

Synergistic Disney

New Directions for Mickey and Media in 1954–1955

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The cover of The Walt Disney Company's 2004 annual report features the words "Disneyland 50" written in sparkling letters above an image of Cinderella Castle surrounded by dozens of Disney characters from Mickey Mouse to the Incredibles. Inside the issue, the company's then Chief Executive Officer, Michael Eisner, in his letter to shareholders, writes,

It was on July 17, 1955 that Walt Disney unveiled something called Disneyland. No one had ever seen anything quite like it, and it created an entirely new category of entertainment, called the "theme park."

It also transformed this Company and proved in an incredibly dramatic way how great creative content can lead to other great creative content. Suddenly, there was a place where people could meet Mickey Mouse, could fly with Peter Pan and could visit Davy Crockett's wilderness frontier. Disneyland, in turn, led to even more creative success and growth with Walt Disney World, Tokyo Disney Resort, Disneyland Resort Paris, and Hong Kong Disneyland [5–6].

Today, more than fifty years after the opening of Disneyland, The Walt Disney Company serves as a textbook example of "synergy," defined by mass communication theorists Werner Severin and James Tankard as "the notion that cooperative interaction among acquired subsidiaries of merged parts of a corporation creates an enhanced combined effect ... companies can spend the least and make the most profit" (358). Janet Wasko, in her critical analysis of the Disney empire called *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, writes,

Disney created strong brands and characters that were marketed in various forms (mostly through films and merchandise) throughout the world. However, the

company's synergistic strategies accelerated dramatically in the 1950s, when the company opened Disneyland, the theme park that used previously created stories, characters, and images as the basis for its attractions [71].

Walt Disney's use of television during the crucial years, 1954 and 1955, sparked the synergistic process that fueled the popularity and growth of what would become one of the world's largest media conglomerates.

In 1953, Walt Disney had one thing on his mind: the completion of his theme park Disneyland, which fell under the business of WED Enterprises, the personal corporation that he established for his projects outside the studio. However, Disney had exhausted all of his financial resources, both corporate and personal, and still fell short of the funds he needed. One morning he woke up with the answer. "Television!" Walt told his brother [and business manager] Roy [Disney].... "That's how we'll finance the park-television!" (qtd. in Thomas 244). Disney met with the board of directors of Walt Disney Productions and convinced them that television programming, which could be produced quickly and cheaply by drawing on the archival material the studio already owned, would go a long way in providing visibility for the company's movies. Thus, board members gave their go ahead, despite their reluctance to embark on two new risky ventures — Disneyland and television — simultaneously. Walt Disney then sent Roy to New York to work out a deal. He would do a weekly prime-time television show for whichever network agreed to give him the loan that he wanted in order to put the finishing touches on the theme park in Anaheim, California, bearing his name.

For years, Disney had been persuaded by television executives to embrace the fledgling medium but, except for two Christmas specials, in 1950 and 1951, he had not committed. Nevertheless, his limited experience proved promising, serving to promote his studio's upcoming animated releases, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan* respectively. As one reviewer predicted after his first special, "That telecast should be worth \$1,000,000 at the box office to *Alice in Wonderland*. I think Disney has found the answer to using television both to entertain and to sell" (qtd. in Cotter 4). Indeed he had. Jay Telotte notes that Disney's early television specials strengthened the company's reputation for quality, already evidenced by its twenty-five Academy Awards for animated cartoons, documentaries, and technical achievements, concluding, "As Walt and Roy Disney had learned through these one-shot productions, their studio could create programs that would draw a large audience, and those efforts could help build an audience for their other projects" (Telotte xvi). Early on, Disney understood the profitability of branching out into new media forms. For example, when he moved into live-action film, he said,

I knew I must diversify.... I knew the diversifying of the business would be the salvation of it. I tried that in the beginning, because I didn't want to be stuck with the Mouse. So I went into the Silly Symphonies. It did work out. The Symphonies led to the features; without the work I did on the Symphonies, I'd never have been prepared to even tackle *Snow White*. A lot of the things I did in the Symphonies led to what I did in *Fantasia*. I took care of talents I couldn't use any other way. Now I wanted to go beyond even that; I wanted to go beyond the cartoon [qtd. in Thomas 204].

