Hobbes’ (1651) main concern was with the growth of Government power. Today, a similar concern might be expressed with regard to the more subtle growth of a marketing ideology, as manifested in multiple, intrusive marketing communications, and the extent to which exposure to this Leviathan might circumscribe the moral development of citizens. This paper seeks to explore the concept of the communications “Leviathan” with regard to its ethical implications for marketing professionals and for society as a whole.

The proposition that citizens in the developed

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world are currently subject to a historically unprecedented barrage of marketing communications is not controversial. Consumers in the developed world may be exposed to up to 2000 promotional messages in a day (Kotler, 1988). Total expenditure on U.K. promotional activities such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion and sponsorship in 1992 has been estimated in excess of £10,000 million.<sup>1</sup> Literacy and access to printed media is high. In 1992, 96 per cent of the U.K. population owned or had access to colour television sets: access to cable systems, satellite provision and the Internet is also burgeoning. Similar statistics obtain in other developed Western nations. Soaked in this cultural rain of marketing communications, consumers face increasing demands on their decision making faculties, demands which may have an ultimately debilitating effect on their ability to make rational and morally coherent buying decisions. There has taken place, and will continue to take place, exponential growth in the extent to which the general population are exposed to commercial and non-commercial persuasive messages, designed by educated specialists, and sponsored by competing international organisations.

The suggestion that this communications Leviathan has a Postmodern character seems appropriate in the light of the emphasis much Postmodern writing places on electronic communications as a primary cultural influence (see, for example, Brown, 1994). This influence has notable epistemological and moral dimensions in the sense that Postmodern media products are characterised by relativism, irony, self referentiality and hedonism. Furthermore, the distinction between marketing culture and entertainment communications such as movies is becoming increasingly blurred (Brown, 1994). In the light of this view the construct of the communications Leviathan is invoked here as a metaphor of Postmodern consumer consciousness with its attendant difficulties of moral and epistemological relativism, the pre-eminence of circular, self referential meanings and the subtle presence of ideological meta-narratives of possessive individualism.

The concern of this paper lies primarily with the normative dimension of this issue. If the con-

struct of a marketing communications Leviathan seems plausible as a metaphor for distinctive features of contemporary culture, what are the moral implications for decision making on the part of both consumers of marketing culture and managers of the marketing process? In this regard the paper is a form of address to the fundamental questions of ethics from a marketing perspective: what is the good life, and how should we behave to sustain a good life within the pervasive influence of a marketing communications Leviathan? How can these questions be framed in the light of the effects which marketing communications might have on the moral sensibility of those immersed in this culture (both as consumers of it, and as managers within it)?

In the U.K. there is currently a largely voluntary system of regulation for marketing and media communications which operates within a broader legal framework. U.K. marketing professional and regulatory bodies such as the Market Research Society, the Advertising Standards Authority and the Chartered Institute of Marketing have sets of ethical guidelines applying to certain issues. Communications professionals often feel that such guidelines are very detailed, in particular with regard to the marketing and advertising of, for example, food, medical and alcohol products. But while there are some specific rules (for example alcohol drunk in TV advertisements must be sipped rather than gulped) the industry guidelines emphasise general requirements of decency, legality and honesty concerning the truthfulness of advertising claims and the means by which these claims are presented. Crucially, these regulatory criteria are culturally and historically relative. What was unacceptable in U.K. advertising in the 1950s is acceptable today. What is acceptable in the U.K. may not be so in other countries, while much advertising in continental Europe is too sexually liberal for U.K. media. Marketing messages might consist of product claims juxtaposed with images which engender feelings of fear, social inadequacy or sexual stimulation in the consumers at which the messages are aimed. The way these juxtapositions are presented in advertisements is circumscribed by the social mores of the time and the place.

