


CRITICAL MARKETING PEDAGOGY: CAUGHT BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Chris Hackley ¹

 0000-0002-8354-8834

✉ chris.hackley@rhul.ac.uk

¹ *Royal Holloway, University of London*

ABSTRACT

Marketing has become a vibrant academic field and a highly popular university subject choice globally since Philip Kotler (1967) first popularised the discipline with his seminal text *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning and Control*. The normative, managerial paradigm popularised by Kotler remains the dominant influence in marketing thought and pedagogy, yet it has many shortcomings, one of which is the fact that it was conceived for a very different world to the one we now face. In this *Pensata* I argue that Marketing pedagogy must be conceived as an intellectually critical discipline if it is to serve the needs of contemporary students, organisations and universities. In order to be an intellectually critical discipline, I suggest that Marketing must engage critically with its own ideological character if it is to equip students with the skills to navigate their path through an ideologically inflected world.

KEYWORDS: marketing; pedagogy; critique; texts; social media; propaganda.

Marketing practice straddles a thin line between persuasion and propaganda (Miles, 2018) and Marketing educators navigate a similarly thin line between enlightenment, and ideology. Since Philip Kotler (1967) first codified the Marketing discipline in its popular form, his textual style has been widely copied, along with its ideological strategies (Eckhardt et al. 2019; Yilmaz, 2022). Mass selling Marketing texts tend to represent the subject as a technical business discipline that aids market efficiency, facilitates consumer choice, and creates wealth and employment. To be sure, the aspiration of improving the education of potential organisational managers, thereby improving the economic efficiency of markets, is laudable. But, since Marketing became a subject widely taught in universities around the world, Marketing pedagogy also has to serve the wider intellectual aims of the university by developing students' scholastic and critical thinking skills to equip them for life as a citizen, as for life as a worker.

The problem Marketing pedagogy faces is that the popular, Kotler-inspired view of Marketing work is simplistic (Svensson, 2007; Hackley, 2009). Marketing work entails a far more complex and nuanced engagement with consumer culture, human behaviour and organisational politics than is acknowledged in Marketing's managerial formulations of the Marketing Concept, the Marketing Mix, STP and the other elements of Kotler's (1967) Analysis, Planning and Control paradigm for Marketing. This naïve managerialist curriculum satisfies neither the liberal intellectual ethos of the university, nor the instrumental ethos of management training and education.

In popular texts, Marketing management is often represented as a singular force for good in the world, while the Marketing manager is an organisational hero who fights for the consumer against the reactionary forces of product orientation (Hackley, 2003). The Marketing concept is cast as an ideological imperative that sits beyond critique (Marion, 2006; Tadajewski, 2018). As for the university academic in Marketing, we tend to feel that we work to the same values as other university disciplines, caring for the whole student and nurturing their intellectual and personal development. On the other hand, critics from other disciplines argue that we are, simply, managerial ideologists, indoctrinating our students into an applied field that lacks a critical engagement with texts and fails in application in its own terms. What is more, these critics argue that Marketing's mere presence as a university subject represents an implicit endorsement of neoliberal market values by the university (Varman et al. 2011). For many critical sociologists, then, Marketing academics are seen as the enemy within, churning out cookie-cutter graduates primed for corporate obedience.

For most Marketing academics, our reality is less clear. We navigate the tension between ideology and enlightenment, hoping that it is possible to teach Marketing in ways that nurture our students' critical thinking and life skills while also equipping them with the knowledge of Marketing discourse and practice that will help them fulfil their vocational and life aspirations (Hackley, 2022). As part of this process, as Gross and Laamanen (2022) point out, we cannot escape the fact that to some degree we reproduce the ideology of our discipline even as we attempt to challenge it, by a process of interpellation (Althusser, 2014). We ask students to apply Marketing concepts to case material, but we also ask them to critically evaluate the material, and the concepts, sometimes without giving them the conceptual tools they need to do so.

