

Joel Penney, **The Citizen Marketer: Promoting Political Opinion in the Social Media Age**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017, 262 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover), \$27.95 (paperback).

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In the context of the ever-expanding use of digital media technologies, concomitant with the profligacy of big data, inordinate power of megacorporations, and ubiquitousness of public surveillance, the question of how citizens can independently formulate and freely express their political opinion becomes critical. The issue gains further urgency when citizens' political participation in digital public spheres becomes implicated in undermining rather than enhancing democratic processes—as revealed by investigations into Russian trolls' influencing of the 2017 U.S. presidential election, the harnessing of voters' preferences by the profiling firm Cambridge Analytica, and the co-option of social media platforms like Facebook for the same purposes.



It is against the backdrop of the debate on potential risks, hazards, and possibilities embedded in citizens' digital political expressions that Joel Penney's proposal of **The Citizen Marketer: Promoting Political Opinion in the Social Media Age** must be analyzed. The author argues that the idea is pertinent because it focuses on microlevel individual expressive political agency and shifts the initiatives for political marketing hitherto a purview of elite institutions (and of their dominant concerns, such as rallying voters during presidential elections) to grassroots and personal political expressions—as embodied in a range of spaces from T-shirts, baseball caps, buttons, posters, and banners in rallies and marches to online digital media platforms in hashtag movements and peer-to-peer persuasive message circulation on social media, blogs, and websites. Through a long-term ethnographic encounter with citizen marketers, the author proposes reflecting on these questions: How are various embodiments of individual political opinions in the contemporary age of digital media changing the landscape of political communication? And how may the enhanced possibilities for political participation thereby change contemporary politics?

The author pursues these questions through the framework of marketing communication because, he argues, citizens draw on marketing's logic and form to construct and amplify their political messages as well as to express their curative agency. The point of contention is that the citizen marketers' innocuous acts of associating themselves with certain ideas and their attempts to influence others through peer-to-peer circulation of memes and other symbolic distillations of opinion and ideology on social media democratize the field of political communication and mark a point of departure in how political marketing is conceptualized and performed. He argues that it is therefore important to understand how the persuasive dimension of citizens' media use for political communication may be different in their form from those of the corporations.

After laying out the book's project and argument in chapter 1, the second chapter traces the history of citizens' marketing endeavors—moving from buttons, banners, and slogans to social media activism and blogs with the introduction of digital media technologies. However, the transition to digitally mediated spheres does not entail a critical redefinition of possibilities for political participation and expression; rather, it only results in greater calibration and intensification of both elite and individual political communication efforts. Nevertheless the author argues in chapter 3 that new media technologies facilitate the emergence of highly visible self-labeled identities, and (as discussed in chapter 4) they bring critical momentum to electoral movements by heightening attention on certain key issues and facilitating the entry of new political players into the fold by undermining the hegemony of mass media, which is heavily relied on by political elites and established politicians. Chapter 5 discusses how in the age of digital media it is the ordinary citizen's curatorial agency, rather than that of the established powers, that sets the agenda for debate and guides people not on what to think but rather what to think about. Chapter 6 sums up the book by reflecting on the arguments about how citizens' marketing activities may be redefining the political landscapes and concludes that the rise of big data would provide more conclusive evidence in support of or against the potentialities inherent in citizens' marketing efforts.

The key dimension of Penney's argument is to position citizens' persuasive communication efforts in a comparative framework with elite and institutional political marketing activities, as mentioned earlier. But the problem with this equation is that the author does not recognize or address the fundamental inequalities in structural and power dynamics between corporations, including their lobbyists, as opposed to ordinary citizens. Moreover, Penney raises the question, "What does the increasing focus on marketing-like practices mean for the future of democratic citizenship?" (p. 37) without referencing the role of marketing and advertising processes in the undermining of democratic publics and politics, especially during the contemporary stage of monopoly capitalism (see Foster & McChesney, 2012; Klein, 2000). This investigation of citizens' successful appropriation from institutionalized domains of political campaigning both marketing's aesthetics and logic to promote individual political beliefs becomes largely laudatory and inconclusive in the absence of a political economic referential framework within which citizens' agency is situated.

