

On The Public Understanding of 'Market-ing':

Battles for vision, legitimacy and form

By

Douglas Brownlie

Abstract

The paper argues we need to re-imagine the broader horizons of marketing in the light of significant changes, not only to the evolving institutional context and conduct of governance, but also to the place of marketing among the collective consciousness of citizens, consumers, workers - those autonomous partners in the expanding 'contractualism' which will underpin the newly emerging market-based service delivery enterprises of a privatising state.

Background

In a paper speaking to the AM2007 conference theme, “Theory into Practice”, the construct ‘relevance’ is used as an analytic to problematize the dualism ‘theory-practice’ (Brownlie, Hewer & Ferguson, 2007). That paper claims good reason for such a strategy, arguing there to be several constituencies with an interest in ‘marketing’¹ as an institutional space generating and distributing governance and wealth creation through channelling economic, social and cultural resources to citizens and communities in a matrix of service provision enterprises.

What is worth bringing forward here is the suggestion that while in the academy we get caught up in worthy, feel-good arguments about the ‘gap’ between theory and practice, rhetoric and reality, we are effectively distracted from wider issues of growing strategic import at the level of the discipline and its defining institutions as they shape contemporary social process.

Yes: ‘marketing in society!’ You may recall that marketing was once more than everyman’s technological fix to the problem of profit. It has also been an ideology; a discipline; an institution; an industry; an economic device; a managerial function; a distributive practice; a mode of governance; a way of doing the ‘social’ etc. Clearly, like the blind feeling their way around the anatomy of the elephant, all of those views and more must necessarily co-exist in a continually market-izing society. As a discipline and practice we understand this at a very general level, although we seem to have lost sight of the bigger picture of evolving social institutions that are shaped by and give shape to markets and marketing. The paper argues we need to re-imagine the broader horizons of marketing in the light of significant changes, not only to the evolving institutional context and conduct of governance, but also to the place of marketing among the collective consciousness of citizens, consumers, workers - those autonomous partners in the expanding ‘contractualism’ which will underpin the newly emerging market-based service delivery enterprises of a privatising state.

The predicament of the public

In the fields of public administration and governance the idea of state intervention, of institutions regulating relationships between state and society, public and private, is undergoing significant revision in the drive to streamline bureaucracy and release scarce resources. This is especially so in regard to the provision of services by the state, where the concept of a client-focused state service provider has never, ever been persuasive at the level of the everyday experience of citizen clients.

The present trend towards the contracting-out of the delivery of state functions further announces newly market-izing forms of the social. Indeed, the current climate of ‘economic austerity’ is expected to bring forth new institutional forms whereby individuals (citizens, consumers, workers - CCW) are not merely conceived of as subjects of state intervention, or instruments of markets. They are no longer merely seen to be carriers of the collective consciousness. Instead they are to be understood as authors of their own identities, bodies, lifestyles and wellbeing. Moreover, those authors can also be understood to be guardians of their own autonomy, where autonomy is not a right to be fought over, but a necessity. Sulkunen (2009)

¹ The textual device ‘market-ing’ is used to bring attention not merely to the gerund form, but also to speak of ‘marketing’ as an embedded social practice that brings markets forth, such that market-ing can be understood as a mode of sociality, as a way of doing and accomplishing the social.

trenchantly argues that as the basis of a new segmented social contract, autonomy will be imposed by new forms of market-driven governance.

Nudging second-generation market-ization

As a discipline of marketing we should be in the vanguard of steps being taken to map the terrain of the collective consciousness with regard to its understanding of marketing as a preferred mode of social integration. Clearly, the broad processes of social marketing systems have achieved the marketization of the delivery of certain state services in the fields of health promotion, where contracts and partnerships govern the distribution of public resources to specific health outcomes. The embedding of that process is gathering commitment to the idea that the state need not be at the centre of social integration efforts.

The logic of social marketing has helped put in place institutional arrangements that have created a market in risk and choice messaging which shapes the regulation of lifestyle choices through the voluntary, if incentivised or ‘nudged’ (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) cooperation of citizens in avoiding harmful choices and improving decisions about health and wellbeing. In the context of newly emerging institutional forms of governance, such as social marketing, which will further drive the marketization of service provision, state-citizen relations will in time also need to be re-imagined and reassembled. In this context we argue that the public understanding of marketing as a mode of social contracting needs to be better understood.

Relevance – a weapon of marketing distraction

Internal debates around discourses of ‘relevance’ are inconclusive in framing claims made upon research and knowledge products (Brownlie, Hewer & Ferguson, 2007). And this is unlikely to change as output falls under the scrutiny of output-based systems of funding and related evaluation approaches typically applied to other publicly funded activities. The move to bibliometrics and sophisticated citation monitoring apparatus will only exacerbate the failure of narrowly defined relevance as an evaluative criterion at the early formative stages of the market-driven model of provision and governance for Higher Education.