The professional regulation of marketing communications in the U.K. is largely reactive, depending upon complaints received. The criteria of “legal, decent honest and truthful” used by the ASA are not defined in any great detail. Thus, from a managerial point of view, the boundaries of what might be claimed and the ways the claims can be presented change over time as cultural norms change. Furthermore, the globalisation of communications renders regulation increasingly difficult and subject to cross cultural influences. But not only are marketing communications ethical guidelines difficult to formulate and police because of scale and cultural variation. They are framed by the cultural phenomenon of the Leviathan itself and consequently they may carry implicit assumptions which exclude consideration of the Leviathan as an ethical issue. In particular, the guidelines seem to presupposes a particular view of ethical social relations. The ethical regulation of marketing communications seems to rest upon an assumption that the ethical dimension of a marketing communication is vested in the extent to which it is like a face to face human relationship. The marketing professional is conceived of as being engaged in a one to one dialogue with a prospective consumer and this dialogue may be dishonest, coercive or inconsistent with current mores of decency regarding, for example, sexuality or profanity. There is no consideration of the moral effect of the totality of marketing communications and the effect this may have on the autonomous decision making ability of the consumer. Neither is there any consideration of the effect of the burgeoning volume of marketing messages on society more generally or on the moral sensibility of those working within this industry. Thus the U.K. (voluntary) regulatory framework positions marketing/communications professionals in a sealed bubble with a channel of communication to targeted consumers who are also in a sealed bubble. Ethical issues are considered in this social vacuum and are framed by a cognitivist discourse which excludes broader social and cultural considerations.

Thus the construct of a possible marketing communications “Leviathan” seems to fall outside the scope of existing considerations of

marketing ethics. The next section seeks to explore this apparent deficiency by examining the psychological presuppositions behind the Leviathan and the ethical implications which may follow.

### **Reflections on the morality and psychology of advertising**

The point that advertising does not, in general, seek to promote the advancement of human moral sensibility, is not new: Kitchen (1994) quotes Lasch (1978) on the ethics of advertising:

Modern advertising seeks to promote not so much self indulgence as self doubt. It seeks to create needs, not to fulfil them: to generate new anxieties instead of allaying old ones . . . It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure. (Lasch, 1978, p. 180).

Lasch’s (1978) main hypothesis gains support from work conducted in consumer research which explicitly uses the motive force of subjective feelings of guilt to try to manipulate human behaviour through guilt inducing advertising themes (Burnett and Lunsford, 1994). More generally, advertisements “intend to make us feel we are lacking” (Williamson, 1978, p. 8). This explicit fostering of consumer doubt and anxiety has ethical implications. While a certain degree of caveat emptor (let the buyer beware) is appropriate in a free society, at what point does the influence of marketing communications become insidious? The question is partly a psychological one: if there are indeed grounds supporting what could be termed “a Communications Leviathan”; it could be asked, to what extent are consumers passive processors of data inputs? Such passivity implies moral subservience to marketing communication designers. To marketing communications professionals consumers seem very far from morally subservient and this is reflected in information processing consumer behaviour models which very clearly resonate the idea that exposure to messages alone is insufficient to have any impact on consumer choice behaviour.

And yet, many models purporting to explain or predict consumer choice behaviour have a clear relationship to Hobbes (1651) as developed by Kitchen (1994) that consumers are “complicated automata influenced by internal material perceptions of an external material world (Hobbes, 1651, p. 52). This general view of human beings is also expressed in David Hume’s (1739) “A Treatise of Human Nature”. Hume (1739) sought to develop moral philosophy as a branch of epistemology and grounded his epistemology in a psychology of concept acquisition. He worked out a cognitivist scheme of how individual humans apprehend the world (through sense “impressions”) and form conceptual thought (“ideas”) from the sense impressions. Hume (1739) is perhaps best known for his theory of causation as a human construction: “the efficacy of causes lie in the determination of the mind” (Hume, 1739, p. 218). We may associate one idea with another if there is some resemblance between them, and if they are contiguous in time or place. Through this dual association, we may infer a causal relation between the ideas and the “one idea is easily converted into its correlative” (Hume, 1739, p. 338). The source of ideas is the self and the subjectivity of experience leaves us alone in the universe to construct meanings through our interpretations of our own sense experience. We understand the world in terms of our own sense experience and communications media offer us a theatre of our own imagination.

Any thing that gives a pleasant sensation, and is related to the self, excites the passion of pride, which is also agreeable and has self for its object (Hume, 1739, p. 340).

On Hume’s (1739) scheme, we infer causal relations from temporal and spatial juxtapositions of advertising images and we make these ideas meaningful through reference to our own sense experience. For example, Hume (1739) emphasises the human predisposition to sympathy, by which he means our subjective emotional reactions to external stimuli. We see television pictures of starving children in Africa and we sympathise, partaking in a diluted version of the

child’s own emotions and those of its parents. Simultaneously, we may experience smugness that neither we nor our children are in such a position. By the same impulse, we see advertising images of affluent consumption and partake vicariously in the emotional scenario of material gratification. However, our experiential reality may not match the image of affluence and the result is a subjective feeling of dissonance, or a state of felt deprivation.

