

**THE CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION OF FAME:  
HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AND REALITY TELEVISION HAVE RESHAPED  
AMERICA'S DEFINITION OF "FAMOUS"**

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*“In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.”*

- Andy Warhol, 1968

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## **Introduction**

This paper aims to establish and analyze a reconstruction of the notion of “fame” that has occurred during the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. It will look at what it meant to be famous before the 21<sup>st</sup> -century and analyze what defines fame today. This work presents the argument that the definition of fame has shifted from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century from one associated with achievement, admirable qualities and societal heroism to one that is not long-lasting, deserved or earned. It argues that this shift has occurred in part due to two parallel developments: the advent of reality television and social media. Social media and reality television have given new validity and fuel to a regular individual’s attempts to gain public attention and thus have altered how humans mentally construct the notion of fame.

This analysis will take place in part by looking at Walt Disney media and how its content has evolved over the last two centuries. Walt Disney media provides a useful lens for analyzing this shift in American psychology for two reasons. First, Walt Disney media existed both before and after the change in the definition of fame occurred. Second, Walt Disney media’s content has historically been a useful lens for analyzing cultural values and phenomenon’s over the years, as its media’s content typically reflects what’s going on in society at the time of its release. As Walt Disney is a huge and powerful media conglomerate, this contextualization of the new “fame” with Disney will also allow for an interpretation of the impact the new definition of fame. Specifically questioning how Disney’s broad promotion of a (more easily attainable) type of fame encourages children to aspire to becoming famous – rather than to other more charitable aspirations.

## Overview

In order to address this claim, this paper will contain four parts. First, it will establish background and history on the Walt Disney Corporation. This first chapter will include discussion of the magnitude and scope of Disney as a media conglomerate, Disney's power and impact on American society and themes of Disney media in the 20<sup>th</sup> - century. Second (and most crucially), this work will establish an "old definition" of fame. Through a review of literature concerning notions of fame and celebrity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this section will explore what allowed for a person to be considered of importance in American culture from the early 1900's to the late 20<sup>th</sup> - century (and thus defined this time period's conception of "famousness"). In its third chapter, this work will transition to questioning and constructing what defines fame *today*.

Again through a review of literature concerning thinking around fame and celebrity, chapter three will attempt to construct a definition of famous that reflects 21<sup>st</sup>-century American culture. However, this section will also include literature that addresses the new developments in 21<sup>st</sup>-century American media (reality television and social media) and how they could have profoundly contributed to this definitional shift. Finally, in its final chapter, this work will return to addressing Walt Disney. This time noting new Disney media's reflection of this new type of famousness in its current programming and questioning the impact and implications that America's reconstruction of fame may have on our youth.

## Chapter 1: A Background on Disney and Literature Review

### On the History of Disney

Founded by Walt and Roy Disney in 1923, the Walt Disney Company originally existed as a cartoon studio – aptly titled the “Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio” – where the two brothers created hand drawn shorts.<sup>1</sup> After Walt Disney produced a short film entitled “Alice’s Wonderland,” Winkler Productions contacted the brothers with plans to distribute a comedy series revolving around Alice. In 1926, Walt Disney Studios was born.<sup>2</sup>

While the studio continued to release short animated features – including one revolving around a mouse named Mortimer (who later became Mickey Mouse), it still did not come close to the magnitude of Disney today. It wasn’t until 1934 that the Walt Disney Company produced a full-length feature film: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. The film took Walt Disney three years to create, but was the highest grossing film of the time by 1939.<sup>3</sup> The profits from *Snow White* provided the Studios with the freedom to expand into Walt Disney Productions and continue making full-length animated films such as *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), and *Bambi* (1941).<sup>4</sup>

World War II marked a decline in box office revenues across America and a period of stagnation for the Disney Company: they were recruited to produce animated propoganda shorts with limited funding. The shorts, along with anything they produced in that time period, were met with only marginal success. (*The Three Caballeros* in 1944

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<sup>1</sup> Krasniewicz, Louise. *Walt Disney: A Biography*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010. Print.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Giroux, Henry A. *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999. Print.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

and *My Melody Time* in 1948, both collections of Disney shorts, failed at the box office.)<sup>5</sup> It wasn't until 1950 – five years after the war's end – that the nation again experienced a successful feature-length Disney animation: *Cinderella*.

The post-war Walt Disney Company continued to evolve and expand. In 1954, Walt Disney envisioned a magical place where children – and parents – could experience the idealized childhood that existed in his fairytales. A year later, the first Disneyland theme park opened in Anaheim, California. In addition to expanding to building theme parks, the Company began producing television. They teamed up with the Coca Cola Company in 1954 to produce their first regular television series. ABC Network launched *Disneyland* – one of the longest running primetime series of all time.<sup>6</sup>

While the Walt Disney Company didn't expand into all divisions of media until 1986, the deaths of Roy and Walt Disney in 1971 marked the Company's newfound focus on the teenage market. Coupled with this increased attention on children above the age of 10, came a continuing domination of screen-oriented media. *The Wonderful World of Disney* and *The Mickey Mouse Club* both became regular staples on primetime television. With the advent of the videocassette, Disney began releasing straight to video films as well.<sup>7</sup> And in 1980, Disney announced the creation of a second Walt Disney World and launched the Disney Channel television network. A subscription-level cable channel, the Disney Channel was to be filled with exclusively Disney content. It

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Telotte, J.P. *Disney TV*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2004. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, Pat, and Jim Denney. *How to Be like Walt*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2004. Print.



broadcast classic Disney films and television series as well as original family-friendly programming.<sup>8</sup>

1986 marked Disney's full expansion from Walt Disney Productions to the Walt Disney Company – expanding its divisions to include theater, radio, publishing and online media. At the same time, they were financed by Silver Screen Partners to continue producing Disney movies. (This gave birth to many of the classic Disney princess films.) In addition to expanding its divisions in the 1980s, Disney began owning and promulgating more mature content and brands. Along with owning ABC Broadcast television network, Walt Disney Studios began operating other cable television networks ESPN, A and E and ABC Family. While continuing to produce media in all fields, the 1990s lent itself to the creation of the Disney Cruise, continued expansion of Disney Parks and Resorts and an overall media market domination that defines the Disney of today.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Walt Disney Company Today**

What began as two brother's cartoon studio is now the largest media conglomerate in the world. The Walt Disney Company is multinational and divided into five media segments: parks and resorts, media networks, studio entertainment, consumer products and interactive media.<sup>10</sup> Most notable are their media networks and the Walt Disney Studios, which is one of the largest and best-known studios in Hollywood.