In this regard the marketing academy ignores the boiling currents of wider social commentary at our peril. Discourses of legitimacy claims are not impervious to wider shifts in economy, culture and society. So why do we professional discourses of marketing continue the imposture of banging on about ‘relevance’ as if it really mattered to anyone other than ourselves and how we exercise claims to interests and advantage. What possible public engagement could we expect with the issue of ‘relevance’ framed in this way?

Constructing the marketized citizen

And so, at one level, the basic idea of the paper is that of ‘public engagement’ – ie ways in which the wider public imagination’ engages with marketing issues in the new community spaces being envisioned by the ongoing privatization of public service provision. Moreover, what do discourses of the ‘public’ bring forth? How do they function? What do we commonly understand by the ‘public’? What do we commonly understand by ‘marketing in society’ or, marketing in the community? What does the collective consciousness make of marketing and society? What is the future for institutions and forms of regulation based on the idea that ‘experts’ within

state agencies should make and take decisions on their behalf about arrangements for markets and marketing? And at another level, how could we be seeking to distinguish between public discourses of marketing in society and the community and lifestyles and the concepts of RISK embedded there – the logic of social marketing applied to ‘marketing’, if you like! In other words, is marketing seen to be part of the solution; or is it understood to be part of the problem? What does it mean to consider yourself a victim of marketing; to be understood as disadvantaged or excluded or vulnerable in the social space manufactured by marketing practice?

In this paper’s view there is something to be gained by seeking to re-frame the ‘relevance’ debate; to shift the basis of discussion towards wider communicative platforms of public opinion where citizens and communities are active participants in the making and functioning of markets – not merely as consumers, employers, employees, beneficiaries etc – but as citizens, community activists, interested participants in democratic and personal decisions about that distribution of resources made possible by ‘market-ing’. So, we need to ask what systematic efforts have been taken as a community of scholars to understand how public opinion of ‘market-ing’ in society is framed by general levels of marketing literacy within society. Like me, maybe you can recall the farsighted, but necessary, initiatives taken in the mid-late 1980s to spread information and awareness about marketing, especially the Channel 4 series ‘The Marketing Mix’ and various training and development initiatives driven by what was then the Institute of Marketing.

Learning from the Public Understanding of Science

This paper has been inspired by involvement with the BAAS ‘Young Scientists and the Media’ campaign (now known as ‘Stand up for Science’) which also brought the author to the Public Understanding of Science (Michael, 2002). It is now almost 25 years since this political and academic movement was established (Gregory and Miller, 1998) with the aim of improving the level of scientific literacy among the general public. The Sage journal ‘The Public Understanding of Science’, run out of the Department of Science and Technology Studies in University College London is itself now around 20 years old!

Since supportive public opinion means votes, means fertile policy initiatives, which in turn means resources for research, the logic of the Public Understanding of Science initiative remains undeniable, even if efforts taken in its name have not always been seen as progressive. Surprisingly though, the idea of audience research is a relative newcomer to the public understanding of science complex (Miller, 2001). The logic of engaging in various communicative domains where battles for ‘share of public mind’ take place is widely recognised in the battlegrounds for public resources.

More recently, with the publication of the House of Lords report ‘Science and Society’ (HMSO, 2000) commentators suggest that the public understanding of science in the UK is now at something of a crossroads (Miller, 2000). After 20 years of efforts to improve ‘scientific literacy’ among the general population - led by such organizations as the Committee on Public Understanding of Science (CoPUS) - surveys suggest that little has been achieved. Debate has and does take place over how to interpret such findings; and it seems that this disappointment is not simply the result of a failure by the scientific community to get their message across, but that scientists have come to understand that they have to earn their place as one among

many authorities in society, and that they can and must learn from the public (Gregory, 2003).

So, the work of Public Understanding of Science Initiative has illuminated the important ways in which scientists must improve their skills in communicating with the public and in dealing with the various media. Exercising any influence over the representation of science in the public domain demands greater media involvement and facility among researchers. But Public Understanding of Science is about more than self-interested science communication; or of finding more effective ways to get the science message across to the layperson. The training of scientists in communications and the media has greatly improved and young scientists now receive training on how to get their messages across to opinion formers in the media and the general public. However, the aim of the better informed layperson is still one that presents significant challenges to the scientific community. The Public Understanding of Science initiative has shown ways in which scientists, or their representatives and the public must work together as citizens within a mediatized scientific culture.

Knowledge and trust are indeed intertwined. And there are new voices and new audiences to consider as we enter a new era of community-based contractualism where local marketing and social enterprise are part of a complex matrix of social arrangements which privatize state service provision.

