Imagining Resistance to Trump through the Networked Branding of the National Park Service

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Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: A Casebook

Edited By Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova

Imagining Resistance to Trump through the Networked Branding of the National Park Service (By Rachel E Moran and Thomas J Billard)

Hours after President Donald J. Trump's inauguration, the National Parks Service (NPS) fell foul of the new administration by retweeting a side-by-side photographic comparison of the crowd size in attendance that day compared to Obama's first inauguration. After being forced to take down the tweet, the NPS were reportedly instructed not to use the social media platform at all (Potenza, 2017). In response, members of the public took up the traditional branding of the NPS in order to create resistance, both online and offline, to the newly-inaugurated President's strict control over the government's public communications. More specifically, members of the public used images and icons associated with the NPS as symbols of resistance, using branded images like Smokey Bear to communicate messages critical of the new administration, both in direct response to its actions against the NPS and its authoritarian politics in general.

For instance, individuals protesting Trump's political agenda redesigned classical advertisements featuring Smokey Bear to carry messages of general discontent with the new administration and to issue calls for civil resistance. The NPS logo—the agency's most identifiable brand resource—was redesigned into the shape of a fist, a symbol of the Black Power movement (see Figure 1). Brand imagery was paired with riffs on Smokey Bear's slogans such as "Only you can resist fascist liars" and "Smokey says resist" (e.g., Figure 2). And "Wokey Bear," as he was redubbed, became a staple of protest signage at the multitude of anti-inauguration demonstrations. Beyond the physical protests, these new branded images circulated online with the sharing of protest images on social media sites, the dissemination of new Smokey designs, and even the sale of merchandise featuring Smokey the Resister (e.g., Frazier, 2017).

Yet, the transformation of the NPS brand went far beyond the mere sharing of "Wokey Bear" imagery, including the creation of alternative NPS social media accounts dubbed "AltNPS." These accounts were designed to mirror the brand strategy of governmental accounts in order to reclaim the agency's messaging in the face of censorship from the Trump administration. This use of the NPS's brand resources to protest governmental authority transformed the meaning of the NPS brand itself, such that it now represents resistance to a government of which it is, in reality, a constituent part. Moreover, via this transformation, the NPS has become a site of civic imagination, as citizens use the brand and iconography of the NPS to conceptualize what resistance to the Trump administration can mean and how it can be achieved.
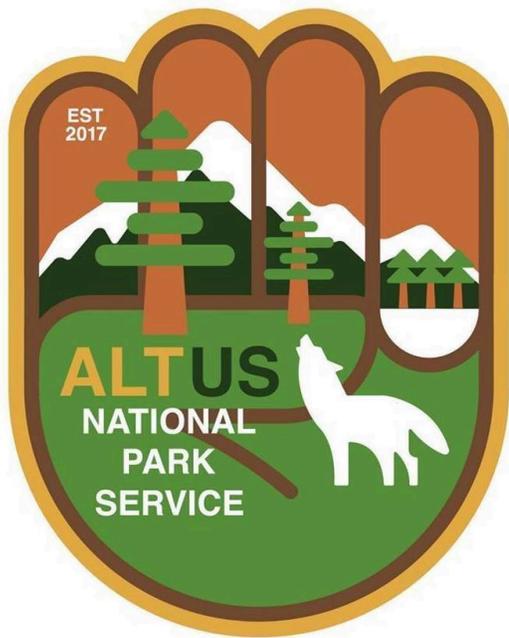

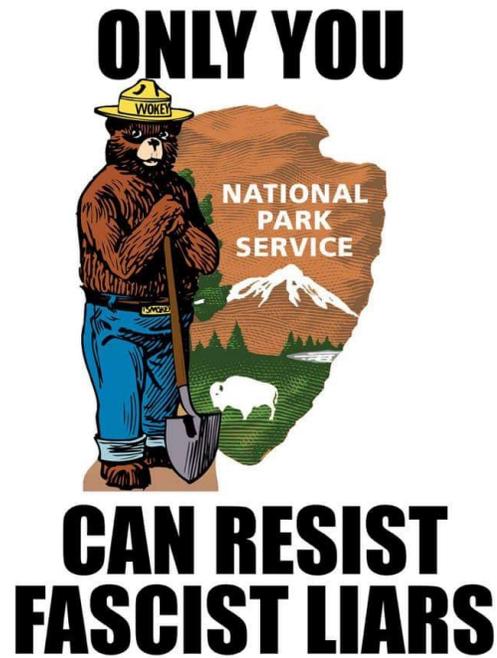**Figure 1.** Redesigned National Park Service logo

Figure 2. National Park Service logo and "Wokey Bear" mascot

The transformation of the NPS's brand identity, as well as its popular cultural meaning, illustrates the elasticity of branding in a networked communication environment. As brands— even governmental ones—attempt to cultivate social connection through and around their symbolic resources (Arvidson, 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), they open themselves up as spaces for the exchange of social and cultural meanings. Within these spaces, however, the networks of brand participants reify existing cultural meanings, while also generating new ones that transform—and even contest—the identity of the branded entity (Billard, 2016, 2017). This power over the structure and articulation of the NPS's brand meaning thus makes the NPS a focal point around which action and activism are organized and, consequently, alternative civic futures are imagined.

