"Token" Symbolic Gestures?

When Krystal Lake arrived at her retail job one morning in early 2016 wearing a new hat, she wasn't expecting to cause a viral Internet sensation. The 22-year-old New Yorker simply wanted to make a political statement to shoppers in her local community who supported Donald Trump's campaign for U.S. president. Lake's hat, which she had imprinted with the words "America Was Never Great," was a parody of Trump's iconic "Make America Great Again" baseball cap that he wore at campaign events and sold to his supporters through his campaign website. Just as these Trump fans helped spread the campaign's marketing slogan to their fellow citizens by publicly displaying it on their foreheads—a material culture corollary to digital activities such as posting #MakeAmericaGreatAgain on social media—Lake took symbolic action to spread the idea that Trump was the wrong choice for the country. As she explained, "I kind of wanted to send a message...the message that other people are trying to send out is, like, America is like this wonderful place, like nothing bad ever happened...I feel like it was a lie." Lake, an African American, went on to cite the history of racial discrimination in the United States and remarked that the "point of the hat was to say America needs changing and improvement."

What happened next came as a shock to her, although it followed a pattern that has become increasingly familiar in a political media landscape shaped by the peer-to-peer sharing of partisan digital content. A photograph of Lake wearing her hat, accompanied by outraged comments like "what an insult to #vets and ALL Americans," was posted on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and quickly spread across networks of conservatives and Trump supporters. To these people, the image was clear evidence that liberals against Trump were unpatriotic and anti-American, and by sharing the image on social media, they ostensibly promoted this idea further in the public discourse. Shortly thereafter,
generation of young people that is blamed for transforming political activism into “slacktivism” or “clicktivism,” among other pejorative terms that signal suspicion regarding the value of expressive media-based practices. The business writer Simon Sinek offers an exemplary critique, lamenting that, to their detriment, today’s social media—savvy young generation “has confused real commitment with symbolic gestures.” In the scholarly literature regarding the Internet and politics, similar concerns abound. For instance, Evgeny Morozov argues that the private and personal nature of many digital media—based political actions tends to privilege comfort and self-satisfaction above all else. This “lazy,” low-cost form of political activity, Morozov warns, may become a weak substitute for more intensive forms of political participation. Stuart Shulman further suggests that when citizens see that their online political expressions are ineffective or simply ignored, they may be dispirited and become more cynical about participating in politics more broadly.

As such critiques imply, the increasing centrality of symbolic forms of political activity has seemingly reached epidemic proportions in the age of social media, threatening to replace “real” activism with a more frivolous, less effective, and even disempowering mode of participation. The assumption that media-based political action may be insubstantial in and of itself is further embedded in the language that some researchers have adopted to describe it. For instance, a study led by Kirk Kristofferson seeks to investigate whether and under what circumstances an “initial token display of support” such as publicly joining a political Facebook group or wearing a political ribbon or button will lead to “more meaningful contributions to the cause.” The notion that media-based action can serve as a gateway to other forms of political participation, particularly at the organizational level, is important to consider—David Karpf argues that this idea is often what motivates political organizations to encourage their members to perform low-cost symbolic actions in the first place. However, the use of the word “tokens” in this context reveals the essentially dismissive position that some analysts have taken toward expressive forms of political activity, both online and offline. As this line of thought goes, such activities may be a first step for citizens to do something meaningful in the political realm somewhere down the line, but on their own, they are superficial, shallow, powerless.

Yet is such a dismissal truly warranted? Does the simple act of posting a hashtag, link, or video, uploading a profile picture; throwing on a slogan hat or T-shirt, or slapping on a bumper sticker do anything politically, in its own right? Such a question has no easy answer because these tactics and their applications are constantly evolving. However, as this book will argue, the study of media-based symbolic action in the political realm can be significantly enriched by considering how it enables citizens to participate in political marketing, a field that has long used the circulation of symbols and media messages to promote
political ideas and help shape political outcomes. In making this conceptual leap, we must take seriously the persuasive dimension of these expressive activities, which have rarely been given front-and-center attention in the scholarship. The explanation is perhaps obvious: at face value, it may seem preposterous to think that one's social media post or public display of a T-shirt or hat could influence others in a way that is politically consequential. Yet from the perspective of contemporary marketing practice, the notion of peer-to-peer influence as a networked aggregate phenomenon is not only accepted wisdom, but also the very core of persuasive communication strategy in the digital age.

"Indeed, one of the main reasons why it is important to consider political media-spreading activity within a word-of-mouth, or viral, marketing framework is that a wide range of organizational actors, from election campaigns to issue advocacy groups, have deliberately adopted this model as a way of extending and credentialing of their persuasive messages. For instance, in the context of U.S. presidential elections, Jennifer Stromer-Galley notes that campaigns are "using digital technologies to identify and empower supporters to persuade others in their own social network," an adaptation of Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld's two-step flow model of peer influence that has inspired generations of word-of-mouth marketing initiatives. In other words, as supporters share a campaign's tweets, Facebook posts, and YouTube videos with their network of peers, they are not only expressing their own views, but also actively contributing to the marketing plan of the campaign as part of a carefully designed viral marketing plan. To offer an example outside of the electoral context explored more in a later chapter, one of the most high-profile social media-based actions in recent U.S. political history, which involved millions of Facebook users displaying support for same-sex marriage by changing their profile pictures to a red equality symbol, was orchestrated by the professional marketing team of the large-scale issue advocacy organization Human Rights Campaign.

However, this kind of top-down effort to foster and direct peer-to-peer media promotion to expand organizational outreach represents only part of the terrain explored in this book. As a range of scholars have emphasized, much of the recent explosion of media-based political activity on the Internet has come not from traditional organizational entities at all, but from loose networks of like-minded individuals who converge online and engage in what W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg call connective action around issues of common concern. Although some aspects of this networked communication are more logistical in nature—including the use of online tools to coordinate offline actions such as protest demonstrations—other forms of connective action center on the coordinated expression of political opinion in participatory media spaces. As Bennett and Segerberg note, networks of like-minded citizens often rely on "peer production and sharing based on personal expression" to cultivate public support for their causes and frame issues on their preferred terms. Crucially, the authors identify this expressive dimension of connective action in terms of viral communication and the spreading of memes, defining the latter as a "symbolic packet that travels easily across large and diverse populations because it is easy to imitate, adapt personally, and share broadly with others." The notion of promoting an idea by packaging it as a meme that can be shared from peer to peer is indeed the very essence of contemporary digital marketing logic. Although traditional political organizations have adopted these techniques more formally, taking cues from the commercial marketing sphere to harness online word of mouth for their promotion and advocacy efforts, the more informal application of the same techniques by grassroots citizen networks suggests that the concept of viral marketing has become imbedded in a much broader range of media-based political activism.

For instance, the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag campaign that became a runaway sensation on Twitter in 2014—part of an effort to raise global awareness about the abuses of the Nigerian militant group Boko Haram—was created not by a large advocacy organization with a hefty digital marketing budget, but by three Nigerian women who encouraged its spread at a grassroots level in hopes that "one voice can grow into millions eventually." In addition, a wave of critical parodies of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, which targeted President Barack Obama's foreign policy with slogans like #BringBackYourDrones and #WeCanBringBackOurDead, arose spontaneously among a fluid network of administration critics and left antiwar advocates—an exemplary case of connective action of the expressive, viewpoint-spreading type. Essentially, such efforts call on citizens to act as microlevel agents in a networked circulation of ideas, disseminating symbolic packets of opinion and ideology as a means of influencing various sectors of the public. Whether orchestrated from the top down or emerging from the bottom up (or somewhere in between), these connective actions position their participants in a fundamentally promotional capacity: through liking, linking, sharing, and a range of other activities, citizens labor to extend and amplify the reach of favored political messages by passing them along and publicizing them to peers.

To be clear, the flow of persuasive political messages on the Internet and beyond is not restricted to this kind of peer-to-peer communication between ordinary citizens. Rather, it is situated within what Andrew Chadwick calls the hybrid media system, where pathways of message circulation often involve journalists, celebrities, and institutional actors in addition to members of the general public. In the case of #BringBackOurGirls, for instance, the initial grassroots success of the hashtag on Twitter spurred the first lady, Michelle Obama, to lend her high-profile support in a post that was retweeted more than 70,000 times, garnering a wave of mainstream press attention that further contributed to its
spread online. In a similar vein, the hostile social media reaction to Lake’s “America Was Never Great” image was greatly magnified by news coverage on right-wing websites such as Breitbart, and as noted, the subsequent online threats beg another round of headlines on left-wing sites like Raw Story that further added to the story’s virality. Surely, professional journalists, political elites, and other major public figures play outsize roles in these hybrid-media flows relative to ordinary citizens. The fact that it was Donald Trump himself who was responsible for launching the meme of “Make America Great Again” through a variety of channels, including his enormously popular official Twitter account, handily illustrates that not all online influence is equal.

At the same time, however, the aggregate contributions of what Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green call grassroots intermediaries, defined as “unofficial parties who shape the flow of messages through their communities,” also deserve sustained attention. Indeed, data suggest that peer-to-peer media spreading can in fact be politically persuasive, at least for a portion of the population. According to a 2012 survey from the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, one-quarter of U.S. adults who use social networking sites claimed that they have become more active about a political issue after viewing posts or having discussions about it on these sites, and 16% claim that they have even changed their viewpoint on a political issue by engaging in such activities. Moreover, although it may be difficult to quantify the magnitude of these sorts of effects on broader social and political outcomes, the widespread public participation in media-based symbolic actions such as hashtag and profile picture-changing campaigns suggests that millions of citizens believe—or at least hold some degree of hope—that such practices can make a meaningful difference in the world.