The Public Understand of Marketing then

So, the Public Understanding of Science (PUS) initiative has shown how scientists and the public must work together as citizens within a informational scientific culture around which circulates robust public discourse. And maybe it is thus that marketers and the public must work together as citizens within a 'marketizing' culture in pursuit of better informed public discourse where consumers and everyday marketers are more actively engaged within the local community. As such, new voices and audiences remain to be heard and marshaled, as they shape the marketing context. Such laypeople need to have a realistic sense of what marketing is capable of; more realistic expectations of the parts marketing can play in driving successful community endeavor.

As PUS has come around to, it is fair to assume that UK society is active, questioning and engaged with many social, cultural and political issues that constitute the context for the mix of public consciousness and opinion. This mix includes robust discourses considering what part marketing has to play in generating the conditions favorable to local enterprising communities. The scope for public contributions to the development of discourses on community marketing is clear.

And so back to relevance

Yes, governance structures such as peer review provide critical ingredients in the production of knowledge, bringing transparency, organization, dialogue and accountability to the research process. Managerial practice can help address some of the impact problems that surround cultures of knowledge production: especially those that occur as a result of the fragmentation of stakeholder communities where funders, users and researchers spring from different social locations and serve the interests of different constituencies. And in the UK there can be little doubt that the RAE has

clearly incentivised the need for ongoing dialogue between those various parties. At its very basic it has provided reasons for them to listen to each other and to find ways around the dysfunctionality of narrowly conceived 'relevance debates.

However, a variety of social communities are affected by research in marketing and the consequences of knowledge production and wider dissemination must be taken seriously by the academy. For there is one critical constituency that we take for granted at our peril and which influences global perception of our work. The media work off and put in circulation representations of our work and contribution!! Indeed, some take the view that it peddles inaccurate caricatures of 'market-ing' as the fount of capitalist greed and corruption, laying the blame for economic and social failure at its door. Some business practices which appear under the rubric of 'marketing' do nothing to appease such views.

So, one step that can be taken towards a wider understanding of how the work of relevance gets done is to communicate the results of marketing studies more widely to various publics, as is done in the physical sciences by means of PUS. This is one way in which the social responsibility of researchers to be seen to deliver 'social awareness and community impact' as relevance can be discharged. For as Holbrook (2005) argues "there is a fatal flaw in the ethos of the marketing project that has made our discipline uniquely susceptible to the degrading influences that have distracted us collectively from critical issues of the role of marketing in society"(2005:143). He refers of course to the powerful doctrine of narrowly defined managerial relevance and the privileged position its supporters hold in the academy through their claims to performance-enhancing knowledge.

The discipline of marketing and the academy that legitimises it need to understand that the agenda previously known as 'relevance' has moved on. The talk is now of engagement and community responsibility and the importance of research being oriented in some way towards what Knorr-Cetina (2006: 7) calls 'publicly desirable goals', things of concern to large segments of the population. The paper argues that marketing would do well to follow science's lead in inventing new research roles for the climate of accountability and this might start with mediators able to communicate the results of marketing studies to wider publics. The future health of the discipline and the academy that legitimises it does not simply lie in the myopia perpetuated by an institutionalised fixation with 'relevance' as the privileging of narrow judgements made in the interests of managers as the only user-community.

In temporary conclusion

In many regards debates about relevance – whether framed as theory into practice, or practice into theory – are convenient distractions. They dissipate our energies and draw attention away from emerging issues of strategic importance at the level of the changing institutional processes and structures that shape the discipline. It is possible to suggest that the discourse of relevance as it is being played out in marketing is itself irrelevant! It is redundant. Such unhelpful debates draw attention away from the key issues of competing for resources in an era of informational capitalism, raising questions about the provision of innovative disciplinary structures and practices to take marketing to civic society and public opinion. We may be entering an era when comfortably settled disciplinary processes need rethinking.

References

Brownlie, D, Hewer, P and P Ferguson (2007) 'Theory *into* Practice: meditations on cultures of accountability and interdisciplinarity in marketing research', *Journal of Marketing Management*, 23, 5-6, pp395-410.

¹House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology (2000), *Science and Society*, London, HMSO.

Michael, M (2002) 'Comprehension, Apprehension, Prehension: Heterogeneity and the public understanding of science', *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 27, 3, 357-378.

Michael, ¹Gregory and Miller (1998) 'Science in public', New York, Plenum.

Miller, S (2001) 'Public Understanding of Science at the crossroads', *Public Understanding of Science*, 10, 1, 115-120

Sulkunen, P (2009) 'The Saturated Society: Governing Risk and Lifestyles in Consumer Culture', London, Sage.

Thaler, R and C Sunstein (2009) 'Nudge: Improving decisions About Health, wealth and happiness', London, Penguin.