constitutes a major challenge moving forward for citizens who wish to complicate standardized displays of visibility on social media (and elsewhere) that threaten to conceal as much as they reveal about the thorny matter of social and political identity.

In this chapter, we have seen how the coming out model of mediated self-labeling has emerged as a core logic of participatory citizen marketing practice, stemming in many senses from the cultural visibility projects of the gay and lesbian movement and expanding into myriad efforts to elevate the public presence of groups that have been hidden, obscured, or underestimated by common-sense perceptions of social and political reality. By entering the public realm of appearance, as Arendt puts it, these groups gain significant opportunities to both compel the attention and sympathy of the broader public and foster feelings of communal pride and belongingness that are crucial for long-term mobilization. At the same time, the simplified, branded labels of identity that are typically used to achieve such ends risk suppressing the complex intersectionality of contemporary political struggle (along lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and more). Furthermore, the trendiness and succinctness that often characterize the culture of memes and social media seemingly make the nuanced refinement of visibility tactics all the more difficult, although a range of digital practices such as parody and remix hold the promise of expanding the representation of identity beyond the most limiting constrictions.

In the following chapter, we will see how the promising yet fraught practice of conspicuous public self-labeling has also emerged as a key element of participatory promotion in the context of electioneering. Rather than coming out from the cloak of invisibility, however, these practices utilize displays of group membership and identification to perform a fanlike enthusiasm for candidates and parties in ways that encourage others to follow suit. At the same time, the reductive nature of these expressive displays of political allegiance raises its own set of concerns, not only in terms of trivializing complex issues but also in terms of dividing citizens into polarized, cordoned-off "teams" for branded partisan promotion.

4

Political Fans and Cheerleaders

Promoting Candidates, One Brand Evangelist at a Time

During the 2015 general election in the United Kingdom, one of the most high-profile moments of candidate promotion came not from the parliamentary parties themselves, but from a 17-year-old student named Abby Tomlinson, who started a trending hashtag on Twitter declaring her admiration for the Labour leader Ed Miliband. #Milifandom was quickly adopted by thousands of like-minded, mostly young British voters, who then continued Miliband's memeification by posting his portrait as their profile pictures and circulating photoshopped images of him fashioned as popular culture icons like Superman. As Tomlinson commented to the press about the hashtag campaign, "We just want to change opinions so people don't just see the media's usual distorted portrayal of him, and actually see him for who he is. Ed is just a great guy and how many other politicians have a fandom? Zero."[1] This focus on attempting to influence peers by circulating promotional political messages places the #Milifandom phenomenon squarely within the citizen marketer approach. Yet despite Tomlinson's claims of ingenuity, this kind of grassroots outpouring of candidate fandom has become an increasingly common fixture on the contemporary political landscape. For instance, across the Atlantic, youthful fandom on social media and elsewhere was a major narrative in the landmark 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama, who inspired a strikingly similar episode in which a college student produced a fawning amateur viral video called "I Got a Crush on Obama" that racked up millions of views on YouTube.[2] Such exuberant brand evangelism may vary widely from candidate to candidate, yet the broader pattern of its emergence signals that the citizen marketer approach is becoming deeply ingrained in the institutional political systems of advanced Western democracies.

Indeed, #Milifandom was only the opening salvo in a series of social media–fueled political fandom episodes in the United Kingdom. Not to be overshadowed by the Milifans, supporters of the Conservative leader David Cameron

quickly responded with the hashtag #Cameronettes in an attempt to foster a rival fan base. Like his Labour-boosting counterpart, the university student who launched the #Cameronettes hashtag explicitly identified peer persuasion as his motivation, stating that "the Left tend to be extremely active on social media and hence can influence the younger demographic. . . . However, it's nice that a pro-Conservative trend has emerged. Hopefully it can highlight the positive record that the Conservatives can be proud of."[3] After Cameron's party won the election and Miliband left his post as Labour leader, an even more high-profile social media effort emerged in support of Jeremy Corbyn as Miliband's replacement. Although Corbyn was widely perceived to be an underdog because of his outsider position in the Labour party, he eventually won the leadership election while riding a wave of social media enthusiasm. This included the prominent hashtag #JezWeCan, which at its height was being tweeted 25 times a second, as well as popular photoshopped memes depicting Corbyn as heroic figures ranging from James Bond to David Beckham to Obi-Wan Kenobi.[4]

In the United States, Corbyn-mania found a parallel in the grassroots social media efforts to boost the 2016 presidential chances of Bernie Sanders, a similarly insurgent candidate who also faced an uphill (and ultimately unsuccessful, yet remarkably close) battle to capture the top position in his party. The hashtag #FeelTheBern, initially popularized by a small group of grassroots activists who were independent of the formal Sanders campaign, became an astounding viral success during the Democratic primary election cycle. In the summer of 2015, it outpaced the official campaign hashtag of Sanders's opponent Hillary Clinton by a ratio of more than two to one on Twitter.[5] A few months later, another Sanders supporter created a promotional effort called #BabiesForBernie, which involved the sharing of user-generated photos of babies dressed by their parents in the candidate's signature white hair and glasses. After the initial photo inspired a legion of imitators on Instagram, #BabiesForBernie was spun off as a Facebook group, as well as a website that sold T-shirts and onesies featuring the slogan—all with the goal of helping Sanders fans spread the meme and the message to their peers.[6] Like many of the above examples, #BabiesForBernie surfaced online without the involvement of any formal campaign or party organization. Rather, effusive supporters took it upon themselves to produce—and, more crucially, to circulate and selectively forward—content that essentially functions as political marketing for their favored candidates. In such cases, promotional labor emerges from "unofficial" political spaces of popular culture, or what Richard Iton calls the vernacular tradition of political discourse.[7] Moreover, the dissemination of both "official" and unofficial hashtags supporting candidates like Sanders and Corbyn was largely peer to peer, powered by citizens working on their own accord as grassroots intermediaries for their preferred candidate brands.

It was at a 2008 Obama rally that I first personally witnessed the spectacular intensity that this kind of political fandom can reach in the contemporary electoral realm. The setting was downtown Philadelphia, days before the much-anticipated Pennsylvania Democratic primary election. The scene surrounding Obama's campaign speech in Independence Park felt more like an arena rock concert than a traditional campaign event: tens of thousands of Obama's followers filled the grounds adorned in myriad T-shirts and other accoutrements declaring their love and veneration for the candidate. Some featured the typical logos and slogans of the campaign's formal marketing outreach, yet many others were distinctly vernacular popular culture artifacts celebrating Obama as a kind of folk hero. Reverent portraits abounded, including the famous blue-and-red "HOPE" image created by the street artist Shepard Fairey, along with phrases like "Barack Star" and "Obama is my Homeboy." However, what struck me most about this dizzying visual cornucopia of pro-Obama sentiment was not its presence at the rally itself, but its potential endurance when the gathering dispersed and these citizens returned to their lives with the exuberant slogans and portraits still splashed across their bodies. I thought too of the deluge of photos and status updates that would inevitably be posted to social media sites like Facebook as a commemoration—and amplification—of the rally's dazzling visual displays. To a great extent, scenes like these are the modern equivalent of the citizen-powered parades of the 1840 William Henry Harrison campaign, only this time, the popular zeal for candidates need not be wholly directed by party leaders and campaign operatives (even as these institutional actors reap the promotional benefits). Furthermore, these spectacles of fandom and promotion are not limited to traditional political spaces like formalized rallies and gatherings, but rather spill into the fine meshes of everyday life—Twitter and Instagram feeds, as well as the vistas of city streets.

The citizens who disseminate these kinds of candidate-promoting messages via memes, hashtags, T-shirts, and more represent an updated version of what Kathleen Hall Jamieson calls the "surrogate message carrier," the very kind that had supposedly disappeared as 19th-century participatory campaign spectacle gave way to the top-down, professionalized, mass-mediated political marketing of the 20th century.[8] Yet as we saw in Chapter 2, citizen marketing practices have been intensifying rather than waning in recent times because of important cultural as well as technological shifts. As political expression and cultural self-expression have become increasingly connected, showing one's support for a candidate can effectively double as a statement about one's own deeply held sense of identity. However, although this dynamic of cultural identification helps account for why citizen marketer efforts like #Milifandom and #BabiesForBernie often emerge from the vernacular spaces of grassroots popular culture, it is important to remember that they do not exist in a vacuum.

Rather, as I will argue, the culture of contemporary political fandom is inextricably linked to broader strategies of candidate image building that have been developed over many decades within the professionalized field of political communication. The intermingling of institutional politics with popular cultural fandom and celebrity worship is thus as much a top-down phenomenon as it is a vernacular response on the part of ordinary people. To appreciate this point, one need look no further than Donald Trump, who successfully leveraged his fan base as celebrity host of the hit reality TV show *The Apprentice* into a political movement that jumpstarted his ascendance to the U.S. presidency in 2016. Indeed, today's political fans and cheerleaders are fully embedded in a hybrid media system[9] that combines new media logics of user-generated content, memes, and virality with older mass media logics that facilitate candidate packaging and image craft.

The idea of political fandom and the expressive culture that surrounds it forms a central theme of this chapter, which explores the relationship between citizen marketing practices and the field of electoral politics. It is a notion that is epitomized not only by the youthful social media users who gush about their favorite candidates by creating celebratory Twitter hashtags and YouTube videos—as well as knocking their opponents with parody, derision, and attacks—but also by the many thousands who share this content with peers in the hopes of making it go viral to impact the election process. Undoubtedly, the incorporation of citizen marketing practices into the realm of institutional politics has important consequences for those who plan and manage such election campaigns. Yet the class of political communication professionals who seek to shape citizen marketing activity for their strategic gain is only a partial focus of this chapter. My primary concern, rather, is with the citizens themselves who engage in these practices as a means of asserting their own political will. As we will explore, these practices are changing what it means to become a part of the democratic process and are opening new avenues for popular involvement through the symbolic performance of enthusiasm and affective identification. At the same time, their boldly partisan character may also exacerbate tensions in everyday social interaction and contribute to the tribal-like cultural divisions that increasingly characterize contemporary civic life.