. . . the cause . . . excites the passion connected with it, and that passion, when excited, turns our view to another idea, which is that of the self (Hume, 1739, p. 330).

For Hume (1739), the association of one idea with another forms a relation in our minds, and, if the association is compelling enough, after a number of repetitions the two ideas may appear necessarily connected. In the context of contemporary marketing, brands may, by repetitive juxtaposition of the product concept, logo and brand name with certain evocative images, generate emotional responses relating to ideas of freedom, power, attractiveness, status. These associations may reflect primitive anthropomorphic tendencies: we are predisposed to extend human qualities to non-human products or brands. The popularity and symbolic power of particular products of marketing demands theoretical explanations which examine how we make meaning in our worlds.

The emotional response to marketing products may sometimes seem logically prior to considerations of technical product quality in consumer buying behaviour. Effective marketing communications often seek to combine emotional and rational appeals. The importance of the role of the consumer’s affective response to marketing communications is well documented (Westbrook and Oliver, 1991; Kuhl, 1986; van Raaij, 1989). The consumer’s primary affective reaction to a marketing communication is the key to motivating and influencing consumer behaviour: the affective reaction has a strong influence on memory and decision making processes (van Raaij, 1989). The consumer may rationalise a buying decision a posteriori, but the brand may

only be permitted to enter the consumer's evoked set of consumption choices if the product is "invested with real emotional values" (Rothschild, 1987).

For the purposes of this argument, the above discussion seems to support the Hobbesian/Humean notion of a consumer as an entity forming internal perceptions subject to external influences. The argument that "advertising has no affect on me" would seem to place improbable confidence in human autonomy, and contradicts considerable weight of philosophical and psychological analysis of human perception and belief. Therefore, it may be conceded that the proliferation of marketing communications and the consumption of marketing messages by the general population constitutes a major unprecedented, undocumented, and under-researched external influence on perceptions with which twentieth century citizens of the developed (and developing) worlds have to contend. However, while individual perceptions of products and brands are influenced by particular marketing communications messages, it is still necessary to examine the impact on consumers and society of the totality of these marketing communications messages. For this task we seem to need a way of modelling the interaction between consumers and marketing communications. Two issues arise at this point: one is a psychological one regarding the cognitive capacity of humans to process marketing data (a subset of environmental data). This question may be addressed through the Cognitive Information Processing Model which represents humans (and consumers) as "complicated automata" (Kitchen, 1994) who process data serially through a sequence of discrete, computer-like operations. The other, related, question concerns consumer response to data overload. Do consumers respond to data overload with confusion, existential despair, and loss of moral identity? Or do they adapt constructively to the Leviathan and become intelligent, cynical, streetwise, circumspect Postmodern Consumers who are just as savvy as advertisers who are trying to persuade them? For enlightenment we will look firstly at the CIP model, secondly at the Postmodern perspective on consumer psychology.

### **The CIP model and the Leviathan**

For Lasch (1978 above), advertising seems to be a source of evil in itself. Notwithstanding counterarguments to this view, it may be argued that Lasch's (1978) position is weakened by a major assumption he makes concerning the way consumers process marketing messages. Specifically, Lasch's (1978) argument assumes that consumers take note of marketing communications, that the seductive overtures of advertising reach receptive and attentive audiences. Kitchen (1994) addresses this point by referring to the Cognitive Information Processing model of consumer behaviour. Marketing has borrowed this model from Cognitive Psychology and it derives particularly from the work of Donald Broadbent (1958) and Newell and Simon (1972). The CIP model views human beings as limited capacity information processing entities. According to the model, data enters the cognitive system through the senses and is processed in linear fashion. Linear processing implies capacity limitation: conscious attention has a relatively narrow focus limiting human capacity to process data. For example, a well-established and replicated finding from memory research indicates that the maximum capacity of short term or working memory is about seven items of information (see, for example, Miller, 1956). This clearly implies a limit to processing capacity. The inference is that consumers do not have the cognitive capacity to process all the marketing communications information to which they are exposed. The linearity of the CIP model implies the possibility of a bottleneck occurring at the point of exposure to data. Assumptions about the way consumers react to this bottleneck are central to the argument that the Communications "Leviathan" constitutes a form of social pollution. Advertising apologists might contend that advertising can do no harm precisely because consumers selectively, and consciously or unconsciously, reject the great majority of marketing communications to which they are exposed. Does this selective attention process, which has presumably evolved by natural selection as a survival mechanism, not imply damaging consequence when subject to



