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ISMD: Glimpses in the Rearview Mirror

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Markets, Globalization & Development Review

ISMD: Glimpses in the Rearview Mirror

The Rebellious Impetus

ISMD emerged almost miraculously from the inspirations of a few rebels in the 1970s and 1980s. The initial impetus came out of the intellectual environment of the marketing department of Northwestern University (NU) where A. Fuat Firat and Nikhilesh Dholakia found each other in the Ph.D. program. Philip Kotler, Sidney J. Levy and Gerald Zaltman were the stars in a constellation that broke the boundaries of marketing through inspirational publications such as "Broadening the concept of marketing" (Kotler and Levy 1969) and "Social marketing: An approach to planned social change" (Kotler and Zaltman 1971).

At that time, the NU marketing department was famous for encouraging aspiring scholars to venture into new territories with their own, independent thinking. Philip Kotler (fortunately for us, an author in this inaugural MGDR issue), already wearing the mantle of the global popularizer of core marketing concepts by the late 1960s, was particularly keen on seeing marketing ideas grapple with the ground realities across diverse geo-economic and geo-political contexts. He was invited to, but could not attend, a marketing and development oriented conference organized in Tel Aviv, Israel, in January 1974 by Professor Dove Izraeli. Kotler could not go, but encouraged doctoral students Nikhilesh Dholakia and Fuat Firat to write on "The Role of Marketing in the Development of Nonmarket Sectors and Conditions Necessary for Success" (Dholakia and Firat 1975), and funded travel by Nikhilesh Dholakia to attend and present at the Tel Aviv conference. Firat and Dholakia, the two friends, aspiring scholars from developing countries of Turkey and India, looked beyond the advanced postindustrial economies and recognized the enormous vacuum in the intellectual arena of the marketing discipline. There was very little understanding of these non-American socioeconomic systems and difficulties in extending even the 'broadening' or 'social change' approaches to these systems. In the meantime, I joined the rebel group. But the immediate challenges were to complete our degrees and return back to our home countries to shape the embryonic marketing discipline in those countries.

Turkey and India were no more hospitable to radical interpretations of marketing than any other place in the world. So we returned to the U.S. as academics and became seriously involved in the pursuit of academic publications and recognition. Attempts were made to participate in the traditional marketing conferences through presentations such as "A Critical View of the Research Enterprise in Marketing" at AMA1980

(Dholakia and Firat 1980) and “Missing Links Between Newer Theories of Development and Marketing” (Dholakia and Dholakia 1982) at AMA 1982.

The most hospitable of these conferences was the Macromarketing Seminar held every two years. The Macromarketing scholars – Stanley J. Shapiro, Robert W. Nason, George Fisk to name a few – were concerned with the impact of marketing on society and open to alternative interpretations. Some of our early contributions to the conversation at the Macromarketing conferences were through presentations such as “A Framework for Analyzing International Influences on Third World Marketing Systems” (N. Dholakia and R.R. Dholakia 1980) and “Towards a Concept of an Ideal System for Comparative Marketing” (R.R. Dholakia and N. Dholakia 1980), which were both presented at the Annual Conference on Macromarketing, held at the Alton Jones campus of the University of Rhode Island, in August 1980.

It was also very helpful that the *Journal of Macromarketing* offered a publication opportunity for some of our thinking and the editors were very open to our contributions. The ideas developed first in the corridors of Northwestern University and later tempered by the gritty realities of Turkey and India, reflecting our emergent thinking at the time, found its way to the pages of the *Journal of Macromarketing*: “Marketing in the Emerging World Order” (Dholakia and Dholakia 1981) and “Consumption Choices at the Macro Level” (Firat and Dholakia 1982) became available to a bigger audience outside the Macromarketing seminars.

These contributions were quite tame compared to the Marxist perspectives that Fuat Firat and Nikhilesh Dholakia wanted to bring into the discussion. They continued to present not only at the macromarketing conferences but also at the American Marketing Association (AMA) conferences to influence the scholarly community’s thinking. Examples include “The De-Americanization of Marketing Thought: In Search of a Universal Basis” (Dholakia, Firat and Bagozzi 1980) at the 1980 AMA conference and “When Dr. Marx read Dr. Kotler: A dialectical look at American markets” (Wish, Dholakia and Rose 1982) at the 1982 macromarketing conference. Those early years were vigorous. The discussions at the macromarketing conferences were particularly spirited, and sometimes quite forbidding.