It is this broad set of participatory political promotion practices, along with the rationales that fuel them and the controversies that surround them, that make up the subject of this book. Its primary point of departure is to consider the long-term growth of these practices, magnified but by no means originated by the popularization of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as signaling an important shift in how political participation is conceptualized and performed in advanced capitalist democratic societies. The term citizen marketer—a play on the closely related concept of the citizen consumer—is an attempt to capture this emergent set of practices and corresponding logics. It is intended to give shape to a particular approach to political action that seems to become more and more high profile and widespread by the year—one that views participation in persuasive media-spreading activities as a privileged means of making a difference in public life.

To be clear, the term citizen marketer should not be taken to refer to an exclusive group that is solely defined by these kinds of practices. One of the primary goals of this book is to question the assumption that participation in symbolic actions such as posting political hashtags or memes necessarily replaces or substitutes for more traditional forms of political participation, as some slacking critics have warned. Rather than detract from real political action, these activities may provide citizens with an additional, complementary set of tools with which to support their interests and advance their political agendas. Furthermore, it may be helping to bring new entrants into the fold of political participation who may have otherwise remained inactive by opening culturally situated—and often affectively charged—spaces of engagement. As The Citizen Marketer argues, widespread participation in these sorts of activities may help invigorate popular democracy by casually injecting the political into the everyday spaces and places of popular culture. Scan your Facebook or Twitter feed, or even walk down a busy street or drive down a highway, and chances are that sooner or later you will see a citizen marketer flash a political message before your eyes that just might make you stop and think. Moreover, because of the participatory nature of these activities, there is great potential to democratize the field of persuasive political communication that has been historically dominated by elite interests and to elevate the voices and perspectives of marginalized groups.

However, another major goal of this book is to explore how the more controversial aspects of marketing and promotion practice introduce challenges that citizens must inevitably face as they adopt this approach to political action. Following Sarah Banet-Weiser’s call to explore the ambivalent spaces of contemporary brand culture, politics included, The Citizen Marketer brings into focus the trade-offs that come with expanding popular participation in politics by extending the marketing logics and languages that have long been used to secure the power of political, social, and economic elites. Marketing is indeed a dirty word in many circles, particularly among segments of the left that have identified neoliberalism and market capitalism as primary loci of contemporary political struggle. At the same time, some of these very critics—such as the Adbusters group led by the culture-jamming champion Kalle Lasn—have determined that the most effective way to push back against the forces of neoliberal capitalism is to co-opt its own marketing and advertising techniques to spread counterhegemonic ideas to the public. This line of thinking will be explored in more detail in the following pages; my point here is simply to underline how the citizen marketer approach has become much broader than any one ideological constituency or bloc. Rather, it is being deployed by a wide range of citizens as a means of promoting and publicizing a variety of political ideas, including those that are broadly critical of elite uses of marketing in modern capitalist societies.

Following from this point, the tensions explored in this book often have less to do with the specific content of participatory political promotion
campaigns—which can reflect both elite interests and counterhegemonic resistance, as well as both right-wing and left-wing ideological positions—than with their formal-stylistic qualities, as well as their fundamentally declarative and side-taking nature. For instance, I examine how these practices are implicated in what numerous critics have denounced as the packaging of politics, raising important questions about the impact of marketing aesthetics on the evolving shape of contemporary political participation across ideological categories. Since the inception of modern political marketing more than a century ago by powerful elites, concerns have been raised about its capacity to trivialize complex issues by reducing politics to a simplified set of choices and to manipulate the public through stylized and emotionally charged appeals that can conceal rather than reveal the substantive agendas of its propagators.

When political marketing becomes more and more participatory, pulling a wide swath of citizens into its orbit and putting them to work as foot soldiers in the dissemination of packaged media persuasion, might these risks of trivialization and manipulation become exacerbated? Or, as Margaret Scammell argues in the context of election campaigniing, does the shift to a more inclusive form of political marketing in an era of expanding media participation hold the promise of making it more authentic, more in tune with the concerns of ordinary citizens, and less in control of elites? Building on Scammell’s call for a new political marketing literacy that can critically evaluate its contributions to democracy, I argue in The Citizen Marketer that reconciling the inherent tensions of a packaged and marketed politics—that is, between style and substance; emotion and reason—is by no means impossible, but requires enhanced introspection and reflection on the part of all who now participate in its spread.

Furthermore, I explore how the citizen marketer approach intersects with the larger trends of political partisanship and polarization, which many critics have decried for potentially imperiling the quality of democratic life. As individuals are afforded more opportunities to take a side, show their support, and spread their preferred group’s message through participatory media practices, the deliberative ideal of citizen-to-citizen interaction as a reciprocal exchange of ideas and a mutual forming of judgments may be significantly challenged. For some, we will see, ‘expressive statement making may serve as a catalyst for two-way political dialogue. For others, however, it can elevate risks of social discord and ideological retrenchment. One core contention of this book is that the citizen marketer approach both closely aligns with and potentially strengthens an agonistic rather than deliberative model of democracy. The resulting emphasis on citizen media participation as a scene of group conflict rather than consensus building may be viewed as either perturbing or empowering, depending on one’s normative and ideological commitments.

Neither a celebration nor a castigation of the trends it documents, The Citizen Marketer 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. To help evince these subtleties, the book spotlights the voices of citizens who have participated in a range of political media—spreading activities both online and offline and interrogates their complex relationships toward the idea of promoting their political beliefs and persuading their peers. In contrast to some previous studies that report relatively little citizen interest in goals of peer persuasion when communicating about politics online, the interview data presented in this book suggest how the citizen marketer approach is being enthusiastically embraced by some individuals who deliberately seek to exert political influence through their media—spreading activities. However, others who engage in the same practices describe more ambivalent feelings toward a viral marketing—like model of political action, reflecting the specter of unsavory manipulation that has loomed over political marketing practice throughout its long history. Still others reject this model outright in favor of alternative conceptualizations of civic communication practices, which, as we will explore, have complex and nuanced interrelationships with the citizen marketer approach (for a detailed description of the research, which encompasses three separate interview studies conducted over a four-year period and includes 101 respondents in total, please see the methodological appendix at the back of this book).

To be certain, a marketing—like, persuasion—centered approach to political action has not been universally adopted at its current juncture; moreover, it may only ever apply to a relatively limited, highly engaged subset of the citizenry who willfully contribute to what political scientists call “activated public opinion.” However, the goal of The Citizen Marketer is not to proffer an all—embracing theory of citizen—level political communication in the digital age—surely a fool’s errand given the complexity of the terrain. Rather, it is to bring to the surface a specific set of practices and logics that I argue has important consequences for the evolving shape of political participation and the character of democratic life. Indeed, defining exactly what citizen marketing is and what it is not—where it begins and where it ends—is admittedly tricky because it can potentially overlap with a broad array of other citizen—to—citizen communication practices. In the following sections, I further delineate the citizen marketer concept by considering its relation to a range of relevant literature. As a first step, it is necessary to examine how a model of peer persuasion has been treated in the scholarship on citizen participation in political media discourse, and how this both diverges from and overlaps with other more widely discussed models that account for the political value of media participation. As we will see, there is an identifiable strand of literature that takes seriously the persuasive role of citizen—level political communication, although a conceptual connection to marketing practice has
rarely been drawn. From there, I develop a more detailed argument about why a marketing framework is useful for making sense of the persuasive dimension of citizen media participation and how it helps to illuminate both the risks and the opportunities that face those who seek to spread their political influence by participating in the circulation of media messages.

"A Battle over the Minds": Delineating the Persuasion Framework of Citizen Media Participation

Following the proliferation of networked digital media technologies from the 1990s onward, scholars have offered numerous ways to conceptualize the meaning and function of citizen-level participation in mediated political discourse. Two of these frameworks—broadly defined here as rationalist deliberative democracy and "cultural" agency-building—have been given extensive treatment in the literature. In contrast, the peer persuasion framework inherent in the citizen marketer approach has received far less systematic attention; although its lineage can be traced in the work of several key theorists, journalists, and activists. Indeed, all three of these frameworks are employed in various ways by the citizens interviewed for this book when explaining how they understand the meaning of their mediated acts of political opinion expression. Although The Citizen Marketer focuses primarily on this third framework, it also examines how a persuasion model overlaps in important ways with the two other major models that account for how citizen-level media participation takes on political significance, as well as how these models can sometimes come into friction with one another.

One of the most common approaches in the scholarship has been to examine how peer-to-peer mediated communication might provide forums for democratic deliberation and thus constitute a renewed public sphere. Influenced heavily by Jürgen Habermas's ideal of consensus building through rational and inclusive public debate, the deliberative democracy framework emphasizes how citizens invested in the common good may use participatory spaces of interaction to produce "critically informed" public opinion that can scrutinize and guide official decision-making processes. In other words, the model privileges two-way exchanges of information and the rational debating of issues as a means of reaching decisions that institutional political actors can then follow. To be clear, this ideal of reasoned argumentation does include attempts to persuade the other party, yet Habermas stresses that both parties must be open to the force of the better argument and that "ill motives other than that of the cooperative search for truth" must be eliminated. We can thus draw a contrast between this deliberative framework and a model of persuasive communication motivated by a desire to simply spread one's deeply held viewpoints to others (which, as we will see, is often the case with regard to the kinds of activities considered in this book). Although the ideal of deliberative democracy has faced much criticism in recent years for its seeming elitism and its unflagging faith in Enlightenment reason, it continues to be a popular way in which both scholars and citizens imagine the political value of participating in media discourse around political issues.