Disney Media Networks is the primary unit of The Walt Disney Company and houses their television networks and distribution companies including the Disney-ABC

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Croteau, David, and William Hoynes. *Media Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2003. Print.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Television Group, ABC Entertainment Group, ABC Family, Hyperion Books, ESPN Inc and Disney Channel Worldwide. In addition to running the most profitable television channels in America, the Walt Disney Company operates worldwide, running television stations, themes parks and resorts in Hong Kong, Paris and elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

Of the Disney Media Networks, the Disney Channel is Disney's cable television station marketed to both children and teenagers. The station airs exclusively Disney content – even their commercials are limited to cross-promotions between Disney entities. In addition to airing original television series, the channel releases Disney Channel Original Movies between 5 and 12 times a year.<sup>12</sup> Of all television networks owned by the corporation, the Disney Channel is the most viewed by the youth market – it receives more children and teenage viewership than ABC Family or any ABC cable television network. Furthermore, the Disney Channel is currently the most viewed television station among kids ages 6-11 and “tweens” ages 9-14 in the world. And starting in 2012 Disney Channel became the most viewed television network for total number of viewers each day among any cable television station.<sup>13</sup>

Not only is Disney media successful in the United States, but it has also reached large viewership abroad. Disney Parks exist in Tokyo, Hong Kong and Paris – a European and Asian park presence that is merely a reflection of their media's international outgrowth. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures International has existed since 1961 and is responsible for distributing their films to the overseas market via the current units of The Walt Disney Studios including Walt Disney Pictures, Marvel

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Telotte, J.P. *Disney TV*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2004. Print.

<sup>13</sup> "Disney Channel Ratings Report." *Disney Channel Medianet*. The Walt Disney Company, 2012. Web.

Studios, Touchstone Pictures and ESPN Films. Through joint ventures with Sony Pictures Entertainment and Warner Brothers, Disney distributes its films in almost every overseas market from the UK and Ireland to Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the Philippines.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of profitability and film success, that is not limited to the United States either. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures has produced six films that have surpassed a billion dollars in ticket sales *worldwide*, making Disney the only major Hollywood studio to have released more than four films that have made that amount of money internationally.<sup>15</sup> Its animated features exemplify this international success. The top three highest grossing animated films internationally are products of Disney, as well as sixteen of the highest-grossing G-rated films.<sup>16</sup>

Disney's worldwide film success and the expanse of its marketplace and viewership are only growing. In addition to achieving a larger box-office gross in North America than any other film studio in 2012, Disney struck a deal in 2012 to distribute movies to Chinese cable television viewers. You On Demand, China's on-demand video service, struck a licensing deal with The Walt Disney Company to bring all of Disney's current films, as well as its classics (like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *Cinderella*) to the Chinese cable TV audience.<sup>17</sup> This broadens Disney's access to include

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<sup>14</sup> Croteau, David, and William Hoynes. *Media Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2003. Print.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Coonan, Clifford. "China's You On Demand Adds Disney Movies to Its Mobile Video Service." *The Hollywood Reporter Online*. The Hollywood Reporter, 30 June 2014. Web.

the world's most populous television market. (China's cable TV audience trumps the United States' with some 187 million households watching cable television.)

### **Marketing the Disney Childhood and Disney "Dream"**

Disney media – specifically film and television, has repeatedly framed stories around the idea of a “dream,” both literally and figuratively. One of the first Disney animations, “Alice’s Wonderland,” detailed a girl’s escape to a new world by falling asleep in a meadow. Even *Fantasia*, the first full-length animated film produced by Walt Disney, evoked a dream-like quality as flamingos and magic spells dance across the screen.<sup>18</sup> But an even more perpetuated theme in all Disney media are dreams as they relate to hopes and wishes for the future.

In Disney’s 1950 film *Cinderella*, a derelict, ashen-faced orphan sings, “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes,” about how if one keeps on believing their heart’s deepest desires can come true. Even more noteworthy is the theme song of the 1940 film *Pinocchio*, “When You Wish Upon a Star.” The song, which was originally sung in the opening and final credits of the film, became the theme song of The Walt Disney Company beginning in 1940.<sup>19</sup> The Walt Disney brothers were constructing a company founded around two things: children and encouraging wish fulfillment. Even Disneyland was marketed as the place “Where dreams come true.”

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<sup>18</sup> Stone, Kay. "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us." *The Journal of American Folklore* 88.347 (1975): 42-50. *The Journal of American Folklore*. JSTOR. Web. 24 July 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, Pat, and Jim Denney. *How to Be like Walt*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2004. Print.

But the Walt Disney Company fostered its influence to be able to shape something even more powerful than children's dreams for the future: the Disney Company can be credited with shaping and defining the idealized American childhood.

In *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child*, Nicholas Sammond explores how Walt Disney Productions capitalized on an American perception of media as a large influencer of a child's development to craft its own notion of an iconic American child. As Sammond explores what he considers the "generic child," he also describes how mass media came to be viewed as a large influence on child development (citing times like when many in society argued that Columbine high school shooters' exposure to violent video games was what brought about the shooters' violent nature). As Sammond discusses the evolution of the role of the child in society from the mid-twentieth century to today, he provides evidence for how Disney's main characters both reflected and added on to society's perception of the child. For instance, Sammond notes how the postwar period (around 1949) also marked Mickey Mouse's twenty-first birthday and Disney's release of the character of "Donald Duck."<sup>20</sup> These events, while on their surface seemingly unrelated to culture's perception of the child in 1949, serve as notable examples for how Disney's icons were actually mimicking culture's view of the "generic child."

In turning 21, Mickey Mouse was leaving the realm of childhood and beginning adulthood. The character of Donald Duck, who came to join him, "was by far the more immature of the two – childish: frenetic, anxious, narcissistic...perhaps the most significant difference was that Donald was far more sexual than Mickey, somewhat of a

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<sup>20</sup> Sammond, Nicholas. *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Print.

skirt-chaser.” (21). Donald Duck’s release came about simultaneously with the rise of new public discourse concerning children’s sexuality (and it being important to the development of their character). (In 1949, Dr. Benjamin Spock was famously attempting to introduce parent’s to regarding their children as sexual beings, focusing on having them observe their children more and manage less – as a way for their children’s characters to develop more naturally.)<sup>21</sup> Thus, Sammond provides evidence for how Walt Disney Productions capitalized on their role in society as a large influencer to both mimic and endorse certain cultural views of what a child is.

### **The Current Importance of Disney**

The Walt Disney Corporation thus exists as an accurate lens for analyzing society. Its media acts as a reflection of the time period at which it was released and the huge worldwide scope of the conglomerate gives it a profound influence on shaping children everywhere. The Disney “dream” itself constantly transforms – reflecting societal values and historical changes. So what does Disney media become when it exists within our current culture – one that is increasingly obsessed with fame? In order to determine this, we must first establish that this cultural obsession with fame exists and what fame has come to mean.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 2: Finding the Old Definition of Fame

A social construction of the notion of fame has existed for centuries. The word celebrity itself is a noun meaning “a famous person.”<sup>22</sup> To understand what it means to be “famous” therefore, we must have an understanding of the definition of being a celebrity.