information overload? As Kitchen (1994) writes,

Assume that many advertising or promotional messages actually reach unintended audiences – that is, audiences which may not be in the market for particular products or services . . . The constant bombardment of messages – indicating product consumption in lifestyle settings – may provide the foundation for a culturally constituted world in which materialism is encouraged and psychological dissatisfaction engendered. (Kitchen, 1994, p. 22)

The intuitive appeal of this argument is clear. Consumers live in a world of Marxian “commodity fetishism” (Marx and Engels, 1846), in which labour worships its own product in a self alienating parody of spiritual fulfilment. Advertising and other forms of marketing communications embody this fetishism by investing products with emotional values, i.e., associating them with personal qualities/attributes. Not to have the product is not to have the attribute. But does this line of reasoning take advertising and contemporary culture too seriously? Perhaps the totality of marketing communications do form a pervasive environment of trivial stimulations within which daily lives go on, but are consumers equipped with the moral sensibility to deal with these challenges? The information processing model implies that consumers can filter a proportion of promotional messages out of conscious awareness. Consumers, after all, are not obliged to watch many hours of television a week. Even where they do, many adopt advertisement avoidance strategies such as “zipping” through advertisements by fast forwarding the video through commercial breaks, “zapping” the pause button so as to record a show or movie without the advertisements, and “nipping” or taking in small, momentary samples of many television channels using the remote control (Kitchen, 1986). However, notwithstanding avoidance strategies, we have still to deal with the possibility that marketing communications data overload could elicit a state of unconscious confusion in consumers, disarming critical and evaluative faculties, and impairing the presumed moral and economic quality of buying decisions.

Buyers can easily become overwhelmed with information (see Keller and Staelin, 1987; Kahneman, 1973; and Miller, 1956). Does this state, prolonged, result in the disablement of critical faculties concerning buying decisions, or do people react to the Leviathan by adapting and evolving into hyper-critical Postmodern consumers?

### **The Postmodern consumer**

Postmodern critical theorists such as Lyotard, (1984), Derrida (1991), Baudrillard and Foucault, have exerted major influence on the development of the social sciences. A significant number of Marketers are now using Postmodern perspectives on knowledge to generate insights into Marketing phenomena. Stephen Brown (1993) writes,

Postmodernism, as its advocates frequently emphasise, has much to contribute to Marketing discourse . . . (it) helps to conceptualise some of the dramatic changes that are taking place in the marketing arena and provides an insight into the current crisis of confidence in the discipline. (Brown, 1994, pp. 45–46).

Brown (1993), while acknowledging the counterpoints to this view, emphasises the influence Postmodernism has had on the development of theories of buyer behaviour in Marketing (see, for example, Foxall, 1984; Venkatesh, 1992; Nyeck, 1992). This influence is derived from the way Postmodern theory emphasises the interpretation of knowledge through metaphor, constructed truth, semiotics, and symbolic realities (see Brown, 1993, p. 31). This abandonment of subject and object, of objective reality and of literal in favour of symbolic modes of communication is particularly significant for consumers given the increasingly blurred distinction between Marketing Communications and popular cinematic culture. The advertising industry is a training ground for aspirant film directors and television advertising reflects this in the prevalence of abstraction and surrealism as opposed to literal descriptions of product features. Explicit product placement promotional

strategies in television and film make it difficult to distinguish between storyline, film stars, and globally branded products. These trends are among many other features of a Communications Leviathan. The sense of the collapse of certainty into cultural, moral and epistemological relativism feeds directly into every home through the technological telecommunications revolution. Brown refers to Baudrillard (in Poster, 1988) in asserting that,

For many, this inexorable fragmentation of modern life, the widespread belief that “anything goes” and the apparent loss of a fixed point of societal reference cannot be divorced from latter-day advances in telecommunications, informatics and the mass media . . . this ceaseless parade of vivid images has denuded people’s ability to discriminate between important and trivial, past and present, global and local, and fact and fiction, other than in terms of the nature and intensity and drama of the images themselves. (Brown, 1994, p. 36).