However, before we examine what motivates citizens to outwardly express their fandom for electoral candidates and parties to their peers—as well as the implications of this activity for social and civic life more broadly—we must first consider the larger context from which contemporary political fandom emerges. Unlike the identity-based social movements discussed in the previous chapter that have traditionally congealed through an interplay of bottom-up and top-down processes, the modern electoral system has long depended on candidates and parties actively and vigorously promoting themselves to

voters via elaborate marketing appeals. Thus, to contextualize the phenomenon of citizen marketing in the electoral realm, we must examine how it has developed in relation to professional electoral marketing campaigns, which are often some of the most expensive and heavily strategized in all of the promotional industries.

Electoral Political Marketing in the Digital Age

At a time in which the mantra *your consumer is your marketer* sits at the conceptual center of the promotional industries as a whole,[10] the process of professional electioneering is undergoing significant transformations. One area of development that has been well explored in recent scholarship is the formal extension of institutional political marketing into networked digital spaces and the adoption of electronic word-of-mouth strategies. Kreiss traces this shift back to as early as 2000, when U.S. presidential campaign organizations "increasingly used the Internet to fashion supporters into the conduits of strategic communications" and worked to "take advantage of existing social networks to create a new 'digital two-step flow' of political communication."[11] In her historical review of Internet-based electioneering in the United States, Stromer-Galley shows how campaigners have enlisted supporters to amplify the reach of their carefully crafted campaign messages, often by building official interactive applications on platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.[12] Although she notes that Internet campaigners may struggle to manage and regulate the two-step flow of persuasive messages on digital platforms that afford users a large degree of individual agency, she argues that they are becoming increasingly adept at using digital communication technologies to "direct and control citizen-supporters to work in concert to achieve campaign goals."[13]

In a study of U.S. digital political consultants, Serazio likewise emphasizes how campaigns are using social media as a venue for "seeding campaign messages . . . operatives have obviously long recognized the authenticity and persuasive power of word-of-mouth, but the new media tools enable strategists to harness it toward electoral ends—leveraging social networks and maximizing shareable content."[14] Referring to this phenomenon as a key element of what she calls "citizen-initiated campaigning," Rachel K. Gibson observes in the UK context that parties often focus on creating "tools for supporters to cooperate in distribution of the party message,"[15] As these accounts underline, contemporary political campaigners are not content to sit back and hope that their candidate goes viral through grassroots fan hashtags and memes, but instead actively work to shape the flow of electronic word of mouth by providing tools and templates to transform supporters into disciplined brand evangelists.

A further reason why political campaign organizations are so eager to launch participatory marketing efforts online is the value of the personal data they generate. Unlike any earlier communication technology, every action and interaction on the Internet produces data points that can be collected, stored, aggregated, analyzed, and packaged for a variety of strategic purposes. As early as 2000, U.S. electoral campaign organizations began using Internet outreach to gather personal information from voters to segment them into smaller groups and send them tailored messages.[16] As Kreiss and Howard note within the context of the 2008 U.S. election, campaigns have used techniques such as building Facebook applications to "help make social networks both visible in the form of data and productive for fundraising, mobilization, and voter identification efforts."[17] Presumably, all present and future digital outreach efforts launched by electoral campaign organizations will be culled for the valuable information they reveal about the citizens who engage in them. However, it would be a mistake to assume that professional electioneers are only interested in fostering peer-to-peer digital communication to mine data for their top-down tailored marketing efforts. Although this may be an important "back-end" goal contributing to the growth of the phenomenon at an institutional level, the peer-to-peer circulation of campaign promotion also holds the seductive promise of paying its own viral dividends.

The tactical use of campaign supporters as both data-mining opportunities and message conduits raises important questions about the extent to which professional electioneers are controlling and managing voters via digital technologies. Stromer-Galley argues that by fashioning what she calls "controlled interactivity" through campaign-administered websites and social media apps, political institutions undercut opportunities for genuine democratic participation and instead exploit citizens as mere "pawns on a chessboard" to win electoral battles.[18] In other words, rather than use interactive technologies to lend supporters a voice in the formation of policy proposals, campaigns opt for a transactional approach that positions them in a purely service role. Kreiss takes a more mixed position in this debate, arguing that "theorists who see a dystopic form of elite management and network optimists who see enlightened collaboration as the consequence of changes in technologies miss the hybridity of a form of organizing politics that combines both management and empowerment."[19] Moreover, Kreiss emphasizes that critiques of elite control neglect to consider the fact that "the interests of campaigns and the publics they mobilize are *aligned* most of the time" (italics in original) and that "many supporters not only accept but embrace" this transactional service role, "given the basic goal alignment between these campaigns and their supporters: the objective is to defeat rivals, not remake democracy."[20] As Kreiss suggests, this alignment of goals helps account for why many Obama supporters in 2008 used online

expressive tools that were outside the control of the campaign, as well as those that it had designed itself, to lend support to their favored candidate.

This point about citizens feeling so closely identified with a politician that they are willing to be used instrumentally as message conduits and brand evangelists begs a crucial question: how did they get that way? If campaign supporters see themselves as members of a candidate's team, ready to "fight the vital 'ground' and 'air' wars," as Gibson puts it,[21] how are such teams formed in the first place? Part of the answer appears to lie in the strategies of digital campaign operatives, who often focus on the community-building dimensions of their official online applications. For instance, in an ethnography of U.S. congressional campaign offices, Jessica Baldwin-Philippi finds that "campaigns are increasingly requesting that supporters circulate campaign material to their own networked publics" as a means of "facilitating interpersonal connections" and strengthening attachments with communities of fellow supporters.[22]

However, to fully interrogate this question of candidate team building, I argue that we must look beyond the specific domain of formalized digital campaigning and consider the broader dynamics of fanlike cultural identification that have increasingly characterized the political landscape of advanced Western democracies such as Britain and the United States. To a significant extent, this phenomenon can be traced back to the work of professional political marketers, who have over time developed sophisticated strategies for branding candidates as objects of celebrity worship through a wide range of media appeals. However, the scholarship on political fandom (and political marketing more broadly) has tended to emphasize a more reciprocal relationship between politicians and the public, with emotional attachments to candidates arising from the interpretive activity of citizens rather than from a wholly top-down packaging process.[23] As we turn now to the issue of how political fandom is mutually co-constructed, the logic of peer persuasion often adopted by citizen marketers in electoral contexts begins to come into sharper focus: rather than acting as mere conduits for campaign messages, those who outwardly symbolize their support for favored candidates work to model authentic emotional attachments in ways that they hope will grow the enthusiastic fan bases of their revered team leaders and, in turn, their electoral prospects.

Celebrity Candidates, "Cool Politics," and Political Fan Cultures

As discussed in previous chapters, the field of institutional political marketing has a long history of using mass media appeals to sell appealing images of candidates to voters. In the 1950s, a series of slick television advertising spots may

have been enough to package candidates for mass consumption. However, by the 1990s, candidate image making had grown to include myriad forms of popular cultural engagement that blur the boundaries between political communication and celebrity media culture. Street uses the term "cool politics" to describe how public officials have come to perform the role of popular culture celebrities as a means of igniting the interest of today's voters—particularly young people who have largely become cynical about political institutions and who have moved away from traditional party affiliations. For Street, "this is not just a matter of being popular, but being popular in a particular way. [Candidates] want to be stylish in the way that stars of popular culture are stylishly cool."[24] In the 1997 British general election, for instance, the Labour leader Tony Blair made a point of associating himself with popular rock stars such as Noel Gallagher of Oasis in high-profile media photo-ops.[25] In the United States, Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign contained numerous moments fitting this trend, most famously when he played the saxophone on the *Arsenio Hall Show* and spoke with young voters on MTV.[26] After Blair and Clinton's youthful support helped pave the way toward electoral victory, the strategy has been endlessly copied (although some have applied it more successfully than others).

In addition to this move toward celebrity-like popular culture engagement through television and entertainment formats, politicians have also begun to use social media to reach voters in more culturally situated contexts. As Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner argue, platforms such as Twitter strengthen the ability of politicians to control their message and influence their supporters, largely because these platforms "circumvent the media's gatekeeping function" and provide a direct conduit to followers who are already likely to be receptive.[27] This suggests that the cultivation of political fandom may be becoming more effective in the social media age, as candidates use their online profiles and feeds to craft appealing images without the interference of journalists who are traditionally tasked with holding these images accountable. In an expanding and hybrid media environment, journalistic watchdog activity still takes place all the time in a variety of outlets, but Gainous and Wagner make the point that citizens are increasingly sidestepping this coverage as they self-select digital media content that conforms to their political views. In particular, they find that the most partisan-minded citizens tend to follow media from favored politicians and activist groups rather than from mainstream news outlets.[28] The result, Gainous and Wagner contend, is an empowered class of politicians who enjoy an increased capacity to sell themselves and their agendas to a receptive audience without the traditional media filters.