The need for critical thinking, and critical reading skills, is more acute than ever. Marketing practice is in a state of permanent technological revolution. Many Marketers have found that Chat GPT can write better advertising copy and other content than they can, but it still isn't very good. There is a slow realisation that personalised social media and search advertising and data-driven behavioural insights do not provide all the answers for building brands (Sharpe, 2013), and that human creativity, craft and qualitative insight remain key to

Marketing strategy. The traditional creative advertising agency system is breaking down and new Marketing professionals have greater latitude to be involved at all stages in the Marketing and Marketing Communications Mix, but to meet this challenge they also need boundary-spanning craft skills, outstanding team building and communication skills, and broad knowledge of socio-cultural trends, styles and movements (Hackley, 2009). The Marketing curriculum still rests too heavily on ideas formed in Boston, USA, in the 1960s.

If Marketing graduates need complex skills of textual critique and comprehension for their work, they need them just as acutely for their lives beyond work. The world has never been more literate, better informed or more connected by digital communication, yet there is a tsunami of misinformation, propaganda and manipulation which corrals vast numbers of people into cult-like systems of belief that tend to benefit the rich, the powerful, and those with malign intent. There is plenty of internet content that is highly informative, such as thoughtful long-form journalism, critical analysis and documented information on every subject, but this has to be sought out. The popular social media platforms are replete with mesmerising and addictive trivia, bad faith communication and outright misinformation.

The widespread consumption of social media misinformation, distraction and propaganda has real world consequences. Attempted insurrections in the USA and Brazil, and the 'Brexit' Leave campaign in the UK, were linked to carefully orchestrated waves of social media propaganda. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was preceded by systematic social media misinformation campaigns, which continue. Recent news stories about a person called Andrew Tate have revealed how much traction this British former kickboxer's misogynistic social media messaging has achieved amongst young men and teenage boys in the UK¹. Tate has millions of enablers who admiringly re-post his content in what amounts to a sustained and widespread programme of propaganda that serves 'incels' and other misogynist groups. We have become accustomed to the dogmatic belief systems of QAnon conspiracy theorists, crypto gurus, preppers, doomers, flat earthers, anti-vaccine campaigners, and deniers of the Holocaust, of the Sandy Hook massacre and of the moon landings, among countless other examples of groups who cleave to a set of beliefs that the vast majority reject as baseless, or wrong. Engaging with believers on social media tends to be met with urges to 'do your research', 'think critically', 'don't follow the sheeple', 'don't believe the MSM (Mainstream Media)'. The sense of belonging and identity from being a member of an in-group that is set against the 'mainstream' seems to overcome all attempts at reasoned counter argument.

Counter-factual information seems to be summarily dismissed as lies by those who have decided that critical thinking should mean disbelieving everyone outside the cult. When the results of the 2020 US Presidential election became clear, losing candidate Donald Trump intensified his social media claims that the election had been won by fraud². The claim that no investigations into electoral fraud had taken place became widely shared and repeated as fact on social media. Yet, Trump and his allies had had more than 50 lawsuits challenging the legality of what must have been the most closely scrutinised election in world history³ summarily dismissed by numerous courts because of lack of evidence. Each of the lawsuits were widely reported on, yet their existence was, it seems, ignored, or dismissed as untrue by the Capitol Hill insurrectionists.

Shockingly, the pattern of social media propaganda preceding attempted insurrection was repeated in 2022 in Brazil. Persistent and unsupported allegations that the Brazilian presidential election was illegitimate were transmitted to vast audiences on social media⁴, and, clearly, a significant number of Brazilian Bolsonaro voters believed and acted on these

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jan/07/andrew-tate-misogyny-schools-vulnerable-boys>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/13/trump-tweets-legacy-of-lies-misinformation-distrust.html>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-courts-election-idUSKBN2AF1G1>

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/28/social-media-platforms-are-failing-brazils-voters>

claims. The parallels between the two events are striking, in spite of the very different electoral systems in each country. Trump and Bolsonaro were allies⁵ and share many right-wing political views. In 2021 both countries scored in the mid-range for perceived confidence in the integrity of their electoral process with indices of 57 and 60 for the USA and Brazil respectively⁶, so it cannot be said that there was a majority of popular opinion that felt disenfranchised by the electoral process (for comparison, the index for Paraguay was 44, 83 for Uruguay, Singapore 59, and 67 for Iceland).