Despite Disney's openness to television, he was a movie man at heart who discovered a new set of rules governing the way business was done in television. When he first proposed a television version of the story of Zorro, for example, network executives advised him that he would have to submit a pilot. "Look, I've been in the picture business for thirty years," Disney replied. "Don't you think I know how to make a film?" (qtd. in Thomas 242). "But this is different; this is television," he was told (qtd. in Thomas 242). Disney, whose studio had already argued that entertainment was the same in any medium, but the industry thinking was consistent: "No pilot, no series" (Thomas 242).

By 1953, however, Disney needed television and was willing to be flexible in adapting to the industry's agenda. After speaking with executives from the three networks, Roy Disney worked out a deal with ABC, which had only had two hit series to its credit, *The Lone Ranger* and *Stop the Music*, was ranked last in the Nielsen ratings, and was anxious to get a quality series produced by a prestigious movie studio in its prime-time line-up (Telotte 6–7). Thus, ABC and Disney signed a contract which stipulated Disney's agreement to produce a weekly one-hour television show in exchange for ABC's \$500,000 investment in Disneyland; furthermore, ABC agreed to become a 35-percent owner of Disneyland and to guarantee loans up to \$4.5 million (Thomas 260; Telotte xxii). Disney was paid \$2,000,000 for the first season, renewable for up to seven seasons for a show called *Disneyland* (Telotte 8). It was scheduled to premiere in October 1954 and Disney's theme park bearing the same name to open in July 1955. All went according to plan.

The first episode of *Disneyland* aired on ABC on Sunday evening, October 27. In his television series, Disney used the same four divisions — Fantasyland, Adventureland, Frontierland, and Tomorrowland — that categorized the realms of his theme park, corresponding with the studio's cinematic genres: its signature animation, as well as action-adventure, the Western, and science-fiction. Although initially reluctant, Disney also appeared himself as a warm, friendly, enthusiastic host in opening segment of each show, linking his image with not only the program the audience was about to see, but also with his theme park reaching the final stages of construction. (He was even nominated for an Emmy Award for Most Outstanding New Personality but

lost to George Gobel.) He provided, as Bob Thomas notes, "continuity and identification" (225). Thus, Disney used his company's new television division to popularize his theme park and movies, becoming one of the first of the major studio heads to effectively practice synergy.

While many of his contemporaries boycotted television, considering it to be either substandard or a threat to the film industry, Disney felt otherwise. "I thought we movie makers ought to get into television ourselves and make it work for us," he said (qtd. in Miller 206). He also noted, "Through television I can reach my audience. I can talk to my audience. They are the audience that wants to see my pictures" (qtd. in *Walt* 46). They were also the audience that would attend his theme park. As Disney reflected, "Every time I'd get to thinking of television I would think of this Park. And I knew that if I did anything like the Park, that I would have to have some kind of medium like television to let people know about it" (*Walt* 45).

Disney was right. His Sunday night series, which gave ABC its highest rating ever and ranked sixth on the Nielsen scale, was an immediate hit, proving to be an important promotional device for his other ventures (Telotte 9). The first episode, titled *Disneyland Story*, showcased attractions being planned for his theme park as well as the direction the television series would take. Additional shows during the first season provided reports on the park's progress. According to J.P. Telotte, "From its opening, ... *Disneyland* sought to situate its audience within an entertainment universe that was endlessly self-referential and that would build its audience on an understanding of and even eagerness for such self-referentiality" (10).

Two particular episodes of *Disneyland* that aired in its first season succeeded beyond even Disney's wildest dreams. On December 8, 1954, *Operation Undersea*, a documentary on the making of the Disney live-action film *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, appeared and immediately gained the nickname "the long, long trailer." Although it was criticized by some for being nothing more than a huge promotional piece for Disney's upcoming film, it was good enough to win an Emmy Award for being the best show of the year and to lure holiday audiences into the theaters, a godsend for Disney, who had spent \$4.5 million on the feature. When the movie was released on December 23, 1954, it became a popular and critical success, as audiences delighted in its climatic battle scene between a giant squid and a submariner. It also proved to be a springboard for a future Disney theme park attraction. On June 14, 1959, the Submarine Voyage was unveiled in Fantasyland, giving visitors the experience of boarding a submarine and exploring lost undersea worlds.

