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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

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## Disney doesn't want to offend anyone. But it's getting caught in the culture wars.

By Steven Zeitchik

Almost no entertainment conglomerate aims for as wide a swath of the viewing public as the Walt Disney Company, which seeks to “deliver stories, characters and experiences that are welcomed into the hearts and homes of millions of families around the world,” according to its promotional materials.

Those homes have seen a lot of slammed doors lately.

ABC's abrupt cancellation of “Roseanne” after a racist tweet from star Roseanne Barr sent many conservative voices on Wednesday into a frenzy about the politics of ABC and parent Disney. It is the latest instance in which the entertainment giant has come under fire from a wing of the American electorate — whether it's over



Roseanne Barr has a history of making racist remarks and of fanning the flames of conspiracy theories. ABC canceled her show for it on May 29. (JM Rieger/The Washington Post)

Jimmy Kimmel, ESPN or an episode of “Black-ish.”

A company that has sought to position itself as a repository for all-American brands — of “Star Wars” and “Dancing With The Stars,” of basketball legends and Marvel superheroes — finds itself grappling with the realities of being a conglomerate this large in a time this divisive.

“We hear ‘Disney,’ and we think kids movies and things

that everyone just kind of loves,” said Carmenita Higginbotham, a professor at the University of Virginia who is one of the country's leading Disney scholars. “And the company likes riding the middle, because that's where the money is,” she said. “But now they're taking all these public hits — they're going from the middle to riding the edges — and it's just startling to watch.”

Like the NFL, Disney has demonstrated a knack for getting pulled more deeply into controversies, even as it tries to avoid them.

The controversy over “Roseanne,” in which Barr on Tuesday used an ugly racial image in reference to former Obama White House adviser Valerie Jarrett, prompted a swift reaction from Disney and its chief executive Robert Iger, who within hours canceled her show and called it the “right thing” to do.

But what had seemed like a moment of unity in the face of hateful speech morphed on Wednesday into another partisan flash point. Conservative voices accused the company of taking a political position by applying a more lenient standard to liberals.

The charge was led by President Trump, who tweeted that Iger apologized to Jarrett but “never called President Donald J. Trump to apologize for the HORRIBLE statements made and said about me on ABC.” The tweet was an apparent reference to comments from Kimmel critical of the White House and a joke, which Kimmel would later apologize for, about Melania Trump’s accent.

The news made for a perfect storm, as conservative blogs had also been taking Disney to task for ESPN’s rehiring of anchor Keith Olbermann, who has a track record of anti-Trump tweets. Disney executives declined to comment for this story.

Yet the right is not the only group that has been incensed by Disney actions. In March, ABC declined to air an episode of “Black-ish” in which members of the show’s family debated NFL players kneeling during the national anthem. Some left-wing commentators criticized Disney for playing to a white working-class base that fuels its popular “Monday Night Football” program on ESPN.

Shortly after, Hollywood trades reported the show’s creator, Kenya Barris, was interested in vacating his deal with the network.

A potential Barris exit would be a loss for a company that has sought to hold itself up as a model of inclusion. It is not lost on analysts that the ABC executive at the eye of the “Roseanne” storm, Channing Dungey, is the first African American woman to run a broadcast network’s entertainment division.

Disney has run afoul of both sides of the political aisle in the same instance. ESPN’s handling of Jemele Hill, the then-“SportsCenter” anchor whose anti-Trump tweets first angered the right because she was not fired, then the left because she was redeployed to a lower-profile job in the print section of the company.

The incidents highlight how tripwires are inevitable in a culture of constant content and social media anger. They also point to a problem faced by Disney, which wants to be the main source of content for the 21st century while also avoiding the era’s pitfalls, company analysts say.

“Disney’s walking a tight-rope here,” said Lloyd Greif, a Los Angeles-based investment banker who follows the company closely. “Choosing sides — Democrat or Republican — is a lose-lose since we’re talking about alienating potentially half of the viewership.”

Greif and other business analysts say the stakes are high for the company — which, with \$55 billion in revenue in 2017, is the country’s second-largest entertainment company after Comcast. What’s more, government regulators are now examining Disney’s proposed

purchase of 21st Century Fox, which is owned by conservative mogul Rupert Murdoch.

“Bob Iger needs to tread lightly lest he get on Rupert Murdoch’s bad side,” Greif added. “Fox clearly is Trump-leaning, and Rupert is Disney-leaning. Disney’s navigating a veritable minefield here and one false step could prove costly in consummating the Disney-Fox merger.”

Iger himself has been on both sides of these culture wars. Before he was attacked by Trump for his handling of Barr, he was attacked by the left for cozying up to Trump. It was just over a year ago when the Disney chief executive, a Democrat, was raked over the coals at a shareholder meeting for not following other CEOs out the door and leaving the president’s economic council, calling his appointment there a “privileged opportunity.” (He later resigned.)

One of the few Disney content divisions that seems to have avoided controversy is the film studio, which has managed to dip into political waters with movies such as “Black Panther” with a minimum of backlash and a lot of profit.

One Hollywood producer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not

want to jeopardize relationships, said “Black Panther” shows Disney can appeal to a political base without courting controversy. But he wondered how long that can last.

“It is an amazing coup what they pulled off — a movie about black militancy that came from inside the studio system and became a blockbuster,” said the producer. “I don’t know if they just don’t know what they made or if others don’t know what they made. But I wonder in this climate how much they can keep doing that without getting some of the same reaction as the TV and other divisions.”

Many analysts both inside and outside Hollywood say that expecting uniformity within Disney, which has a wide portfolio of sports, news, entertainment and other assets, is unreasonable.

But others say that only raises the question of whether a company with so many personalities will be able to stay above the fray and maintain its broad commercial base.

In fact, some say these incidents could collectively lead to an identity crisis, forcing Disney to choose between following its corporate conscience and following the dollars. Some critics said the issue that

played out with “Roseanne” illustrates that the show should never have been greenlighted in the first place, given Barr’s past comments.

“What I think Disney is on the cusp of saying, after “Roseanne,” is, ‘Let’s go back and reevaluate our priorities,’” said William Klepper, a professor at Columbia Business School. “They’re affected by a culture of accountability. That’s a change from how many conglomerates operate. And that’s a very positive thing.”

Others say that not all of the controversies are as straightforward and that this poses a challenge for a company with broad-consumer ambitions.

“Disney has demonstrated that they’re skilled at navigating damage control,” said UVA’s Higginbotham. “The problem is just that there’s so much damage to control.”