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MARKETPLACE

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BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor: It's a big night for politics on television. Despite a seasonal dearth of formal candidate debates or campaign advertising, Wednesday is the night for NBC's White House drama "West Wing" and for Timothy Bottoms playing the comedia del arte version of George W. Bush on "That's My Bush" on Comedy Central. "That's My Bush" did not premier to a shouting chorus of critical acclaim, but its existence tells us something about marketing ideas, be they political or otherwise, here in the 21st century. University of Southern California media analyst Martin Kaplan joins us now.

Dr. MARTIN KAPLAN (USC): Nice to see you.

BRANCACCIO: Now, Marty, I know you to be a man with a prodigious sense of humor. Does that sense of humor extend to this thing called "That's My Bush"?

Dr. KAPLAN: Yes. It's a little bit like watching a train wreck, but there's something funny in the grotesque. There's an ancient tradition that that's a part of. Yes, I've seen the first two episodes of "That's My Bush" now.

BRANCACCIO: All right. An ancient tradition. You mean, Shakespeare...

Dr. KAPLAN: No, the--the--in ancient Greece, the three tragedies in the course of the Socratic festival always ended with a satire play in which people strapped on enormous prosthetic devices you can't mention on a family radio program and made fun of everything that preceded it.

BRANCACCIO: The thing is a lot of folks, if this show takes off, may actually glean a substantial amount of their political information, understanding of the political world, through this farce on Comedy Central.

Dr. KAPLAN: Yes, in fact, there are studies that show that most people--50 percent say they get some or all of their serious news about politics from late-night shows like "Leno" and "Letterman" and "Saturday Night Live," and—and now "That's My Bush." And it's interesting. It's not only because that--they're being parodied; it's also because the politicians are going there. I read one account that said that Al Gore in September got less cumulative coverage from all three networks put together than he did from one appearance on "Letterman."

BRANCACCIO: It does make you wonder if the comedy take on politics breeds cynicism.

Dr. KAPLAN: Well, it's--it--one of those chicken and egg situations. To what degree is the audience being given what it already wants? In some ways, the culture of Mad magazine that I grew up with is now mainstream. Something which used to be thought of as edgy and full of attitude is now par for the course. Right now the notion is that politicians are liars and idiots, and which of those two tribes you belong to is kind of irrelevant.

BRANCACCIO: Exception, of course, is the program on NBC, the "West Wing," which actually reveres public service.

Dr. KAPLAN: Yes, and so on the same night you have a kind of sentimental, romantic version of what it's like to be in politics, a kind of Clinton administration that might have been, and then a little bit later, like this satire play and ancient Greeks, the whole thing is turned upside down and revealed that no one is for anything but yucks.

BRANCACCIO: It must encourage you, though, at some level that you can draw an audience using politics.

Dr. KAPLAN: Well, one-third of the country's young people turn out to vote, which is not a particularly encouraging number. You can also draw people with pornography. So it's not as though there's kind of intrinsic, civic goodness in this enterprise. The truth is that entertainers and politicians are now both in the same business, which is capturing attention. How in a world in which there are so many competing things for people's attention can you possibly get any of it? Well, some ways you kind of hit them over their head with whoopee cushions.

BRANCACCIO: Marty, thank you. Martin Kaplan is director of the Norman Lear Center at USC.

Coming up on MARKETPLACE, finding value in being useless.

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