On December 15, 1954, the first installment of the three-part story of Davy Crockett ran on the *Disneyland* television show. Originally, there were

problems with the trilogy because there was not enough material to fill three television hours. To remedy the problem, Disney asked a new studio composer George Bruns to write a little song as filler. A half hour later, Bruns had something, and Disney arranged for a demo recording. "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," as the song became known, was to be featured in all three installments of the show. The first glimpse into the song's popularity appeared when snippets of it were played in a preview of the first *Disneyland* show, and when *Davy Crockett, Indian Fighter*, the first installment of the series, aired, it became a colossal hit. "The Ballad of Davy Crockett" ranked number one of the Hit Parade for thirteen weeks and sold ten million copies (Thomas 257), propelling Disney's music division.

Disney was unprepared for the unprecedented popularity of the Davy Crockett story and its star, Fess Parker. "We had no idea what was going to happen with 'Crockett,'" he recalled. "Why, by the time the show finally got on the air, we were already shooting the third one and calmly killing Davy off at the Alamo. It became one of the biggest overnight hits in TV history, and there we were with three films and a dead hero" (qtd. in Maltin 122). Wanting to capitalize on the phenomenon of the television series, Disney pieced together the three episodes, including George Bruns' by then famous song, into a feature film, *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*, which was released on May 25, 1955. By that time, the sale of Davy Crockett products, especially coonskin hats, had created a lucrative revenue stream for the Disney merchandising department, resulting in a \$300 million industry. All told, ten million coonskin hats were sold, in addition to toy rifles, costumes, coloring books, and other items bearing the Disneyland Frontierland imprint.

The impact of the *Disneyland* Davy Crockett trilogy was monumental. Although the shows cost \$700,000 and Disney was only assured of \$300,000 from television, he made far more from merchandising. The popularity of the series solidified *Disneyland* as the number one television show in America and created a bankable star, Fess Parker, who played a key role in the opening of Disneyland and starred in many of the studio's live-action films, including *The Great Locomotive Chase* (1956), *Westward Ho the Wagons!* (1956), *Old Yeller* (1957), and *Light in the Forest* (1958). Parker, and Buddy Ebsen, who also starred in the Crockett series, became linked with Disney in the popular imagination, promoting the studio's image and products. Also, the Walt Disney Music Company, which was formed in 1949 for sheet music sales, thrived for the first time, and Disney established a new subsidiary for phonograph records (Thomas 258). Disney was unsure if audiences would go to the theaters to see a spliced together version of what they had already seen on television, but surprisingly they did. *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* earned \$2,500,000

at the box office and whetted people's appetites for the Frontierland experience at Disney's soon-to-be-opened theme park.

The month after *Davy Crockett* hit movie theaters, Disney released another feature, the animated fantasy *Lady and the Tramp*, which premiered on June 16, 1955. Disney promoted this, too, on his *Disneyland* television show, and it proved crucial to the film's good reception. Disney had grown weary of animating familiar fairy tales because audiences were difficult to satisfy, given their expectations based on what they read in books. However, it was even more risky to release an expensive animated feature that no one had ever heard of. Through his use of television, Disney was able to popularize the original story of *Lady and the Tramp* so that by the time that the movie appeared, filmgoers recognized it and wanted to bring their children. Thus, television opened a new door for Disney by enabling him to familiarize audiences with unknown property before a film version was released. *Lady and the Tramp* would also be featured in the Fantasyland realm of the theme park.