What enabled this to happen was the cultural and iconographic significance of the NPS's brand resources, and in particular the icon of Smokey Bear. First released during the Second

World War in 1942 (Rice, 2001), Smokey was the central figure of public service campaigns raising awareness about wildfire prevention in the western United States. With so many able-bodied men away at war, the government could not spare the manpower to fight wildfires, so they needed to prevent them from beginning in the first place (Morrison, 1995). In the intervening years, however, Smokey Bear has evolved beyond his role as a public service announcement into a new role as a cultural icon (Helmers, 2011). The subject of a 1952 song (which introduced the apocryphal name "Smokey *the* Bear"), radio plays, cartoons, children's books, comic strips, dolls, and toys, as well as the mascot of the Junior Forest Ranger Program, which inducted millions of American children (Morrison, 1995; Wilson, 2014), and of wildfire education programs at nearly every American school (Ballard, Evans, Sturtevant, and Jakes, 2012), Smokey has a cultural resonance far beyond any other governmental marketing tool. Indeed, his cultural resonance is so great that in 1952, the United States Congress passed the Smokey Bear Act, which removed Smokey from the public domain and placed his image under the control of the Secretary of Agriculture (Morrison, 1995).

As Douglas Holt has written, "the crux of iconicity is that the person or the thing is widely regarded as the most compelling symbol of a set of ideas and values that a society deems important" (2004, 1), and Smokey stands in many ways as the most compelling symbol of the federal government's mandate to engage in service to the public. As is oft noted in scholarship and commentary on Smokey Bear, he is a warden figure (Morrison, 1995), "a friendly and stalwart steward of nature" (Wilson, 2014, 106), "a denizen of those woods you're visiting, and he cares about preserving them" (Earle, 2000, 31). Whereas other symbols of governmental responsibility emphasize authority and dominion over the public, Smokey represents guardianship of the public's shared natural resources (DiSanza and Bullis, 1999). As Marguerite

Helmers noted, Smokey wears a hat that "aligns him with the authority of the Park Service rangers," but the rest of his apparel mirrors that of the Civilian Conservation Corps, "a group of workers who embodied the value of service and aligned it with patriotism and the parks" (2011, 48). Thus, as a branded image of the NPS, Smokey Bear communicates the government's obligation to nurture, rather than dominate, the public it serves, which made him—and the NPS he represents—the perfect brand image through which to criticize an administration that quickly revealed itself to hold alternative values of governance.

The resonance individuals expressed with Smokey Bear iconography and its reimagining in the service of political commentary is reflective of the ways in which communities are formed around brand imagery, as well as how these communities become facilitators of political and civic imagination. In their seminal work on "brand communities" Albert Muniz and Thomas O'Guinn argued that brands are social objects and are socially constructed (2001, 27). The communities that surround brands are not united simply by acts of consumption but by an affective bond with the brand itself, as well as with others through connection to the brand. They further characterized this social connection as emblematic of wider trends in brand thinking that have moved beyond the traditional consumer-brand dyad to a consumer-brand-consumer triad. From this perspective, the NPS cultivates a triadic relationship wherein social connection is facilitated among citizens through connection with the brand of the NPS. This is particularly potent in the case of the NPS given its role in the personal history of millions of Americans who grew up going to, and continue to frequent, National Parks, and for whom Smokey Bear is a resonant cultural icon.

The individual connection citizens feel with the public spaces guarded by Smokey and the NPS has been central to the NPS's branding efforts, and can be seen clearly in their social

media strategies. Rather than actively producing original brand content, the NPS relies on crowdsourced branding materials contributed by citizens through social media, which collectively builds a brand image reliant on their network of brand participants. The primary social media feeds used by the NPS—Twitter, Facebook and Instagram—utilize the hashtag #findyourpark to source images from their wide network of visitors to populate their feeds. Currently the Instagram version of the hashtag has been attached to over 1,000,000 images from users around the United States. Given the centrality of users to the maintenance of the NPS brand, and the personal attachment individuals have with the public spaces being promoted, it is unsurprising that individuals feel an identity-affiliation with the brand resources used by the NPS. Moreover, the move from "closed" to "open" brands seen in marketing in recent years (Pitt, Watson, Berthon, Wynn, and Zinkhan, 2006) affords brand communities a stake in the creative direction of the brand, thus opening space for brand imagery to be utilized in ways that may support or contest the brand's institutional image. Resistance to the Trump administration through the use of NPS brand imagery by political activists therefore exists as a prime example of how civic engagement arises from brand communities.