In the 2016 U.S. election cycle, this dynamic was epitomized by the Republican candidate and eventual victor Donald Trump, whose campaign as a whole represents a chillingly logical endpoint of the hybridization of electoral

politics, popular culture, and media celebrity. Trump leveraged his immense public notoriety as a television star to amass a Twitter following in the millions that towered over that of his competitors and, in the words of the *New York Times*, mastered the platform "in a way no candidate for president ever has, unleashing and redefining its power as a tool of political promotion, distraction, score-settling and attack."[29] Labeling Trump "the Twitter candidate" and likening his success on the platform to Franklin D. Roosevelt's pioneering use of radio and John F. Kennedy's mastery of television, *Salon* noted that Trump "has proven himself as the first major U.S. politician to use social media in a way that truly amplifies his message beyond traditional campaigning."[30] Crucially, this message amplification hinges on the reciprocal relationship between Trump and his impassioned fans, who not only follow him on Twitter but also circulate and endorse his posts through retweeting, liking, etc.

However, whereas Gainous and Wagner suggest that politicians can harness the power of top-down digital media outreach to influence voters, other scholars emphasize the capacity of the political audience to more critically evaluate the process of political image making. For instance, identifying the above-noted cool politics trend as part of a broader "restyling of politics" characterized by a "new prominence of discursivity, symbol-making, and aesthetic design," John Corner and Dick Pels argue that these trends can result in "new forms of visual and emotional literacy" on the part of citizens.[31] In contrast to the pessimism of trivialization critiques that have continually dogged political image-making practices (discussed in Chapter 1), Corner and Pels suggest that this kind of affective and culturally situated engagement has the capacity to strengthen critical understandings of institutional politics in an era of increasing cynicism. Liesbet Van Zoonen offers a similarly optimistic assessment that argues "for the equivalence of fan practices and political practices, an equality that facilitates an exchange between the domains of entertainment and politics that is commonly thought to be impossible."[32] For Van Zoonen, popular culture fandom resembles partisan political behavior in the sense that both have come to hinge on deep emotional investments among audiences. Referencing the atmosphere of political rituals such as the Obama campaign rally described above, she notes that "when the party leader arrives, the scenes of crowds yelling and cheering are not so different from the sight of fans shouting for their favorite sports or movie star."[33] Although such affective bonds may be criticized as irrational or vulnerable to manipulation, Van Zoonen maintains that they lead to an affective intelligence[34] that drives both fans and citizens toward active roles in discussion, community building, and creativity.

In her analysis of the role of marketing in democracies, Scammell likewise contends that emotional responses to politicians can serve as a gateway for critical judgment rather than blind obedience. For instance, addressing the focus on

candidates' personal lives and character qualities through their media appeals, Scammell posits that "personalization of politics invites us to engage our emotional intelligence and evaluate politicians by the normal standards of popular culture. It links distant high politics to the everyday."[35] Furthermore, Scammell describes a broader shift in political marketing toward the so-called branding model, which emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between brands and publics that takes seriously their interests, needs, and emotional responses. As she explains, "brand images, the marketing literature insists, emerge as much from the bottom up as the top down"[36] and are co-constructed in a way that depends on "the experience and perception of consumers, which in turn arises out of multiple and diverse encounters."[37] In other words, brand images are arguably as much a product of audiences as they are of the marketers themselves, and are successful only when they are genuinely responsive to citizens' interpretive processes of meaning making. Thus, what the work of scholars like Scammell and Van Zoonen suggests is that political fandom is not a wholly manufactured invention of elite image makers and social media–savvy politicians, but is rather to some extent an organic outcome of campaigns and candidates that meaningfully resonate with citizens on deep emotional levels through their public outreach. Scammell admits that such formula may perennially risk a prioritization of style over substance, as a multitude of trivialization critics warn, but she nevertheless insists that what she calls "good" campaigns will successfully appeal to both the emotional intelligence and the political rationality of voters in ways that foster authentic engagement and participation.[38]

Either way, the deeply felt emotional identification with politicians that scholars like Scammell and Van Zoonen describe appears to be a key ingredient in moving citizens toward a participatory marketing role in elections. At face value, it would seem that the purpose of branding candidates as popular culture celebrities would be to simply inspire a level of fanlike devotion that would motivate voters to choose them at the ballot box. However, as commercial marketers have come to appreciate, popular culture fandom does not merely end at the point of "sale." Rather, as researchers of fan cultures such as Jenkins have emphasized, fandom is inherently participatory in nature, galvanizing a wide range of expressive and creative practices at the grassroots level.[39] Banet-Weiser also makes this point in her more critical work on brand culture, noting that contemporary branding strategy is increasingly focused on moving consumers toward revering and identifying with brands enough to proliferate them through expressive forms of participatory cultural production.[40]

It would thus appear that fostering citizen-level participation in electoral marketing outreach is not simply a matter of designing the right tools to create and share promotional content. Rather, it is intimately tied to broader practices of image making and cultural engagement that forge emotional connections

between voters and candidates. In other words, the fanlike devotion fostered by cool politics approaches—as well as the restyling of politics more broadly—constitutes a key ingredient for spurring citizen marketing practices in the electoral context. Without the impassioned zeal of a candidate's fans, a grassroots culture of media participation is unlikely to take off and achieve the promotional goal of going viral. Thus, from the campaign perspective, the objective is to develop a resonant brand image that will inspire supporters to do much of the promotional labor *on their own* at the grassroots level, rather than attempt to wholly direct this labor from the top down.

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle, such a lesson was seemingly learned the hard way, as campaigns faced public backlash when trying to manufacture their own viral moments on social media platforms. For instance, the Hillary Clinton campaign suffered an instructive high-profile incident on Twitter in which a call for her youthful supporters to express themselves through emoji images was widely mocked. Tweeting from the official Clinton campaign account, the following prompt was given to followers: "How does your student loan debt make you feel? Tell us in 3 emojis or less." The ostensible goal was to kick-start a social media trend that would put Clinton's campaign into the Twitter spotlight, with supporters both creating their own emoji responses and sharing those made by their peers. However, many of Clinton's own followers expressed dissatisfaction with the tactic, which they saw as a form of pandering to the youth vote. For example, one Twitter user replied, "I love you but we don't need you to do this," and another sarcastically questioned, "is there a 'condescended to' emoji?" The overwhelmingly negative response was then picked up by journalists as a laughable social media "fail," with one reporter describing the Twitter reaction as "swift and merciless."[41]

At a time when the political communication landscape is inundated with irreverent expressions such as pop culture–referencing memes and jokey Instagram photos, such a backlash may seem puzzling on the surface. However, the incident points to the risk of fabricating vernacular expressions of political fandom from the top down, which may be perceived as inauthentic by those who might otherwise be receptive to the same kinds of expressions when coming from the bottom up. It also may be the case that the emoji tactic conflicted with the overall brand image that the Clinton campaign had been attempting to cultivate through its broader media outreach, which tended to frame her as the most serious-minded candidate in the race. The backlash could thus be interpreted as a case of voters exercising their emotional intelligence, pushing back against the top-down construction of political brand image when it fails to resonate. Indeed, the Clinton emoji episode suggests the challenges that campaigns face as they attempt to exert controlled interactivity, in Stromer-Galley's terms, in a peer-to-peer communication environment that depends on the

participation of ordinary people who may or may not wish to play along with the script.

Many success stories can be cited as a counterpoint, as Stromer-Galley indeed does in her analysis of the 2008 Obama campaign's digital outreach.[42] What, then, distinguishes the viral successes from the fails? As I have argued in this section, the answer may only be partially attributable to digital campaign strategy in and of itself, such as the building of interactive applications and the generation of viral-ready content. To reap the promotional benefits of a grassroots fan culture that operates above and beyond the parameters of official electioneering and into the vernacular spaces of the popular, campaigns must foster deep levels of connection and identification with voters that come about through much broader image-construction processes. However, whether these public images are the authentic results of citizens' emotional intelligence or instead an insidious form of manipulation through stylized packaging and top-down message control is another question. As we will see, the lines between the two may not always be clear when it comes to the lived experiences of those who adopt the citizen marketer approach in electoral contexts.

As we shift now from the campaign perspective to that of citizens who willfully participate in peer-to-peer candidate promotion, the notion of authentic personal identification, or at least the appearance of it, becomes paramount. In exploring how citizen marketing participants understand the persuasive potential of their symbolic displays of candidate support, we find that the performance of connection and identification seems to matter much more than the circulation of any specific campaign message. Once we have outlined this logic in detail, we will then consider how these displays of deeply held, culturally situated identification feed into broader dynamics of polarization and partisanship. As we will see, these declarative symbolic practices pose significant challenges to civic life at the same time as they promise to help political fans and cheerleaders rally their side to electoral victory.

Contagious Enthusiasm: Rallying the Like-Minded and Building Momentum inside the Bubble

How exactly do citizens who circulate election-themed promotional content conceptualize the potential efficacy of these practices? What audiences do they intend to reach when selectively forwarding campaign-supportive (or opposition-denigrative) messages to their peers, and what precisely do they hope will happen as a result? In the following section, I consider how the public performance of fanlike enthusiasm for politicians is deployed for the goal of building and strengthening support among those who may already be

sympathetic or receptive to the message. As it turns out, rallying one's own side in a cheerleading-like fashion constitutes perhaps the most crucial, if overlooked, logic of citizen participation in electoral political marketing.

Indeed, such a strategy may seem counterintuitive on the surface. When speaking with citizens who seek to boost their favored campaigns and candidates through media-spreading activities, a major concern that is often raised is the seeming futility of reaching only those who are already in agreement. As Cass Sunstein shows in his work on partisan blogospheres, citizens with strong political allegiances are increasingly separating themselves into communities of the like-minded, creating "information cocoons" and "echo chambers" that limit contact between those with divergent viewpoints.[43] Gainous and Wagner also find convincing evidence for this pattern on social media platforms, noting that "by allowing the consumer to pick their own network of communication, social media allows citizens to self-select their content in a way that avoids any disagreeable ideas or interpretations."[44] This apparent inaccessibility of one's opposing political camp was referenced by several interview respondents who doubted their ability to change minds with their own promotional symbolic actions. Trevor, for instance, explained that "my followers on Twitter are predominantly progressives, liberals . . . I don't really expect that we're making converts in tweeting these things because by and large the people who are following are people of like mind." Laura similarly noted that being politically persuasive on Facebook is difficult because "by now some of the people with whom I have deep philosophical disagreements have unfriended me. . . . The population of people on my Facebook page is shrinking to people who share my point of view. There aren't many of the others left."

