

The Ambivalences of the Citizen Marketer Concept: A Response to Tabassum Ruhi Khan

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).

Rebuttal by
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In a recent review of my book ***The Citizen Marketer: Promoting Political Opinion in the Social Media Age***, published in this journal, Tabassum Ruhi Khan (2018) raises important questions about the relative power of citizens in digital flows of persuasive political communication at a time when corporations, states, and other elite institutions have invested extraordinary resources into exploiting social media for their advantage. Since the book was written, revelations about the systematic manipulation of political message circulation by professional operatives through the use of social bots and other deceptive tactics—including the widely reported efforts by Russian state agents to influence democratic elections around the world—has undoubtedly shifted the parameters of many of the debates explored in its pages. However, the increasing professionalization (and, indeed, weaponization) of political influence spreading online only underscores the book’s core conceit that we must take seriously social media persuasion and its attending logics of viral marketing as significant loci of power in an era of fully mediatized politics. For citizens who seek to counteract the power of elite actors on digital social platforms, the only recourse, I would argue, is to run toward rather than away from what the book describes as the battlefield of promotional meme warfare. As a consequence, we need to think through the promises and potential pitfalls of the citizen marketer approach to political activism now more than ever.



While I strongly agree with Khan that the field of online political promotion is far from even due to pervasive structural inequalities, the review is incorrect in stating that the book does not recognize or engage with these pertinent issues. In fact, the entire closing section of *The Citizen Marketer* is dedicated to mapping the structural power relations that are embedded in systems of digital and participatory political persuasion. In particular, this discussion focuses on “top-down efforts to steer, manage, and control peer-to-peer flows of political messages” (p. 181), which include the cultivation of celebrity–fan relationships via politicians’ social media accounts and other forms of strategic image making, as well as “the economic incentives of for-profit journalism agencies to exploit the politically-charged sharing of online news articles to maximize advertising revenue” (p. 182). In addition, the discussion addresses the role of technology companies like Facebook in constraining and distorting the free flow of political expression and citizen-to-citizen influence—which ranges from the filter bubbles created by commercially motivated algorithmic filtering to outright censorship and abuse of power—and calls for “an acute awareness of, and active engagement with, the

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structural barriers and hurdles imposed by commercial digital intermediaries and the governments that regulate them" (p. 181). To be certain, the book only scratches the surface of the many complex issues at hand, and I echo Khan's call for more political economy research that interrogates the structural inequities of the Internet and their challenges to grassroots citizen empowerment. However, the review's assertion that the book "presents the citizen marketer's agency as existing in an amorphous, unstructured context" (2018, p. 11) is simply not the case.

My sense is that this unsympathetic portrayal stems from a more fundamental reading of the book as "largely laudatory" (2018, p. 9) of the citizen marketer concept, and even of the institution of marketing more generally. This may be partially attributable to the semantics of the title; generally speaking, we academics tend to hold up the label of "citizen" as an ideal of democratic participation for which we should strive, and to couple this with the controversial and oft-maligned status of "marketer" could be seen as condoning the latter by merely juxtaposing it with the former. However, the term is intended to be not an honorific but rather a discomfiting provocation, one that raises difficult questions about how these two roles have become entangled over time and how we must critically navigate the rocky terrain that results from their collision. Much like the thorny but productive concept of the citizen consumer from which the term draws inspiration, the idea of the citizen marketer is an acknowledgement of how political activism has transformed, for better and for worse, in response to multiple economic, cultural, and technological shifts that have heightened the power of mediated symbolic circulation.

Following from this point, *The Citizen Marketer* is in no way meant to be a continuation of the digital optimism rhetoric of the 2000s that naively proselytized the Internet as a savior for democracy. At the same time, the book is also not an artifact of the currently vogueish countertrend of digital pessimism that I find to be similarly limiting and partial. Rather, it attempts to carve out a more ambivalent space for assessing the nuances of the participatory political communication that has developed in tandem with the logics and tactics of viral marketing. As stated in the introduction, *The Citizen Marketer* is "neither a celebration nor a castigation of the trends that it documents" and "seeks to draw out the potential opportunities as well as the potential risks that are introduced by this broad shift in the conceptualization of political action" (p. 9) that prioritizes media-based, marketing-like persuasion.

Judging from the tone of the review, a castigation may have been preferred. Yet taking such a position would require one to discount the many ways in which citizen-activist networks have appropriated the machinery of viral marketing to promote viewpoints that the review in fact advocates in its critical discussion of monopoly capitalism, from *Adbusters* and its progeny #OccupyWallStreet to the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign and the bevy of anticorporate memes and hashtags that were produced and circulated by grassroots supporters. Before risking sounding too celebratory, though, I must also emphasize that some of the most influential citizen marketing agents of the 2016 election cycle were the far-right (so-called alt-right) white supremacist Trump supporters who, as Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis (2017) detail in their illuminating *Data & Society* report, "developed techniques of 'attention hacking' to increase the visibility of their ideas through the strategic use of social media, memes, and bots" (p. 1). To be clear, these far-right attention hackers and media manipulators are not the same as the professional Russian trolls that have dominated the headlines for over a year; rather, they are precisely the sort of voluntarily engaged, promotional media-spreading citizen activists with which the book is primarily concerned.