However, in contrast to a framework that emphasizes formalized decision making and consensus building, many scholars have drawn attention to more informal and culturally situated sites of citizen media participation—a move that seems to reflect the rise of popular networked digital platforms like Facebook and Twitter that combine political interaction with entertainment and peer socializing. This so-called culturalist turn tends to focus on how politically themed interactions at the level of popular culture help build and strengthen collective identities and networks that can then be mobilized into action. According to Peter Dahlgren's theory of "civic cultures," the identities fostered through participation in informal peer-to-peer interaction—on social media and elsewhere—form the preconditions for more traditional forms of political participation by enhancing a sense of civic agency. María Bakardieva, whose work is also associated with this approach, argues that the moral and political identifications that emerge from everyday digital media participation form a "major reservoir of civic energy" that can potentially spur organizational participation at both the social movement and the institutional political levels. Similarly, a group of researchers led by Jessica Vitak finds that young people's election-themed activities on Facebook help develop their political identities and foster civic skills that are necessary for future participation in the electoral political domain.

In recent years, a substantial amount of research on politically oriented Internet use has lent empirical support to this broad body of theory connecting everyday online communication with various forms of collective political mobilization. For instance, Todd Graham, Daniel Jackson, and Scott Wright demonstrate how informal conversations about austerity policies among U.K. citizens in nonpolitical and culturally oriented online forums had a direct impact on subsequent organized actions, including protest demonstrations and coordinated campaigns to contact legislators. Along similar lines, Jessica L. Beyer shows how discussion forums on popular culture-themed websites like 4chan and the Pirate Bay became a breeding ground for organizational mobilization around freedom-of-information issues and how this organized activity hinged on the group identities fostered by these online cultural spaces. In addition, numerous large-scale survey studies have found a positive correlation between general social media use and offline forms of political participation, particularly...
in the context of joining social movement demonstrations and protest actions. However, in her meta-analysis of these studies, Shelley Boulianne points out that the evidence for causation is somewhat weak and that other variables, such as level of political interest, could explain the correlation. Researchers have also found a positive relationship between social media use and offline civic activities such as joining group associations, which, according to social capital theory, is predictive of future levels of political participation.

In sum, this broadly defined research framework understands the potential value of informal political interaction and expression on the Internet as an agency-building, identity-strengthening, preliminary step toward future political participation. Interestingly, several studies that seek to measure whether online communication will lead to offline political participation define the latter as including the symbolic expression of political viewpoints, albeit in material rather than digital form. For instance, Boulianne notes that the variable of political participation is often defined in a way that collapses together activities like voting and volunteering for election campaigns with decidedly symbolic actions such as displaying political buttons and signs. This seems to suggest an assumption on the part of the researchers that this kind of expressive action is in fact a meaningful and valuable form of political participation—an endpoint as opposed to a stepping stone—although its precise import is largely unspecified. Adding to the confusion is the fact that some of the very online political practices that are seen as being identity- and agency-building precursors to real political participation, such as expressing opinions on social media platforms, are in a sense simply digital versions of offline symbolic activities like displaying political buttons or signs. Under such a schema, posting a political symbol on one's Facebook profile could be classified in an entirely different way than wearing that same symbol on one's lapel, although the motivation behind these actions—and perhaps even their impact on lookers—may be similar.

To help clarify this complex set of issues, it is helpful to refer to Joakim Ekman and Erik Amna's detailed typology of political participation and civic engagement. The authors make an important distinction between manifest political participation, defined as "all actions directed towards influencing governmental decisions and political outcomes," and latent political participation, defined as prepolitical or "potentially political" forms of activity. In addition to civic association, membership and community involvement (often defined in the literature as civic engagement), the latent category also includes the act of paying attention to political issues and having discussions about them with peers, both online and offline, as well as cultivating "a sense of belonging to a group or a collective with a distinct political profile or agenda." Here, we can recognize the major themes of the above-outlined culturalist framework, in which peer interaction about politics builds identity and agency in a way that creates potential for future mobilization. By contrast, the manifest category, which represents what citizens do politically once they have been mobilized, includes communicative action intended to impact both the institutional and the extraparliamentary political spheres (along with a range of other actions that share this same basic set of goals, such as volunteering for election campaigns or joining social movement organizations and activist networks). Thus, for Ekman and Amna, "making one's voice heard" on issues of public concern is classified as manifest rather than latent participation because it is deliberately aimed at shaping political outcomes. As they suggest, this can occur either by directly influencing public opinion, such as in the case of handing out leaflets on a street corner, or by applying pressure to decision makers, such as in the case of signing petitions. In both scenarios, we can identify persuasion as the defining characteristic of these expressive forms of manifest political participation.

Thus, according to Ekman and Amna's typology, communicating about politics online (as well as offline) could be considered either latent or manifest, depending on one's underlying motivations. The key distinction is the intended instrumentality of the expression, rather than any specific form or venue of communication. Of course, in real-world contexts of everyday media participation, the line between interacting about political issues as a noninstrumental means of political socialization and making one's voice heard on these same issues as a means of instrumentally shaping public opinion may be profoundly blurred. The interview research presented in this book attempts to draw out these nuances by exploring the often-overlapping and multifaceted motives that citizens assign to their political expressions on digital platforms and elsewhere. However, the value of drawing such a distinction here is that it helps avoid the pitfall of treating all forms of citizen participation in mediated political discourse as simply prepolitical steps to some other form of mobilization down the line. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, it is true that the kinds of expressive and symbolic activities examined in this book under the framework of marketing-like persuasion often contain a prepolitical, agency-building dimension, and this must be accounted for when assessing their broader political relevance. At the same time, however, we must not lose sight of the more instrumental and persuasion-oriented dimension of this expressive symbolic action, since it constitutes a significant component of the manifest participation that scholars point to as being the end goal of the latent stage.

As noted previously, some research focusing on the electoral context does include symbolic expressions of political opinion in definitions of manifest participation, although this is typically limited to offline activities such as displaying political buttons and signs (where a sense of "realness" is perhaps more immediately apparent). Yet the specific function of such expressive activities—including peer persuasion—does not warrant much in-depth attention in studies that
treat participation in elections as a broad composite phenomenon. In contrast, a more robust framework of instrumental peer persuasion can be found in certain strands of scholarship that examine social movements and their uses of alternative media. Here, we can more clearly delineate a third approach to theorizing the value of citizen media participation, distinct from both the deliberative and the culturalist-approach. For instance, Manuel Castells describes how new citizen movements that exist outside of the political mainstream use participatory media platforms to directly enter into contestations of power: "Because power relations are structured nowadays in a global network and played out in the realm of socialized communication, social movements...act on this global network structure and enter the battle over the minds by intervening in the global communication process" (italic in mine). Castells further posits that the Internet provides protest movements with a "means of acting on people's mind, and ultimately serves as their most potent political weapon." In a somewhat similar vein, Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples argue that in the contemporary era of mediatedized politics, activists strategically deploy mediated visual artifacts as so-called mind bombs that have the capacity to alter public opinion and, in turn, political events. In these analyses, metaphors of warfare and weaponry (i.e. mind-bombs, battle over the minds) are often employed to signal the instrumental force of these media-based symbolic actions.

As this vocabulary of mind warfare suggests, the peer persuasion framework of citizen media participation invokes a conception of political life that focuses on conflict, rather than on building consensus in the interest of the common good. In this way, it aligns with Chantal Mouffe's agonistic vision of democracy, which she offers as an explicit alternative to the deliberative democracy framework. As Mouffe argues, "What the deliberative democracy model is denying is the dimension of undecidability and the ineradicability of antagonism, which are constitutive of the political. By postulating the availability of a non-exclusive public sphere, of deliberation where a rational consensus could be obtained, they negate the inherently conflictual nature of modern pluralism." As a contrast, Mouffe's agonistic pluralism model emphasizes the centrality of contention in democratic processes, which would by definition include the sort of mediated battle over the minds described by theorists such as Castells. In recent years, the theory of agonistic pluralism has been cited by numerous scholars as a more realistic way of describing today's polarized online-political discourse than the high-minded notion of a rational deliberation of issues. For instance, Zizi Papacharissi argues that "Mouffe's emphasis on the agonistic foreshadows modes of political expression that have been popularized through the Internet," such as partisan blogs, activist YouTube videos, and contentious online political discussion threads. Daniel Kreiss also invokes the agonistic model in his discussion of how the professional digital teams of election campaigns seek out supporters who will help them win media battles rather than question or debate their policy proposals, noting that "new media staffs generally focus on mobilizing preexisting selves who bring their ideological commitments to the public sphere." In contrast to deliberative-minded citizens who solicit an open exchange of viewpoints in a cooperative search for truth, or citizens who communicate with peers about politics as a means of formulating their own identities and attachments, agonistic-minded citizens have already made up their minds, have already taken a stand, and use media participation as a means of fighting for their side.