Undaunted, the rebels reached out to sympathetic others to spread their ways of thinking. The European scholars were more receptive. Nikhilesh Dholakia teamed up with Johan Arndt and invited others – including some of the influential American mentors like Philip Kotler and Louis W. Stern, from Northwestern University – to contribute their

thoughts, leading to the edited book *Changing the Course of Marketing: Alternative Paradigms for Widening Marketing Theory* (Dholakia and Arndt 1985); and Fuat Firat, Nikhilesh Dholakia and Richard Bagozzi joined forces to edit *Philosophical and Radical Thought in Marketing* (Firat, Dholakia and Bagozzi 1987), assembling again innovative and mold-breaking perspectives of marketing scholars, largely from the U.S. but also from other countries.

Seminars and journal publications still did not build a passionate community of scholars. Rebellious thinking without resources made little impact. Two things happened. Olav Jull Sørensen in Denmark teamed up with Nikhilesh Dholakia to create the Network of Marketing and Development Bulletin or NOMAD Bulletin (1983), a newsletter to promote and support an active network of concerned scholars and policy makers. The inaugural issue sought to define both development and marketing more broadly (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The First NOMAD Bulletin

Second, Erdoğan Kumcu at Ball State University, together with Fuat Firat decided to host the first International Conference on Marketing

and Development (ICMD) – the conference that later evolved into the International Society of Markets and Development (ISMD) – in Istanbul, Turkey (1986). At the first ICMD, Fuat Firat and Erdoğan Kumcu invited all the reigning marketing dignitaries of the day – those willing to explore the under-studied aspects of marketing in global, developing contexts. At that seminal conference, interspersed with culinary and cultural experiences, all those present agreed that the marketing and development needed its own forum and focus. In Figure 2, the marketing stalwarts like Philip Kotler, Gerald Zaltman, Russell W. Belk and Hans Thorelli are visible along with the early creators of the NOMAD Bulletin, Olav Jull Sørensen and Nikhilesh Dholakia, together with the first ICMD conference co-chairs Erdoğan Kumcu and Fuat Firat. Figure 2 also shows Nikhilesh and Ruby Dholakia flanking Philip Kotler on the banks of the Bosphorus in Istanbul.

Figure 2: The First ICMD Conference in Istanbul, Turkey

ICMD Beginnings

The discussions and presentations at the Istanbul conference were focused on marketing and development. For instance, Fuat Firat and Nikhilesh Dholakia presented their thinking on topics like “The Marketing of Development: A New Game in the Global Political Economy” (Dholakia 1986) and “Development in the Era of Globalizing Markets and Consumption Patterns” (Dholakia and Firat 1988). It was encouraging to hear that we needed to continue to build on this early start. It was agreed that conferences were the first easy step to create a forum by bringing together scholars from different parts of the world to share their views and perspectives and build a like-minded community. Face-to-face discussions were expected to increase the personal connections and create a support system.

The first formal conference after the pioneering and inaugural Istanbul meeting, chaired by James Littlefield of Virginia Tech, was held in

Budapest, Hungary – in 1988, still a part of the Soviet bloc – at the Karl Marx University of Economics, where marketing scholars from communist and socialist countries shared their perspectives and experiences on marketing and development. It was almost as if “Dr. Marx was interpreting Dr. Kotler” in the presence of Dr. Kotler. The early enthusiasm generated in Istanbul not only infused attendance by the marketing luminaries such as Philip Kotler, Gerald Zaltman, and others as well as those who were totally committed to marketing and development such as pioneers Fuat Firat, Erdoğan Kumcu, Nikhilesh Dholakia, Olav Jull Sørensen and others.

The enthusiasm for the conference was strong but conference co-ordination and management were daunting. As the ISMD website notes “although the lack of formal organization posed some difficulties, it was decided that Erdoğan Kumcu of Ball State University would continue to be the focus of information exchange and correspondence”. A call for proposals generated eight proposals for the next conference and a network of past conference committee members, instituted through Erdoğan Kumcu, evaluated the proposals and selected New Delhi as the site for ICMD-III. Some of the enthusiastic attendees can be seen in Figure 3 including co-chairs (me and Kiran Bothra) as well as Carlos Sequeira and Luis Dominguez who were selected to host the fourth ICMD conference in Costa Rica as well as John Kuada (later, ICMD-Ghana co-chair), Russell Belk (later, ISMD president), Roger Layton, Robert Nason, Erdoğan Kumcu (ISMD Executive Director, until his untimely demise in 2004), Olav Jull Sørensen (later, ISMD president), Annamma Joy (later, ICMD-China co-chair) and Güliz Ger (later, ISMD president).

Figure 3: The New Delhi, India ICMD Conference Attendees

The Birth of ISMD

It was in India that it was decided to formalize an organization – International Society of Marketing and Development (ISMD) and which since then has been changed its name to “International Society of Markets and Development”, to broaden the Society’s appeal to a wider range of disciplines. The Society was registered in Indiana in December 1992 and Erdoğan Kumcu served as its Executive Director until his death. A small group worked on the creation of the Society and the formal proposal was presented at the subsequent conference in Costa Rica. A board was created and I was elected as the first President.

