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Branding America: Patriotic Products and Consumerism After September 11th

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was no connection to Maher's post-9/11 gaff, many believed this was a direct result (Associated Press, 2002).

Just a brief look at topical humor after the attacks of 9/11 illustrates the cultural importance of this discourse in helping the nation to process the occurrence of such a tragedy. Topical humor in the United States reflects and questions national values as a means to clarify our ideals and establish a common culture. This occurs through the simultaneous referencing and mocking of shared social values. Topical humorists are especially vital in this regard as they bring current events into a broader context with past events and contemporary values. Specifically, topical humor in the aftermath of 9/11 helped audiences to transcend the immediate tragedy. In doing so, they allowed for an emotional release of fear and anxiety and facilitated an adjustment to a changed world. Topical humorists on late night television provided both relief and the tools to adapt to an ever-changing world after 9/11.

—Elizabeth Benacka

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SPOTLIGHT ESSAY/EVERYDAY LIFE: PATRIOTIC PRODUCTS

On the evening of one of the most heart-wrenching, confusing, and frightening days many Americans have ever experienced, citizens turned to their nation's leader for words of hope, encouragement, and perhaps even explanation. Many people were

feeling helpless and found themselves looking for guidance or suggestions of ways to cope; looking for ways to help their fellow citizens in need; looking for how to help their country heal. On September 11, 2001, at 8:30 p.m. eastern standard time, President George W. Bush finally addressed the nation and proclaimed, "Our financial institutions remain strong and the American economy will be open for business as well." In other words, in their moment of need, Americans were told by the president of the United States to go shopping.

Knowing that Americans were being pointed in their direction, many businesses immediately began marketing their products, as well as themselves, as patriotic. In part to express support for the country in a time of need, and in part to reap the largest amount of profits possible, corporations used the concept of branding to make their product or company synonymous with patriotism. In general, the concept of branding works on the premise that there are specific values and beliefs associated with the image of the product, as well as the company that produced it. When consumers purchase a brand-name product they are, by the act of buying, endowed with its qualities. A particularly effective brand-name product is one that instantly connects its implied meaning to the producer and purchaser of the good.

In the case of September 11, an array of companies began including patriotic images in the advertisements of their usual products. Thus, when consumers purchased a commodity laden with patriotic imagery they were investing in "brand America" and as a result could feel as though they performed their patriotic duty in the aftermath of September 11. For example, General Electric's post-9/11 full-page ad featured a sketch of the Statue of Liberty in the act of leaving her pedestal and rolling up her sleeves. At the top of the page was the headline "We will roll up our sleeves. We will move forward together. We will overcome. We will never forget." The ad works by encouraging consumers to believe that GE is on their side, supporting the country in a time of need. Other companies followed suit.

For example, the advertisement for Perfect Beauty's patriotic twinkle tweezers, which were red, white, or blue stainless steel decorated with three rows of red, white, and blue Swarovski crystals, read "Tweeze with Pride! God Bless the USA!" Similarly, formal dress designer, Jessica McClintock, created patriotic prom dresses for her spring 2002 line. These dresses were known as "the American Collection" and featured red, white, blue gowns covered in red, white, and blue rhinestones. In a 2002 interview with the *Wall Street Journal* about 9/11, McClintock stated, "I was very shaken by this event like everyone" (de Lisser, 2002, p. 1) which resulted in her conscious choice to create dresses that were representative of American pride. Likewise, shoe designer Steve Madden created a white athletic shoe emblazoned with the U.S. flag and called "The Bravest," a phrase that, in the aftermath of the attacks, explicitly evoked the bravery of firefighters, police officers (Barstow and Henriques, 2002), and other emergency personnel who served the country on September 11. Perfect Beauty, Jessica McClintock, and Steve Madden are just a few additional examples of products created to capitalize on post-9/11 patriotic fervor.

Post-9/11 culture provided an opportunity for companies to rebrand themselves and their products as American. In doing so, they supported the president's directive

to consume, gave Americans a concrete way to express their support for their country, and made a tidy profit in the process.

—Lori Bindig and M. Bosau

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SPOTLIGHT ESSAY/EVERYDAY LIFE: SOCIAL NETWORKING

The classification of government documents and sealed court records increased after September 11, 2001; however, during the same period, the use of social networking sites experienced explosive growth. This increase in social networking contradicts the idea that safety comes from secrecy and instead shows that Americans tend to find routes of public expression in the absence of public discourse.

Government document classification increased 40 percent between September 11, 2001, and 2003, and the government spent more than \$6.5 billion managing classified documents (Weitzal, 2004). To justify government restriction of documents, public information was said to provide terrorists a “road map” for future attacks; however, the Reporters’ Committee for Freedom of the Press pointed out the absence of causal links between government openness and 9/11 (Dalglish & Leslie, 2005; Roberts, 2006). Furthermore, the U.S. press, previously charged with open, investigative reporting encountered roadblocks that minimized their role as impartial managers of public discourse (Weitzal, 2004). Tied to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the government’s withdrawal of information from the public sphere and journalism’s lack of reporting diminished the ability of everyday Americans to participate in public civil rights, terrorism, and immigration discourse.

In contrast, the burgeoning social networking movement saw people clamor to express themselves in a public forum with little secrecy. For example, Friendster launched in 2002, and one million users registered on LiveJournal in 2003 (Searcher, 2007). Facebook connected university students initially and now boasts more than 200 million users (Facebook, 2009). The historic avenues of public engagement, such as the press, unavailable to citizens because of government secrecy, were re-created online.

As government and journalistic institutions backed away from the open dialogue of healthy democracy, Internet users created areas of their lives where a feeling of openness existed. Studies of everyday living and popular culture have shown that government efforts to maintain control are counteracted by the tactics of a populace seeking small areas of control (De Certeau, 1984). In this case, open participation