In addition to being grounded in a fundamentally agonistic conceptualization of democracy, the notion of citizen activists marching into a media-centered battle over the minds to win political victories hinges on a broader set of assumptions about the primacy of sign and image in the political realm that broadly aligns with postmodern perspectives. For instance, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner argue that in a postmodern era in which "social life is filtered through the media, politics becomes a battle of images." In fact, some theorists have posited that the overarching dominance of media images and signs in political processes—a set of developments sometimes described as postmodern politics—has shaped a generation of citizens who not only perceive political power to be equivalent to symbolic communicative power, but also are eager to get in on the action. Kevin Barnhurst, for instance, argues that in the minds of younger citizens raised in a postmodern, media-centered world, "the essence of political life...is the expression of opinions and preferences." Similarly, John Gibbins and Bo Reitner claim in their book The Politics of Postmodernity that under conditions of media saturation, "the key method of political activity is voicing one's view and getting it heard. Politics in postmodernity is recognized to be constructed in language; politics is language"—to which we might add all forms of symbolic expression, including images and video as well as words. What this suggests is that the broader mediatization of politics in the postmodern era has inspired citizens to act on the media—the realms of signs and images—in the hopes of making their own mark on the political world. As we will see, the self-aware and deliberate way in which many respondents featured in this book discuss goals of political persuasion when engaging in media participation suggests the intuitive appeal of this approach under postmodern conditions, as well as the need for scholars to understand this shift through a more robust theoretical lens.

To this point, perhaps the most explicit articulations of a media persuasion-centered approach to political action can be found not in the scholarly literature at all, but rather in two prescient texts of premillennial popular media criticism that are well steeped in a postmodern view of political reality: Culture Jam by Kalle Lasn and Media Virus: by Douglas Rushkoff. In Culture Jam, Lasn coins the term "meme warriors" to describe an emergent generation of citizen activists that privilege mediated public persuasion as a central political strategy: "Potent
memes can change minds, alter behavior, catalyze collective mindshifts and transform cultures, which is why meme warfare has become the geopolitical battle of the information age. Whoever has the memes has the power."54 Lasn further lauds the Internet as "one of the most potent meme-replicating mediums ever invented"55 and calls on his fellow left-progressive activists to use digital networks to spread ideas, influence minds, and ultimately affect global political change. Rushkoff offers a similar vision in his treatment of viral media as an efficacious political tool in a postmodern, media-centric age characterized by what he calls the dataspHERE: "People who lack traditional political power but still seek to influence the direction of our culture do so by infusing new ideas into this ever-expanding dataspHERE. These information 'bombs' spread throughout the entire information net in a matter of seconds."56 Like Castells and others, Lasn and Rushkoff draw on agonistic metaphors of warfare to suggest the instrumental—and potentially powerful—impact of citizen media circulation on the shaping of broader public opinion.

In addition to these martial allusions, metaphors of contagion in the writings of Lasn and Rushkoff—that is, the language of memes and virality that have greatly come to define the era of networked digital media—signal how this framework of citizen-level media participation aligns with contemporary digital marketing logics. Both authors, whose 1990s-era works were written prior to the proliferation of Web 2.0 and social media, arguably helped popularize the notion that to effectively make a difference in a media-drenched world, one must focus on injecting it with in-fectiously persuasive messages that can replicate and spread throughout the culture. Thus, Lasn writes that to "jump-start the revolution...we just need an influential minority that smells the blood, seizes the moment and pulls off a set of well-coordinated social marketing strategies."57 Rushkoff's Media Virus, although it avoids the explicit marketing-speak of Lasn, nevertheless conjures a model of peer-to-peer influence that has proven to be highly influential in the development of viral marketing more broadly since its publication in 1994 (indeed, the book is often credited with inspiring the viral marketing concept in the first place).58 However, Rushkoff's primary focus is on the use of viral media for political rather than commercial persuasion, as he describes how the activists that he documents "depend on a worldview that accepts that a tiny virus, launched creatively and distributed widely, can topple systems of thought as established as organized religion and institutions as well rooted as, say, the Republican Party or even the two-party system altogether."59

A key assumption underlying these biologically derived metaphors of contagion is that persuasive media messages act as uncontrollable forces, spreading from person to person through social contact and ultimately overtaking the public mind as a kind of ideological pandemic. Understandably, this perspective has been roundly criticized for proposing an overly mechanistic model of peer influence. For instance, Henry Jenkins holds up Rushkoff's book as a prime example of "a flawed way to think about distributing content through informal or ad hoc networks."60 For Jenkins, reducing people to "involuntary hosts of media viruses" undermines the role of human agency in the peer-to-peer spread of media messages, leading him to suggest that the term viral media be retired altogether in favor of the less deterministic "spreadable media."61 Although The Citizen Marketer retains the viral metaphor as a useful, if flawed, concept for thinking about peer-to-peer political persuasion, it positions this issue of agency as one of central importance. After all, if those who circulate persuasive media messages imagine their efforts to be an instrumental means of political action, then they must necessarily see themselves as active agents of dissemination rather than passive conduits. Later in this chapter, I outline the concept of curatorial agency as a way of understanding how individuals might assert a degree of control over flows of media messages as they willfully contribute to networked and aggregate processes of making content "go viral" (to borrow a common cultural catchphrase).

The seemingly inescapable metaphor of viral influence also appears in Bennett and Segerberg's aforementioned discussion of connective action in digital networks,62 as well as Papacharissi's work on affective publics as potential agents of political change.63 Notably, however, Papacharissi offers an alternative conceptualization of cultural and ideological contagion that avoids the mechanistic overtones of biologism, evoking instead religious forms of practice. Drawing from Mary Douglas's anthropology of religion,64 Papacharissi argues that collective expressions of political opinion on networked platforms like Twitter "may disrupt dominant narratives" in ways that resemble challenges to "ordered or cleaned structures of rituals."65 As Papacharissi explains, "the potential for disruption and interruption derives from the fact that these narratives amplify visibility for viewpoints that were not as prevalent before."66 This idea of citizens challenging the political status quo by making underrepresented perspectives and identities more publicly visible is a key theme that will be picked up in later chapters, as I explore how media-based symbolic action is imagined to work as a persuasive and effective form of political participation.

Papacharissi's model of religious-like contagion thus provides one compelling way of conceptualizing a peer persuasion-focused framework of citizen media participation. However, my core argument in this book is that our understanding of such a framework can be greatly enhanced by critically probing its relation to marketing logics and practices, particularly as they shift to more and more participatory and viral models in the digital age. To be sure, making this leap to a marketing framework is bound to make many uncomfortable, since the domain of marketing has itself been a frequent target of political and ideological critique. Those who are sympathetic to such a viewpoint may therefore be
tempted to avoid the connection between viral marketing and viral politics altogether and seek out a framework of peer persuasion that is wholly independent of marketing discourses. As should be clear by now, my approach in this book is quite the opposite: however, rather than simply pushing these critiques of marketing and its potentially worrisome effects on society to the side, I contend that they help bring to the surface many of the key issues that loom over a media persuasion–centered model of political participation more broadly, regardless of whatever viewpoint or ideology is being made to go viral. In the following section, I examine this body of criticism as a way of highlighting what is at stake in the hybridization of politics and marketing logics. Indeed, the citizen marketer approach is by its very nature embroiled in these tensions, even as it promises to democratize the domain of marketing that has long been an instrument of power and influence for political and economic elites.

The Citizen Marketer in Context: Promotional Culture, Packaged Politics, and the “Marketplace of Ideas”

To better understand the tensions and fault lines surrounding the citizen marketer approach, it is necessary to begin by considering the broader ascendency of marketing logics and models in the political cultures of advanced capitalist democracies. For Andrew Wernick, the 20th century was largely characterized by the increasing dominance of promotional practice in all areas of these societies, politics included. Wernick introduces the term promotional culture to refer to the way in which promotional messages have become “co-extensive with our symbolic produced world.” What this means is that in consumer-based economies that depend on the promotional industries for their very functioning (advertising, public relations, etc.), marketing becomes a kind of überlogic that comes to pervade all social activities and institutions—even those that exist outside of the commercial marketplace. For Wernick, this promotional culture has fully penetrated the domain of institutional politics, resulting in the explosion of slick election campaign advertising and the branding of politicians. Under conditions of an all-encompassing promotional culture, the practice of politics itself becomes largely a matter of circulating competing promotional messages, particularly via technologies of symbolic mediation. In line with numerous theorists noted previously, Wernick associates this shift with the predominance of the image and the sign in postmodernity.

In the United States, in many ways the global leader of institutional political spectacle from the 19th century onward, the promotion of electoral candidates has been deeply intertwined with commercial marketing practices.

The historian Liz Cohen traces the use of consumer-oriented mass marketing techniques within U.S. elections to as early as the 1890s, noting how their use intensified starting in the 1930s when both the Democratic and the Republican parties began hiring advertising professionals to promote their candidates. By the 1950s-era presidential campaigns of the Republican Dwight Eisenhower, many of New York’s top advertising agencies, such as BBDO and Young & Rubicam, were on board, making electoral marketing nearly indistinguishable from the pitching of household products. Over the years, numerous observers of the U.S. political system have been highly critical of this long-term move toward a mediated, marketed, and merchandized form of politics. Back in the 1950s, fresh from his defeat at the hands of Dwight Eisenhower and his well-remembered “I Like Ike” advertising campaign, the former U.S. presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson remarked that “the idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like breakfast cereal… is the ultimate indignity to the democratic process.” Similar critiques of the use of corporate-style marketing techniques in presidential campaigns can be found in political commentary throughout the postwar period, from Joe McGinniss’s The Selling of the President, 1968 to Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s Reagan-era Packaging the Presidency. As the United States exported this model of candidate marketing across the world from the 20th century onward, many critics have similarly lambasted it for its seemingly problematic elevation of political style over substance: for instance, the Australian scholar Elaine Thompson argues that “television, advertising, polling and image making have all been transmitted from America to Australia and have helped change the nature of election campaigns… these changes have helped trivialize issues.” The common concern among these critics is that as politics becomes packaged and marketed more and more like a commercial product for mass consumption through television and other mass media, superficial concerns will inevitably trump substantive ones and leave the democratic process impoverished in the process.