Disney's television fare during the first season of *Disneyland* consisted mostly of items from the studio archives, especially cartoons that featured characters who would become the stars of Disneyland's Fantasyland, as in "A Tribute to Mickey Mouse." It also included feature-length animated films, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, live-action films, such as *Treasure Island*, and nature documentaries, such as *Seal Island*. Although it was cost effective to use archival material, the studio also produced original shows, often exceeding the \$100,000 budget necessary to ensure a profit. The *Man in Space* series, for example, was an expensive three-episode venture produced by Ward Kimball on the history and future of space travel with technical commentary by NASA rocket scientists, including Wernher von Braun. Like *Davy Crockett*, it turned out to be good enough to be released in theaters, and it dovetailed nicely with Disney's theme park realm of Futureland, which had a cornerstone attraction titled *Rocket to the Moon*.

When Disney's \$17 million Disneyland opened in Anaheim, California, on July 17, 1955, everything went wrong, prompting Disney to dub the day "Black Sunday." Despite intense heat, thirty-five thousand people swarmed through the gates to the park. Many of them had obtained counterfeit tickets to the invitation-only event designed exclusively for the press, dignitaries, and those who had worked on the park and their families. Throughout the day, rides broke down, restaurants ran out of food and drink, and lines to attractions ran long, causing people — especially children — to become irritable and impatient. A gas leak in Fantasyland necessitated that the area be closed. The entire event was captured on live television, with Ronald Reagan, Bob Cummings and Art Linkletter serving as a master of ceremonies. Despite the bad

reviews, however, Disneyland attracted a million visitors in its first seven weeks, and predictions of attendance were exceeded by fifty percent (Thomas 200). The best explanation for this is that by the time the park opened, Disney, through his prodigious use of television, had created an audience for the park, and people were excited to see it for themselves despite what the reviewers said. In essence, Disney received income, a guaranteed loan, and merchandising residuals for the opportunity to promote Disneyland on television. The success of the television show fueled the success of the park and the films, signaling the effects of synergy.

Disney used television once again in 1955 when the *Mickey Mouse Club* premiered on ABC on October 3. By this time, Mickey Mouse, whose career in movies was waning, had been established as the host of Disneyland, and the show, with its familiar M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E chant served to further promote the Mouse, the park, and other Disney properties. While the Wednesday evening *Disneyland* show attracted families, the 5:00 P.M. after-school *Mickey Mouse Club* was a variety show of cartoons, singing, dancing, and newsreels geared to children and teens at a time when the post-World War II baby boom was reaching its highest point and contributing to America's becoming a child-centered culture. "Children," said one woman in 1955, "give life new meaning, a new focal point, a new frame of reference, a new perspective" (qtd. in Mintz 277). At its height of fame, the *Mickey Mouse Club* attracted seventy-five percent of the nation's televisions and created a market for Disney byproducts, especially Mickey Mouse ears. It also popularized, especially for teens, not only a group of cool youths called the Mouseketeers but everything associated with the Mouse and Disney. Given the show's ability to attract youth, it had no difficulty attracting advertisers, especially Mattel, whose Burp Gun and Barbie dolls became among the first toy phenomena of the television era. Cy Schneider, who worked for Mattel, describes the effect of the first Burp Gun advertisements aired during the *Mickey Mouse Club*:

Before Christmas 1955, Mattel had shipped more than one million Burp Guns at \$4.00 each. Considering the company's previous annual sales volume for their entire line of products was only \$4 million, this was unheard of success. They had more than doubled their sales volume. The demand for the Burp Gun was so great, there wasn't even a part to be found in stores ... we even received a letter from President Eisenhower asking us to find a Burp Gun for his grandson David. The Burp Gun had fired shots heard around the world [22].

Thus Disney's relationship with Mattel Toys was cemented, and in subsequent years Mattel products were made for and sold throughout Disneyland.

