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Mysteries, markets, and myths: Publishing relevant policy research

David Stewart
Loyola Marymount University, david.stewart@lmu.edu

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This issue of the Journal of Public Policy & Marketing *(*JPPM*) is the last to be published during my tenure as editor. The five years I have served as editor have been a time of growth for the journal: growth in submissions, growth in the number of papers published, and growth in the influence of* JPPM*. Serving as the editor of a major journal such as* JPPM *is a learning experience. My service as editor of* JPPM*, combined with my prior terms as editor of* Journal of Marketing *and* Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, has taught me a great deal about the marketing discipline, the enterprise of scholarly research, and the role of marketing in a broader societal context. I use this final editorial to share some of what I have learned and to offer advice to scholars who wish to contribute to scholarship in marketing and public policy.*

The Mysterious Character of Scholarship on Marketing and Public Policy

Among doctoral students, new scholars, and much of the public at large, publishing in academic journals is a mystery. What is selected for publication and why; the process of peer review; the roles of theory and prior empirical work; and the factors that contribute to the impact, or influence, of published scholarship are difficult to reduce to a simple formula. Scholars can become more successful with practice over time, learning by doing, but part of the mystery still remains. The reason for this continuing mystery is that scholarship is inherently a creative activity, and therefore, it is best evaluated upon completion rather than in advance. The mystery of successful scholarship exists for all journals, but scholarship related to marketing and public policy appears to be especially mysterious.

The reasons for the mysterious nature of scholarship related to marketing and public policy are related to the abstract nature of markets and policy. Whereas one can observe and talk to an individual consumer or a collection of consumers, markets are defined by complex interactions among buyers, sellers, suppliers, intermediaries, influencers, facilitators, institutional infrastructures, and a host of other dimensions. Perhaps this is why so much "marketing research" focuses on groups of identifiable consumers or the outcomes associated with identifiable consumers' behaviors in specific markets. Such research involves studying the larger phenomenon, a market, by example and necessitates the integration of research across numerous examples to arrive at general principles. The good news for marketing is that there have been some successful efforts at such integration (Hanssens 2015; Leone and Schultz 1980; Marketing Accountability Standards Board 2017). The bad news is that there are too few such efforts, and the linkages to policy decisions, or even general management and financial performance decisions, remain to be well articulated.

Similarly, there is much mystery about policy. Among marketing scholars this mystery arises, in part, because few of them have been systematically exposed to the mechanisms of policy analysis, formulation and implementation. But, like the concept of a market, "policy" is also an abstraction that, like markets, is often studied by example. Policy exists at many levels, and many policy debates are not so much about "problems"—though there is ample room for debate about problems—as it is about how these problems might be addressed. Policies can exist at the local level, the state level, the national level, the international level, and all manner of other levels (e.g., government, corporate, industry, not-for-profit organizations, various other governing and standard-setting bodies). A naive perspective, often included in the implications section in otherwise good submissions to *JPPM*, is that policy makers will find the reported results useful or that policy makers should "do something." Such recommendations are not helpful because they do not identify which policy makers, at what level, and for what purpose.

Indeed, marketing, a discipline with unique expertise in the design of value delivery systems, should have much to contribute to the discussion of policy formulation—the design of efficient and effective systems and institutions for producing specific outcomes that serve the general welfare of a society. Such contributions require a far deeper understanding of both markets and policy making than is evident in much of marketing scholarship, including that published in *JPPM*. It requires careful analysis of problems and opportunities *and* careful analysis of alternatives for addressing problems and realizing opportunities. Marketers have a long history of identifying market opportunities and of assessing both the relative merits of different opportunities and different approaches to realizing these opportunities. There is a need to apply this same discipline to the examination of policy alternatives. This also means separating the evaluation of "problems" and "opportunities" from specific policy decisions designed to address these problems and opportunities. This separation will create a richer

David W. Stewart is Editor of *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* and President's Professor of Marketing and Law, Department of Marketing and Business Law, College of Business Administration, Loyola Marymount University (email: david.stewart@lmu.edu).

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and more useful dialogue for scholars and policy makers. Too much policy debate today conflates problems with solutions. For example, one can agree that there is serious cause for concern about the environment but reject specific policies as ineffective, inefficient from a cost–benefit perspective, or likely to produce consequences that are undesirable on other dimensions, even if the policy successfully addresses the focal problem (e.g., prohibition).

There are also a variety of assumptions—myths, actually—that often reside in policy-related scholarship and in policy making. Marketers could add significant gravitas to their contributions by identifying these myths, making them explicit, and elucidating the reality in contrast to the myth.

Myths

There is no doubt that competition among suppliers is an important form of competition with the potential to benefit consumers. Economists, who have dominated much of the policy debate regarding competition, have tended to focus on supply-side competition. It is clearly important that such competition be "fair" and provide a means for innovation and creative destruction that produces new, better, and less expensive alternatives for consumers (Schumpeter 1942). Competition among suppliers is not the same as competition between buyers and sellers. Much of what has been written about markets in a policy context begins with the premise that markets are a competition between buyers and sellers. A corollary of this view is that markets represent a zero-sum game in which there are always winners and losers. The role of government (policy) in such markets is to establish the rules of the game and insure that the competition is "fair."