In *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*, Joshua Gamson analyzes the meaning of celebrity in American life. Through a series of interviews, Gamson tried to determine what is done to acquire, maintain, and make use of being a celebrity. He begins his exploration in the 1900’s, noting that an essential piece to comprehending the definition of celebrity is to define a hero. “Before we had celebrities we had heroes,” Gamson notes. A hero, according to Gamson, is a person whose fame is “deserved and earned, related to achievement or quality.”<sup>23</sup> Many similar works note this same distinction between celebrity and “hero.” Scholars have distinguished heroes as individuals who achieved fame both in a way related to retaining attention and accomplishing feats on behalf of society.

### Fame in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century

The roots of heroism (as an expression of fame) reach far back in the history of early Western civilization. Going as far back as the mid-1800’s to the days of Alexander the III of Macedonia, who came to be known as Alexander the “Great.” In *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*, Leo Braudy alleges that Alexander the Great represents the “roots of fame.” “Alexander the Great deserves to be called the first famous person,” Braudy argues. “He sought to be remembered not for his place in an eternal descent but

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<sup>22</sup> Gamson, Joshua. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: U of California, 1994. Print.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

for *himself*.”<sup>24</sup> Alexander the great mythologized himself. He constantly related his achievements to those of established heroes and gods. Thus, Alexander the Great *created* an image for himself that was both public and heroic: “Alexander the Great” from Alexander the III of Macedonia.

Julius Caesar is a similar instance of an individual who intentionally created a heroic public image in the early days of Western civilization. Braudy presents Julius Caesar as an individual who made concrete attempts to construct a public version of himself (distinct from his private image) in a way that promoted him as a hero. Julius Caesar possessed a “taste for theater and symbolic staging” in his role as a Roman general and statesman. Even in his death, despite the fact that he had just been stabbed 23 times, he engaged in the very “image-savvy” act of artfully arranging his toga.

When analyzing the examples of heroism that are Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar certain themes rise to the forefront. Both stories illustrate a common cultural motif of individuals who are considered societal heroes making explicit attempts by themselves to construct their public image. In addition, however, both individuals meet the definition of heroes presented by Gamson in that their fame is related to an “achievement or quality.” (Alexander the Great is remembered for creating one of the largest empires of the ancient world and leading one of its most successful armies.<sup>25</sup> Julius Caesar is remembered for his huge feats as a military commander.)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Braudy, Leo. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. Print.

<sup>25</sup> "Alexander the Great (Alexander of Macedon) Biography." *Alexander the Great (Alexander of Macedon) Biography*. History of Macedonia, 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2015.

<sup>26</sup> "Julius Caesar (100BC - 44BC)." *BBC News*. BBC, 2014. Web. 08 Jan. 2015.



This pattern of heroism as a useful synonym for fame and celebrity is common in many writings concerning early Western notions of fame. In *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol*, Barry Schwartz uses George Washington to demonstrate how the popular cult transformed a man of “ordinary and unremarkable characteristics into an image of heroic proportions.”<sup>27</sup> Through written and oral accounts of his early life and actions, (in the form of paintings, engravings, statues, bank notes, sheets of music, and more), a story was crafted “definitively about greatness.” “Public virtues,” Schwartz notes, “earned him fame.”<sup>28</sup> George Washington again, is an instance of the public coming to know an individual for their achievements where a public image has been carefully constructed. This instance of a famous individual in early Western times again takes on the form of a societal hero.

Patterns of publicity that defined early Western notions of a “hero” consistently repeat themselves in 20<sup>th</sup>-century examples of celebrity. However, as Gamson accurately notes, technological advancements of this time period mark a transition in how the public image of a “famous person” was crafted. The definition of fame transforms from being less connected – though still related – to what we might think of as a hero and to more closely resembling how we currently construct the idea of celebrity.

### **Fame in the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century**

In a series of essays on fame, James Monaco articulates the transition from hero to celebrity in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century – as well as what he believes is the difference between the two: “Now what these hero types all share of course, are admirable qualities – qualities

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<sup>27</sup> Schwartz, Barry. *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol*. N.p.: Cornell UP, 1990. Print.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

that somehow set them apart from the rest of us. They have *done* things, acted in the world: written, thought, understood, led. Celebrities, on the other hand, needn't have done – needn't do – anything special.”<sup>29</sup> Monaco is one of the first authors to address this elimination of a distinction between deserving and undeserving people being qualified as celebrities. What accounts for the erasing of this distinction? According to Monaco, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century allowing for individuals to craft their public image more easily giving them the ability to “replace real life with artificial image.”<sup>30</sup>

Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century America contains two large advancements that greatly contributed to this shift in how culture constructs celebrity: the birth of modern American consumer culture and new technologies of film. Over the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth, amusement activities moved into the center of everyday American life.<sup>31</sup> Between 1870 and 1920, as the national product grew, the workweek declined and household expenditures (especially in consumer goods such as “amusements, leisure pursuits, and products related to appearance”) exploded. They tripled between 1909 and 1929.<sup>32</sup> The leisure business was booming. Simultaneously came the introduction of modern technologies of film.

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<sup>29</sup> Monaco, James. *Celebrity: The Media as Image Makers*. New York: Dell Pub., 1978. Print.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, Quintard, Jr. "United States History Timeline 1900-2000." *United States History Timeline*. University of Washington Department of History, 2013. Web.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

1894 marked the opening of the world's first kinetoscope parlor in New York City.<sup>33</sup> A few years later, short moving films became the preeminent popular entertainment of the time. (Films were short – only about a few minutes long.) Still, however, the film industry was far from where it was in the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century – when it saturated America and allowed for the creation of entertainment celebrities.

This change occurred in 1908, when Edison and Biograph opened the Motion Pictures Patent Company (MPPC) and 400 small theaters began showing films to almost 200,000 individuals daily in New York City.<sup>34</sup> The coupling of a growth in the consumer marketplace and film industry created an industry competition that fueled developments in film production. The most important development was in 1915, when feature-length films replaced single-reel programs. These new more expensive films were not only seen by more individuals (as Americans were engaging in more leisure activities), but they also cost more to produce – prompting the film industry to begin acquiring more expensive actors.

Thus, the transformation of the film industry and American consumer culture prompted a transformation in the definition of celebrity. Actors could not only create a public image, but also display it to the world through the new vehicle of communication that was the major motion picture. This form of celebrity differs from both the 19<sup>th</sup>-century definition of a celebrity and any previously mentioned definition of a hero.