This sense of the political opposition being out of reach is especially pertinent in the context of social media platforms, where users are given the ability to manually control their contacts and screen out anyone perceived to be troublesome or undesirable with a few clicks of a button. Researchers in Israel, for instance, find empirical evidence of politically motivated unfriending on Facebook, as 16% of Jewish Israeli users (of more than 1,000 surveyed) reported that they had severed their connection with someone because they disagreed with what that person had posted regarding the 2014 Gaza conflict.[45] Another large-scale survey study finds that exposure to divergent or "cross-cutting" political views is notably limited in online spaces that are primarily political in nature, lending further evidence to fears of a fragmented and polarized digital public (however, this was less the case in online forums that are more culturally oriented and less explicitly political in nature).[46] Furthermore, even those who would avoid self-segregating behaviors on the Internet may nonetheless be pushed into so-called filter bubbles because of the algorithmic processes of sites like Facebook. For instance, the EdgeRank algorithm filters posts from Facebook connections

according to how often, and in what ways, a user interacts with them.[47]As a result, a Facebook user's feed may automatically remove or filter down posts from friends that show weaker ties in the network—such as those who have fewer political interests in common—giving an algorithmic boost to the echo chamber phenomenon that is also fueled by voluntary unfriending (in response to growing complaints about the polarizing effects of news feed filtering, Facebook released a high-profile internal study in 2015 purporting to show that "compared to algorithmic ranking, individuals' choices about what to consume had a stronger effect limiting exposure to cross-cutting content,"[48] although the study was subsequently criticized for its questionable methodology and self-serving framing of the data).[49]

Such political self-segregation also extends well beyond the Internet echo chambers and filter bubbles. When I spoke with college-age Obama supporters who wore campaign-themed shirts around their heavily Democratic college campuses (located in the urban northeastern United States), they often pointed to the political homogeneity of their immediate surroundings as a reason why they failed to see their displays as serving a persuasive function. Cassandra, for instance, recounted that "we were kind of in a bubble because a lot of people on this campus were Democrats," and Eric noted that "the group of people I'm going to be hanging out with is probably similar-minded, so wearing a T-shirt is not going to cause as much debate or discussion. . . . It's preaching to the choir." For those who circulate promotional political messages to their peers, the struggle to move beyond "preaching to the choir" may thus seem unsurmountable in both online and offline contexts.

If the people who are most likely to come into contact with peer-to-peer persuasive messages about elections are already in agreement, then what, if anything, is the point of sending them? Some might conclude that it is in fact pointless, and the echo chamber of social media is often cited by observers as a reason to dismiss grassroots expressions of candidate support as merely frivolous sideshow.[50] However, when faced with the apparent dilemma of only being able to reach the politically like-minded, some respondents whom I spoke with suggested a compelling logic: success on the electoral playing field is not only a matter of securing popular support as such, but is also tied to the relative *intensity* of this support. Therefore, it would follow that reinforcing commitment among members of a political faction would potentially strengthen its ability to achieve its collective goals, making preaching to the choir a worthwhile endeavor.

In democratic systems like that of the United States and Britain that do not require mandatory voting and whose elections are often decided by the turnout levels of one partisan base over another, this logic does seem to make sense. For instance, back in 2010, when President Obama's approval ratings were down and his party was facing the threat of losing the upcoming congressional elections

to the Republicans (which indeed it eventually did), some Obama supporters spoke of trying to reinvigorate their like-minded peers through spirit-lifting promotional appeals. Rachel explained that wearing her Obama T-shirt in the run-up to these 2010 midterm elections was meant "for people who already like Obama, but have not yet considered voting this year . . . hopefully it will hype up some excitement for this election," and Ryan remarked that wearing his Obama T-shirts during this period was "directed to people who voted for him and are now scared . . . like an energy campaign. We should be wearing our shirts, posting articles on Facebook, just maintaining something." Rachel and Ryan thus framed their public displays of enthusiasm for the president as serving a voter turnout function, prodding fellow supporters of Obama's party to make the effort to continue registering their support at the ballot box.

This notion of helping to build an "energy campaign" aimed at an audience of sympathetic peers, rather than an out-of-reach opposition, was also articulated by Trevor in the context of Twitter: "By and large the people who are following me are people of like mind . . . I think the main thing you accomplish is interaction with others, and it sort of builds an energy . . . I think it's more energizing people, keeping the momentum going, and keeping people engaged." Although Trevor did not provide examples of what this "energizing" activity could achieve in a concrete sense, one could imagine what might result: in addition to potentially increasing voter turnout, such a boost in enthusiasm could translate into more campaign donations, more organizational volunteering, and perhaps more citizen marketing activity as well. However, Trevor's and others' use of abstract terms like "momentum," "energy," and "hype" suggests a diffuse and intangible dynamic at play that is not necessarily reducible to any particular measurable result. Rather, such language seems to gesture toward affective relationships between citizens and their favored candidates, forged in part through cool politics and other culturally oriented forms of appeal. In other words, the spreading of energy and momentum among members of one's own faction can be understood as an attempt to extend and multiply the emotional intensity of political fandom, strengthening a form of identification with candidates and parties that is deeply cultural in nature. Here, the promotional labor of the citizen marketer becomes the performance of a contagious enthusiasm—the cheerleader drumming up team spirit by modeling an exuberance for others to follow.

This conceptual framework of modeling the affect of fandom accounts for how the peer-to-peer circulation of campaign-promoting content can potentially serve a useful reinforcement function for an audience of the like-minded. Furthermore, it is also helpful for understanding citizen marketing practices aimed at winning the electoral support of undecided voters. In interviews with citizens who wore candidate-branded T-shirts in public during the 2008 U.S. presidential election cycle, a consistent theme was their desire to visually

depict the popularity of their preferred candidate in such a way as to compel others to join the proverbial bandwagon. As the logic goes, those who witness these images of grassroots support would then be more likely to vote for the candidate because they sense broad social approval among their peers. Anthony, the president of his school's College Republicans, explained this line of reasoning in detail when accounting for why he and his fellow club members wore John McCain shirts to local campaign events in 2008:

> We want to make sure that people know the candidate has support in that area, and that's an important way to actually increase support for them. It's attractive to have a whole group of students going around wearing a T-shirt . . . people think to themselves "oh, there's energy and youth support for the candidate." Generally, it does lead to at least people considering that candidate and his or her views.

Rachel, the president of her school's College Democrats, articulated a similar logic when describing how she saw wearing Obama T-shirts as helping her candidate's electoral chances that same year:

> There's definitely this "part of a crowd" kind of mentality. When everybody's wearing the same thing, there's definitely this collective force. If they see that their candidate is popular, then they'll think "oh, well I should probably vote." They're not going to go out and waste their time to vote for somebody who's down. . . . So seeing everybody wearing something that supports the candidate kind of says "alright, yeah, this person has some support."

As Anthony and Rachel's comments suggest, this logic of persuasion is an extension of the visible identities model outlined in the previous chapter. By making their favored candidate's supporters into a more publicly visible and legible group through practices of self-labeling, they saw themselves as rearticulating political reality and reorienting social norms in a way that can subtly influence the behavior of others. In this case, however, visibility is less about stepping out from the shadows and making one's interests known to the world than about depicting the relative intensity and enthusiasm of rival political fan bases. In other words, self-labeling is used here to facilitate a bandwagon effect that could persuade undecided voters to line up behind the candidate who has seemingly captured the adoration of "the people."

This kind of momentum-building strategy is particularly ripe for critiques of political trivialization. The persuasive message being sent in this context does not appear to have anything to do with a candidate's actual policy platform.

Rather, it communicates only his or her relative popularity and level of social salience—the so-called energy surrounding the campaign. A model of encouraging voters to pick their leaders based on how beloved and cool they are perceived to be among their peers may sound to many like the ultimate example of aestheticized politics as antidemocratic mass manipulation—the very kind that the Frankfurt School theorist Walter Benjamin famously warned about in the context of the Swastika-emblazoned popular spectacles of Nazi Germany, which, in his words, provided the masses "not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves."[51] Furthermore, there have been numerous cases of candidates allegedly counterfeiting such displays of grassroots identification and enthusiasm via deceptive tactics. For instance, it was reported in 2015 that Donald Trump hired professional actors to wear Trump-branded T-shirts at a rally announcing the start of his presidential campaign.[52] In the previous election cycle, the Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich was accused by a former campaign staffer of purchasing roughly 80% of his million-plus Twitter followers through fake dummy accounts and follow agencies.[53] However, even if displays of grassroots candidate support are genuine rather than counterfeit, by spurring their fellow citizens to hop on political bandwagons and express their desire to be part of a victorious crowd, are those who engage in this kind of citizen marketing activity nonetheless complicit in manipulative practices?