The postmodern consumer is represented as a . . .

. . . restless, cynical, world weary, self obsessed hedonist demanding instant gratification and ever-increasing doses of stimulation . . . (postmodern consumers are) a “moronic inferno of narcissists cretinized by television” (Lasch, 1978; Callinicos, 1989; in Brown, p. 36).

This jaundiced model of the consumer is not that of a rational, decision making entity. It is that of an entity without moral sensibility or critical faculties. An analysis of the ethics of Marketing Communications based upon such a model of the consumer might conclude that Marketing Communications professionals should afford targeted audiences the same level of ethical consideration as they might pet rabbits. While acknowledging the rapid pace of social and cultural change and the decline of absolute values of morality, the Postmodern model of the consumer represented above may be considered pessimistic. It also begs the question of whether Marketing Communications professionals should define their own standards of professional ethics by those of their consumers. This question is so fundamental to ethics that it is now appropriate

to look at some ethical perspectives drawn from the philosophers of ethics who have influenced contemporary conceptions of morality and social justice.

### **Philosophical perspectives on the Postmodern Communications Leviathan**

Bertrand Russell (1945) saw philosophy as . . .

. . . an integral part of social and political life: not as the isolated speculations of remarkable individuals, but as both an effect and a cause of the character of the various communities in which different systems flourished. (Russell, 1945, preface p. ix).

It is, in the light of this view, appropriate to take a philosophical perspective on the ethics of contemporary Marketing Communications since this Leviathan arises from, and is an integral part of, contemporary social and political life. Indeed, it may be considered very odd that so much speculation on general business ethics does occur without the underpinning rigour and timeless insight provided by the theorists who have shaped our very conception of the notion of ethics.

Plato’s (reprint 1955) perspective held some striking parallels to those of contemporary philosophers of the ethics of mass communications. His work was produced in a time of popular democracy in Athens, and political power was won, when not by force, by sophisticated rhetoric, the art of verbal persuasion. In the non-representative democracy of fifth and fourth century Athens all 45,000 voters<sup>2</sup> were entitled to vote at the law making mass meetings of the Assembly. Even the law courts were under its popular control. Plato was deeply influenced by what he saw as the weak ethical standards and social instability engendered by this system. His contemporary, Thucydides,<sup>3</sup> described Athenian popular democracy as a matter of “committing the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude.” That the multitude was not equipped with the education and experience to make well considered decisions was evident in the political turbulence and social instability of the times. Plato railed against “sophistry”, the insincere but

superficially effective forms of argument he saw as one of the principal evils of the time, and which was taught by professional travelling teachers to any young man who could pay (see Plato's *Gorgias*, reprint 1960). Sophistical argument dominated the Assembly and this pre-technological Communications Leviathan was heavily influential in the daily experience of the typical Athenian. Plato saw this influence as malign and, in his idealised "Republic" (reprint 1955), took a radically authoritarian position on political and social freedom, advocating strict censorship and rule by the minority. Underpinning Plato's ethical view was his theory of knowledge.

For Plato, the temporal world is imperfect and consequently all knowledge gained from sense data is also flawed. He used the simile of the cave to illustrate this idea, portraying the masses of the population as limited beings content to be amused by the shadows on the cave wall, unaware of, and perhaps indifferent to, the triviality and error entailed in such false images of "knowledge". Plato regarded epistemological error as the source of ethical wrong. People would always act in the right way if they knew what it was: the problem as he saw it was that most people would, could, never attain true knowledge because of their innate limitations. They were destined to live perpetually in a shadowy world of error and trivial amusement. He felt that these people, the majority, should have their lives controlled by the few who were capable of attaining true knowledge through education and reflection: the "Guardians". True knowledge and ethical correctness were one and the same – to know the right, is to do right. Education was the key and the corrupting influences of popular drama, poetry, and personal property would have no place in his idealised society. Plato's view on today's Marketing Communications Leviathan is easy to infer: he would see it as a wasteful and corrupting force for evil incompatible with stability and social justice.