Henry Rogers, a public relations specialist in the 1950s cites Rita Hayworth as an accurate example of the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century American celebrity. Rogers describes

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<sup>33</sup> Dirks, Tim. "Film History Before 1920." *Film History Before 1920*. AMC Filmsite, 2015. Web. 09 Jan. 2015.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

constructing a reputation for Rita Hayworth that was both “on and off-screen.” Her name was known publicly by nature of being an actress, but with Rogers assistance she was also publicized as an Egyptian offspring, “given an exotic background to match her reputation off-screen.”<sup>35</sup> This merging of an individual’s screen roles with an off-screen personality was essential to the stars of the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century film industry.

As Rogers describes, publicity departments would carefully manufacture a celebrity’s public image through publicity and advertising. “The department manufactured an authorized biography of the star’s personal life based in large part on the successful narrative roles of the star’s pictures...the department would disseminate this information by writing features for fan magazines, press releases and items for gossip columns...a publicist would be assigned to supervise the correct choice of clothing for public appearances.”<sup>36</sup> Celebrities in this time were not only individuals who received attention but also possessed a public image – one so carefully manipulated their ability to garner attention almost depended upon it.

In addition to providing a greater ability for a celebrity’s public image to be constructed, technological advancements in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century affected the notion of celebrity in other ways. Primarily, public media (such as popular magazines and literature) focused more on Hollywood movie stars – idols related to *consumption* (entertainment and sport) rather than production (industry, business, natural sciences).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Gamson, Joshua. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: U of California, 1994. Print. 26.

<sup>36</sup> Hanson, Ralph E. *Mass Communication: Living in a Media World*. Washington, DC: CQ, 2011. Print.

<sup>37</sup> Gamson, Joshua. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: U of

Furthermore, the attention they gave to these individuals became more about their lifestyles. They were idolized for their personal tastes, habits and expertise at engaging in the leisure activities that were now more common in society, rather than their contributions.

The best example of this is in looking at magazine writing about Hollywood movie stars in the 1940s. Writings about famous people at these times report their personal habits to the extreme degree – intentionally attempting to shed light on their private lives. *Life* and *Look* magazines contained sections on “how stars spend their fortunes” – exhibiting their homes, pets, beauty secrets and dietary preferences. In one magazine Ginger Rogers explained, “why he liked fried potatoes.” Another reported on what Mahatma Gandhi’s “simple evening meal” consisted of.<sup>38</sup> Not only does this represent a shift in public attention towards entertainers, but it also promoted a greater sense of connection between the famous and their admirers. Celebrities could be called “consumerist heroes.” Famous Hollywood stars were individuals who had a great grasp of how to engage in leisure activities, but which public writing put less recognizable emphasis on for any notable achievements.

This new sense of fame being closely connected with the lives of Hollywood entertainers seems well correlated with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century changes in technology discussed above. As a society became more focused on leisure and consumerism, individuals who knew how to live in leisurely ways became more admired. As new technologies allowed for their private lives to be artificially constructed and more widely displayed, individuals

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California, 1994. Print. 38.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

with craftily constructed private lives became better known. The result of these changes being that individuals considered famous possessed less of a correlation with “greatness” (accomplishment, achievement, societal contributions) and more of a correlation with popularity.

Thus, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a shift in how America constructed the notion of a celebrity. Important to note is that the process of constructing a celebrity (or famous person) was highly affected by the process of industrialization. As technologies changed how an individual could form their public persona, the amount of behavior or achievement to justify one’s public persona was lessened.

Here, an important theme rises to the surface: one about *visibility*. As an individual’s visibility and ability to be made visible to the public changed, so did their methods of public image construction and thus, so did the public’s conception of that individual. As discussed in this chapter, this had the effect of transforming the definition of celebrity. Greatness, fame and an individual’s well knownness became less correlated with their achievements or contributions to society (like in the days of Alexander the Great). And though even Julius Caesar showed patterns of intentionally constructing what might have been a false image, it wasn’t to as extreme a degree as Rita Hayworth – who intentionally falsified a personal history for purposes of receiving more public honor.

## Chapter 3: The 21<sup>st</sup>-Century's New Definition of "Famous"

### The New Definition

Analysis of writings about fame and celebrity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries create a definition of fame in that time period: one where celebrity is often associated with heroism and accomplishment, but more often comes to be known for an individual's artful self-presentation in the public eye. This shift in what garners public attention becoming more pronounced as industrialization occurred.

If changes in technology in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century had such a large impact on America's definition of fame (the way society constructed the notion of celebrity), it only logically follows that the 21<sup>st</sup>-century – an era wrought with advancements in technology and the digital revolution, would demonstrate a large shift in how we honor individuals publicly, and more importantly, *why*. Thus, this section will explore how we now construct what makes an individual a celebrity – or in other words, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century's new definition of "famous."

## 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Changes: The Birth of Reality Television

In the same way that advancements in film affected how 20<sup>th</sup>-century America conceived of the notion of celebrity, changes in 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology have profoundly affected how we understand fame. Crucial to this change was the advent of a new type of visual entertainment: reality television.

Reality television, a genre in which regular people's lives are showcased as "reality" or individuals are given the opportunity to compete in game shows or talent competitions, marked a drastic change in visual programming at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Beginning in 1948, viewers began to receive content labeled "reality-based" television. Allen Funt started the trend with his 1948 television series, *Candid Camera*. Often credited as the first reality television show, *Candid Camera* put unsuspecting individuals in abnormal situations and recorded their reactions.<sup>39</sup> Unlike regular programming at the time, the resulting televised content was unscripted and did not contain actors (with the exception of Funt). *Candid Camera* was followed by a number of television game shows. (*What's My Line* premiered in 1950 and *To Tell the Truth* was a television hit in 1956.)<sup>40</sup>

As newsgathering techniques and technology became more advanced, it became more of a regular practice for people to be displayed in their "real-life" settings on all types of television. Sony's U-Matic videocassette format marked a notable development in 1970, making portable video affordable for every television news station. In conjunction with the greater availability of editing technology, this new portability of

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<sup>39</sup> Slocum, Charles B. "The Real History of Reality Television." *Writer's Guild of America*. Writer's Guild of America West, 2013. Web. 27 Feb. 2015.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



video brought about the news style of *60 Minutes*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *Dateline NBC*, and other news magazines that highlighted regular individuals more candidly and instantaneously. *America's Funniest Home Videos* and *Cops* (both live-action shows focused less on news and more on entertainment) premiered in 1990 as further variations of the vastly growing reality theme.<sup>41</sup>

It wasn't until 1992, however, that programming similar to the vast majority of reality television today premiered. *The Real World* was the first reality television show that utilized the structure and staging of current reality programming.<sup>42</sup> *The Real World* staged an environment in which "reality" could occur by placing strangers together in a house for an extended period of time and taping the drama that ensued. The advent of computer-based non-linear editing systems for video allowing for a very specific reality television structure that *The Real World* exemplified. The premise of the show coming from the choice of city, the character creation coming from the casting, and the storyline creation coming from the confessional interviewing – all carefully tied together by choices in timing and editing.