Amanda, one of the college students I spoke to who wore Obama T-shirts during the 2008 election, expressed some sympathy with this line of critique. Although she publicly displayed her support for the candidate at the time, she admitted that "now looking back, I realize I was pretty uninformed, and kind of easily persuaded by a good campaign . . . I think I can admit now that I was naive and that I didn't know really what I was campaigning for." As Amanda explained, she got caught up in the Obama bandwagon that had surrounded her and her peer group: "I just think that everyone around me was voting for Obama, and he seemed to be this positive, young, inspiring guy . . . just seeing the frequency of it, how many people liked it, and the fact that all of my friends liked it." She further noted that "pop culture was very pro-Obama, and he had all these celebrities endorsing him and things like that . . . I know that had an effect on me." In other words, the recommendations of admired popular culture figures—one of the essential elements of cool politics, as noted previously—worked alongside the recommendations of trusted peers in persuading her to both support the candidate and participate in the promotion of his campaign. In hindsight, she regretted her focus on style over substance: "I didn't really look at the nuances of the campaign and I didn't look at the issues as much. . . . I just think that I wasn't really critically thinking."

To some extent, Amanda's candid testimony lends credence to the fears of trivialization and manipulation that haunt the political marketing spectacle in its

contemporary, participatory phase. The packaging and branding of candidates as objects of celebrity devotion rather than architects of substantive policy, the focus on emotional bonds over complex issue-based appeals—all are seemingly extended and intensified by peer-to-peer forms of candidate promotion that model political support as a kind of viral trend. Amanda's story could thus be seen as pushing back against the optimism of theorists such as Van Zoonen who emphasize the critical acumen of fan cultures in both entertainment and political contexts. By her own account, Amanda did not feel that she demonstrated much in the way of emotional literacy or affective intelligence when she opted to go along with the fashionable Obama trend and leave critical thinking aside.

However, such a story is far from universal, and it would be problematic to assume that the affective intelligence of political fans—defined as "How emotion and reason interact to produce a thoughtful and informed citizenry"[54]—is merely a wishful fantasy. Rather, Amanda's account prods us to consider the potential risks, as well as the presumed benefits, of blurring the boundaries between political communication and the ecstatic brand evangelism of fan cultures. And what, in fact, are these benefits? As scholars like Van Zoonen, Street, and Scammell would be quick to remind us, the imbrication of politics and popular culture offers new pathways for political participation in an era in which formal political institutions are at risk of losing broad public involvement because of cynicism and disillusionment. For Van Zoonen, the key to overcoming civic disengagement is to determine "how politics can borrow from the elements of popular culture that produce . . . intense audience investments, so that citizenship becomes entertaining."[55] In a similar vein, Street argues that stylized packaging makes politics more accessible to citizens by reducing the difficulty of paying attention to issues and providing "cheap information" that makes engagement more likely from a rational choice perspective.[56] From humorous Internet memes and T-shirts to flashy YouTube viral videos, the expressive tools of citizen marketing do appear to help make electoral politics entertaining and accessible, particularly for young people who have grown up in a postmodern world dominated by media and popular culture. To be certain, showing support for candidates with symbolic artifacts is more fun and easy than the tedious legwork of traditional campaign volunteering (although, as I will address in more depth in Chapter 6, the relationship between these two forms of activity is cause for much controversy and debate). Although risks of trivialization and manipulation may always be lurking around the corner, it is important to recognize the role of political fans and cheerleaders in spreading the emotional investments that make the duties of citizenship an altogether more entertaining and appealing enterprise.

However, the public expression of celebrity-like adoration, cultivated by cool style and slick candidate packaging, does not fully account for the range

of citizen marketing practices in the context of elections. It may go a long way toward explaining the popular spread of reverential profile-picture portraits, gushing YouTube video clips, and impassioned Twitter hashtags, but what about the other side of the political marketing coin—attacking the opposition? In the following sections, I explore the relationship between the deep, culturally grounded investments of political fans and the partisan antagonism that colors much of contemporary political discourse.

Partisan Rancor in a Polarized Public

During the 2012 U.S. presidential election cycle, one of the most memorable citizen marketing moments of the vernacular variety took place during the televised debates between Obama and his Republican opponent Mitt Romney; while the two candidates went back and forth, online partisans spun out instantaneous memes mocking the statements of their preferred candidate's rival. During the first debate, Romney's remark that he would "fire" the *Sesame Street* character Big Bird (in reference to his plan to cut funding for U.S. public television) inspired Obama supporters to memeify this perceived misstep with everything from humorous image macro memes to parody Big Bird Twitter accounts. As the digital ridicule spread across the Internet, news articles with titles like "How the 'Fire Big Bird' Meme Could Hurt Mitt Romney"[57] began to proliferate in headlines (notably, the official Obama campaign organization seized this moment and quickly produced its own Big Bird–themed anti-Romney television ads that followed the lead of the grassroots memes,[58] an intriguing example of how vernacular citizen marketing practices are now often driving official political communication strategy). During the second debate, Obama supporters circulated another round of online anti-Romney memes that mocked the candidate for using the phrase "binders full of women" when discussing his experience promoting gender equity in the workplace,[59] an incident that was echoed four years later when feminist supporters of Hillary Clinton transformed Donald Trump's "nasty woman" remark into a popular anti-Trump hashtag.[60] It was as though the ranks of these candidates' teams were ready to pounce at every turn, flooding the web with derisive jibes in the service of turning public opinion against their competition. Of course, these symbolic skirmishes cut across party and ideological lines: for instance, anti-Obama memes had been inundating the U.S. conservative blogosphere since the candidate first became a public figure, depicting him as everything from a Communist dictator to the *Batman* villain the Joker.[61]

In the 2016 election cycle, this trend of candidate bashing at the grassroots level reached a fever pitch as Clinton and Trump, two public figures with the highest recorded unfavorability ratings in U.S. presidential campaign history,[62]

became their respective party's nominee. In response to Trump's rising poll numbers, for instance, critics unleashed a torrent of anti-Trump memes and videos on social media, including "Darth Trump," a parody clip depicting him as the Star Wars villain, along with image macros and GIFs portraying Trump as real-world villains such as Hitler and Mussolini. Writing for the New Yorker, Ian Crouch notes that on social media, "Trump's critics seem game to match Trump's own hysterical hyperbole—to fight fire with fire. . . . perhaps if enough people share these memes, the thinking goes, it will act like a social-media version of Sinclair Lewis's 'It Can't Happen Here,' and wake others up to the threat of creeping fascism."[63] Not to be outdone, Trump fans proved adept at circulating anti-Clinton memes across the Internet in the run-up to the election, with the particularly castigatory rhetoric of posts from the Reddit sub-group r/the_donald (such as a meme juxtaposing a Star of David symbol with Clinton in seemingly anti-Semitic fashion, which was later retweeted by Trump himself) becoming a source of widespread scrutiny and controversy.[64] As these examples lucidly suggest, citizen marketing practices in electoral campaigns are not limited to the effusive promotion of favored candidates, but include a hefty dose of vitriol for the opposition.

This may be especially true in the context of the United States, which has witnessed a notable rise in partisan acrimony in recent years. A widely reported study by Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood finds that "hostile feelings for the opposing party are ingrained or automatic in voters' minds," leading to discriminatory behaviors that even exceed discrimination based on race.[65] The authors label this phenomenon "affective polarization," since it has little to do with substantive differences in political ideology and more about feelings of in-group and out-group identification. Similarly, Lilliana Mason attributes growing polarization not to divides over issues, but to an increase in cultural identification with the opposing camps of liberal and conservative. As she explains, Americans "have become more closely identified with their parties, and these stronger identities have caused them to behave in more partisan ways . . . it is not that we are angry because we disagree so strongly about important issues; instead, we are angry, at least partially, because of team spirit."[66]

Mason's invocation of sports metaphors here is apropos. The polarization of the U.S. polity into "red" and "blue" sides speaks to inherently cultural divisions that bring to mind local football or baseball rivalries. If rival political candidates represent leaders of opposing teams on an electoral playing field, as the metaphor goes, the voting public becomes the fans in the stands that cheer for their own side and jeer the other. Indeed, in the interviews gathered for this project, I heard these kinds of sports metaphors come up time and time again. For instance, when speaking with Melissa about wearing an Obama-branded T-shirt

to a spontaneous rally on the night of the candidate's 2008 election victory, she compared the experience to a similar victory rally for her favorite football team: "It was like a 'we won' kind of thing. It was celebratory, sort of like when I had my Terrible Towel with me when the Steelers won the Super Bowl. It's sort of like the same thing." In a similar fashion, Kyle, a young conservative, described how he had gotten into the habit of wearing his Republican-themed T-shirts the day after his party experienced a political victory: "I'd watch the news or commentary and say 'oh, we had this little tiny victory.' At the time it sounded like a good idea to wear it. I'm also a big sports fan, so I think the best analogy is that it's like if one of my teams wins I'll wear that shirt the next day to say 'hey, we won.'" The appearance of the phrase "we won" in both Melissa's and Kyle's accounts serves as an apt illustration of the centrality of cultural in-group identification in the contemporary political landscape.

Another common metaphor that has been used to describe contemporary political polarization is that of tribalism. Mason, for instance, writes that the nature of political conflict in the United States is shifting "from one of reasoned disagreement to one closer to ethnic discord,"[67] and the political pundit and former U.S. Cabinet member Robert Reich argues that "the two tribes are pulling America apart, often putting tribal goals over the national interest."[68] The underlying critique here is that such tribal-like (or teamlike) divisions are antithetical to the ideals of deliberative democracy. As Mason puts it, "one unfortunate consequence of this identity-based polarization is that it cannot be resolved by reasonable debate."[69] Although such concerns may be specific to the American context, they have global implications as well, especially when considering the fact that U.S. political strategy and marketing practices are currently being exported around the world through the widespread use of consultants.[70]

Indeed, one can draw a clear line between the trend of identity-based polarization and the strategies of professional political marketers, from the restyling of candidates as popular culture brands for lifestyle expression to the increasing use of negative campaign ads that paint the opposing side as the reviled outgroup enemy.[71] What happens, then, when more and more citizens are brought into the fold of these marketing tactics through peer-to-peer media practices? By participating in the circulation of partisan media content—cheering on the leaders of one's team and sniping at leaders of the other side—do the citizens who engage in these activities actively contribute to the tribal-like cleavages that threaten democratic discourse? To gain a better understanding of how these tensions play out in everyday contexts, we now turn to the accounts of those who have experienced them firsthand when confronting members of the political opposition with partisan media content.

