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The Inner Workings of Disney

In the last 10 years, there has been an unprecedented amount of superhero movies released that have been notorious box office breakers. This is no coincidence. In 2009, Marvel Entertainment Inc. was purchased by and became a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company for a whopping \$4 billion (McLaughlin 2015). This venture successfully captured the public's attention, and subsequently, their hard-earned money. Since this acquisition, they have released 18 movies, with worldwide box office totals adding up to approximately \$16.5 billion (Goldberg 2018). Being a personal fan of Marvel was my motivation behind choosing to research Disney as a media conglomerate.

With one of the world's most recognizable names, the Walt Disney Company comes in as the second largest media conglomerate, behind AT&T, as of October 2018. (Seth) It is well versed, known for its international presence, and is segmented into many different areas of media. The Walt Disney Company's humble beginnings are crucial when evaluating how it was able to branch out and grow to what it has become now. After establishing its presence and making a name for itself, Disney began its ascent into becoming one of the most well-known names in media history. It has gone on to acquire some of the biggest companies in the world as its subsidiaries, and is still on the rise.

History in Media

The Walt Disney Company started out as a small animation studio in the 20s, initially struggling to get its feet off the ground, but saw success upon creating the iconic character of

Mickey Mouse. He went on to be the star of *Steamboat Willie*, a synchronized sound cartoon, which was groundbreaking for its time period. Although it was not the first of its kind, due to its immense popularity among audiences, *Steamboat Willie* was credited with pioneering the integration of sound into future animations (Hysell 2011). Disney grew to produce full-length features, namely *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. This was the first full-length feature film to use celluloid animation, a technique that involves using intricate layers of transparent sheets with hand-drawn animations. (Sanders 2018). Both of these techniques were crucial to the growth of how media could be presented, along with giving Disney credibility as a company on the rise.

When WWII rolled around, the Walt Disney Company was commissioned by the United States government to create war propaganda. *Der Fuehrer's Face*, an anti-Nazi short cartoon starring Donald Duck, was released in 1943 (Quinn 2017). Nazi Germany is depicted as a hellscape of never-ending labor, and is sure to poke fun at the absurdities of Nazi beliefs and actions. The end of the cartoon places emphasis on Donald Duck being extremely grateful to live in the United States. *Der Fuehrer's Face* won an Academy Award, which shows the success it had with viewers. Propagandic media's integration into what had previously been simply a silly cartoon meant for kids changed what was seen as the norm. It became more acceptable to insert messages, subtle and overt, into everyday viewership.

Expansion

Disney has grown immensely since its days of solely producing animations. The 50's were a busy time, as their first live-action film, *Treasure Island* was released. Along with this, new animated films and several television series, including *The Mickey Mouse Club* were

released. Founder Walt Disney's passion project of opening a theme park was realized in 1955, with Disneyland opening in California to great success. The trend continued throughout the following decades, with Disney pumping out more films and TV shows. Along with these came the addition of radio, music, news, books, Disney products, and in general, the expansion of their empire. Walt Disney World opened in Orlando, Florida in 1971. International theme parks and resorts followed in Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. (Sanders) Disney pushed its brand into many different mediums and in many different locations in order to stake their claim in all the places they could.

In recent decades, Disney has shown that its interest resides in that of acquiring companies and adding them to their arsenal of media. Buying Pixar in 2006 led the Walt Disney Company to usher in an era of computer-animated glory. In previous years, the companies had a strained relationship due to conflicts between Disney CEO Michael Eisner and head of Pixar, Steve Jobs. However, with the appointment of current Disney CEO Bob Iger, Jobs believed that the merger would bring good, saying, "Now, everyone can focus on what is most important, creating innovative stories, characters and films that delight millions of people around the world." (LaMonica 2006) This addition to Disney's assets allowed for them to begin curating new, modern animation alongside some of Pixar's best and brightest.

Acquisitions

The Walt Disney Company has forged on with buying seemingly countless other companies. Something that they have had to learn, however, is how to go about approaching the public with the information that a certain company or brand is being placed into the hands of Disney. "More brands within the Disney family can mean more awesome theme park rides and

attractions. Or it can mean more money behind the cool things that you love, to make them even cooler. But there are also Disney detractors out there who view the Disney-fication of things as a dumbing down or as an edge-softening of a brand that previously had some grit.” (Wilson 2016)

In cases such as Disney acquiring Lucasfilm, Marvel, and The Muppets, there exists a very real and intense pressure of having to meet high standards set by the glory that their past ventures are remembered by. Fans do not want to see their childhoods ruined by a new company taking over and not living up to the vision that their past creators brought. In this sense, Disney takes a very big risk by choosing to invest billions of dollars into what can be considered a gamble on audience reactions. However, virtually almost all of Disney’s acquisitions have brought immense success, and their investments tend to pay off. For example, Disney purchased ABC in 1996 for \$19 billion, and in 2014, ESPN, a subsidiary to ABC, grew to being worth \$50 billion alone. (Wilson)

Disney is nowhere near done growing. In fact, it is looking to purchase 20th Century Fox, outbidding Comcast for a staggering \$71 billion, (Lima, Palmeri 2019). The deal is not quite sealed yet, as there are still agreements that need to be made, and antitrust regulations to appease. If Disney achieves this, they will be in charge of and have access to an insane amount of assets.

Public Perception

Disney’s name generally evokes positive emotions, as people attribute it to their childhoods, or Disneyland/Disney World, which have the slogan “Where Dreams Come True” firmly attached to them. They also have a very good track record when it comes to putting out thought-provoking media that grows with the times. *Moana*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Coco*, *Mulan* and *Pocahontas* alongside many more movies, TV shows, and other mediums show that

Disney is inclusive and eager to foster diversity. Disney also has rules when it comes to respect for others. For example, at all of their resorts and theme parks, employees are instructed to point with two fingers instead of one if directing a guest where to go, as pointing with one finger can be known as a rude gesture in other cultures (Leasca 2017).

Opinion on Conglomeration

Conglomeration can most certainly be a good thing, as it enables growth and can lead to incredible productions. Small companies, business, or people with ideas unfortunately do not always get the time of day, and can fade into the background alongside bigtime competitors. When they are offered a helping hand that can provide them with the funds or talent to make their vision come to life, it's hard to see a downside. However, the fact that many people do not realize that there is a virtual oligopoly on the information being put out to the world is frightening. If a population is to trust its media, it is imperative they know the central source it is being emitted from and hold said source accountable for its actions. Falling into blissful ignorance is one of the most dangerous things that can happen to a society. If we start trusting everything that we are presented with and don't think to challenge something that we might see as incorrect or immoral, we no longer have a voice. Even if it is coming from the company we associate with the iconic mouse and the childhood magic, it is important to question things and evaluate things critically.

Conclusion

The Walt Disney Company has a rich history which sets it apart from all other conglomerates. Starting from a small family-owned animation company and rising to being the second biggest media company certainly highlights upon the successes in its ventures. Disney

has provided millions and millions of people with entertainment and continues its work of putting out movies, shows, music, products, experiences, and knowledge for generations to come.

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