Reality television saw its explosion of global popularity following the release of *The Real World*. In addition to shows that mirrored *The Real World's* format, reality television show competitions flourished. CBS's first season of *Survivor* (a reality competition where contestants compete to see who can survive on a deserted island to win a one million dollar prize) premiered in 1999, followed by *American Idol* (another competition where contestants compete to win a recording contract). *Survivor* and *American Idol* both topped the U.S. season-average television ratings in the year of their

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

premiere and then experienced continuous success. *Survivor* went on to have over twenty-one seasons. *American Idol* still holds the longest number one rank in the American television ratings, dominating over all other primetime programs and other television series in the overall viewership tallies for eight consecutive years from the 2003 to 2011.<sup>43</sup>

After the massive success of shows like this, American programming in general became saturated with reality shows. Certain reality television franchises experienced massive global success with international adaptations (– many of these being reality talent competitions similar to *American Idol* with contestants competing for a prize). For instance, *Dancing with the Stars*, *The X Factor* and *Star Academy* all spawned over 30 international adaptations.<sup>44</sup>

Reality television's most notable difference from programming before 1990 was that the featured individuals were not actors or people with any extraordinary abilities that qualified them to be on television. The contestants were most often regular individuals without any previous fame or notoriety. Reality television, thus, operated as a vehicle to put people in the public eye, appearing on television shows with massive audience followings. Furthermore, reality television then functioned as a vehicle to *keep* people in the public eye. The reality television talent competitions specifically (such as *American Idol* or *The X Factor*) awarded its patrons with a recording contract valued at over a quarter of a million dollars and the included publicity deals with the album

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<sup>43</sup> Elavia, Serena. "The Collective Conscience of Reality Television." *The Atlantic*. The Atlantic Monthly Group, 29 Oct. 2014. Web.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

companies. Reality television was making explicit attempts to *create* stars, “idols,” and celebrities out of previously unknown individuals.

This new type of television created “idols” in two ways that, surprisingly, wasn’t always well correlated with which contestant was the last individual remaining or the winner of the show’s ultimate prize. *American Idol*, one of the first and most successful reality talent competitions, created a number of successful recording artists (Clay Aiken, Carrie Underwood, and Kelly Clarkson to name a few) by awarding them with recording contracts from RCA records.<sup>45</sup> But individuals who didn’t win the show have also maintained successful careers in the limelight – the show acting as only a springboard to put them in the public’s attention.

Now a notable actress, singer, and celebrity spokesperson, Jennifer Hudson came in seventh place on the third season of *American Idol*. She then went on to win worldwide acclaim when she won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress and a Golden Globe award for her performance in *Dreamgirls* (and maintained a number of other product endorsement deals).<sup>46</sup> Elisabeth Hasselbeck is a well-known American television personality and talk show host who co-hosted ABC’s *The View* and now works as the female co-host of *Fox and Friends* (an early-morning national news talk show that began in 2010).<sup>47</sup> Hasselbeck, however, had no formal training or background in acting or performance prior to each of these career moves. Her television career began in 2001 when she was a contestant on the CBS’s second season of *Survivor*. Though she came in

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<sup>45</sup> Inocencio, Mark. "13 of the Most Successful American Idol Contestants." *Ryan Seacrest*. Ryan Seacrest Enterprises, 10 Jan. 2014. Web.

<sup>46</sup> "Jennifer Hudson." *People Magazine*. Time Inc., 2014. Web.

<sup>47</sup> "Elisabeth Hasselbeck." *People Magazine*. Time Inc., 2014. Web.

sixth place in the show's competition, she received a huge amount of audience attention for her personality. This publicity earned her the focus of casting agents for *The View*. Two years after her *Survivor* experience she successfully auditioned to become a co-host.<sup>48</sup>

Jennifer Hudson and Elisabeth Hasselbeck are examples of a huge contingent of individuals – those who were once unknown, but received notoriety and public attention from reality television. More importantly, they aren't unique examples of how reality television can change the way a person is viewed. The *New York Times* estimates that there are as many as 1,000 people on air as reality TV stars at any given time (qtd. in Poniewozik, 92). James Poniewozik, in "What's Right With Reality TV" heightens this capability of reality television even further when he describes the genres ability to make stars, saying reality television has moved from a fad to "a way of life."

"Reality TV is now a valid career choice," Poniewozik argues. "For a few talented individuals this has made possible actual real-life opportunity... and for others, this has enabled a life of lucrative famousness for famousness" (94). In *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, Edgar-Jones emphasizes reality television in a similar way for how it transforms famousness and "deconstructs" the celebrity façade. "We're making ordinary people extraordinary," Edgar-Jones notes, "With this, we're making famous people very, very ordinary." (46).<sup>49</sup> Reality television

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<sup>48</sup> Poniewozik, James. "What's Right with Reality TV." *Time Magazine* 22 Feb. 2010: 92-97. Print.

<sup>49</sup> Biressi, Anita, and Heather Nunn. *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*. London: Wallflower, 2005. Print.

allows individuals to grab the media spotlight without “overtly drawing on education, entrepreneurial skills or even obvious talent.”<sup>50</sup>

It’s this capability of reality television that allows it to have a transformative cultural effect. Edgar-Jones’ comments suggest that the individuals who receive attention from reality television might do so in a way that’s unjustified – bringing into question the lasting nature and validity of the attention or “fame” that they collect.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Growth of Social Media

Reality television is not the only advancement in technology in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century that has affected our cultural constructions of fame. Advancements in internet technology and its growing massive number of users led to the development of social media specifically through the creation of social networking and content-sharing websites.

Even before the Internet was accessible to the general public, its focal point was social interactivity (granted that computer networking was military focused). As it has expanded since the 1970s and 1980s however, that focus has been developed into the modern day communication hubs of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other huge online entities. In the 1970s, CompuServe existed as one of the few computer systems that allowed for social interaction in a way anywhere close to today's massively used social-networking websites.<sup>51</sup> CompuServe began as a business oriented mainframe computer communication solution, but was opened for public use in the late 1980s. In addition to allowing for file-sharing and accessing news information, CompuServe exhibited the first instance of technology that's the closest to today's social networking interfaces: a new (at the time) service called "e-mail."<sup>52</sup>

Today's social-networking sites true predecessor however was likely America Online – specifically for how it allowed users to create "member profiles," and attempted to create of "online communities."<sup>53</sup> This difference between America Online and CompuServe is notable for how it provided the main feature of today's social-networking

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<sup>51</sup> Liu, Aaron. "The History of Social Networking." *Digital Trends*. N.p., 04 Aug. 2014. Web. Feb. 2015.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

sites (the creation of user profiles) that give its users an audience and viewers and provide another way of connecting with the general public through the Internet.