Aristotle, Plato's pupil, carries quite a contrasting tone in his main ethical work, the "Nicomachean Ethics" (reprint 1976), written for his son, Nicomachus. Attempts at social and political control are much less evident. Aristotle's

collected lecture notes reflect on what he saw as the principle ethical problem, the problem of how an individual is to live the "good life". Aristotle saw happiness as an ethically suitable ultimate objective in life, although he rejected the hedonistic forms of sensual "happiness" advocated by other philosophical schools of the time. Unlike the Stoics who were, with Plato, to be so influential in the development of Christian notions of ethics, Aristotle's work held the psychological insight that even self denial is a form of self affirmation. His "Golden Mean" doctrine was a call to self regulated behaviour as a kind of subjective moral absolutism: ethically correct behaviour involves self knowledge about one's own appetites and predispositions, and the "right" course of action given a particular circumstance may be different for every individual because virtue and vice are relative not to exterior standards but to internal predispositions. While the highest good is considered to be the reflective life, Aristotle's work regards an "adequate" supply of external "goods" to be a precondition of happiness. Aristotle's ethical man, therefore, the "Eudaimon", is neither the self sacrificing ascetic of Platonic, eternally minded medieval Christianity, nor the transcendently minded mystic of Eastern religious philosophy. He is an individual who seeks personal happiness in this world as if life is a skill to be mastered, and a sense of deep responsibility toward others is as inherent a part of such a man as is a sense of responsibility towards himself.

Aristotle's ethical position places ultimate responsibility for the individual's moral development not on the state but on him(her)self. The Marketing Communications Leviathan would, therefore, simply constitute another of life's dilemmas to be negotiated carefully and thoughtfully by the emotionally and psychologically mature "Eudaimon" of Aristotelian ethics. It is perhaps worth remembering that Aristotle was writing for his son and for his students: whether he thought the "masses" equal to such responsibility is another question. In more recent philosophy thinkers have sought to integrate notions of moral responsibility within a civil society with the principle of personal freedom for all, a principle that was alien to the ancient



Greeks, who took for granted the existence of a servile underclass of slaves and the non-contribution of women to public affairs. One such thinker, highly influential in political philosophy, was John Stuart Mill (1859).

Mill's thought evolved in the influence of that of his father James Mill and the Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The political philosophy espoused in "On Liberty" is not without contradiction but its central thesis is that freedom of speech, thought and act is a sine qua non of human development: human potential can never be fulfilled, according to Mill, if private behaviour is constrained either by the State, or by the "tyranny of the majority" imposing their own conventional mores on individual behaviour. People should be free to conduct their "experiments in living" so that possibilities may be explored and progress made through a process of dialectic. Thesis is met by antithesis and the free and uninhibited interaction of each results in a new synthesis of ideas or of action. Mill's guiding principle was expressed thus:

. . . The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others (Mill, 1859, p. 68)

Mill's implicit position on censorship seems clear. Those Postmodern consumers would simply have to regard the Communications Leviathan as an opportunity for personal development. In a process of cultural *laissez faire*, some would fail to cope and be "cretinized" by the mass communicators: others would evolve into morally mature, critically aware individuals who might not have done so without the intrusive and challenging presence of the Marketing Communications Leviathan. Some of the limitations to individual freedom Mill lists seem anachronous to contemporary mores: for example he suggests that the freedom to procreate is one which may legitimately be interfered with by the State. The power of men to determine the lives of their families is also to be limited, as is the economic power of individuals to indulge in vices such as drink (through State imposed consumption taxes). Notwithstanding

the contradictions in Mill's position, the modern world is one of greater complexity than "On Liberty" assumed. The Marketing Communications Leviathan may well have constituted a special case for State Intervention for Mill, since it is clearly not a case of individuals privately indulging their idiosyncracies to no social ill effect: it is a very public phenomenon with social ramifications that Mill may well have found an instrument of oppression rather than one of liberty. For Mill, the "tyranny of the majority" may well have been embodied in the Leviathan effect with its glorification of popular culture and its tendency to address people as group members rather than as individuals. However, the Leviathan is also an inherent feature of democratic capitalism in its function as the medium of the market: market information is not "perfect" in the sense classical microeconomics attaches to the term, but the extent to which it is propagated at all is due to the Communications Leviathan. Arguments opposing the free action of the Leviathan would, it seems, have to be on social and ethical, but not economic, grounds. Thus, this postmodern phenomenon may fall outside the scope of Mill's nineteenth century theme.