It was once thought that the cure for ignorance in the world was literacy. But the extraordinary successes of global education and technological advances in communication have not been accompanied by a growth in wisdom. Indeed, the very tools of the liberal intellectual vision, literacy and the mass availability of information, have been turned back on themselves. Faced with an abundance of information, many people seem to have retreated from the challenge of critical thinking to take refuge in the certainty of prejudice. We live in a time of historically unprecedented literacy levels: 87% of the global population can read, against just 12% in 1820⁷. An estimated 86% of the global population has access to a smartphone⁸ and, through that, access to much of the world's information. There are regional variations in digital infrastructure and access to informative and balanced media content, but neither the USA nor Brazil seem relatively deficient in either. The literacy rate in Brazil is 99%⁹, the highest in the world, far higher than the USA, where adult literacy is 79%¹⁰. Brazil has the 5th highest number of smartphone users of any country in the world, with 139 million people or some 64% of the population owning one¹¹. In the USA, 88% of the population owns a smartphone¹².

Marketing is culturally complicit in this state of affairs. The major social media platforms evolved into systems of profitable surveillance that sell advertising, and influence. They had to serve the market to generate profit, so they became the dominant force in the market. The very same algorithms that drive personalised advertising to user newsfeeds also drive content filled with hate, lies and strategic distraction. The all-embracing logic of advertising, the consequences of which we were warned about when television first became a mass medium (Pollay, 1986; Postman, 1986), has become the governing business model not only of social media platforms but of the world's communication infrastructure. The distinction between editorial and advertising, and that between advertising and ideology, have largely collapsed, and entertainment, news and information are the major conduits for seamless cross-promotion in the form of sponsorship, branded content, native advertising and similar hybrid techniques (Hackley and Hackley, 2023). There has been a generational shift in media consumption patterns so that the traditional organs of record, the flagship national newspapers, have lost their advertising revenue and become the playthings of superrich proprietors. As a reaction, many people now ignore established media outlets and get their information about current affairs and politics from their networks on social media, unfiltered by editorial standards or press regulation.

Marketing has to be an academic discipline that embraces critical perspectives, not to undermine the fragile normative ideological basis for our field, but in order to equip our students with the skills and knowledge that they will need for work, and for life. Marketing academics operate in a prime position within one of the most popular subject choices in the world, Business and Management studies, and our discipline is directly engaged with the

⁵ <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2023/01/12/brazil-insurrection-jan-6-parallels/11017222002/>

⁶ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58533f31bebafe99c85dc9b/t/62bb1188ea129d15fd58abac/1656426896778/Electoral+Integrity+Global+Report+2019-2021+0.1.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/09/reading-writing-global-literacy-rate-changed/>

⁸ <https://www.bankmycell.com/blog/how-many-phones-are-in-the-world>

⁹ <https://www.globaldata.com/data-insights/macroeconomic/literacy-rate-in-brazil/>

¹⁰ <https://www.thinkimpact.com/literacy-statistics/>

¹¹ <https://newzoo.com/insights/rankings/top-countries-by-smartphone-penetration-and-users>

¹² <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/content/us-smartphone-penetration-continues-climb-while-tablet-penetration-stagnant>

everyday world of consumption and social media. But, teaching students to apply the naïve conceptual frameworks of managerial Marketing to case studies is not enough. We must try to help students to become critical readers of texts, not only so that they can make discerning judgements about market research and consumer behaviour, but so that they can also learn to distinguish between a text written by a bot and one written by a human: between one written to promote a singular world view, and one written to inform a nuanced point of view: and between fallacious arguments, and valid ones.

