The citizen marketer

Promoting political opinion in the social media age

Bossetta, Michael

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Book Review for *The Citizen Marketer: Promoting Political Opinion in the Social Media Age* (2017: Oxford University Press) by Joel Penney

Michael Bossetta (University of Copenhagen)

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Joel Penney makes an innovative, interdisciplinary intervention into the scholarship on political participation with *The Citizen Marketer: Promoting Political Opinion in the Social Media Age*. By melding modern marketing frameworks with democratic theory, Penney offers a timely heuristic for rethinking citizens' engagement with politics on social media. The "citizen marketer approach" developed in the book considers low-cost, redistributive forms of online participation – such as changing one's profile picture on Facebook or retweeting a politician's message on Twitter – to be persuasive practices of peer-to-peer communication that enact contemporary citizenship. "[S]uch efforts," writes Penney, "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 segments of the public" (pg. 5).

Tackling the slacktivism debate head-on, Penney stresses the participatory and agential qualities exhibited by citizens when they share political content online. Rather than treating rebroadcasting practices as a passive or perfunctory, Penney asserts that citizens assume a "curatorial agency" in their "selective forwarding" of media to peers (pg. 31). Indeed, it is precisely this cognitive process of selection that separates humans from bots. The sharing practices of networked citizens, collectively, can increase their influence as gatekeepers and upend traditional power relations by "democratiz[ing] the field of persuasive political communication that has been historically dominated by elite interests" (pg. 7).

However, the picture isn't quite so rosy for the demos. With elites compressing complex policy issues into tweets, memes, and GIFs, the trend towards "packaged and marketed politics" (pg. 8) might carry significantly negative consequences for democracy. Penney outlines these risks in detail: the reduction of substance in political debate, the facilitation of manipulative propaganda, or the promotion of self-interest over the collective good. Writ-large, the book's central question is whether informal, low-cost forms of participation serve to "trivialize" politics or foster broader inclusion into the democratic process (p. 168).

To answer this question, Penney first provides a genealogy of citizen marketing. The exercise, which is too often lacking in social media studies, helps situate citizens' digital campaigning practices within the broader context of their offline antecedents. Penney identifies two waves of citizen marketing practices. The first, engendered by the shift from authoritarian rule to liberal democracy, is marked by the mass demonstrations and political rallies of the 19th century. Dovetailing with the rise of capitalism, this period witnessed citizens proudly displaying ribbons, banners, and badges to symbolically express their political preferences during organized events.

Penney traces the second wave of citizen marketing to the wearing of political T-shirts, which has its roots in 1960's protest subcultures but would later be adopted by political campaigns. On the one hand, this relatively casual mode of political expression indicates a

trivialization of politics vis-à-vis attending large-scale demonstrations. Upon closer inspection, however, the low-cost act of dawning a political T-shirt also holsters a number of positive democratic qualities.

First, it lowers the barriers to entry for citizens to become politically engaged (if albeit minimally). Second, it facilitates community building and social trust among strangers through visual signifiers of affinity. Third, it opens up political expression to social and cultural spaces that may be devoid of politics or marginalized by existing power configurations. And fourth, it personalizes the act of political expression by putting individuals in control over when, where, and how they choose to broadcast their political preferences to peers.

Each of these positive democratic qualities is exhibited – and exacerbated – by citizens' use of social media. Compared to political T-shirts, social platforms heighten the degree of individualization and magnify the scope of political expression. Penney's historical lineage therefore serves to expound a critical dynamic in the interplay between political trivialization and popularization. In many ways, it is precisely the simplification of content and lowered cost of participation that begets the potential for widespread democratization.

Penney coins the term "light politics" to conceptualize the tradeoffs incurred by this phenomenon. Here, "light" has both a content and activity dimension. The political content shared by citizens online is often "reductive, simplified, or lacking gravitas," but this lightness in content also facilitates its potential to "easily and casually travel across a culture, circulating political ideas into the spaces and places of everyday life" (pg. 169). In other words, simplified political content is accessible to a broad public, who can send content viral through the various low-cost redistribution functions enabled by social platforms.

The concept of light politics, although developed towards the end of the book, is illuminated through three empirical chapters. These chapters neatly correspond to three strands of political communication research: extra-parliamentary movements, electoral campaigning, and journalistic reporting. Each chapter comprises a case study of citizen marketing practices, and the data stem from in-depth interviews with ordinary citizens. The first case is built around the identity politics of citizens changing their Facebook profile pictures to support LGBT rights. The second comprises citizens' promotional efforts during the 2012 U.S. election, both on Twitter and by wearing political T-shirts. The third focuses on citizens' selective forwarding of news online and the corresponding agenda-setting role these actions play in the attention economy.

In the empirical chapters, Penney presents the positive and negative democratic implications of citizen marketing for each sphere of politics. In the case of social movements, Penney shows how changing one's profile picture in solidarity with a cause can increase its visibility and foster community building among minorities. On the downside, however, the standardization of memetic templates can conflate complex identities within a social movement, stifle representation among certain subcultures, and lead to a "reductionist identity politics" (pg. 93).

In electoral campaigning, the promotional efforts of citizens that often mimic fan culture can stimulate political participation. However, this participation may derive from affect rather

than substance, potentially leading to manipulation by elites or the polarization of publics. Similarly, citizens' sharing of online news can positively promote civic knowledge or display "a strongly agonistic scene of information warfare far removed from the deliberative ideals of disinterested knowledge exchange" (pg. 157).

Penney negotiates these tradeoffs in smart but accessible prose. He utilizes a point-counterpoint format that presents both sides of the argument thoroughly and transparently. By doing so, Penney tactfully traverses the fault lines that emerge in contemporary debates common across communication subfields: affect versus reason, style versus substance, and participatory versus deliberative democracy.

While the book provides an excellent and thought-provoking engagement with these debates, it falls somewhat short on prescriptive measures to further operationalize the citizen marketer approach. Moreover, despite an impressive array of illustrative examples, the book's empirical chapters are largely Anglo-focused. How might the citizen marketer approach apply in less consumerist contexts like Northern Europe, where public service broadcasting is strong and visible displays of political affiliation are often taboo?

Such questions are left open for future research. Still, Penney's citizen marketer approach equips scholars with tools for theory building that can inform both qualitative and quantitative research designs. As such, the book is a must read for scholars of political communication, journalism, and social media research. Additionally, Penney's arguments hold relevance for practitioners of political and advocacy campaigns, who can use the book's lessons to conduct their digital marketing efforts in a democratically responsible manner.