Crucially, these worries over political trivialization are closely linked to concerns about undue public manipulation by elites. As John Street explains, the critique of packaging in politics typically refers to “some form of deception: [packaging] is a device for distracting attention from the content, of presenting things in a way that fails to reflect their true character.” The feared result of packaged politics, Street notes, is a “political system in which cynical politicians and their party managers seduce and delude the voters,” essentially tricking them into supporting candidates and policies that they wouldn’t have otherwise had they only been presented with more accurate and truthful representations. This parallels well-established critiques of commercial marketing, where the concern is that style-heavy advertising campaigns deceive consumers into buying products that they don’t really need by associating them with desirable
by the career of Edward Bernays, a 20th-century master of media persuasion who traversed the fields of business and politics. Bernays famously pioneered the use of Freudian psychology to manipulate publics by appealing to the irrational impulses of the unconscious, applying his techniques to both government propaganda and commercial public relations (the latter being a term he himself coined as a more positive-sounding substitute for propaganda—a perfect encapsulation of his handicraft). As the legacy of Bernays reminds us, the histories of propaganda, commercial marketing, and modern political advertising and promotion are all bound up with one another, connected by a thread of potentially deceitful manipulation that continues to haunt the terrain of political persuasion in the contemporary era.

If political elites have been transformed by an all-encompassing promotional culture into manipulative, even propagandistic media marketers, then where does this leave ordinary citizens? The most pessimistic view, articulated by Frankfurt School—influenced theorists such as Stuart Ewen, suggests that the promotional media spectacle of elite-institutional politics and its "dominance of surface over substance" ultimately has a pacifying and disengaging effect on citizens—a sort of new opiate of the masses. However, this idea has been challenged in recent years by cultural studies scholars who emphasize the agency of the political audience to interpret and actively construct meaning out of the persuasive marketing messages handed down from above by political elites. Writing off the public as a bunch of brainwashed dupes, so they would say, ignores the possibility that many media-literate citizens are becoming savvy about how the system works. At the same time, Barrie Axford notes that although interpretative agency can help citizens resist elite political manipulation and thus potentially assuage the sorts of fears noted above, this alone "can still leave them without the means and perhaps the desire to affect the process" of a politics marketed from above.

This concern over the relatively weak role of citizens in political systems dominated by elite media marketing and promotion ties in with broader critiques of the marketplace of ideas as a model of democracy based on (neo)liberal economic principles. Associated with mid-20th-century thinkers like Anthony Downs and Joseph Schumpeter, this model envisions a system in which politicians competitively sell themselves and their policies to voters in a way that mimics commercial markets, and has provided the conceptual foundation for modern political marketing as a professionalized practice.

For many critics, the underlying problem with the marketplace-of-ideas model—above and beyond any concerns over the manipulative tactics that may be employed in the selling process—is that it positions citizens in a consumer-like role that is seen as fundamentally passive and limiting. For instance, Justin Lewis, Sanna Inthorn, and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen argue that in advanced Western capitalist democracies steeped in neoliberal values, "the world of politics is left to the politicians and
the experts, who compete to sell us positive images of themselves... [consumers] respond to the possibilities on display rather than setting the agenda... their power is limited to the ability to choose one product rather than another... as a way of being, it falls far short of the ideal of citizenship that underpins democratic society."92 Echoing these concerns, Nico Carpentier argues that the liberal marketplace-of-ideas model carves out a minimalist role for democratic participation: that is limited to voting-as-buying, resulting in a weakened democracy dominated by elite rather than citizen control.93

Furthermore, critics have raised concerns about how a consumer-like model of democratic citizenship emphasizes the pursuit of individual self-interest over a more civic-spirited concern for what is best for the larger community. For instance, Liz Cohen discusses how the system of modern institutional political marketing has mimicked the commercial marketing sphere in emphasizing audience segmentation and highly tailored appeals, leading to the troubling trend of "purchaser citizens" who act like self-interested consumers in their interactions with government. Instead of asking how various policies might benefit the greater good, Cohen argues, purchaser citizens, shaped by their experience of consumer-tailored political messaging, ask only how these policies might benefit them personally.94 Along similar lines, Heather Savigny argues that a marketer-consumer model undercut democracy because of its "inherent individualization of both the public and political actors, and emphasis upon their differing short-term goals," which she connects to the troubling encroachment of neoliberal ideology more broadly.95 Although Asad and Bennett advocate for a more neutral and context-contingent understanding of the marketplace-of-ideas concept, their analysis of modern political marketing trends leads them to warn of "a possible eclipse of traditional political cultures through the continual initiatives of marketing research and strategic communication." Messages that target individuals at deep emotional levels may tear down the collective associations that draw citizens into public life.96 In other words, as citizens are increasingly addressed by political marketing professionals in terms of their personal needs and desires as consumers, they may lose sight of the broader public interest and foreclose their own potential to contribute to collective and civic goals.

Thus, the consumer-like citizen who emerges from a liberal marketplace-of-ideas model of democracy is envisioned by critics to be self-interested, politically delimited, and ultimately demobilized. A similar picture emerges from scholarship that examines the effects of corporate encroachment into spaces of political activism that lie outside the institutional or parliamentary sphere. For instance, Alison Hearn argues that so-called corporate social responsibility efforts like Disney's pro-environmental online venture advance an individualistic, self-centered, consumption-celebrating style of activism that diminishes the kind of collective consciousness necessary to organize and effect meaningful political change.97 Along similar lines, Dahlgren laments the rise of consumption-centered activism because of its seemingly inextricable ties to a neoliberal model of "intensive commercialization and values that increasingly affirm private fulfillment over social solidarity."98 Interestingly, Dahlgren connects this idea to the earlier-noted critique of slacktivism, describing personalized digital expression as an essentially consumerist form of political participation "where feeling good takes priority over political commitment."99 For Dahlgren, the feared result of "societal participation via commercial logics" that privilege personal pleasure and satisfaction is a "weakened political efficacy"—again, a key theme that cuts across a range of critical scholarship on the hybridization of democracy and market relations.

However, the pessimistic conclusion that consumption activity—and marketing activity, for that matter—is fundamentally at odds with meaningful democratic participation is by no means universally held. In the next section, I examine how the concept of the citizen consumer has been used to advance a more optimistic vision of "politics by other means" and how the concept of the citizen marketer emerges from this line of thought and potentially continues this recuperative project. In contrast to scholarship that positions the roles of citizen and consumer as fundamentally antithetical to one another, the citizen consumer literature alerts us to the complex ways in which these roles might potentially be reconciled, creating new and alternative routes to political participation and empowerment. At the same time, the litany of criticisms of the market-democracy nexus outlined above—from leaving citizens vulnerable to trivialization and manipulation to prioritizing self-interest (or perhaps factional group interest) at the expense of the broader public interest—help sensitize us to the profound issues that must be navigated as the domains of both consumption and media promotion are increasingly embraced as sites of political action.

From the Citizen Consumer to the Citizen Marketer

To properly elucidate the concept of the citizen marketer, it is necessary to examine how it extends from the logic of the citizen consumer. Broadly speaking, the citizen consumer can be understood as a person who consciously draws on his or her status as a citizen when making consumption choices in the commercial marketplace or, as Cohen describes, "put[s] the market power of the consumer to work politically."91 In its most typical usage, the citizen consumer describes an orientation of individual social actors who take into consideration the political repercussions of their consumption behaviors and make deliberate
choices about whether to purchase specific products in accordance with their political interests. Using the allocation of their shopping budgets as a political tool to support certain kinds of favored businesses, industries, and production practices—as well as to deny financial support to others that they perceive as problematic—consumer citizens work to reshape the marketplace of consumption into a venue of political participation. In her historical analysis, Cohen emphasizes a distinction between this model of the citizen consumer and the more self-interested purchaser citizen noted previously; whereas the latter acts like a consumer in the realm of politics, the former acts like a citizen in the realm of the marketplace. In other words, rather than prioritizing personal pleasure and satisfaction, citizen consumers are seemingly guided by altogether more public and civic concerns, even as they assert their political will through individual acts of consumption.