Indeed, one of the key messages of *The Citizen Marketer* is that the shift toward a more participatory phase of political opinion promotion in the age of social media opens the door to a wide range of issue publics that had fewer opportunities to gain attention under older, gatekeeper-heavy media systems and regimes. This includes democratic socialists like the “Berniecrats” who flooded Facebook and Reddit in the absence of (perhaps deliberately) scant corporate news coverage, and also the ersatz National Socialists who helped push Trump to egregious victory by retweeting racist Pepe the Frog memes that would never be printed in a major circulation newspaper. Thus, the arguments in the book about the opportunities for citizen empowerment engendered by the widespread popular adoption of viral political marketing tactics are not intended to be normative in any partisan political sense. Rather, in line with *The Citizen Marketer* as a whole, they are profoundly ambivalent about the changes we are witnessing as social media emerges as the centerpiece of both elite and grassroots political promotion and influence spreading.

Furthermore, the review’s interest in challenging “whether the concept of citizen marketer is a useful framework to explore citizens’ political persuasive strategies” (2018, p. 10) seems to hinge on a conflation of marketing and advertising as a macro-level set of commercial institutions in consumer capitalist societies with a more micro-level and flexible set of communication tactics that have been adopted by a variety of entities for a range of strategic purposes. While it is obviously true that transnational corporations have played a dominant role in the development of marketing and advertising on the whole—particularly their more worrisome attributes of manipulation, trivialization, simplification, and deception, with which Khan is rightfully concerned—we must not delimit the discussion of marketing communication to refer only to the activities of powerful corporate actors. In truth, democratic election campaigns, both conservative and progressive and both large and small, also engage in promotional marketing activities, as do nonprofit advocacy organizations and NGOs, labor unions, and more loosely defined grassroots citizen networks. At the very least, each of these groups tactically deploys attention-grabbing and influence-spreading digital artifacts like slogan hashtags, profile picture logo symbols, and concisely packaged memes and video clips to promote and advance their varied agendas. Moreover, the shift in recent years toward the centrality of peer-to-peer amplification and endorsement of messages on social media has significantly reshaped each of these forms of political promotion and has carved a larger role for popular participation. However, *The Citizen Marketer* does not argue that viral marketing-like participation on the part of citizens necessarily opposes or defangs the power of elite institutions, as the review seems to imply. While this may be a possible outcome in a specific given context, it is also quite possible that institutional elites can successfully exploit the persuasive benefits of social sharing and peer endorsement to consolidate their power.

The long-established critiques of marketing as manipulative, deceptive, and antithetical to the ideals of the democratic public sphere thus point to challenges that *all* political marketing participants must contend with, even those who co-opt marketing speak to promote ideas that run counter to the ideological agendas of corporate and other elite powers. In other words, if the problems inherent in marketing speak were ever confined to those elites, they are all our problems now. By thinking about marketing as something that only “they” do (i.e., the global neoliberal order), we miss the opportunity to become more critical and reflective of our own engagement with those tactics and logics.

This brings me to my biggest point of contention with the review, which is its claim that *The Citizen Marketer* is unconcerned with “recogniz[ing] 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” (2018. p. 10). The chapter entitled “Towards a Critical Literacy of the Citizen Marketer” is themed around this very concern, and emphasizes the need for developing media literacy skills that can make citizen marketing activity “more introspective, more adaptive, more critically engaged and aware of its embedded power relations” (p. 187). The chapter also introduces a key distinction between an uncritical acceptance of marketing that reproduces its most troubling tendencies—ranging from its traditionally hierarchical and managerial structure of marketer–consumer relationships to its risks of trivialization and simplification that can manipulate publics and push them toward partisan extremes—and a *critical* acceptance that recognizes these inherent risks and works to actively negotiate them.

Becoming more aware of marketing’s many potential harms is crucial, yet so is acknowledging the reality that the packaged expressions of marketing speak are powerful instruments of persuasion that any constituency must inevitably contend with to operate in today’s mediated political battleground. As the review points out, some of the citizens interviewed for the book are ambivalent or even resistant to the notion that they are acting in a marketing-like capacity when sharing their political opinions online. Conversely, many other interviewees express enthusiastically embracing this role as a perceived opportunity to influence public opinion in line with their interests. By developing a more critical literacy of the citizen marketer approach—the ultimate goal of the book—both types of citizens stand to benefit in terms of reflecting on their sometimes deliberate and sometimes unwitting relationship to viral marketing logics.

References

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