Today's most prominent social-networking websites (Facebook and Twitter), however, didn't win the web immediately. They were preceded by a number of other attempts to capitalize on the web's profound ability to connect users and allow them to construct a public image on their own. Classmates and SixDegrees.com were websites released in 1997 as a way to allow for online reunions and a public display of connections between users – however, neither experienced tremendous success.<sup>54</sup> Social-networking finally hit its stride with the American public in 2002 with the launch of Friendster. This site promoted the idea of creating an online community by demonstrating how people can have and share common bonds. MySpace was launched a year later in 2003. Though it now no longer is the dominant social-networking site in America (that honor belongs to Facebook) – it did maintain a stronghold on the young adult demographic until Facebook was opened to the public in 2006.<sup>55</sup>

Followed by Twitter in 2007, Facebook became the dominate social media website. Unlike sites before it, in addition to allowing its users to connect and utilize the site's applications, Facebook allowed for user's to engage in a clear promotion of *themselves*, as well as the things that they liked. It did this through allowing participants of the site to construct online profiles and also through the creation of the “like” button – which allowed individuals to clearly display both their individual preferences and their preferences for other people's posts.

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<sup>54</sup> Bennett, Shea. "The History of Social Networking Through the Ages." *Social Times*. Ad Week, 26 June 2014. Web.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Twitter similarly advanced in part due to how it allowed for the promotion of the *self*. In 140 characters or less, users of Twitter are asked to display their thoughts – which then get sent out to all of their “followers” (other Twitter users who choose to subscribe to that user’s Tweets). The more followers a user has on Twitter, the greater the audience for their posts. Facebook’s user profile scheme operates similarly. The more “friends” a user has on the website, the greater the number of people who will receive information about what that user displays or “likes.”

Social-networking sites are one of two great online advancements to occur in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Sites with the specific function of *content-sharing* (verse content-sharing as well as social-networking) also blossomed.<sup>56</sup> YouTube (a video sharing site where users can upload, share, and view new videos) was started in 2005 and is now used by over one billion individuals.<sup>57</sup> This website allows for self promotion in a way even more visually impactful than Facebook and Twitter for how it allows users to share not only pictures or short writings, but also videos.

In the same way that Facebook allows for an individual to gain social capital through their number of followers and “likes,” YouTube allows its users to receive momentum from constantly increasing the number of views on their videos, as well as the number of subscribers to their channels. The ability to upload and post short films about oneself that YouTube provides creates a medium for identity building that is even richer with imagery and cinematic detail that that afforded by Facebook.

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<sup>56</sup> Dickey, Megan R. "The 22 Key Turning Points in the History of YouTube." *Business Insider*. N.p., 15 Feb. 2013. Web.

<sup>57</sup> Fitzpatrick, Laura. "A Brief History of YouTube." *Time Magazine*. Time Inc., 31 May 2010. Web.



In conjunction with sites like Twitter and Facebook, which allow for the rapid dissemination of information, YouTube has created a widely used online platform where previously unknown individuals can showcase their talent. In addition to a site for homemade tutorial videos and short films, YouTube has become a place for performers and singers to post videos of their performances. One of the most notable instances of this was Justin Bieber. At age thirteen, Justin Bieber was known only in his hometown for winning local singing contests. After posting videos of himself performing on YouTube, Bieber was noticed by Scooter Braun, the owner of Raymond Braun Music Group (a recording house that was also run by Usher).<sup>58</sup> The owner got in contact with Bieber after viewing his popular homemade films and immediately signed him his first album contract. Justin Bieber almost immediately became a world superstar. His first official YouTube video received over 700 million views and *Forbes* magazine named him as one of the ten most powerful celebrities in the world (three times).<sup>59</sup>

Justin Bieber wasn't the only individual who capitalized on YouTube in a way that earned him worldwide attention. Rebecca Black is another notable instance of a previously unknown individual being placed into the public eye because of YouTube. In late 2010, Rebecca Black's mother paid a Los Angeles record label \$4000 to produce a short music video titled "Friday" and starring Black.<sup>60</sup> In the first month after it was posted to YouTube, Black's video received only 1,000 views. But on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 the video went viral. Unlike Bieber, however, Black's music video was noted for how it

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<sup>58</sup> "How Justin Bieber Became Famous." *Band Brand* 22 Mar. 2011. Web.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Perpetua, Matthew. "Why Rebecca Black's Much-Mocked Viral Hit 'Friday' Is Actually Good." *Rolling Stone*. Yahoo Music, 15 Mar. 2011. Web.

showcased Black's lack of talent. Media coverage of her work was negative and critics called her performance, "the worst video of all time."<sup>61</sup>

Despite the negative reception, Rebecca Black's posting to YouTube demonstrates the website's ability to not only draw in a large amount of audience attention, but also to do this in a small period of time. In a matter of days, Rebecca Black went from being unknown to having a number one song on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and appearing on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Furthermore, Black demonstrates how social-networking sites being utilized in conjunction with content-sharing sites (like YouTube) increases their ability to move individuals into the public eye in a short period of time. The day that her video went viral, Rebecca Black was also the most talked about topic on Twitter.<sup>62</sup> As individuals tweeted negative (and sometimes positive) opinions about her video to their followers (who subsequently may have tweeted about the same thing to their followers or re-tweeted the previous comment), they created an ever-increasing cascade of viewers that became partially responsible for how quickly Rebecca Black became heard of.

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

## How these Developments Reconstruct Fame

Social media (defined here as social-networking and content-sharing sites) and reality television have redefined how society constructs the notion of famous and recreated the route through which individuals can become celebrities. It has done this, however, in ways that are both intuitive and more complex.

First and foremost, this new type of media has allowed for new locations for the circulation and creation of celebrity. As was the case with Rebecca Black and Justin Bieber, user-generated content could be moved into the mainstream media very quickly. YouTube provided each of these users with an outlet to create content that featured them and then display it to a massive audience. Content-sharing sites allowed for the proliferation of this content very fast. The individuals moved from being relatively unknown to the media spotlight (as was the case with Rebecca Black *literally*) overnight.

Jennifer Hudson and Elisabeth Hasselbeck took the reality television route to becoming celebrities. Each of them capitalized on reality television's (rather than social media's) ability to put regular individuals into the public eye. Both of them did so on shows that were mainstream and gave them access to large audience followings. Thus, while their routes to becoming modern-day celebrities were different than Bieber and Black's, they demonstrate similar notions of networked media's ability to recreate routes to fame.

As these new media technologies redefine how the public creates celebrities, they simultaneously are redefining what it means to be famous and *be* a celebrity. In *To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter*, Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd analyze how social media sites like Twitter redefine celebrity as a "practice." Marwick and Boyd

argue that these developments reconstruct fame by allowing for famousness to be something that can be “performed” online, and by altering traditional notions of “celebrity management.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, the same shift that occurred between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – when new technologies in film allowed for celebrities to more intentionally create public images in a way that was highly correlated with the amount of attention each celebrity then garnered, is occurring today. New media technologies increase the amount of visibility an individual can receive in a way similar to how new technologies in film and public media did in the 1940s. In the 1940s this constant creation of celebrity personas and display of their leisure activities made greatness, fame and an individual’s well-knownness in society become less correlated with their achievement and more associated with popularity. The effect is similar here.