This politicalization of personal consumer activity has been identified by scholars as part of a broader shift in advanced capitalist democracies toward what Bennett calls “lifestyle politics,” which correlates with a long-term decline in citizen participation in traditional political institutions. As Bennett explains, the “dutiful” citizen of the past felt an obligation to participate at this institutional level and saw activities such as voting and formal party membership as the center of political life. However, because of a range of factors, including increasing public cynicism toward political institutions, as well as the growth of consumer culture and its attending values of individual self-expression and empowerment, today’s citizens often look outside traditional political institutions and organizational collectives to advance their political agendas. These “actualizing” citizens, Bennett argues, are guided by a “higher sense of individual purpose,” which may or may not correspond with their own material self-interest, but certainly aligns with their closely held ideological commitments and attachments. Addressing the Latin American context, Nestor Garcia-Canciini posits that the appropriation of consumption for new forms of activism centered on issues such as environmentalism, race, and gender is a development rife with democratic potential, as corrupted political institutions are effectively sidestepped in favor of more directly accessible sites of participation. As Canciini argues, “questions specific to citizenship...are answered more often than not through private consumption of commodities...than through the abstract rules of democracy or through participation in discredited political organizations.”

This more optimistic assessment of the citizen consumer as a form of “politics by other means” is also reflected in Bennett’s work on what he terms “logo activism,” which marks a key turning point in the scholarship. As Bennett argues, the politicization of consumer culture now extends beyond mere consumption activity (e.g. boycotts and “buycotts”) to include activist efforts to appropriate the symbolism of brands to launch political critiques of the transnational corporate entities that deploy them for economic gain. Specifically, Bennett examines networked digital communication campaigns, largely grassroots in nature, that co-opt and parodify brand logos like the Nike “swosh” to draw widespread attention to the human rights, labor, and environmental issues that surround these very corporate actors. The advantage of logo activism, Bennett posits, is that it repackages radical political ideas in a branded language that is instantly recognizable—and thus potentially more accessible and impactful—to a consumer-oriented public that may be less responsive to older, drier forms of political advocacy.

This notion of using the stylized appeal of marketing techniques to critique the marketers, so to speak, represents the core logic of culture jamming, a thoroughly postmodernist approach to activism that seeks to “destabilize and challenge the dominant messages of multinational corporations and consumer capitalism” by directly hijacking and subverting them. Although its conceptual lineage has been traced to the Situationist International movement of the 1960s and related figures such as Guy Debord, the term was first coined by the experimental music group Negativland in the 1980s in reference to public billboard alteration and other radically appropriative political art projects. It was then further popularized in the 1990s by Adbusters magazine, known for its anti-consumerist parodies of commercial advertisements. Crucially, the development of culture jamming and logo activism points to a politicization of marketing activity that parallels the politicization of consumption activity denoted in the concept of the citizen consumer: the latter seeks to co-opt the domain of commerce as a venue for asserting one’s political will, and the former seeks to co-opt the closely related domain of commercial promotion and media advertising for similar ends.

Furthermore, Jamie Warner notes how culture-jamming techniques of marketing parody and subversion are being applied to the domain of institutional politics, in addition to the typical corporate targets of logo activism and outfits like Adbusters. Warner explains that “as politicians and political parties increasingly utilize the branding techniques of commercial marketers to sell their political agendas, it follows that similar jamming techniques could be employed to call those branding techniques into question.” For instance, the “America Was Never Great” hat, created by Krystal Lake as a critical appropriation of the Trump campaign’s marketing efforts, serves as a vivid illustration of what political culture jamming can look like in the contemporary context.

Examining the logic of culture jamming draws our attention to how the idea of political marketing has transcended its origins as an elite practice and has been adopted by a wide range of constituencies as a means of disseminating political ideas in the postmodern language of promotional culture. Now that both hegemonic and counterhegemonic forces are exploiting the formal
how audiences become part of the logic of the marketplace. Indeed, the promotional industries of the early 21st century have become greatly focused on fostering and encouraging this kind of participatory marketing activity, coaxing social media users to share an abundance of branded viral content in hopes that this peer-to-peer communication will be more persuasive than traditional paid advertising (which has shown to be far less trusted by the public).

In the industry literature, this emergent consumer-as-marketer goes by many names, including the brand advocate and the customer or brand evangelist.

In addition, the term citizen marketer has also been used in commercial digital marketing contexts, although it is meant in a different way than how I define it in this book. For instance, Jackie Huba and Ben McConnell describe citizen marketers as ardent fans who use Internet tools to create amateur promotional messages on behalf of their favorite brands, products, and people: "they are on the fringes, driven by passion, creativity, and a sense of duty. Like a concerned citizen." In addition, Ruth E. Brown describes citizen marketing as the act of "consumers voluntarily posting online product information" through reviews, videos, and other forms of user-generated content that can influence the purchasing decisions of their networked peers. In both cases, the authors equate citizen marketing with the amateur production of promotional messages, which, again, is not how I deploy the term. As in the case of culture jamming, this sort of amateur production activity may expand the available range of persuasive media content that can be spread peer to peer, beyond that which is created by professionals and traditional elites. However, thinking of citizen marketing only in terms of amateur production obscures the promotional labor that people engage in as they publicize favored content through practices of circulation, sharing, and endorsement.

Furthermore, the word "citizen" is invoked in these commercially oriented treatments of the citizen marketer more as a synonym for an ordinary person or media amateur than as a way of signaling any distinctly political activity. At the same time, however, Brown’s emphasis on how networked consumers are driven to share both positive and negative assessments of commercial brands—a point also made by Jenkins, Ford, and Green in their discussion of grassroots intermediaries as having the potential to be brand hostiles as well as brand supportive—suggests how consumers may assert a degree of power over the commercial marketing process as they take advantage of their own peer influence on digital platforms. To be certain, this kind of industry-focused literature is intended to help professional marketers figure out how to manage and shape electronic word of mouth for their own strategic purposes. Yet it is also acutely aware of the struggle to adapt to a more participatory media environment in which consumers have in some sense democratized the flow of persuasive messages. In this sense, Brown’s take on the citizen role of what she calls citizen...
marketing in the commercial context dovetails with a key theme of this book: as the field of media promotion becomes more and more a site of public participation in the digital age, there is potential for a broadening of voices and perspectives and an increased opportunity for grassroots actors to challenge the power of the institutional elites that have traditionally controlled the machinery of persuasive communication.

Although the role of the grassroots intermediary (i.e., the brand advocate or evangelist, etc.) has largely been examined up to this point in relation to the commercial sphere, this book is concerned with how it becomes a site of participation in the political sphere, in the broadest of possible senses. In other words, my focus is on how people use their promotional power as microlevel, peer-to-peer agents in the broader information environment to help advance a political—as opposed to a purely commercial—agenda. In some cases, like the logo-activism campaigns discussed previously, this may in fact involve targeting the corporate sector on distinctly ideological grounds. However, unlike earlier definitions that are limited to the domain of the commercial marketplace, my definition of the citizen marketer refers to peer-to-peer media-spreading activity that is motivated by an interest in promoting one’s political opinions and agendas to one’s peers. In other words, the citizen marketer consciously draws on his or her status as a citizen when making choices about participating in the circulation of mediated symbolic artifacts, a practice that by its very nature affords free promotion and publicity to various ideas, organizations, and people. In the era of networked digital media and the social sharing of content, this promotional labor has become as routine as going shopping at the supermarket, so perhaps it is not surprising that it has been widely embraced as a venue for politics by other means in a way that parallels the citizen consumer model.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, this kind of citizen marketer activity is now being deliberately fostered by a wide range of political institutions and organizations, which are following the lead of the commercial sphere in attempting to exploit the persuasive power of electronic word of mouth for strategic ends. Regarding electoral campaign promotion on social networking sites like Facebook, for example, Michael Serazio explains that “as part of wider ambitions by the advertising industry to coloitize these spaces, [political] consultants are eagerly pursing the recruitment of evangelists there, which represents ... the holy grail for campaigns.” As this language underlines, the political equivalents of brand evangelists are not whole inventions of the professional class of digital marketing consultants, but emerge more organically from the broader technological and cultural conditions of the social media age, to the point where their promotional labor can be “recruited” by institutional actors: Thus, examining the citizen marketer approach only in the context of formalized, institutionally architectured viral promotion risks missing the full scope of the phenomenon, which spans both grassroots connective action and participation in professional political marketing campaigns.

However, the story of the citizen marketer does not begin with Facebook and Twitter, or with the rise of contemporary viral and social media marketing strategies, although these developments have made this approach to political action far more widespread and visible. If we expand our understanding of media content to include artifacts inscribed with text, graphics, and other symbolic material, we can begin to put the long and complex lineage of citizen marketing into focus. For instance, for those who wish to spread a persuasive political message to a public audience but are without access to traditional media outlets (i.e., newspapers, radio, television, etc.), the corporeal human body has historically been mobilized as a kind of ad hoc exhibition screen. As Stuart Hall once noted with regard to black popular culture, “these cultures have used the body as if it was, and often it was, the only cultural capital we had,” underlining how this personal space of signification has been utilized by even the most historically marginalized and disempowered groups. Indeed, printed buttons, T-shirts, caps, handheld signs, and banners have been used by generations of citizens from across the spectrum to inject political messages into public space. In addition, a range of conspicuous personal possessions have similarly been transformed into media screens for political messaging purposes, most notably the automobile (i.e., bumper stickers) and the home dwelling (i.e., lawn signs). Of course, these word-of-mouth—or word-of-mouth, word-of-car, etc.—promotion techniques have long been exploited by elites for institutional political marketing, just as today’s digital consultants are currently working to take advantage of content sharing and endorsement on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

This history of politically themed, message-spreading consumer goods underscores how the citizen marketer has grown directly from the citizen consumer: in the case of slogan T-shirts or bumper stickers, citizens not only use their politics to guide their consumption choices at the cash register, but also display the purchased goods as a means of publicizing the viewpoints expressed therein. A parallel can be drawn to the act of sharing political media content on digital networks: at once, an individual consumes the content that she or he favors and conspicuously displays the consumption choice in ways that expand its publicity (through liking, linking, reposting, etc.). Thus, relatively primitive personal platforms for exhibiting media material, such as T-shirts and bumper stickers—which are limited to displaying static, two-dimensional graphics and short bits of text—can be understood as forerunners to today’s social media profile pictures, hashtags, and status updates. Although each of these platforms has its unique technological and expressive capabilities, what they have in common is that they all provide media nonprofessionals with microlevel (but not necessarily insignificant) opportunities to participate in the spread of political
messages in the service of advancing their interests. It is no mere coincidence, then, that slogans like “Make America Great Again” and “America Was Never Great” would appear both in digital posts and on displayable objects like baseball caps, since both types of venues can be used as sites of conspicuous symbolic consumption to make one’s politics visible to a public audience.