One of the key concerns of the Society was to hold the conference away from major metropolises in the Western world (see Figure 4). Conferences have been held in Beijing, China (1995), Mangalia, Romania (1997), Accra, Ghana (2000), Bangkok, Thailand (2003), Thessaloniki, Greece (2005), Washington, DC (2007), Hanoi, Vietnam (2010), Casablanca, Morocco (2012), London, UK (2014) and now Lima, Peru (2016). Washington, DC and London, UK were anomalies in terms of location but not in terms of issues discussed; and were chosen since these global metropolitan cities are well-connected to most of the world.

Figure 4: Beijing, China ICMD Conference (top row) and Ghana and Vietnam ICMD Conferences (second row)

Looking Back to Look Ahead

Now in 2016, as we prepare to attend the Lima, Peru conference, we can look back at what we have achieved as a Society and what challenges lie ahead. I am using this opportunity to share some views based on my experience since the creation of this Society. We have come a long way since the early beginnings in the 1980s, and even earlier 1970s origins of the precursor intellectual influences. The Lima, Peru conference will be the 14th conference held under the ISMD banner. The name change (from marketing to markets) reflects some of the changing interpretations and perspectives of marketing and markets. As I reflect on some of the changes as well as the criticisms and comments that have been expressed in writing or verbally over the years, they can be grouped into a few categories. One is regarding the location, the host institution and non-academic components of the conference. The second is regarding the academic component of the conference. Let me address both these comments.

The primary goal of this Society (ISMD) and the Conference (ICMD) from inception was to attract scholars from diverse backgrounds – theoretically, methodologically as well as geographically. In the early years, it was difficult for scholars from institutions and locations outside the affluent western world to attend conferences. Not only was money an issue, but the entire cultural context of academic discussions and alternative perspectives were new. Many scholars, particularly from the non-western countries, needed much more encouragement and support than commonly offered at any conference in putting their perspectives on paper and then presenting before an audience. While the world has come a long way since the early years, I believe this still remains a strong need and we need to figure out how best to provide this assistance. With the creation of MGDR, our own online, open access journal, this becomes even more vitally important.

Location decision becomes an issue depending on one's own perspective. From the start of the Society, it was felt that to be truly inclusive as well as depart from the traditional, western-dominated marketing perspectives, the conference should be held in locations outside the western world. Choice of a host institution is not always easy. If I look at higher education the world over, there are many private and public institutions but it is the private or semi-autonomous institution that has the flexibility to host these conferences, particularly in the non-western countries. I believe our primary concern should be the facilities and support system that will allow a conference to be planned and supported so that it functions smoothly. I work at a public university in the U.S. with very limited resources and it is challenging and very hard work to make

sure that any such organized effort runs smoothly. When public institutions are involved, as in Romania or in the first attempt in Vietnam (which – because of unexpected bureaucratic hurdles – had to be moved, almost at the last phase of planning, to Thailand in 2003), it becomes a lot more challenging if the host institution does not have the necessary resources.

Location decisions serve to attract certain kinds of attendees and create barriers for others. Several of the traditional marketing conferences – ACR, AMS, etc. – are now routinely held outside the western world and therefore locations such as Costa Rica, Vietnam, Morocco, etc. no longer appear as attractive to certain attendees for whom the location (not the issues) are the dominant criterion for selecting which conference to attend. For others, more intrinsically interested in issues of markets, marketing and development, cost and logistics of attendance becomes a formidable barrier. This is particularly true for scholars from non-western countries. Visas are not always easy, the transportation logistics become more complicated, and hotel and other costs are not necessarily any lower if ISMD conferences are held outside the western world or major emerging economies (where competition often keeps hotel rates relatively low). For instance, the ICMD conferences held in India and China in the early 1990s attracted very few participants from other developing nations outside the host country (except for the select western participants, who have more ample travel budgets). The flip side of this is that the total number of participants was very large in both China and India because both were very large, populous countries. Costa Rica, Romania, Ghana or Vietnam – smaller countries – attracted fewer participants from outside but also attended by fewer total number of participants. After those experiences, ISMD changed its strategy and held two conferences in the western world: Washington, DC in 2007 and London in 2014. Attendance, however, was still quite limited. This is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

Dwindling attendance threatens the economics of hosting a conference. I have not only hosted ICMD in Delhi, India; I have also hosted a Macromarketing conference in Rhode Island as well as COTIM conferences in USA and Europe. Based on my experience, I cannot emphasize the economics of holding such a conference. Each conference must be solvent for the Society to attract quality proposals for subsequent conferences. A large number of attendees help the economics of the conference. Currently we rely only on conference fees which, if set too high, become a barrier to attendance. Securing grants and other institutional support is time consuming: all those who have spent countless hours planning and organizing these biennial events know how challenging it is.