Creating Converts or Creating Conflict?

Of all of the potential target audiences for the grassroots circulation of persuasive campaign messages, the group composed of those who support the opposing side may ultimately be the most desirable. After all, winning over converts would not only increase the ranks of one's own team, but also weaken the competition. However, considering the fact that citizens' political allegiances and voting preferences are often shaped by deeply ingrained, culturally bound forms of group identification, this audience presents the most obvious challenges for persuasion as well as the greatest potential for producing conflict and discord. Furthermore, this audience may simply be out of reach for many because of the aforementioned growth of information cocoons and echo chambers[72] within a sharply polarized electorate. Nevertheless, some practitioners of citizen marketing appear to be up for the challenge.

For instance, Kenneth, who described himself as a recent convert from Republican to Democrat, spoke of "trying to get some of my friends to convert" with his posts on Twitter about the 2012 presidential election. As he figured, his large and heterogeneous online social network made him better positioned than others to break through to other side: "When I post something, a hundred people on Twitter are going to see it . . . so I've got a pretty good reach on that. So I know if I can get a message out, if it changes one or two people's opinions over the long haul, I feel like I've done a pretty good thing." Theresa offered a somewhat different rationale for her perceived persuasive efficacy via social media, surmising that although she alone did not have access to a large and receptive audience of potential converts, her position within larger network dynamics ultimately made her circulation activities worthwhile:

> Most of my audience [on Twitter] probably would agree with me . . . I know I have some conservatives that follow me on Twitter, but even if they're not going to be willing to pass it on, some of the people who are more liberal like me might be willing to pass it on. And then they have some people, conservatives . . . and the people that follow them too . . . If you just keep getting this out there and other people grab it and then they pass it on, it's just going to spread outwards to even people who aren't politically of my persuasion.

In other words, by forwarding it to her peers, Theresa felt that she could increase the chances that the media content she favors would eventually expand to networks of oppositional audiences that are outside of her own immediate social network.

Although digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter may provide limited opportunities to advance beyond the echo chambers and forward persuasive messages to those with opposing views, the scene of physically embodied public space allows for more direct forms of confrontation. For instance, many young conservative respondents described wearing political T-shirts on largely liberal college campuses as a way of deliberately challenging their Democratic-leaning peers. William, who owned a shirt printed with Obama's portrait along with the slogan "NOPE," explained that he specifically wore it around the "people who were so rabid" about the candidate after the 2008 election to compel them to question their loyalty in subsequent election cycles: "the 'NOPE' [shirt] was kind of me being like 'hey, now you know that it's not that simple.' Nothing really had changed . . . people were expecting Obama is going to save the world right off the bat. It was one of those things where like it's like 'nope, it didn't happen. Time to think it over again.'" Robert wore a similarly confrontational T-shirt featuring the slogan "I Told You So" (a commentary on the perceived poor performance of the Obama administration) around Democrats on his campus for two distinct reasons: "Wearing these shirts, one, it might make them say 'hmm, maybe I should rethink things,' or two, it might make them angry. I'm fine with both."

A similar dynamic of both angering the opposition and potentially influencing them was expressed by Brandon, who, as discussed in Chapter 3, made a habit of going to Obama rallies wearing conservative shirts with Republican and Tea Party slogans. He explained, "when I go to Obama stuff, the reason is to provoke and get them fired up. . . . I like conflict. I just get a rush by going to those types of events." Brandon recounted that he had been physically threatened on several occasions at these events because of what he was wearing and that he relished this negative reaction. Although Brandon's actions appear to be largely centered on receiving a thrill from antagonizing those with whom he disagrees, he also identified a persuasive goal: "Every time I go to an event like that, I think that if one person talked to me, if one person's viewpoint was changed, I did my objective."

As such testimony suggests, interpersonal conflict is an inevitable byproduct of citizen marketing practices aimed at the political opposition, particularly (if by no means exclusively) when the forwarded content itself is hostile in nature. For some, like Brandon and Robert, this conflict can be a source of great excitement, even pleasure. However, for others, it can be disheartening and can create unwelcome and contentious interactions. For instance, Nicole, who wore Republican T-shirts around her heavily Democratic campus, noted that "some people will make a snide comment. Usually it's more just a look, or they'll roll their eyes or something like that." Crystal, another Obama supporter, described being "picked on" by a conservative peer for wearing a candidate-branded shirt and lamented that "people really try to stir something out of you."

In fact, the risk of unwelcome conflict was so distressing for some that they chose to pull back from this kind of "in-your-face" political expression in their everyday lives. Dustin, for instance, described how he came to avoid wearing his Obama T-shirt around supporters of the opposing candidate during the 2008 election cycle: "My roommate is a Republican supporting McCain, and we'd get into some pretty heated debates at times . . . so I guess that was one of the reasons why I just didn't necessarily want to always flaunt [the T-shirt] around. I just felt like it could have provoked another debate that I just didn't feel like getting into." Dustin went on explain that he would limit wearing his political T-shirt in the future so as to not impede the development of social relationships: "I think I would remain reserved, not wearing a campaign T-shirt every day . . . because I do feel like politics are extremely polarizing. And especially for people that you don't know very well, that can have a bad effect . . . that gives them a reason right off the bat to take issue with you. And I would much rather be neutral going into a relationship." In other words, he sought to resist the tribal-like divisions fostered by heated political partisanship and maintain his ability to socialize with a wide range of people. Accounts such as Dustin's thus underscore the notion that participating in electoral marketing at the grassroots level poses real threats to the quality of everyday social interaction, potentially exacerbating the tensions of a deeply fractured public.

This concern with the divisive potential of citizen marketing practices may be particularly heightened in the context of face-to-face encounters, since the display of politically charged material objects like slogan T-shirts brazenly disrupts casual social spaces that are not formally set aside for political expression and debate. When passersby cannot help but be confronted with the sight of political messages that they disagree with, they may understandably feel accosted and react with hostility. However, other scenes of interaction, such as digital platforms like Twitter, are also not immune from the discomforting aspects of partisan confrontation. Erin, for instance, described her dissatisfaction with the contentious responses she received from her political tweets:

> I used to get into Twitter arguments with members of the Tea Party, and they could get really frustrating. And it would last hours, you know, back-and-forth, like a hundred forty characters, you'd end up like tweeting and tweeting and tweeting and it would get really frustrating. So sort of attacking other views on Twitter, or promoting other views that are in opposition to someone else . . . [Twitter] is not the most effective vehicle for that.

Erin thus came to doubt the efficacy of her efforts to win over those who disagree with her on Twitter because they seemed to produce nothing but endless arguments.

One solution to this sort of unwanted conflict may be, in Dustin's words, to be more "reserved" when encountering others. Studies led by researcher Kjerstin Thorson provide empirical evidence for this pattern among U.S. Facebook users, finding that they will often suppress their political opinions on the platform because they fear how such posts will be received by friends who are not in agreement,[73] and that they often perceive political expressions on the platform to be unwelcome "rants" that merely cause discord.[74] This phenomenon can be traced more broadly to what Nina Eliasoph refers to as "political etiquette," which is particularly prominent in the U.S. cultural context.[75] Conducting her ethnographic research prior to the growth of social media, Eliasoph observes that Americans generally avoid expressing their political views in public venues because they perceive political disagreement to be incompatible with the desired order of social life. Further, she warns that "in trying to get along, and make the world seem to make sense, we sometimes develop an etiquette for talking about political problems that makes it harder for us to solve them."[76]

By contrast, the sense of personal control offered by what Papacharissi dubs the private sphere of Internet communication[77] would seemingly embolden many citizens to become more outwardly expressive of their views from behind the comfort of the screen. Yet as Thorson's research suggests, there may be limits to this as well, particularly when considering the acrimony of much online political discourse that may be similarly unwelcome. Although the citizens spotlighted in this chapter—and this book as a whole—generally go against the grain of the pattern of reticence identified by Eliasoph, it is nonetheless apparent that the bold public declaration of political opinion and allegiance may only be attractive for a limited subset of the public that is unfazed by the threat of interpersonal conflict. Indeed, there appears to be a spectrum of approaches—one that is likely related to differences in individual personality and temperament. Some, like Dustin, may be more cautious and measured in their symbolic political declarations, whereas others, like Brandon, may throw caution to the wind as they embrace a provocateur role.

In addition to holding back to maintain a sense of political etiquette, the avoidance of partisan antagonism on networked digital media may be also be achieved, as noted above, by simply hitting the "block" button. As Oliver explained with regard to his anti-Romney tweets during the 2012 election cycle, "I have a tendency to block people who are really obnoxious, because there's no sense in talking to people . . . who are so committed to Mitt Romney that they won't listen to anything negative about him." Indeed, the tools that social media platforms offer users to control the composition of their social networks can help minimize contentious and unwelcome interactions with those holding opposing political views. This trend was demonstrated in most spectacular fashion during the 2016 U.S. presidential cycle with the launch of Friendswholiketrump.com, a website that identifies Facebook friends who hit

the like button for the candidate. As one reporter put it, the site "provides us an interesting and easy way to judge our Facebook friends, or create an easy 'unfriend' list."[78] Removing social media connections to block out undesired political posts may very well bring peace of mind. The cost, however, is the deepening of partisan entrenchment—the veritable sealing off of Sunstein's digital echo chambers.

One-Way Declarations Sparking Two-Way Dialogue?