One of the primary contributions of The Citizen Marketer is thus to draw connections between these forms of participatory and embodied media practice that may not have previously been recognized as related. My argument, however, is not simply another version of “there is nothing new under the sun”—that is, that networked digital media simply offer new ways of doing the same old things. In fact, much of this book is dedicated to exploring how digital technologies are both intensifying and transforming the citizen marketer approach in many crucial ways, particularly in terms of allowing citizens to strategically share journalistic information with peers as well as more concise and packaged symbolic expressions. Furthermore, I do not mean to suggest that older artifacts like placards and buttons indicate an age-old tradition of participatory political marketing that has been with us since the dawn of time. Although important antecedents do stretch far back, the citizen marketer approach has developed in response to specific political, economic, and cultural conditions—a point that will be addressed in detail in the following chapter, which explores the citizen marketer’s historical lineage.

Selective Forwarding and Curatorial Agency

In making the connection between digital and material culture forms of political message spreading, this book focuses on a specific aspect of participatory media practice that demands sustained attention: what I refer to as selective forwarding. By this, I mean the act of selecting preexisting media material that one favors and sharing it with others via a platform that she or he can personally program or control—essentially a matter of media distribution, rather than production. Whereas the creative political expressions of citizens working in mediated contexts—blog authors, YouTube video producers, Internet meme makers, etc.—have been the subject of much scholarly interest and discussion in recent years, the practice of passing along the creative expressions of others to a public audience is only now beginning to emerge as a major focal point of theory and research. This is perhaps because original creative work may be seen as innately more interesting and exciting than “mere” relay, which, by contrast, can appear mundane,rote, or facile in character. In discussions of human agency, political and otherwise, it is far easier to recognize how the act of crafting unique creative expressions provides individuals with a potentially influential voice. However, according to the viral model that has come to pervade much of participatory media culture, it is the peer-to-peer circulation of information—as opposed to its initial moment of creation—that truly marks its salience and resonance among the public. Thus, the act of nodal distribution takes on crucial significance in a framework of viral marketing—like political persuasion, as each individual agent of dissemination contributes to the overall spread of a message.

As noted earlier, critics of viral metaphors of contagion have rightly emphasized the human agency involved in the spread of media material, although they typically point to creative processes of transformation as their primary evidence. For instance, Limor Shifman writes that “in the digital age, people...can spread content as is by forwarding, linking, or copying. Yet a quick look at any Web 2.0 application would reveal that people do choose to create their own versions of Internet memes, in startling volumes...user-driven imitation and remix have become highly valued pillars of contemporary participatory culture.” This focus on remixing and other forms of productive agency dramatically pushes back against the notion of viral transmission as an involuntary process. However, it is not the only way to make such a case. Even when people forward media content as is, they are still engaging in processes of selection and dissemination that are strongly agentic in character. To borrow a term popular in business circles, we can identify a curatorial agency that lies at the heart of selective forwarding practices. In the curatorial metaphor, authorial voice comes not from creating symbolic content, but from assembling it and (re)presenting it to an audience. By choosing to pass on certain media artifacts over others in a crowded information environment, agents of selective forwarding actively help push the flow of media messages in the direction of their own interests, echoing Jenkins’s adage that “materials travel through the web because they are meaningful to the people who spread them.”

Stressing the importance of curatorial agency within participatory media practice does not detract from or downsize the significance of creative or productive agency—without the latter, the former could not exist. However, a focus on selective forwarding, and the curatorial agency that it engenders, affords an opportunity to examine a much broader group of participants in the field of mediated political persuasion beyond the relatively smaller circle of professionals and amateurs who create their own symbolic content. In other words, we must consider not only the Krystal Lakes of the world who fashion political slogans like “America Was Never Great” (or, for that matter, the Donald Trumps of the world who craft media persuasion campaigns to advance elite power), but also all those who amplify and boost these messages by passing them along in both online and offline venues. Indeed, much of the activity discussed in this book involves the selective forwarding of persuasive political messages as is, such as, changing one’s Facebook profile picture to a social movement symbol,
strategically tweeting links to news articles that raise awareness about select issues, and displaying mass-produced T-shirts, buttons, and bumper stickers that promote a favored electoral candidate or cause.

The notion of curatorial agency thus helps us to appreciate how joining broad-scale efforts to disseminate political messages can be conceptualized as potentially exercising a modicum of power and influence in a deeply mediatized political realm. Although many participants in such campaigns may not have a hand in producing or remixing the content itself, they play a part in adding to its meaning and value by standing behind it and integrating it into the "face" of their public identities. Crucially, this added value is often seen as stemming from the authenticating power of ordinary people who choose to associate themselves with a message by presenting it via their personalized media outlets and channels. In other words, embodied personal endorsement is seen to lend an air of authentic grassroots support and enthusiasm to a political message, which may be instrumental in terms of its capacity to persuade. Thus, rather than viewing those who engage in selective forwarding as "dumb" connective links in a networked dissemination of ideas, we can recognize the complex relationships that form between individuals and the symbolic content they choose to incorporate into the public presentation of their social and political identities.

Furthermore, as much as the viral metaphor of involuntary contagion may be far from the reality, it is important to consider how it has impacted the way in which communicative power is perceived at a time when making content go viral has become a common frame. Although the notion of viral infection paints a picture of weak and vulnerable audiences that are susceptible to outside control, it also makes this control appear to be easily accessible to anyone who wishes to seize it for his or her own purposes. In other words, the viral media metaphor can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering for individuals, depending on whether one sees him- or herself as an active agent of dissemination or as a target. Moreover, this double-edge sword of the viral media metaphor seems to place an imposition on those who wish to see their political interests succeed in a mediatized political realm: either infect the media or the media will infect you. Presented with this choice, it is understandable that many citizens would try their hand at the media persuasion game in hopes of furthering their own political agendas. Thus, although we can uphold that the peer-to-peer spread of media messages is a process that is rich with human agency at every stage, we can also recognize how viral notions of mind contagion may act as a driving force in the popular uptake of the citizen marketer approach. Indeed, imagining those around you to be potential targets for your infectious message can provide an encouraging sense that you may in fact be able to make an impact on them and thus contribute to the broader shaping of public opinion. Although the viral contagion model is far too simplistic and mechanical to work as automatically as it suggests, it appears to serve as a useful fiction for many who wish to assert some small degree of control over the realm of political media and marketing that has historically pored down from above.

At the same time, it seems to demand a large leap of faith on the part of participants who must see themselves as meaningfully contributing to cumulative network dynamics that are, by definition, diffuse and aggregate in nature. The lack of immediate measurable feedback indicating the impact of one's own contributions to wide-scale projects of political promotion and influence presents a clear challenge for those who would take on a citizen marketing role, since it may be difficult to envision such connections between the individual and the mass. Yet as going viral becomes more of an accepted way of thinking about how microlevel acts of media sharing and spreading can add up to something much larger, the seductive appeal of citizen marketing will likely continue to gain force. Moreover, as discussed in the concluding chapter of this book, the recent growth of Big Data analysis promises to make peer-to-peer networked action increasingly quantifiable and legible, potentially adding further fuel to the citizen marketer approach. As the Facebook data analyst Eytan Bakshy notes in reference to the popular red equal sign profile campaign for marriage equality (discussed at length in Chapter 3), "for a long time, when people stood up for a cause and weren't physically standing shoulder to shoulder, the size of their impact wasn't immediately apparent. But today, we can see the spread of an idea online in greater detail than ever before." Notably, such an analysis says virtually nothing about the broader political consequences of a networked spread of ideas. Yet for those who adopt the approach of the citizen marketer, contributing to larger processes of message circulation is seen as a privileged pathway to empowerment in an age in which politics has become a fully mediatized phenomenon.

Outline of the Book

The citizen marketer approach to political participation may hold a great deal of promise for those who desire to remake the world in their interests, yet do these tactics make any difference? If so, how much? How could we even tell? From a practical standpoint, these may be the million-dollar questions, and The Citizen Marketer does not purport to have any easy answers. Rather, the primary purpose of this book is to qualitatively explore the experience of citizen marketing practices within lived social and cultural contexts. It is less concerned with gauging the precise extent to which citizen marketing translates into measurable political agency than with how this agency is conceived by social actors and what this can tell us about the shifting contours of political participation. By
investigating the motivations and logics behind the act of pushing one's political viewpoints in public via media-based symbolic action, as well as how it has developed and intensified in response to key social, cultural, and technological changes, *The Citizen Marketer* charts the evolution of political participation in an age of mediatized politics, promotional culture, and viral circulation.