Locations in the emerging countries create a challenge of timing and scheduling. Because of local arrangement issues as well as season and weather related issues, we have not been able to hold a conference at regular intervals in ways that help potential attendees coordinate their travels with their academic calendars. This poses a barrier for scholars who are genuinely interested in markets, marketing and development and cannot plan for a predictable regularity.

Figure 5: India's Prime Minister and Finance Minister lighting the Inaugural Lamp at the New Delhi Conference

Criticisms regarding the non-academic component include dissatisfaction when 'luminaries' are invited to participate in the Conference – as invited speakers or in some other prominent, even ceremonial, role. I see two issues. First, these dignitaries offer a point of view, even if different from ours, which is nevertheless a point of view about markets, marketing and development. Sometimes they are quite illuminating. When I co-chaired the India conference in 1991, the Prime Minister of India, after many attempts, agreed to inaugurate the conference (see Figure 5). While it created a logistical headache (it was very well attended as the brief history of the Society recounts on the website), it also offered a moment of awe and inspiration; at least for me. As conference co-chairs, we were asked to write a speech for the Prime Minister (PM). After many days of consultation, a version was provided to the PM's office. At the podium, the PM – Mr. Chandra Shekhar – listened intently to the opening remarks of Dr. Philip Kotler, and then got up to basically tear apart Kotler's points with his own perspective on marketing and development, based not on marketing textbooks but on his political

field experience in the low-income context of India. It was impromptu, unrehearsed but offered by a very knowledgeable and powerful policymaker. I am sure that half the audience agreed with the PM and the other half with Dr. Kotler. We have to allow for multiple points of view.

Second, the presence of luminaries tends to attract a larger number of attendees and this allows us to introduce our perspectives to an audience that would not ordinarily be part of our community. We have to make our perspectives known to a bigger audience. Given that nobody in our group has attained the 'star' power beyond the immediate constellation of scholars (apologies to Russ Belk), if we do not think of ways to expand the group, we will die a slow – perhaps not even a slow – death. I have heard that we do not need to expand the group. All we need is a core group of like-minded scholars. I fear like-minded also means closed-minded, closed to all but one's own in-group points of view.

Criticisms have also been expressed for the cultural, culinary or touristic excursions that are often part of the conference. Personally, if I am traveling to another culture, I want to know and experience as much as possible and it is even more enjoyable when it is shared with a like minded community. The Society is about building a community, not only serious scholarship (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Dancing at the Romania Conference, Attendees at the Morocco Conference

The second, more serious criticism has been about the quality of the discussions as well as the topics chosen for discussion. If attendance at the ICMD conferences is motivated only by the 'touristic' value of the location, then of course the discussions would not be meaningful. But there are also questions regarding 'quality' of the paper/presentation. It has been said that even the regular attendees do not present their 'best' work at the conferences. We need some self-reflection as to what papers

we choose to present and why. As a Society, we need to collectively reflect on why these decisions are made, if the criticism is true. Perhaps the creation of the online journal would meet some of the academic aspirations of our community.

Finally, some participants feel that only a certain perspective, approach, methodology should be included in ICMD conferences and probably in the online journal. It reminds me of the initial discussions we had at the Macromarketing conferences many decades ago and some of the gatekeepers who were reluctant to accept alternative views that led to the creation of ISMD. I personally would be disappointed if ISMD has such divisions which will fracture this community, a community which still needs to be built and nurtured.

It appears to me that today there is a large overlapping intersection of macromarketing and ISMD scholars but both communities are small and struggling to expand their respective groups. More importantly, members of each group are attempting to increase the quality and visibility of their efforts. The *Journal of Macromarketing* has now established itself and was recently ranked number 10 among marketing publications (Koojaroenprasit et al. 2015). With the establishment of the online journal MGDR, ISMD will now be able to offer a dedicated outlet for publications and it will be important to build it so that the publications are not only easily accessible but also considered high quality and relevant. I would like to urge all readers – those with long association with ISMD and those with new exposure to ISMD and MGDR – to submit their best work for consideration in this new online journal.

The question of quality and relevance still remains to be addressed. I would encourage that a diversity of perspectives and methodologies be encouraged while we remain clearly focused on the topics that define us. How we achieve that I will leave to the community of scholars we have created so far; and the new global range of researchers who would be reached by MGDR.

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