There is no need for markets to be characterized as composed of winners and losers, at least when analyzing relationships among buyers and sellers. It is certainly the case that some markets have a structure that creates winners and losers, but this is not an inherent characteristic of buyer–seller markets. The marketing literature is filled with discussions of long-term relationships between buyers and sellers, market orientation, and cocreation, among other concepts, that suggest more cooperative and collaborative relationships between sellers and buyers. The role of "policy" with respect to such collaborative relationships is (or should be) different from its role in markets characterized by more competition between buyers and sellers.

Furthermore, the relative market power of buyers is quite strong compared with that of sellers, at least in many markets. The consumer who shops by comparing prices and product descriptions online with the aid of consumer reviews possesses a great deal of knowledge and power. Similarly, the retail shopper who uses a mobile telephone to compare prices and products within a store possesses enormous leverage, much to the chagrin of many retailers. There are, of course, still vulnerable consumers who require protection, but policy with respect to the markets and competition must recognize the power of the consumer in a connected, digital era.

Any policy analysis related to markets must also recognize that markets tend to work very well. Markets are so successful that the only time they really receive attention, except from the scholarly class, is when they appear to fail. A common myth, especially among policy makers, but also among some contributors to *JPPM*, is that market failure is common. There is no evidence that market failure is common, especially when markets are genuinely free.

In some policy work related to markets, there is often an implicit (if not explicit) assumption that any problem—whether it be obesity, smoking, lack of financial literacy, environmental destruction, or just general dissatisfaction—is driven by market failure. Such assumptions deserve to be tested. At minimum, there is a need to identify whether there is a "market" issue rather than, say, an educational problem, a personal preference for a lifestyle some find undesirable, or a mood disorder. If there is a market issue, the next question is whether it is the case that the market has failed, and if so, why? If there is a market failure, is the failure really attributable to the way the market mechanism works or does not work, or has the market mechanism been distorted by government actions or other externalities? Marketers, with their distinctive expertise related to the design of value delivery systems, are uniquely qualified to contribute to such analyses.

An additional common myth is that "policy" is carried out by decision makers in some monolithic institution. Yet, as noted previously, policy exists in many forms and at many different levels. The reporting of a finding that may or may not result from some market failure with the implication that "policy makers" should pay attention to the finding and/or do something about it is, at best, intellectually lazy. Indeed, some apparent market failures arise from the existence of competing and contradictory policies at different levels of government, a topic that should receive more attention from marketing scholars interested in policy issues.

Another set of myths when addressing policy issues, whether related to markets and marketing or other areas, revolves around attributions regarding the motives of business and government. Business is often viewed as self-serving and lacking the motivation to serve the larger society. There is no doubt that this is the case for some business managers and some businesses. There are also bad actors in business. However, government, at whatever level, has its own share of bad actors, and many policy actions are driven by motives that are often inconsistent with general social welfare. Government is not a neutral arbiter; nor is it benign or benevolent. The entire discipline of public choice focuses on the role of economic and other motives that drive political and policy-making behavior (Buchanan and Turlock 1962). It is not difficult to find examples of policy that does not serve general consumer welfare but, rather, exists to serve the needs of special interest groups. One of those special interest groups includes policy makers, government employees, and others who often have strong economic interests in defining problems in a particular way and in support of particular self-serving policies. The self-interest of government is problematic for at least three reasons: (1) the process of creative destruction that characterizes most markets is largely absent in government organizations owing to a lack of competition; (2) policy makers often exhibit the Kruger–Dunning syndrome (Kruger and Dunning 1999), in which people fail to recognize their own limitations and attribute to themselves superior insight and skill relative to the general population; and (3) the concentration of power and resources in government provides the means for especially destructive, large-scale actions.

Scholars who aim to understand markets and public policy need a healthy skepticism of both markets and government. Both institutions are necessary for a society to provide for its needs, but both are subject to failure. The myths of corporate profit seeking to the exclusion of other objectives and of a benevolent government altruistically providing for social welfare not only are unhelpful, they blind research to true and creative insights about how a society might best provide for its needs.

Finally, there is a myth that it is possible to study markets and public policy in a value-free context. Value judgments permeate consumers' choices about what they buy and chose to consume. The consumption of a product by one consumer who enjoys the pleasure it provides is an expression of values, just as another consumer's objection to the use of the same product is a value judgment. Markets can and often do operate to serve different tastes, preferences, and values within a society; thus, markets are often segmented and products differentiated. Policy, in contrast, generally involves an effort to impose uniformity, including a uniformity of values. Thus, there will always be a tension between market and government. It is important that scholars working at the intersection of marketing and policy acknowledge and explicitly articulate the role of values in the operations of markets and the design of policies. This does not mean abandoning personal values; rather, it means being explicit about these values and making them a part of a constructive dialogue.

Some Concluding Comments

Marketing is an extraordinary discipline with a unique perspective about how a society can and should provide for its needs and wants. No discipline has greater expertise regarding consumer behavior and the design of value delivery systems. The social science that marketers conduct is as good as any in any other discipline, but too often marketing's important and unique contribution to understanding and improving the performance of markets and social welfare receives too little attention, even in the pages of a journal like *JPPM*. Marketing's status as a research enterprise, as a contributor to the performance of organizations, and as a means to improve quality of life and social welfare will grow as it more directly and positively addresses the implications of its scholarship for achieving these objectives. Doing so will also increase the probability of publishing in *JPPM* and remove a bit of the mystery.

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