Corporate marketing and advertising processes have been integral to the propping up and survival of monopoly capital or the current economic contexts, which are marked by an exponential increase in the oligopolistic power of large corporations and the decimation of labor's bargaining position (McChesney, Stole, Foster, & Holleman, 2011). Marketing and advertising processes also support an economic, political, and cultural climate, which not only condones but also thrives on manipulation and trivialization of core human values in order to promote consumerism. Indeed they facilitated the emergence of "buy now, pay later" culture and supported the transition of the economy from being manufacturing based to greater reliance on finance, insurance, and real estate—events that have raised debt to unsustainable levels. The author situates the citizen marketer's agency and progressive politics within such pernicious terrain but does not find it pertinent to explore whether citizen marketers are conscious of the ideological and political challenges they face or if their political messages and memes are in any way a response to the insidious simplifications of advertising and marketing speak. According to Penney, citizens successfully experiment with consumerist marketing logic of exhibitionism to propagate their messages. However, if promotion were the only outcome of citizens' inversion of marketing logic,

then it would appear that such agency is without intellectual depth and that citizens' participation is not contingent on their understanding of the working of marketing and advertising as a system that buttresses the iniquitous political-economic logic of late capitalism.

But inversely, it would also be pertinent to inquire whether the concept of citizen marketer is a useful framework to explore citizens' political persuasive strategies. And notwithstanding the inundation of everyday life by restrictive and manipulative marketing and advertising speak, do citizens consciously or unconsciously regurgitate the same rationality when they construct their particular political messages? Or does the framework merely have seductive appeal? The interviews with the citizens in chapter 5 present an ambivalent verdict. According to the informants, they see their role as that of educators, and the motivations guiding their persuasive speech include a desire to inform, alter, and educate their fellow citizens (p. 144). They are thereby involved in promoting the highest values of civic culture rather than regurgitating marketing's manipulative speech. Moreover, the informants in their assessment of their political speak give credence to their positionality as citizen journalists, and according to them they deliberately follow journalist norms of bipartisanship, objectivity, and balance to create more convincing and credible political speak. And as the interviews reveal, citizens' political communication efforts do not abide by marketing techniques of obfuscation, manipulation, or trivialization.

Despite conflicting evidence from the field, Penney persists in viewing citizens' persuasive political speech within domains of marketing and promotion and positioning citizen marketer as a valid framework for understanding citizens' agency in participatory digital public spheres. This argument is in tandem with the propensity to rehabilitate marketing and advertising processes within discussions of participatory citizenship. For example, Margaret Scammell's (2014) *Consumer Democracy: The Marketing of Politics* presents a similar argument, that since marketing's language and logic is all-pervasive, citizens' activism must inevitably be viewed as working in tangent with their rationale. The point of divergence is that Scammell recognizes the imperative to educate citizens so that they are able to distinguish between marketing as a cynical ploy and marketing as tool for enhancing democratic participation. But, notwithstanding this important objective, the overall concern is to reconcile consumerist democracy with an ethical political quest for the greater common good.

In stark contrast, Robert McChesney (2013), in *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*, paints a dire landscape that emerges as a result of late capitalism's colonization of the Internet. In his book he systematically exposes how various regulatory and policy directives have given huge monopolistic corporations unbridled power to commercialize the digital public spheres in ways that negate both the Internet's inherent egalitarian structure and its capacity to recharge the democratic public sphere. McChesney highlights the tension between the potential and the realities of institutions and process for strengthening democracies such as that of credible, independent, and citizen journalism, which is severely restricted by commercial viability. Therefore, while the Internet destroys traditional journalism's business model, it does not facilitate the emergence of an alternative reliable proposal. In contrast, in his book, *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*, Cheney-Lippold (2017) highlights how proliferation of algorithms and the rise of big data organize, contain, and redefine individual experiences, choice, and decision. Moreover, the existence of big data also enables surveillance of citizens to critically undermine principles of democratic society.

Notwithstanding that citizens' political communication efforts must contend with technological, regulatory, and political-economic constraints shaped by monopoly capitalism, as well as the fact that marketing and promotion are integral to perpetuation of an iniquitous status quo, Penney presents the "citizen marketer's" agency as existing in an amorphous, unstructured context. The book would have greatly benefited by recognizing the opposing pressures.

### References

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