Marwick and Boyd use Twitter as a prime example of how the way our definition of celebrity has shifted. Twitter allows for celebrities to create profiles and tweet their own content, in an attempt to control their publicity and allegedly display their personal thoughts while crafting a public image. Instagram is similar. By giving celebrities the ability to post photos of their day-to-day lives (images of breakfast foods, casual outfits and lazy mornings make frequent appearances), Instagram is supposedly providing the public a window into celebrities’ personal lives.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, these social media sites allow celebrities to interact with their fan base directly. Twitter users can tweet at a celebrity and celebrities are often times known for tweeting personal responses back.

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<sup>63</sup> Marwick, Alice, and Danah Boyd. "To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17.2 (2011): 139-58. Print.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

Marwick and Boyd classify this change in the definition of famous as the development of “celebrity practice.” By revealing to the public what appears to be personal information and thoughts, sites like Twitter are creating a sense of intimacy between participant and follower. “On Twitter,” Boyd states, “celebrity is practiced through the appearance and performance of ‘backstage’ access.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, celebrity is becoming an ever changing *performative practice*, “rather than a set of intrinsic personal characteristics or external labels.” This practice does not only involve celebrities connecting with their fans by being tweeted at and tweeting back. It also involves “fan management.” Just as regular people can have varying numbers of Facebook friends, “likes” on a post, and Twitter followers, celebrities can also have audience levels for their online posts that grow and shrink. When social media is used to develop and maintain a fan base made up of online followers, popularity becomes maintained through ongoing fan management and constant performance of that followed public image in the form of tweets.

Thus, celebrity has not only changed to become a “performative practice,” but also a continuous spectrum. As individuals can have larger or smaller numbers of followers on Twitter or friends on Facebook, they can arguably have varying levels of fame directly correlated with that number. Thus, regular people (who all have profiles and online followers) can also be considered celebrities but at a level lower on the spectrum. (Videoing, blogging, and other uses of social media sites allowing for ever-growing techniques to increase your popularity, number of followers and respective “fame.”) As any individual can utilize these social media sites and create an online image

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

or presence, any person is given the same tools to craft their identity publicly as was once afforded to only celebrities through their agents, publicity team and magazines.

Celebrity can now be *practiced* by any person. Any individual can be considered famous and placed along the continuous spectrum of fame. Online friends and followers constitute one's fan base, and ever more so popularity – rather than achievement or authentic engagement with the public, is the goal.

## Chapter 4: The Impact of the Reconstruction of Fame

### Walt Disney Media Today

As discussed in Chapter 1, Walt Disney media provides an accurate and unique lens for analyzing society. Its media acts as a reflection of the time period in which it was released, and the worldwide scope of the conglomerate gives it a profound influence on youth that allows its media's content to provide insight into the current generation of children. Thus, as new media technology has caused culture's definition of fame and celebrity to transform, Disney media and the carefully crafted "Disney dream" have transformed with it.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Walt Disney Company released films and television that promoted a dream about finding true love. This original Disney dream was first told in Disney's 1950 classic film *Cinderella* (which tells the story of an orphaned girl who escapes her wicked stepmother when she marries Prince Charming).<sup>66</sup> This simple narrative – of finding true love and living happily ever after – was a dream that “dominated Disney fairytales in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” *Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast* and the other highest grossing animated Disney films from 1950 to 1992 all told stories of girls who achieved their dream by meeting and marrying a prince.<sup>67</sup>

Over the course of the past century, however this Disney dream has transformed from a fairytale about finding true love to a different kind of narrative, one that draws on the new opportunity afforded by reality television and social media to give regular individuals fame and reflects a current American obsession with instant recognition. Told

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<sup>66</sup> Craven, A. "Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 9.2 (2002): 123-42. Print.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

in a similar format to the Disney princess movies, stories about young people who are famous or become famous overnight now dominate Disney television and film.

*Cinderella* exemplified the old Disney dream. *Hannah Montana*, a Disney Channel original television series, exemplifies the new one. *Hannah Montana* tells the story of a regular teenage girl who leads a double life as a pop star. The show, which premiered in 2006, became Disney's most popular television series of all-time and is emblematic of Disney media released this century.<sup>68</sup> Between 2002 and 2012, Disney Channel went from releasing no films that told stories of kids becoming famous to having almost a quarter of all its movies focused on that topic.<sup>69</sup> In addition, in 2011 alone, three of the six new series on Disney Channel were about kids becoming celebrities and the number of television shows concerning famous young adults increased from being non-existent from 1983 to 2005, to composing almost one-half of all the programming on the Disney Channel after 2006.<sup>70</sup>

More notable than the way in which Disney media has had an increasing focus on fame is how current Disney media specifically reflects culture's new definition (of more instant, attainable, and performed) fame. Disney programming about famous kids clearly relates clearly to the growth of reality television and social media – and how each one of these entities reconstructed celebrity. Steven Peterson, the Executive Producer of *Hannah Montana*, explicitly related the choice of making *Hannah Montana* about a famous teenager to the reality television boom: "Celebrity is huge for kids because of the sense of

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<sup>68</sup> "Disney Channel Ratings Report." *Disney Channel Medianet*. The Walt Disney Company, 2012. Web.

<sup>69</sup> Khademi, Casey A. Disney Channel Original Movies and Television Shows since 1983. 12 Mar. 2012. Raw data. Stanford University, Stanford, CA.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*



empowerment,” Peterson said in the 2006 *Time Magazine* article “A Disney Star is Born,” “Especially with all the reality shows now on TV” (qtd. in McDowell 2). Evidence that reality television and the growth of social media contribute to the fame-oriented programming exists in looking at the plotlines of the Disney television shows and movies. *Shake it Up*, one of the Disney Channel television series focused on kids becoming famous, is explicitly about fame achieved from winning a contest on a reality television dance competition. The two characters experience overnight success from reality television after being previously unknown teenagers. In the series, their fame continues even after the reality show has ended. *Austin and Ally*, a Disney Channel Original Series set to premiere in 2012, is about an aspiring singer who becomes an overnight singing sensation when his friend posts a video of him online. Notably, this series was released in 2012 only a few months after Rebecca Black took this route to becoming an overnight singing sensation.

In 2011, Disney Channel also released *Geek Charming*, a Disney Channel Original Movie about a geeky boy who makes a homemade video about his female friend and then posts it online to help her gain notoriety. This film not only demonstrates how Disney’s content reflects the influence of YouTube and social media on how we construct fame, but it also evidences how Disney makes clear its encouragement of kids to *dream* of fame. The title of the film and its content make clear references to the 1950s classic Disney film of *Cinderella* that encouraged children to dream of finding true love. In the title of *this* film, *Prince* Charming has been playfully replaced with *Geek* Charming. Rather than dreaming of a prince, the female protagonist desires a boy who

can help skyrocket her to fame with a video camera. A new Disney dream is being created focused on an instant attainment of fame.