Activists' use of NPS brand imagery is especially interesting given that it was used both to contest the burgeoning authoritarian tendencies of the incoming administration *and* to reify the traditional brand of the NPS as a public-serving entity. Rather than seeing this as an example of brand signifiers' vulnerability to hijacking for alternative causes, the NPS case illustrates the complexities of brand management in a networked era (Billard and Moran, 2017). Despite the NPS being a governmental agency, and thus subordinate to the executive administration, its reliance on the public for the development of its brand image distributes power over brand meaning across a network of individuals and institutions. Consequently, when institutional

powers attempt to reclaim centralized control over the brand—for instance with the Trump administration's removal of information about climate change from the NPS's online presence—relations within the brand's network are disturbed. The locus of control over the brand's meaning no longer resides with the branded entity, but rather is collectively held across the network of brand participants (albeit unevenly). This decentralization of power means that the government cannot prevent its own subordinate brand from becoming a site at which counter-governmental resistance can organize. Moreover, the "openness" of the NPS's brand imagery (including and especially Smokey Bear) offers a set of communicative resources through and with which the collective political aims of the newly resistant brand network can be expressed.

This alternative vision of the NPS—represented both by the resources reimagined by brand network participants and by the "AltNPS" social media accounts they created—launches from, yet moves beyond, the identity-affiliations enabled by the brand's open nature into collective imagining of alternative possibilities of governance and civic values. As Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, and Gabriel Peters-Lazaro discussed in their introduction to this volume, civic imagination involves the ability to imagine positive alternatives to contemporary socio-political situations and to imagine oneself as empowered to bring about those changes, both of which are facilitated by a shared "cultural vocabulary" in which would-be activists communicate their imaginings. In the current case, the alternative future imagined through the NPS brand is one in which the federal government upholds its civic and moral obligation to preserve the environment for future generations and values democratic principles in its engagement with the public. The emergence of the AltNPS on social media is indicative of such imagining in practice. These social media feeds issue calls for action and #resistance from their followers in what we might consider a role-playing of the NPS in an imagined reality without the

current political constraints. Further examples were seen in how Smokey Bear imagery was used

by protesters in the March for Science in Spring 2017 (see Figure 3). Activists used NPS

imagery on protest signs to contest the administration's downplaying of climate change, reaffirm

the NPS's values as an environmental champion, and push for fulfilment of the government's

role as a steward of the public. For those who employed the NPS brand in their protest activities,

the NPS thus exists not only as a site of political contention, where conversations over policy

priorities can take place, but also as a space within which civic futures can be imagined.

Figure 3. Smokey Bear protest sign

Participation in the practices of networked branding further emboldened individuals as

civic agents by providing an icon of collective civic responsibility in the figure of Smokey Bear,

which could be repurposed as an aspirational symbol of individuals' own contribution. As a

figure of both positive governmental authority and of civic agency, Smokey Bear exists as a

powerful cultural role model for individuals seeking ways to become involved in civic life in the

wake of the Trump administration. Identification with this resonant culture icon allowed

individuals to put themselves in Smokey's boots and model their actions on those of the figure to

whom they have looked since childhood as a model of collective responsibility. Reciprocally, in

using the branded symbol of Smokey, they have attributed to him their own desires to be

empowered civic actors and "resist fascist liars" (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Smokey Bear poster design

By communicating their resistance through Smokey Bear, in addition to attributing messages of resistance to his image, activists utilizing NPS branding make salient how networked brands act as a cultural vocabulary with which a multitude of political conversations can be had. As such, the NPS' brand resources exist as pseudo-linguistic resources that can be used in *individual* acts of *collective* civic imagination. That is, the brand resources of the NPS can be—and, indeed, are—invoked in individuals' acts and articulations of dissent that contribute to the collective ethos of resistance. The polysemy of the NPS' brand resources further brokers political relationships through the unification of diverse political interest groups, each of which opposes different aspects of the Trump administration's agenda. For instance, activists used Smokey Bear imagery in both the Women's March and the March for Science as emblematic of both environmental and conservationist concerns, as well as of feminist critiques of the misogynistic policies of the incoming administration.

These uses and transformation of the NPS brand by individuals in service of political resistance is emblematic of what we have termed as *networked branding* (Billard and Moran, 2017). The networked nature of the NPS brand results from the confluence of several trends increasingly common in contemporary brand culture, namely the participatory nature of branded entities' public communications, the cultivation of personal identity-affiliations with brands, and the ease of digital manipulation of iconographic brand resources in an age of technologically empowered amateurs (Billard, 2016, 2017). The very practice of networked branding therefore enables civic imagination to occur, as brands have become collective resources with which, and transformative spaces in which, civic associations can form and political consciousness can be raised (Bennett and Lagos, 2007).

The success of the NPS brand—both in its ability to take a central role in the public's social relationships and in its open structure, which has allowed it to be transformed in the service of civic imagination—stands as a testament to the revolutionary political potential of contemporary brand culture. We view the practices discussed in this chapter as indicative of a brand culture—situated within a networked society (Castells, 2010)—in which citizenship and consumer culture are not mutually exclusive categories, and citizens are empowered to restructure brand meanings for collective expression, even if that brand belongs to the government. Accordingly, we expect that the increasing prevalence of networked brands will facilitate an increase in popular political expression through the logics of consumer culture and, in particular, contribute to the cultivation of civic imagination.

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