The years 1954 and 1955 proved pivotal for television as well as for The Walt Disney Company, as it set into motion many of the synergistic practices that would characterize the company, and the media industry in general, in

subsequent years (see Appendix A). In the mid-1950s, Walt Disney believed this was the right thing to do in order to build his company and achieve his goals. As Jay Telotte asserts,

More than simply establishing another source for capital ... this accentuation on combining entertainment and merchandising also helped spur the worldwide popularity of Disney's films and affected the company's entire production process. Certainly, this thrust marked the beginning of a fruitful symbiosis—of product and marketing, of mass entertainment and personal consumer experience—that would increasingly come to identify the company, to mark its singular place in American culture as the primary and most successful example of the entertainment-marketing conglomerate, and later to script the terms for the company's entry into television and other mass media" [xi].

However, today, in a vastly different media landscape, critics like Sam Craig, director of the Entertainment, Media and Technology program at New York University, disagree. "Synergy has proved more elusive than a lot of people imagined," said Craig (qtd. in Sutel D3). The Walt Disney Company, which replaced Michael Eisner with Robert Iger as chief executive officer, has expressed no plans to downsize, as other companies, such as Viacom, have. However, as Associated Press writer Seth Sutel observes, "After many years of getting bigger, major media companies are trying something new: getting smaller" (D3).

In the more than five decades following Disney's foray into television and the opening of Disneyland, corporate synergy has created what some regard as a media monster, consuming resources, choices, and opportunities. This metaphor recalls a scene in *Jurassic Park* (1993), a cinematic blockbuster inspired by Disney's theme park phenomenon. In the film, an exchange occurs between John Hammond, the park's owner, and Ian Malcolm, a scientist who espouses chaos theory. "All major theme parks have delays," says Hammond. "When they opened Disneyland in 1956 [sic], nothing worked."

"But, John," Malcolm replies, "when the Pirates of the Caribbean breaks down, the pirates don't eat people."

Disneyland may not have been quite ready for prime-time on opening day, but due to a prime-time television show which popularized Disney's animated characters and the theme park concept, the public had already embraced it, demonstrating to Disney how different corporate entities could mutually benefit one another. In subsequent years, the Disney empire grew, and as Janet Wasko outlines in *Understanding Disney*, today encompasses theatrical films, home video, cable television, network television, theatrical productions, audio products and music publishing, children's products, art and collectibles, on-line business, consumer product marketing, publications, theme parks worldwide, resorts and hotels, regional entertainment, a cruise line, a prototype

community, a sports franchise, a research and development arm, and radio (43–60). Some may regard this highly synergistic model as a corporate monster; however, for Disney in 1954 and 1955, its early inception served a purpose: promoting Disneyland so that the risky venture paid off, establishing a blueprint for the company's business practices and, most importantly, signaling new directions for the media and entertainment industries.

Appendix: 1954–55 Disney Timeline

- October 27, 1954 *Disneyland*, the first Disney television series, premieres on Wednesday nights on ABC. The first episode, *The Disneyland Story*, describes future episodes of the series as well as the Disneyland theme park. Walt Disney appears as the host of the show and is nominated for an Emmy Award for Best New Television Personality.
- December 8, 1954 *Operation Undersea*, a documentary on the making of the Disney live-action feature *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, runs on *Disneyland*. Although it is dubbed "The long, long trailer," it wins an Emmy Award for Best Show of the Year.
- December 15, 1954 *Davy Crockett, Indian Fighter*, the first episode of the Davy Crockett trilogy, airs on *Disneyland*. The show stars Fess Parker and is an immediate hit, as is its theme song "The Ballad of Davy Crockett" by George Bruns.
- December 23, 1954 The live-action feature *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* is released.
- January 26, 1955 *Davy Crockett Goes to Congress*, the second episode in the Davy Crockett trilogy, airs on *Disneyland*.
- February 23, 1955 *Davy Crockett at the Alamo*, the last of the Davy Crockett trilogy, airs on *Disneyland*.
- May 25, 1955 The live-action feature *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* is released in theaters. It is an edited version of Disney's three television episodes.
- June 16, 1955 The animated feature *Lady and the Tramp*, the first animated feature filmed in Cinemascope premiers.
- July 17, 1955 Disneyland, Walt Disney's \$17 million theme park, opens in Anaheim, California.
- October 3, 1955 *Mickey Mouse Club* television series airs its first show at 5:00 P.M. on ABC.

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