### **Concluding comments**

This paper has attempted to address the ethical implications of a Postmodern Marketing Communications Leviathan, an entity to which consumers in the developed worlds are exposed on a daily basis. These ethical implications have been examined from a primarily normative perspective. The cumulative influence of this phenomenon on consumer buying decisions and on society has not been researched to any noticeable extent. The possibility that the Leviathan may degrade consumer decision making faculties and impair the moral development of individuals raises many ethical questions concerning, for example, the regulation of marketing communications and the education of consumers. Perspectives on the questions of regulation have been explored by drawing selectively on classical philosophy and Postmodern critical theory. The

arguments may be summarised in the following way. On the one hand, a *laissez faire* approach to individual ethics consistent with the thought of Aristotle and John Stuart Mill would place the Marketing Communications Leviathan above State control and beyond the self regulation that already exists within the professions of the domain. Marketing Communications specialists could not be held responsible for social ills: the burden of responsibility would lie on individual consumers notwithstanding the difficulty of dealing with the intrusive and complex challenges the Leviathan presents. On the other hand, a Platonic approach and one more consistent with Western Christian ethical traditions would place some collective social responsibility on the State for regulation of the Leviathan. This collective control might relate to the content or to the quantity of Marketing Communications, but it would imply that those who prove unequal to the challenges posed by the mass of Marketing Communications in the consumers' environment require some protection from this Postmodern Leviathan, even though such protection would constitute an interference with individually directed moral development, and a limit on personal freedom.

The approach of this paper has been to examine classical ethical perspectives on the Leviathan in the light of a psychology of advertising communication. Taking a lead from David Hume's epistemological moral philosophy, the paper attempted to discuss the possible cumulative effects of the Leviathan in terms of cognitive information processing models of consumer behaviour. This cognitivist psychological position offers one fruitful basis for an ethical treatment of marketing communications but there are others which might offer directions for future research. For example, the critical but neglected question of the normative in marketing and management education is deeply problematic and any attempt to deal with the ethical issues of marketing within management education have to address this (Hackley, 1988a). The management of business processes are necessarily social activities involving managerial influence over and/or involvement with, the lives of others. How, then, can ethical issues be dealt with in schemes of

business education which have no coherent philosophy of practice? Furthermore, any attempt to educate managers to be experts in marketing must deal with the tacit dimension of practical knowledge (Hackley, 1988b). Any given situation in the social world has an experiential aspect which can only be apprehended as experience. Can normative treatments of business ethics embrace situational particulars, given the particularity of every problem situation which a marketing communications professional is likely to face? Finally, from the consumer point of view, there are ways of attempting to understand how advertising and marketing communications work which fall outside the information processing paradigm. For example, semiotic approaches to understanding how advertising works (Hackley, 1988c), social constructionist perspectives in the social psychology of marketing communications (Hackley and Kitchen, 1988; Hackley, 1998d) and attempts to examine the phenomenology of the contemporary consumer experience (Hackley and Kitchen, 1997) all offer counterpoints to the traditional, and dominant, cognitivist schemes of marketing communication. These approaches might offer bases for the development of the ethical dimension of marketing management within general business education, based on a sounder understanding of the social psychology both of marketing communications, and of business management education.

But the effects of the totality of marketing communications in relation to society as a whole is an issue the ethical dimensions of which seem to go beyond social psychology, and indeed beyond moral philosophy. For marketing communications and the ethos of possessive individualism which runs as a sub text within them might be seen in ideological terms as the promotion of values which maintain, and sustain, a system of institutionalised social power relations. Such an analysis would seem to fall within the scope of a political science of marketing communications. However, whether the promotion of such capitalist ideologies is benign in and of itself, or is simply an unavoidable component of business discourse, the practical ethical issues remain pertinent. These concern the intellectual bases for the construction of normative ethical

approaches concerning the formation of the legal framework for marketing communications, the conduct of professionals within the industry in designing marketing communications strategies, and the role of the Leviathan in framing the behaviour and values of the Postmodern consumer. This paper has attempted to discuss some of these issues on the basis that the Communications Leviathan represents an historically unprecedented cultural context for the individual moral development of citizens, and that classical ethical perspectives retain a contemporary relevance in the task of conceptualising and re-conceptualising business ethics in the era of the Postmodern Communications Leviathan.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This estimate is derived from calculations made by Kitchen, 1994, op. cit.

<sup>2</sup> V. Ehrenberg, *The Greek State*, p. 30, and A. H. Jones, *Athenian Democracy*, pp. 8–11, in Lee (Trans.) p. 26

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. R. Warner, Bk. 11, p. 65 (Penguin Classics).

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