

# THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE RE-LABELED?

## The Public Health Implications of Social Media



### Hungry for Social Media

On September 11, 2020, an individual on Twitter, a social media platform, made a post entitled “Want to bring this revolution to your grocery aisle?”. The post featured pictures of food items that had been purchased, taken home, and re-labeled with labels containing social justice messages. The food items were then brought back to the store and placed back on shelves for purchase. These actions had been performed by a friend of the individual that made the Twitter post.

Also, a link to a Google Drive containing numerous altered label graphics in pdf format was posted. These labels were made to resemble easily recognizable brands of packaged foods and mimicked the design of popular canned fruit sauce, canned vegetables, canned meat, coffee, peanut butter, soup, and sandwich spread. The drive also contained instructions on how to adhere the labels to the products and recommendations to avoid re-shelving altered goods at specific grocery chain, due to possible legal action.



### Social Justice Labels

The product labels that contained social justice messages were graphically similar to the original food labels. The labels also featured working bar codes that allowed consumers to purchase re-labeled items.



However, the new labels did not contain any of the FDA 21 CFR 101 labeling requirements, including: the common name of the food, a designation of ingredients, the name and place of business of manufacturer, packer, or distributor, nutrition labeling, declaration of net quantity of contents, and other requirements.

### Public Health Implications

Since ingredients, and allergen information had been removed from the label, consumers may have been unaware of potential allergen reactions that could have affected their household, which caused these food items to be a public health hazard.