This pattern of Disney media constructing a dream oriented around society's new definition of fame happens again and again in the programming they've released in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Their 2009 television hit *Sonny with a Chance* has an opening sequence and theme song that directly mimics the theme song of *Cinderella* ("A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes") with lyrics about "having a dream" and allowing it to "come true." What's notable about the opening sequence of *Sonny with a Chance* is that the imagery that Disney associates with the "dream" (as those lyrics are voiced) are things like the Hollywood sign, the show's main character getting on an airplane and flying to LA to be on television, and the Hollywood Walk of Fame. (A stark contrast to what appeared onscreen in *Cinderella* when "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes" played during the ending sequence: Cinderella driving off in her carriage after successfully marrying the prince.) The "Disney dream" is no longer about marrying a prince, but now clearly about becoming famous.

The Walt Disney Media Company is not the only media outlet to have its content reflect the increasing cultural focus on fame and its changing definition – in fact, far from it. In *The Rise of Fame: An Historical Content Analysis*, Yalda Uhls and Patricia Greenfield (two Professors of Communication at the University of California, Los Angeles) analyzed trends in children and tween-oriented programming from 1967 to 2007 – taking note of how their content's focus has shifted. They analyzed programming released on all television networks – including, but not limited to, the Disney Channel. In analyzing the values displayed on the most popular television shows in the United States

during this time period, Uhls and Greenfield found that the displayed values shifted from being more “communitarian and familialistic” to being more individualistic. They found that fame (what they classified as an “individualistic value”) was judged “as the top value in shows from 2007, up from number fifteen (out of sixteen) in most of the prior decades.”<sup>71</sup> Values revolving around family or community were displayed less and less. Overall, the content of children’s programming across the board has become fame-centric – Disney is not the only media network attempting to inspire kids to dream about fame and reflecting our culture’s new definition of celebrity.

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<sup>71</sup> Uhls, Yalda T., and Patricia M. Greenfield. "The Rise of Fame: An Historical Content Analysis." *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 1st ser. 5.1 (n.d.): n. pag. 2011. Web.

## **Impact on Youth**

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century's changing definition of fame has shown up across media entities. The Walt Disney Company's programming is only emblematic of a new trend of fame – and the ease that now comes in attaining it – being taught to youth. There may undoubtedly be a profound psychological effect on promoting this new value system amongst young adults – as well as a larger effect that this changed definition of fame may have on society.

The generation that now views Disney media day-to-day is now hearing repeated stories about young adults becoming “famous” and celebrities through social media and reality television. Some argue that the influence of promoting teenage stardom is negative. Specifically, film and television that endorse achieving fame might make young people value celebrity over their family, give them unrealistic career goals, or encourage narcissism. A 2007 Pew Research Study, “A Portrait of Generation Next” surveyed over 1500 individuals ages 18 to 25 and found that fifty-one percent said that being famous was their generation's most important or second-most-important life goal.<sup>72</sup> Though this can't be definitively attributed to fame-oriented television and films, it is consistent with the content of the Disney shows.

Others argue that telling stories of famous teenagers might also have benefits. By portraying kids who were triumphant in achieving their dreams, the tales may mean that Disney is simply supporting the pursuit of extreme success. In a *USA Today* article entitled “Generation Y's Goal? Wealth and Fame,” researchers interviewed University of

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<sup>72</sup> "A Portrait of "Generation Next"" *Pew Research Center Publications* (n.d.): n. pag. Pew Research Center, 9 Jan. 2007. Web.

Michigan students in response to the Pew Research study. They found that students were inspired by the rags-to-riches stories they saw on television to “want success in their own arena” (Jayson, 2). One 21-year-old entrepreneur noted, “Fame doesn’t necessarily mean being on TV. Being an influential figure in one’s field is being famous” (qtd. in Jayson, 2).<sup>73</sup> The Disney programming may be valuable, therefore, for possessing an inspirational quality – it encourages individuals to aim for great success in their field, even if their arena is unrelated to music.

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<sup>73</sup> Jayson, Sharon. "Generation Y's Goal? Wealth and Fame." *USA Today* 10 Jan. 2007: n. pag. Web.

## Conclusions

Regardless of its potential effects on our newest generation, Disney media is inarguably displaying something that society demonstrated first: a cultural reconstruction of the notion of fame. Just as the advent of new technologies shifted how society conceived of fame from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the massive new media technologies of social-networking sites and reality television have altered our construction of fame in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

The change in our culture's definition of fame that occurred between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries isn't very different from that which occurred from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In the 20<sup>th</sup>-century the creation of new technologies of film and public media changed the way in which people viewed celebrities and increased the focus on their public lives and lifestyles. As their private lives became artificially constructed and more widely displayed, individuals with well-constructed private lives became better known. As a result, individuals considered famous possessed less of a correlation with "greatness" (accomplishment, achievement, or societal contributions) and more of a correlation with their popularity.

The shift in our definition of fame from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century's definition to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century's definition has followed a similar pattern. Reality television and social media has altered the way in which we view *anyone*. Any individual has the capability of creating an online profile, connecting with their followers or "fans," publicizing their content through photographs or videos and most importantly, putting themselves in the public eye. This ability to garner almost unlimited attention changes whom society focuses on, making fame (again) less correlated with greatness and more correlated with

popularity (or the attention they've received from reality television and the internet). As Marwick and Boyd put it, fame becomes a performance or a spectrum. Individuals can become famous at different levels, and can "practice" their fame through artful self-presentation. As a result fame is less often a sign of societal heroism and more often not long-lasting, deserved or earned.

This altered definition of fame is far from finished evolving. In fact, the definition of fame may now be able to be thought of as *perpetually* evolving. As new technologies develop that alter the visibility with which we perceive other individuals, ourselves, and relations between each other, so will the way in which we consider the different status levels of individuals. As technologies develop that allow for more people to receive attention and craft their self-presentation, the question will continue to arise as to whether or not the attention they garner is justified, valuable, meaningful, or altogether meaningless.

In reconstructing our methods of publicity and what accomplishments we consider fame-worthy, we undoubtedly risk overseeing when true greatness exists. Though (as the examples of Julius Caesar and George Washington first demonstrated), there have always been some individuals who artificially self-promote themselves as "heroes," hopefully this increase in our ability to self-promote won't make us lose sight of when true heroes exist – especially when these notions are so clear and prevalent in the media we give to youth. The social media and reality television superstars can step aside, for those few heroic, accomplished and truly contributive modern-day individuals that actually warrant a label of "famous."

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