Marketing is, in part, an attempt to make a science of persuasion. Students cannot gain a rounded understanding of persuasion unless they understand the rhetorical techniques that are deployed to persuade in our extant fields of advertising, consumer research, branding, Public Relations, political marketing, health and social marketing and so on. If this seems somewhat subversive of the techno-managerial Marketing curriculum, a degree of subversion is entirely in keeping with good teaching, that is, teaching that challenges students to think for themselves (Postman and Weingartner, 1969: Hackley, 2022). By challenging students to read texts that subvert Marketing ideology, Marketing pedagogy can serve the university ethos by providing a liberal intellectual education. At the same time, it can also serve Marketing organisations by nurturing professional Marketers who are capable of critical thinking and who understand the role that socio-cultural activism (Holt and Cameron, 2010) plays in Marketing practice.

References

- Althusser, L. (2014). *On the reproduction of capitalism*. Verso.
- Eckhardt, G. M., Varman, R. & Dholakia, N. (2019). Ideology and critical marketing studies. In M. Tadjewski, M. Higgins, J. Denegri-Knott and R. Varman (Eds) *The Routledge Companion to Critical Marketing*. 306-318. London, Routledge.
- Gross, N. & Laamanen, M. (2022) 'Hey, you there! Marketing!' On ideology and (mis)interpellation of the marketing educator as subject, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 38:3-4, 309-332, DOI: [10.1080/0267257X.2021.1944896](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2021.1944896)
- Hackley, C. (2003). 'We are all customers now...' Rhetorical strategy and ideological control in marketing management texts. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(5), 1325–1352. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00382>
- Hackley, C. (2009) Parallel universes and disciplinary space: the bifurcation of managerialism and social science in marketing studies, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 25:7-8, 643-659, DOI: [10.1362/026725709X471541](https://doi.org/10.1362/026725709X471541)
- Hackley, C. (2022) Crap detecting. Autoethnographic reflections on critical practice in marketing pedagogy, *Journal of Marketing Management*, DOI: [10.1080/0267257X.2022.2132754](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2132754)
- Hackley, C. and Hackley, R.A. (2022) *Rethinking Advertising as Paratextual Promotion*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK ISBN: 978 1 03531 213 9.
- Holt, D. and Cameron, D. (2010) *Cultural Strategy: Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands*. OUP, Oxford.
- Kotler, P. (1967) *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning, and Control*, Prentice Hall, USA.
- Marion, G. (2006). Marketing ideology and criticism: Legitimacy and legitimization. *Marketing Theory*. 6(2), 245–262. DOI 10.1177/14705931060693985
- Miles, C. (2018) *Marketing, Rhetoric and Control: The Magical Foundations of Marketing Theory*. Routledge, London.
- Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. (1969: 2009 reprint). *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. New York, Delta Books.
- Postman, N. (1986) *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 1987, Methuen, York.

- Pollay, R. W. (1986) The Distorted Mirror: Reflections on the Unintended Consequences of Advertising, *Journal of Marketing* 50(2):18–36 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233894821_The_Distorted_Mirror_Reflections_on_the_Unintended_Consequences_of_Advertising
- Sharpe, B. (2013) *How Brands Grow: what marketers don't know*. OUP, Oxford.
- Svensson, P. (2007). Producing marketing: towards a social-phenomenology of marketing work. *Marketing Theory*, 7(3), 271–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593107080346>
- Tadajewski, M. (2018). Critical Reflections on the Marketing Concept and Consumer Sovereignty. In M. Tadajewski, M. Higgins, J. Denegri-Knott, & R. Varman (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Critical Marketing* (pp. 196–224). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315630526-12>
- Varman, R., Saha, B. & Skálén, P. (2011) Market subjectivity and neoliberal governmentality in higher education, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27:11-12, 1163-1185, DOI: [10.1080/0267257X.2011.609134](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2011.609134)
- Yılmaz, Z. (2022). Interview with Dr. Chris Hackley on Critical Theory, Social Constructionism and Marketing. *Düşünce ve Toplum Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* , 4 (2) , 209-226 DOI: 10.55796/dusuncevetoplum.1212829 <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2805690>

Author

Chris Hackley is Professor of Marketing, School of Business and Management, Royal Holloway, University of London.