It would thus appear that citizen marketing practices aimed at the political opposition inevitably result in one of two outcomes, each of which challenges democratic ideals. One the one hand, there is the threat of antagonism and rancor; on the other, there is polarized self-segregation. Surprisingly, however, some who engage in these ostensibly confrontational activities describe them as a way of initiating reasoned civil discussions about politics with people who hold divergent views. For instance, Alyssa described her Obama T-shirt as "a conversation starter. And whether some person would disagree or agree, you can get into an insightful debate and get to the core of our beliefs, and argue or agree . . . and it's stimulating." Michael mentioned a similar dynamic when describing the conversations that were sparked by his Republican candidate T-shirts: "Some people come up and usually they'll talk to you about it ... 'oh, why do you like them?' or whatever, and you just explain what you think about their ideologies. It's just to have a conversation in general, because I like politics and hearing different people's sides of it." Here, Michael and Alyssa identified motivations for displaying promotional material for electoral candidates that move beyond the domain of peer persuasion. Although it may seem counterintuitive, they framed their one-way partisan declarations of support as catalysts for two-way dialogue.

Similarly, in the context of Twitter, Wendy explained that posting partisan content such as humorous anti-Republican videos allowed her to socialize with a diverse group of citizens whom she described as "hardcore political junkies" like herself:

> We're all really obsessed with the election cycle. Instead of picking one another because we have the same view, it's more like picking one another because we want to talk about the same issues . . . . I'm pretty open to people coming back and saying "hey, you know, whatever you posted or your comment is really stupid for the following reasons. You should look at this."

As Wendy's comments suggest, platforms like Twitter offer opportunities for communities of "political junkies" who hold a range of viewpoints to connect and engage in open-ended discussions. Although the endless arguing noted above by Erin can creep into these digital exchanges, it would be a mistake to conclude that the peer-to-peer circulation of partisan media inherently precludes the sparking of political dialogue of a more congenial nature.

Thus, it appears that the very symbolic actions that may threaten civil political discourse may also in some cases enable it. However, in contrast to the more formal deliberative processes of consensus building addressed in Chapter 1, the political talk described in these examples more closely resembles the sort of noninstrumental discourse endorsed by Mark Button and Kevin Mattson, who cite "the benefits of an open-ended version of public talk that is not constrained by means–end rationality and which enables individuals to develop the arts of political engagement and democratic citizenship."[79] Similarly, Eliasoph argues in her analysis of everyday political interaction more generally that "citizens have to talk themselves into their political ideas together, and that means having places for casual political conversation."[80] Indeed, research on casual political talk in so-called online third spaces—that is, those that allow for informal socializing and are typically themed around shared cultural interests rather than explicitly political concerns—suggests that these spaces play an important role in preparing citizens for broader political participation by enhancing understanding and a sense of civic community.[81] Although symbolically declaring one's allegiance to a candidate (or expressing condemnation of the opposition) may seemingly conflict with the spirit of engaging in open-ended exchanges for the purpose of mutual learning and connection, it appears to help at least some citizens break the ice, as it were, of political etiquette and avoidance.

In such cases, these expressive and declarative practices can be recognized as contributing to broader civic cultures, which, according to Dahlgren, form the basis of broader citizen engagement in an era characterized by the blurring of boundaries between politics and popular culture and the public and the private.[82] To be clear, this potential outcome of fostering civic agency and identity through casual political talk—in line with the culturalist framework explored in previous chapters—is different from the instrumental, persuasive goals that are typically bound up in citizen marketing practice. Depending on the individual, persuading one's peers may or may not be a primary motivation for circulating media content that takes sides in the polarized and partisan political climate, and some may be more focused on sparking open-ended conversations and learning from one another than on winning over converts. Furthermore, Todd Graham points out that the goals of online political interaction may vary according to the type of communication environment fostered by different Internet forums

and venues. Graham finds that whereas spaces formally devoted to political top-ics tend to create an environment of competitive battling and one-upmanship, those that are more informal and nonpolitical are more likely to support goals of civic learning and mutual solidarity building.[83] Since the symbolic expressions treated in this chapter tend to traverse the spaces of formal political communi-cation and informal popular culture, it appears that they are pertinent for both types of processes.

As Eliasoph reminds us, it is incorrect to assume that "the purpose of activ-ism is to win battles, not to inspire general public debate and political partici-pation," and she notes that the activists that she observed in her ethnographic research "did not just want to win, they wanted to inspire broad discussion about society."[84] The testimony presented in this chapter suggests that there are citi-zens who fall on both sides of this spectrum. It is clear from the above accounts that a desire to persuade members of the other side does motivate at least some who circulate partisan media content, and the social discord that can arise from such cross-cutting encounters may be welcomed as well as feared, depending on one's relative taste for conflict. Furthermore, it is likely that the particular kinds of symbolic political actions discussed in this chapter, which tend to emphasize deep emotional identifications with one's partisan team, and the vilification of the opposing side as a kind of cultural out-group, may make a transition to two-way, mutually respectful political dialogue more difficult (if certainly not impos-sible). Rather than try to pin down these practices as producing either healthy democratic interaction on the one hand or unhealthy polarization and antago-nism on the other, it is important to emphasize the agency of individual actors in pursuing a variety of outcomes. When it comes to reaching across tribal lines and targeting the political opposition, both harmony and cacophony remain possibilities.

Conclusion: The Complex Role of the Citizen Marketer in Electoral Democracy

In this chapter, we have seen how peer-to-peer citizen marketing practices have come to complement and extend the top-down promotional efforts of elec-toral campaigns, in terms of both venerating preferred candidates as objects of emotion-laden fandom and ridiculing and bashing the competition. Whether one seeks to reinforce support among members of one's side by modeling a contagious enthusiasm, capture the hearts of the undecided by fashioning per-formances of popular approval and identification, or even challenge members of the opposition to rethink their views through confrontational displays and declarations, electoral-based forms of citizen marketing follow logics endemic

to the contemporary promotional industries as a whole: the targeting of specific audience segments, the harnessing of word-of-mouth endorsement for strategic purposes, etc. As we have seen, some of this citizen marketing activity may grow directly from the digital outreach efforts of the campaigns themselves, who have over time developed a variety of tools and tactics to transform supporters into conduits for promotional campaign messages in a two-step flow of influence. However, these efforts have been supplemented, even arguably overshadowed, by the grassroots promotion of candidates at the vernacular level of popular cul-ture, a phenomenon that is not wholly independent of the broader branding and image-making strategies of campaigns, but is also largely outside of their direct control.

This kind of instrumental, manifest participation in institutional politics at the citizen level—following the terminology of Ekman and Amna[85] discussed in Chapter 1—is broadly viewed by scholars as a positive outcome for democracy, at least in contrast to the widespread political disengagement that has character-ized numerous Western democracies in recent decades. As Ekman and Amna put it, the growing academic interest in identifying new forms and pathways of political participation—particularly via the Internet—is "justified by a concern about declining levels of civic engagement, low electoral turnout, eroding public confidence in the institutions of representative democracy, and other signs of public weariness, skepticism, cynicism and lack of trust in politicians and politi-cal parties."[86] However, although the impassioned candidate evangelism profiled in this chapter would appear to be a welcome antidote to such trends and even perhaps a revivification of popular democracy, it raises its own set of concerns that stem from the long-standing critiques of political marketing's controversial role in democratic societies.

As we have seen, the peer-to-peer spread of election-themed content is often fueled by a fanlike identification with candidates and campaigns that mir-rors engagement with popular culture fields of entertainment, celebrity, and sports. The act of spreading online memes that depict one's favored candidate as James Bond or Superman, or the competition as Darth Vader or the Joker, has an obvious appeal for both ordinary citizens and democratic theorists. At a time when political institutions are threatened by mass apathy, particularly from the young, this kind of emotionally charged participation at the symbolic level promises to bridge the gap between political and cultural spaces and pro-vide citizens with pleasurable ways to not only become engaged in elections, but also make instrumental contributions in the form of peer promotion and persuasion. In contrast, critics of political marketing as political trivialization would remind us that there are legitimate reasons to question whether style-heavy expressions of political fandom might crowd out space for more complex issue discussions and even manipulate citizens into embracing—and, in turn,

further propagating—appealing images that can conceal as much as reveal substantive policy positions. After all, concise popular culture formats such as memes, hashtags, and T-shirts tend to leave little room for in-depth articulations of political ideas, and the frequent emphasis on candidates' personalities (and even physical appearance) in expressions of political fandom seems to follow the most reductive tendencies of elite political packaging.

In response, those who stress the affective intelligence and interpretative agency of citizens would argue that political image making is in fact a reciprocal process, and that we must therefore take seriously the authenticity, even sagacity, of expressivist responses to politicians that traverse official and unofficial spaces of political discourse. Indeed, we can identify threads of each side of this debate in the key logic of persuasion employed by the citizen marketing participants highlighted in this chapter, in which public displays of candidate enthusiasm and identification are exploited for their potential bandwagon effect. If these performances are authentic outcomes of citizens' affective intelligence, then they can be seen as helping to proliferate critical and moral judgements at an accessible level of popular culture, and thus, as Scammell puts it, connect "distant high politics to the everyday."[87] If, however, these performances are merely cynical imitations of genuine enthusiasm harnessed for the purpose of artificially manufacturing "buzz"—or at worst, outright forgeries, as in the case of paying actors to wear T-shirts at rallies or using fake accounts to boost Twitter follower numbers—then they would seemingly exacerbate the trend of democratic elections as manipulative and image-centric popularity contests that are emptied of substance.