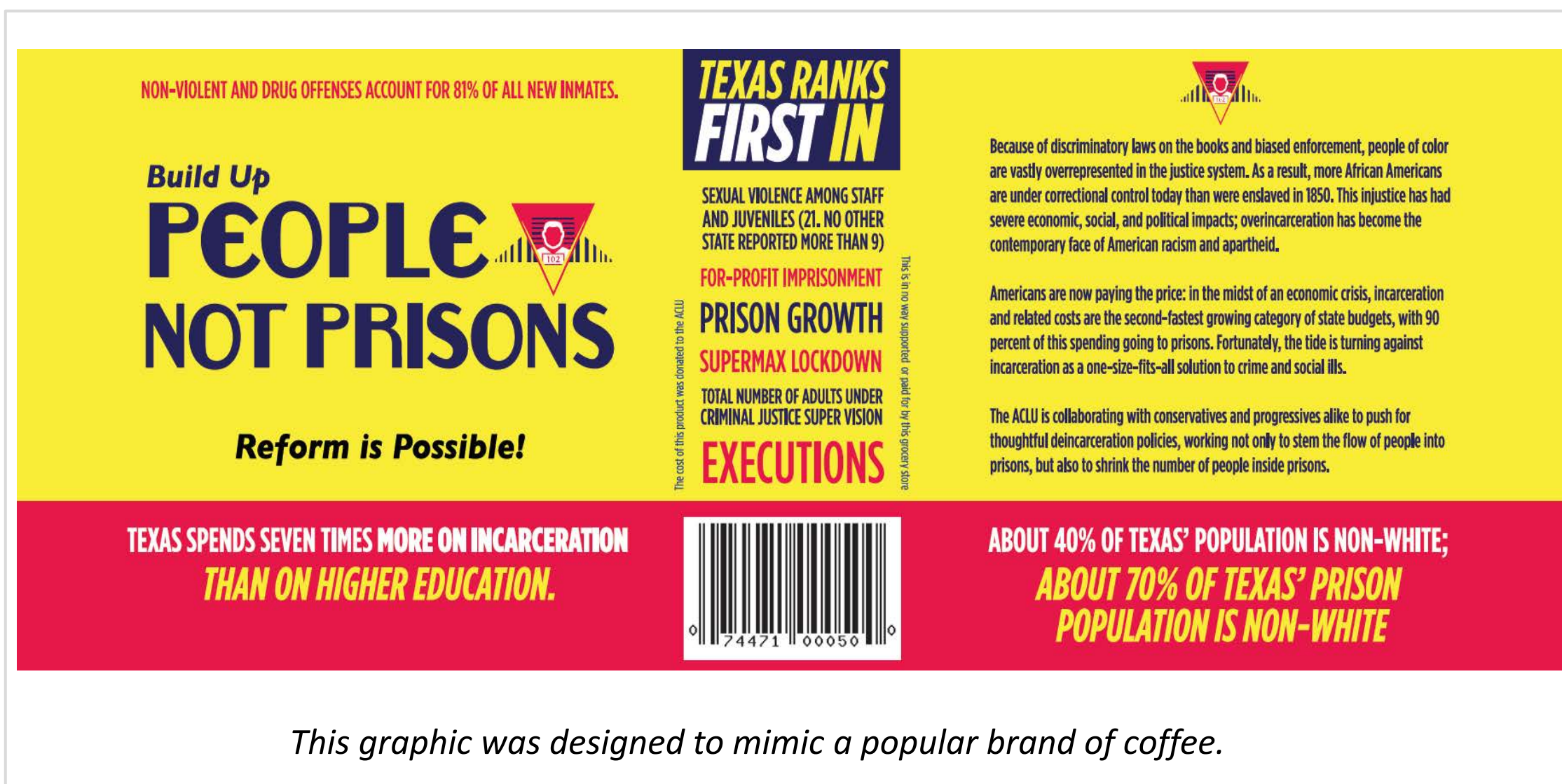
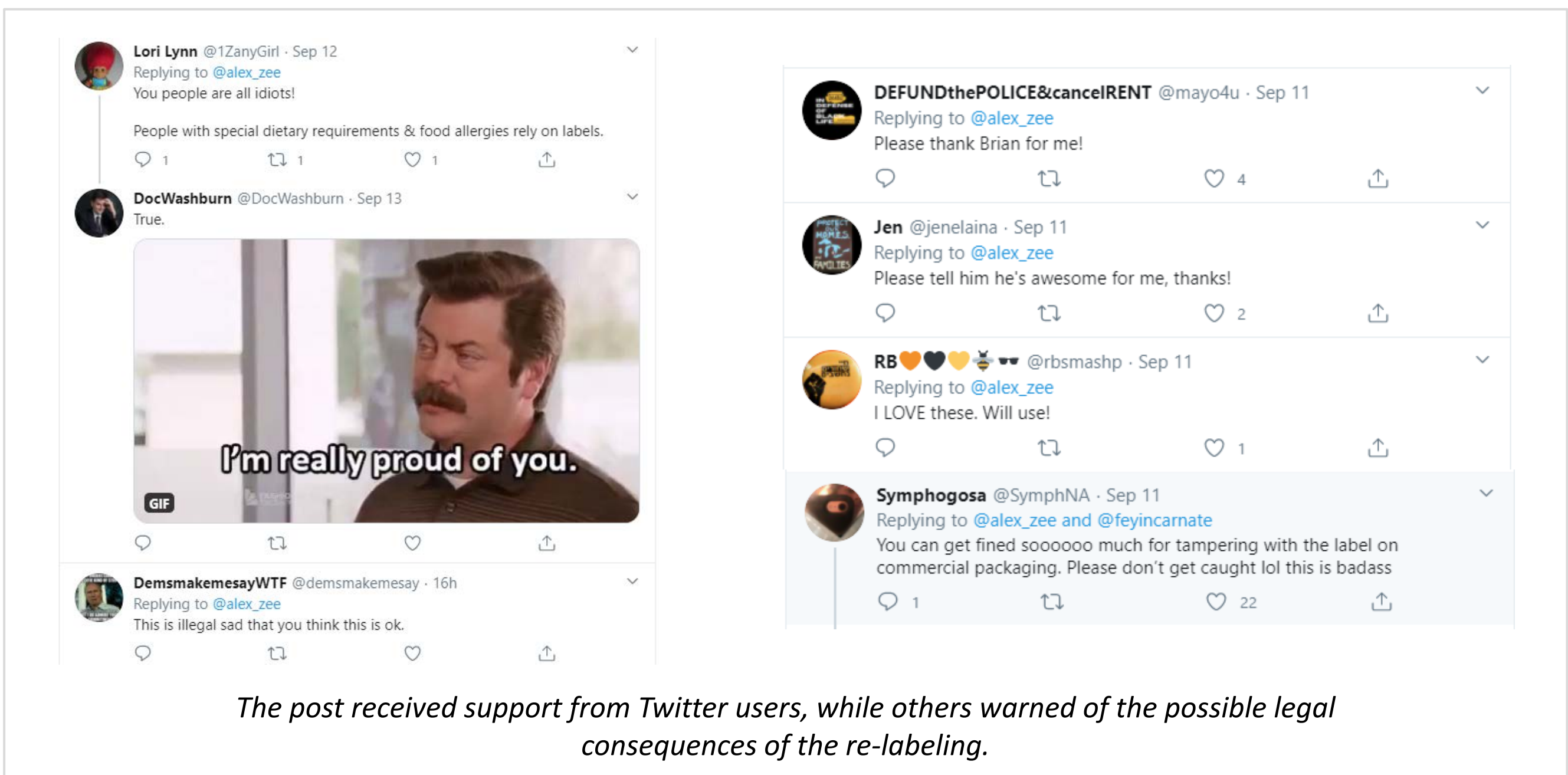
Tampering with food labels is a criminal act. The general public may not be aware of this based on the re-tweets expressing interest in these particular re-labeling efforts. However, despite the potential for criminal repercussions, businesses may not want certain media attention during the current social environment. This may lead to avoidance of involving regulatory agencies or law enforcement, and instead using alternative means of corrective action.

Public health alerts are a common method of sharing health threats, however in this situation, a public alert risked increasing the re-labeling activity on a larger scale. Despite no public health alert being issued by TRRT agencies, this incident was shared by many news outlets, with articles containing direct links to the Google Drive housing the re-designed labels. Labels are still available to download and print at the time of this publication.

