

“Branded Entertainment”: Digital Advertising and New TV Business Models

Mickey is watching you: My Magic Plus and the Disney tourist at work

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Last year, Disney rolled out My Magic Plus, a digitally based series of platforms that customizes the Disney park experience for participating guests. My Magic Plus consists of two primary tools: My Disney Experience and MagicBands. The first is a site and app where customers create avatars, link with friends and family who are also visiting the park, manage fast passes, and make reservations at various eateries on Disney Park properties. The MagicBands are branded wristbands that visitors use to check in at rides, validate their FastPass access, enter their Disney resort hotel rooms, buy merchandize, and charge items to their room. The thing is, the MagicBands contain radio signals that beam your location to the Disney network and let the system know where you're located at all times. Both of these tools are touted as conveniences that “personalize” the guest's visit and give them a kind of VIP treatment. In order to take advantage of the full range of My Magic Plus offerings, guests must immerse themselves into the Disney vacation offerings, by staying at a Disney resort hotel, by consenting to data collection, and by being tracked 24/7 by their wristband. Like so many other digital technologies and social networks, My Magic Plus blends content with advertising and exchanges a customized experience for personal information, following an opt-out model that allows a consumer greater pleasures and preferences if they allow Disney to observe their behavior. Since every member of a group gets a band—and that's often families with children—Disney also has a privileged perspective on family dynamics in their carefully crafted vacation space.

I'm not interested in exploring the Orwellian ethics of data collection here. Big data remains a technological boogieman because of its opacity and invisibility: we cannot know what exactly is being collected, when we are under scrutiny, and how our information will be used. I am more fascinated by My Magic Plus' links to previous methods of marketing. Indeed, this kind of spatially dependant advertising is one of the oldest marketing models in the industrialized world and one of the earliest strategies in digital advertising. Putting children's clothing departments next to women's departments, displaying milk at the back of the grocery store, placing the “buy” button on the right side of the screen—these tactics rely on the simultaneous coexistence of content consumption and marketing research. The superficial difference between these former consumption examples and the My Magic Plus experience is that the former are types of labor while My Magic Plus is supposedly about leisure. This begs a return to Smythian theories on leisure, for in fact, My Magic Plus does not offer a seamless vacation experience. Instead it is an impetus for vacation planning and consent to take part in an immersive human research study.

As Ian Bogost pointed out,ⁱ MagicBands make it so Disney knows when you're on the toilet. However, I am more intrigued by this mixing of leisure and work and entertainment and advertising, as well as market researchers' interest in social

interactions within families. Rather than relying on interviews and surveys that often go unanswered, Disney can record movement within the park and points of sale throughout the time of a visit. It can also equate some of those activities with the identity of that particular wearer, as well as the possible dynamics between linked family and friends. After experiencing some heat from Congress, Disney assured consumer citizens that it would not use data to market to children under the age of 13, but of course that doesn't negate the rather lucrative channel of appealing to parents.

This seems part of a greater move by Disney to combine content with marketing across various entertainment products and experiences. Disney still claims to be as a folktale adapter, but it performs better when its films are synergetic platforms, like the 2013 hit *Frozen*. Think of the pre-lease of Demi Lovato's version of "Let It Go," the elaborate unveiling of the Elsa dress within the film's narrative—a la Belle's yellow ball gown—, or the almost immediate announcement that *Frozen* would go to Broadway. Disney has fully embraced the shortened pipeline, which lays bare the concomitance of leisure time and work time. We are shepherded to the movies in the hope that we will continue on to the stores and parks. Even that is too linear for a media world that is no longer dependant on the model of primary texts and ancillary markets. My Magic Plus makes it all too clear that the "magic" of Disney is that we cannot literally see the man behind the curtains. It creates an alluring veneer of personalized entertainment, with only a wristlet to remind us that we are working on Disney's factory floor.

¹ Ian Bogost's blog entry, "Welcome to Dataland": <https://medium.com/re-form/welcome-to-dataland-d8c06a5f3bc6>