In truth, it may be difficult to definitively distinguish one from the other, and both scenarios could occur simultaneously, even within a single campaign. Thus, rather than choose a side in the long-running debate about political packaging that now looms over amateur civic practices as well as elite campaign marketing, it is perhaps more judicious to articulate the trade-offs—the potential benefits as well as the potential risks—that stem from this multifaceted set of trends. In Chapter 6, I develop the metaphor of light politics in an attempt to capture this dynamic, which refers at once to both the relative insubstantiality of the political messages spread via citizen marketing practices and their buoyant ease of travel across everyday cultural spaces. As I will argue, the dual-sided concept of light politics can be extended to the citizen marketer approach as a whole, since it points to the ambivalence of expanding popular participation in politics by broadening the purview of political marketing that is notorious for its trivializing (and often elite-serving) tendencies. Navigating these tensions is thus a complicated affair, demanding new forms of critical literacy that can interrogate connections between the style and substance of various citizen marketing efforts, as well as the broader power structures that surround them.

For now, it is important to reiterate that the combination of intensive, culturally situated participation in electioneering at the citizen level and the attending specter of trivialization and elite manipulation is not at all a new phenomenon, at least in the U.S. context. Rather, it harkens back in many ways to the period of the mid to late 19th century, which, as Schudson notes, was characterized by massively popular banner-waving parades and rallies for parties and candidates, as well as a strong sense of citizen affiliation and identification with partisan teams. Critics would later look back on this era as a time when powerful elites corrupted the democratic system by seducing low-information voters with stylized spectacle and appeals to in-group loyalty.[88] Similar accusations could be directed toward the contemporary phenomenon of political fan cultures. However, the increased capacity for citizens as well as elites to shape the flow of campaign messages—especially, but not exclusively, via networked digital media—appears to create a far more complex and nuanced hybrid of top-down and bottom-up symbolic power.

And how, exactly, can we describe this citizen power in the institutional political sphere? As we have seen, participants in peer-to-peer candidate promotion are essentially positioned in a service capacity on behalf of campaigns. As Stromer-Galley points out, this arrangement tends to foreclose a participatory role in the actual formation of a candidate's policy positions and thus threatens to disempower citizens as they become mere servants of an elite political class.[89] However, the partisan supporters who volunteer their promotional labor for candidates seem eager to be used as foot soldiers in the "meme warfare" of modern electioneering battles, because their goals and interests are closely aligned with their campaign of choice. The potential power of citizen marketers in elections, therefore, would appear to have less to do with shaping the policies of given competitors than with selecting and promoting new and alternative candidates who are seen to be more representative of their political identities.

It would then follow that these practices would ultimately be most impactful when pushing insurgent and outsider candidates into the public spotlight and spreading interest and energy around their campaigns. Indeed, we can glimpse this pattern in many of the prominent political fandom episodes discussed above, such as the intraparty leadership contests that were turned upside down by popular grassroots movements—on social media and beyond—to support Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders over their more establishment-oriented party rivals. In each case, the ascent of these candidates as objects of impassioned political fandom, as spread through Internet memes, viral videos, and hashtags, coincided with their increasing levels of voter support. Although it would be foolish to claim that such citizen marketing activity is a decisive factor in determining election outcomes (indeed, in the case of Sanders, it was decidedly not), it undoubtedly makes a significant contribution to the broader

promotional outreach of campaigns. Furthermore, it can help create powerful journalistic narratives of insurgent grassroots momentum that filter through the hybrid media environment.

Notably, such a framework of citizen marketing power in elections more or less adheres to the liberal marketplace model of democracy outlined in Chapter 1, in which voters buy (and, in this case, also help sell) one candidate option over another. As we have seen, this model has been frequently criticized by scholars for limiting the part played by citizens in democracy and forestalling a more collaborative and deliberative public role in the shaping of candidates' policy positions.[90] In addition, the marketplace model has also been accused of prioritizing individual self-interest over the public interest, since consumer-like citizens seemingly choose candidates who are seen as best fulfilling their own needs rather than the needs of the broader society. With regard to the first line of critique, it appears that an expanded capacity for citizens to promote candidate alternatives through participatory media interventions would go a considerable way toward making the marketplace model of democracy more democratic, even if the candidates themselves come preformed. In governmental systems dominated by a few major parties, this would appear to have more relevance for intraparty contests such as primary elections, where insurgent and outsider campaigns have more of a fighting chance, than for general elections that typically limit voter choice to a narrow set of party-approved options. In the UK context, Corbyn's surprising ascendance to the head of the Labour Party was enabled by a crucial change in the rules regarding candidate selection and recruitment; as Labour moved to a "one member, one vote" process for selecting their leadership post,[91] the door was opened for an insurgent, citizen-powered promotional effort that made the hashtag #JezWeCan into a clarion call for left-wing voters to shake up the party. If there was ever a case to be made for the power of peer-to-peer memes and hashtags to impact electoral outcomes, then the Corbyn-mania of 2015 would serve as a strong piece of evidence. Moreover, the Corbyn story underlines Anstead and Chadwick's broader point that institutional structures greatly affect the role that the Internet plays in election campaigns.[92] Depending on the structure for selecting and recruiting candidates, the power of citizen marketers to intervene in the electoral process through mediated performances of contagious enthusiasm may vary greatly from democracy to democracy.

With regard to the second line of critique of the marketplace model, it may well be the case that the trend of growing polarization and partisanship in democracies like the United States is intensified by a focus on advancing one's political self-interest when both buying and helping to sell favored candidates. As we have seen, evangelistic political fandom hinges on a deeply held sense of cultural, even tribal-like, allegiance that inherently emphasizes in-group and

out-group divisions over consensus building and compromise. As citizen marketing participants take firm, declarative stands in partisan election battles and incorporate their personal candidate preferences into their self-expressions of identity, they may be pulled further into polarized camps that are increasingly hostile and closed off from one another. In this sense, we can draw a line between the marketplace model of democracy and Mouffe's framework of agonistic pluralism,[93] since both stress the centrality of contestation and factional conflict in political processes (even as they emerge from different intellectual traditions). However, one could argue that the pure self-interest of market relations and the tribal group interest of political agonism are not necessarily one and the same, with the latter being significantly more public-spirited than the former. Although the agonistic model does contrast with the consensus-building ideal of deliberative democracy, its focus on advocating for collective group interests (including those of marginalized and oppressed segments of society) also diverges from Cohen's notion of purchaser citizens[94] who are only concerned with what elected officials can do for them personally. Thus, the tribal-like agonism that characterizes political fans and cheerleaders might represent a middle position between a purely self-interested and a wholly public-interested citizenry, suggesting a compromise of sorts between the feared excesses of the politics-market nexus and the lofty ideals of deliberative democracy that downplay the persistence of conflict and social division.

Furthermore, as discussed above, the declarative agonism of citizen marketing practice and two-way processes of political dialogue are not always mutually exclusive. Rather, impassioned symbolic expressions of political allegiance and identification create a volatile spark in casual social spaces, which can catalyze both civic dialogue and discord and retrenchment. Thus, it is up to individual citizens to determine how to strike their own balance that comports with their broader goals and sensibilities. Undoubtedly, the kinds of political fandom practices detailed in this chapter have important implications for civic identity and agency-building processes, in accordance with the culturalist model. Symbolically displaying one's identification with a campaign or candidate, as well as engaging in the casual political talk that can follow from these ice-breaking expressions, may help form the preconditions for other kinds of participation in the institutional political sphere, such as donating, volunteering, and organizing. Indeed, these expressive media-based actions may support a range of outcomes above and beyond peer persuasion, and we must take this into consideration. At the same time, however, we must take seriously the instrumental and manifest dimensions of citizens' promotional labor in electoral contexts and beyond.

However, before we turn to a conversation of citizen marketing's broader consequences, including its relationship to other forms of political participation, it is necessary to explore one additional aspect of persuasive media spreading

that has risen sharply with the growth of digital social media: the strategic circulation of journalistic information. As we will see, in contrast to the blatant cheering and jeering of candidates and parties that underwrites formal political marketing and campaigning, the selective forwarding of news constitutes a far more subtle enterprise that blurs the boundaries between educating one's peers and persuading them.

*[handwritten note: again —
to combination of
leisure & labor]*

5.

News Spreaders and Agenda Setters

The Promotional Labor of Raising Awareness

"Make Kony famous." This was the charge of the advocacy group Invisible Children, which launched a viral video sensation in 2012 with a half-hour web documentary on the human rights abuses of the Ugandan militant leader Joseph Kony. The peer-to-peer circulation of the video, as well as related mentions of the Kony story, were staggering: one week after the clip went online, nearly 5 million Kony-related tweets appeared on Twitter, and the video itself received well over 70 million views on YouTube and another 16 million on Vimeo.[1] Although this grassroots media-spreading activity was spurred to a large degree by celebrity involvement—including Twitter mentions from pop stars such as Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber—it also depended on the participation of millions of citizens who chose to selectively forward the content to their friends and followers. In the process, they helped realize the goal set out by Invisible Children—Kony indeed became a household name.

Shortly after its astounding success, however, the Kony 2012 movement seemed to falter. Criticism of the organization's questionable practices, including accusations of fact twisting and financial impropriety, pushed its founder toward a high-profile public breakdown.[2] Furthermore, as Kony himself continued to evade capture by international authorities and media interest in the story began to wane, Kony 2012 became a symbol for the seeming impotency of trendy social media–based political discourse and fodder for endless jokes.[3] Like many of its contemporaries, the Kony 2012 campaign was focused on raising informational awareness about an issue in the public mind, rather than on any practical steps that would be needed to address it. This alone was enough to raise the ire of many who doubt the efficacy of awareness-raising as a viable strategy for creating social and political change. What difference does it make if more people know about an issue if they are unable to do anything about it? To many, the viral phenomenon of Kony 2012 was the ultimate example of a futile slacktivism.[4]