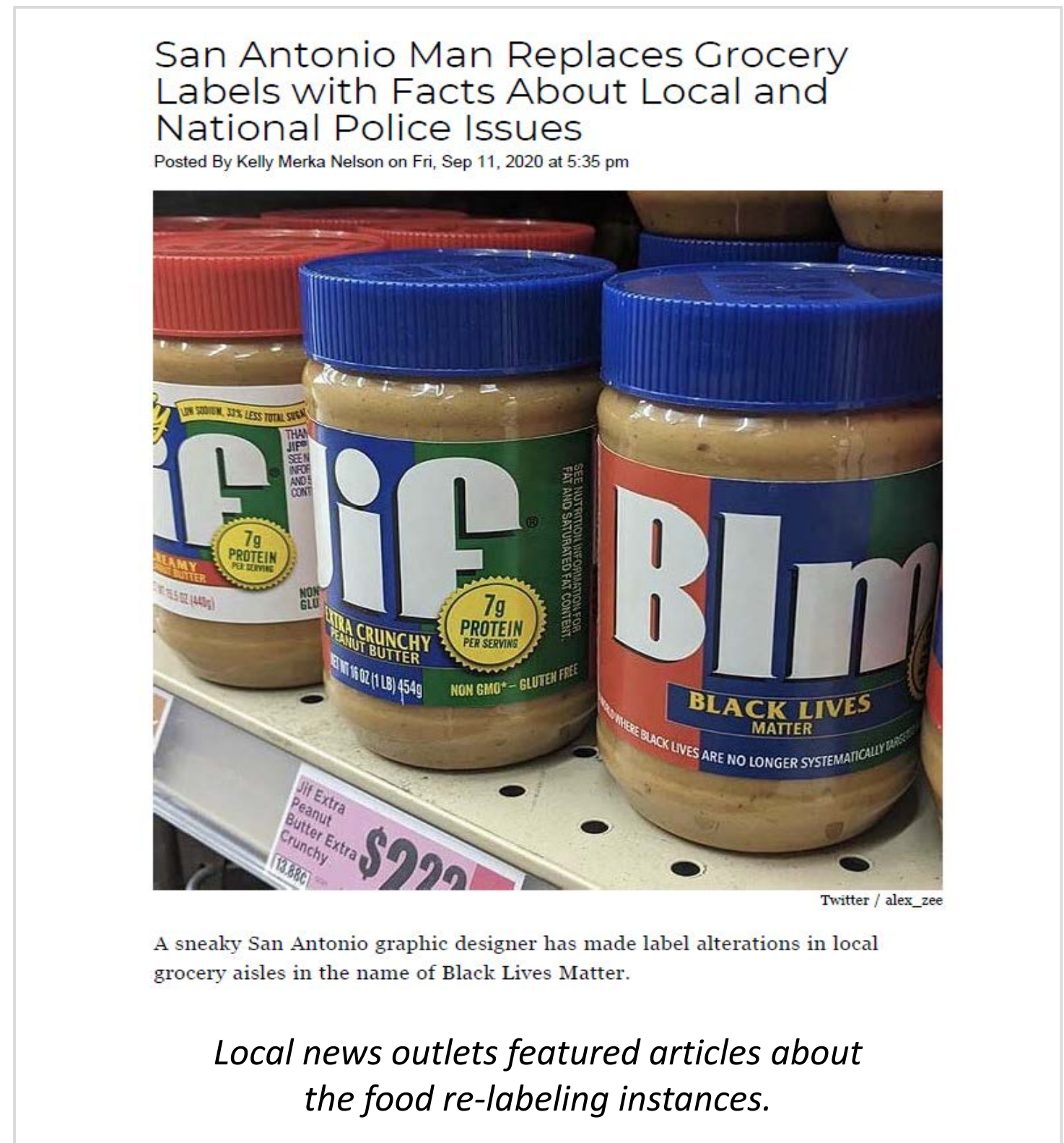
### Actions Taken

The FBI released an information report concerning the re-labeling incident, which was shared with public health agencies and regional private sector partners.

The grocery store chain where the re-labeled foods had been placed, cooperated fully with law enforcement and the TRRT. The individual that placed re-labeled items on store shelves was identified, and sent a cease-and-desist letter stating that replacing a label on a food product in this manner was illegal. The incident was approached as an individual that made a poor decision in relaying social justice messages. The grocery chain asked for discretion and did not want the incident to go public. All of their stores were monitored for repeat incidents. The TRRT has not been made aware of similar incidents in any other store locations at the time of this publication.



Shortly after, the original posting was re-posted, also known as a re-tweet. The tweet received several thousand re-tweets and likes. Some people expressed support and interest in also re-labeling and re-shelving the food items, while others were critical of the efforts and warned of potential legal consequences, and dangers of undeclared food allergens.



### Law Enforcement and Rapid Response Team Awareness

News of this Twitter activity was featured on a San Antonio news website, which garnered the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The FBI then contacted U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), in order to request assistance with the developing investigation. This information was further forwarded to Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), and the rest of the Texas Rapid Response Team (Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) and Office of the Texas State Chemist (OTSC)).

The TRRT was able to confirm that there were 4-5 instances where a food product label on the shelf was replaced with a label containing protest messages at a Texas grocery store chain in the Austin area.