Furthermore, the book critically examines the tensions and uncertainties that arise from the imposition that citizen marketing and its lofty promises of empowerment place on those who wish to influence the political world. If we feel that we must outwardly promote our political beliefs and identities through continual participation in public mediated discourse, how might this potentially threaten the quality of our social interactions and contribute to a fractured and contentious public? In what ways might the imposition to take sides and show support for one competing set of viewpoints over another exacerbate ongoing trends of political polarization and partisanship? Furthermore, how might a shifting emphasis toward symbolic political goals risk a disconnection with the structural realities of the social and political world, and how might new forms of media and marketing literacy help avoid these pitfalls and potentially maintain such connections? *The Citizen Marketer* probes these questions and many others by putting the experiences of its practitioners under the microscope, teasing out the anxieties as well as the hopes of those who have leaped into the fray of participatory political promotion.

Interviews gathered from more than four years of qualitative empirical research form the core of much of this book, although Chapter 2 investigates the more historical context of citizen marketing, tracing a lineage that extends to the beginnings of political iconography and propaganda. However, the shift from authoritarian to democratic systems of government, along with the rise of the bourgeois public sphere, marks a key turning point in this history. As the badges and heraldry symbols of monarchic and despotic allegiance give way to the promotional spectacle of Western democratic elections, symbolic artifacts of political sentiment such as banners and buttons begin to offer new entry points for citizen participation. This emergent repertoire of collective action also becomes a significant aspect of organized social movements and protest groups, which similarly incorporated symbolic public displays into their efforts by the middle of the 19th century. However, although part of the story of citizen marketing emerges from the tradition of formalized collective assembly and public political spectacle, Chapter 2 also explores the influence of a more vernacular tradition of political message sending associated with cultural forms of expression such as dress. This culturally situated engagement with politics takes a revolutionary turn in the countercultural movement of the 1960s onward, as expressive style contests to serve as a symbolic public articulation of new political viewpoints and identities. Of particular significance in this history is the growth of the slogan-printed T-shirt, a keystone object of citizen marketing that signals the arrival of mediated political expression into popular culture and the casual spaces of everyday life. After tracking the development of the “body screen” enabled by mediatized apparel and other conspicuous commodities, Chapter 2 turns to the digital body of Internet profiles—a set of platforms that have greatly multiplied the ways in which citizens can share political opinion with others. However, rather than emphasizing a transition from offline to online spaces of citizen marketing, Chapter 2 concludes by exploring the interconnections between corporeally embodied displays and the digital networks that often amplify and extend them in new and significant ways.

This historical context sets the stage for the following chapters, which draw on firsthand interview data to explore how citizen marketing is currently playing out in several key political contexts. Chapter 3 focuses specifically on the terrain of identity-focused social movements, using the extended case study of gay and lesbian activism to examine how citizen marketing practices are mobilized in strategic projects of mediated public visibility. Taking as its theoretical point of departure Hannah Arendt’s notion of the space of appearance in the public realm, the chapter charts how citizens use media-enabled practices of self-labeling to announce the presence of their identities and attempt to influence perceptions of social and political reality. Through tactics such as posting identificatory profile pictures on their Facebook accounts, gay and lesbian citizens and their allies model a style of political advocacy that puts visible identities to work as visual rhetoric. Although this “coming-out” model may have particular resonance for the gay and lesbian community that has long sought to end its historical invisibility, it is now been adopted by a wide range of political constituencies that seek to challenge notions of who “the people” out there truly are. More critically, Chapter 3 also considers how public visibility campaigns may contribute to a flattening of differences, as social identities become branded with homogenized sets of symbolic artifacts. On the one hand, the packaging and branding of identity, long a sticking point in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender politics because of its association with mainstream assimilation and the marginalization of intragroup difference, alerts us to the possible limits of visibility as a strategy for inducing social and political change. On the other hand, the grassroots nature of participatory coming-out campaigns also introduces opportunities for those who are marginalized in such efforts to become visible in turn, as strategies of parody and reflexive commentary are used to complicate unified and simplified displays of collective political identity.

Chapter 4 turns from the identity politics of social movements to the formal political realm of election campaigns. Drawing on the stories of citizens who voluntarily participated in the peer-to-peer marketing of candidates, as well as developments from recent election cycles in the United States and the United
the personalized drama of Internet "cause célèbres" may open important spaces for citizens to encounter the political in culturally accessible and emotionally powerful ways, it also comes with attending risks of trivialization that recall the well-established critiques of political marketing.

The concluding chapter of *The Citizen Marketer* further interrogates the pressing debates and controversies that arise over the course of the book. Taking as its central theme the question of how we might develop a critical literacy of citizens marketing to assess its broader social and political consequences, Chapter 6 begins by returning to the slacktivism controversy that continually dogs this set of practices. Although there is little available evidence to support the theory that participating in symbolic, media-based actions becomes a one-to-one substitute for other forms of political participation, the converse theory positing that these practices will move citizens "up the ladder" of participation also demands critical scrutiny. As discussed in Chapter 6, a third possibility remains—that is, that citizens marketing practices may have little or no causal relationship with other forms of political participation whatsoever, and both organizationally active and organizationally inactive citizens remain at their respective levels of commitment even when engaging in media-based persuasion.

Yet beyond the issue of how citizen marketing may or may not impact other forms of political activity, what does the increasing focus on marketing-like practices mean for the future of democratic citizenship? It may potentially expand the circle of political participation by making it easier, more accessible, more casual, and even more fun—but at what cost? Indeed, the citizen marketer approach presents many notable risks: in addition to exacerbating political polarization, partisanship, and an ideologically driven relativization of knowledge, perhaps the most serious threat of citizen marketing's ascendance is that it might attenuate the connection between symbolic victories in the media and complex political realities on the ground. The challenge, then, for those who adopt these practices is to work to retain and strengthen connections between the symbolic and the material, and this requires a deep reflexivity about the nature of the political content we choose to spread to others and what we hope to achieve by doing so. By drawing critical attention to these practices and exploring the lines of tension that run through them, *The Citizen Marketer* compels us to heighten our awareness of our participation in the promotional culture of the contemporary political sphere, and to think more carefully through the meanings of what we push out into the world via the plethora of media platforms that we can now personally curate and control.

In addition, Chapter 6 addresses how a critical literacy of citizen marketing practices must also include an enhanced awareness and consideration of the broader power structures that bear upon them, ranging from elite attempts to shape peer-to-peer political message flows to serve institutional agendas to gaps.
in technological access and skills that may reproduce inequality in citizen marketing's digital scenes. Furthermore, the discussion of critical literacy returns us to the profound tension regarding the relationship between citizen marketing and the neoliberal market ideologies that seemingly underwrite it. Here, I suggest a distinction that potentially can be drawn between an uncritical acceptance of marketing logic that replicates its hierarchical and managerial power structures, and a more critical acceptance that attempts to refashion the marketplace of ideas into a more democratized field of agonistic symbolic contestation. Importantly, this potential democratization of political marketing differs from the claim, often made by its professional practitioners and defenders, that political marketing is innately democratic because it caters to the public's wants and preferences through processes of opinion research and adjustment. Although such a notion leaves in place the hierarchical power relations of elite managerial practice, a more radical reworking of the idea of political marketing calls on citizens to wrest a degree of control over the persuasion process through participatory media actions and interventions.

The task of navigating the tensions outlined above may be particularly urgent at the current juncture, yet such concerns are far from new. In Chapter 2, we will continue our exploration of the citizen marketing approach by charting its historical lineage over the decades and centuries, ranging from the formal public spectacle of mass democratic assemblies to the informal expressive practices of postwar popular culture. As we will see, public participation in the circulation of political symbols has long been a fixture of democratic life as well as a source of controversy and concern.

2

The Historical Lineage of the Citizen Marketer

Citizen Marketing in Two Waves

The year is 1840, and in cities across the United States, a new form of political spectacle is on the march. Tens of thousands of men parade down the streets, bearing cloth banners and silk ribbon badges that promote the candidacy of their favored presidential hopeful, William Henry Harrison. The image of the log cabin, a symbol of Harrison's purported salt-of-the-earth origins, is emblazoned on innumerable objects carried in the processions. So too is Harrison's portrait, as well as the inescapable campaign slogan, "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too." Some parade-goers even roll giant balls made of buckskin through the streets that broadcast block-letter slogans in support of Harrison and his Whig Party. As the historian Roger Fischer notes, these pioneering promotional objects of the 1840 Harrison campaign can be understood today as "the remote ancestors of our modern billboards, bumper stickers and lawn signs,"—not to mention the viral videos, image macro memes, profile pictures, and other digital media content that citizens now use to conspicuously promote their political preferences to their peers.

Far from being mere dazzling curiosities, the participatory visual extravaganzas of 19th-century American electioneering played a key role in marketing political candidates and parties to the public. According to Fischer, this campaign tradition depended on "vast numbers of rank-and-file supporters with enough enthusiasm to covet objects promoting a candidate and enough flamboyance to promote that commitment proudly on their lapels elsewhere." In other words, efforts such as the 1840 Harrison campaign were powered by the labor of early citizen marketers, who took it on themselves to forward their preferred candidate's message to their fellow voters through the public display of promotional material. Michael Schudson, in his historical treatment of the evolution of American citizenship, describes this mid-19th-century period