

## Chapter 14

### **'It Was a Mascara Runnin' Kinda Day': Oprah Winfrey, Confession, Celebrity and the Formation of Trust**

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In his book *Dude, Where's My Country?* (2003) Michael Moore posits that should Oprah Winfrey stand against George W. Bush in the 2004 election she would win by a landslide. He claims that she would succeed because Oprah is a real person. This is an interesting claim to make about an individual who is only really known through her screen persona. And yet Moore claims that he is perfectly serious. He argues that Winfrey would beat Bush 'hands down' because 'America loves her and her enormous personal wealth means that she can't be bought' (Moore, 2003, p. 27)<sup>1</sup>.

Moore is pointing to a real problem: the zeitgeist in which trust in politicians is low, who are seen to be acting out of self-interest rather than that of the public.

Nonetheless, his identification of Winfrey as a viable alternative to the existing choices for political leadership presents a paradox. On the one hand, a symbol of individualism and success, celebrity does present a position of distinction imbued with a certain discursive power. As Marshall (1997) says, 'Within society, the celebrity is a voice above all others, a voice that is channeled into the media systems as being legitimately significant' (pp. 48-9). On the other hand, the sign of celebrity is also 'ridiculed and derided because it represents the centre of false value'.

Celebrity, then, is an articulation of 'the individual as commodity' (pp. x-xi).

There is a further paradox in Moore's formulation of Winfrey as an ideal presidential

candidate. Her celebrity persona has developed through her long time performance as a talk show host. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is predominant within a much-derided genre which attracts vilification largely on the grounds that individual distress is exploited for public spectacle and commercial gain. Talk shows emphasis on the emotional rather than rational, along with their lack of substantive political content, has engendered not a small degree of concern for the cultural pollution that the programs are believed to generate (Himmelstein, 1984; Keller, 1993; Abt and Seesholtz, 1994; 1997; Collins, 1998<sup>2</sup>; Fraser, 1998<sup>3</sup>).

However, within the context of contemporary media culture, Moore's eulogy of the Oprah persona is not surprising. The Oprah phenomenon indicates a popular appetite for the authentic that appears to be located at the level of individual response to situations and systems beyond personal control. Oprah<sup>4</sup> is a charismatic individual whose specific attributes are particularly effective in the contemporary cultural context that is marked by instability, uncertainty and anxiety. Some of the messages posted on fan web-sites support this claim. One such example comes from Dixie Lady: 'Because you have touched my heart so many times and in so many ways, I offer a part of my heart to you'. Another comes from Laura who writes 'Oprah, thank you for many years of growing and learning ... Oprah is the one hour of serenity I can count on every day where I can regain my balance' (Gifts from the Heart, 2004).

Whether or not we see her through the same lens, it can be of no doubt that Winfrey is a media cultural icon of some considerable stature. In 2005 *Time* magazine voted her one of the 100 most important people of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the National Civil

Rights Museum granted the National Freedom Award, and she was admitted to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Hall of Fame. She has won seven Emmies for 'Outstanding Talk Show Host and nine Emmy Awards for Outstanding Talk Show. Winfrey is the highest earning black woman in America, wields considerable power in owning not just her own TV production company, *Harpo*, but also the magazine, *O, The Oprah Magazine* and *Oxygen Media* which comprises the *Oxygen.com* web-site (<http://www.oxygen.com>) and the *Oxygen TV* network<sup>5</sup>. One of the most interesting aspects of this catalogue of success is that it is predicated on a persona whose trademark is the 'ordinary' and the 'everyday'. While Oprah is not unique in her ability to convey a sense of ordinariness, the longevity of her popularity, the intense attachments and degree of trust she appears to engender suggests a particularity to her performance that is worth examining in detail<sup>6</sup>.

Oprah-as-celebrity has been created through her daily interactions with the 'ordinary people' who appear as guests on her show in which the subject material is the ordinary -- sometimes extra-ordinary -- real life experiences of the everyday.

Crucially, Oprah's practice of revealing aspects of herself and her life experiences as a means of empathising with her guests and/or presenting the rationale for that day's subject, is the means through which she represents herself as ordinary and, therefore, authentic. Clearly, Oprah Winfrey is anything *but* ordinary and everyday, but I would argue that her show's emphasis on the emotional life of herself and her guests fosters a particular kind of relationship which, although mediated by commercial television, is grounded in a representation of the 'real' that has a powerful cultural resonance.

The figure of Oprah offers the possibility of thinking through the fragility of self-formation within contemporary culture when trust in political and legal systems

appears to be low.

This chapter explores the interactions between Oprah, her guests and viewers as a means to understanding the ways in which she negotiates her celebrity status and works to produce the levels of trust within her viewers that is expressed by Moore and the fans cited above<sup>7</sup>.

It should be pointed out at this stage that there is a wealth of material that addresses a range of issues in relation to TV talk shows in general and to Oprah Winfrey in particular. Many of them consider the shows from a feminist or gender perspective (Squire 1994; Epstein and Steinberg, 1995; 1996; 1998; Gamson, 1995; 1998; Shattuc, 1997; the public sphere (Carpignano, Anderson, Aronowitz and Diafazio, 1990; McLaughlin, 1993; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Alcott and Gray-Rosendale, 1996); class (Grindstaff, 1997) and 'race' (Masciarotte, 1991; Peck, 1994). Many of these categories overlap producing a debate that is as rich as it is complex. Whilst the Oprah persona cannot be separated from the larger political concerns that speak to class, gender, and 'race' my approach here is to focus very specifically on the dynamic between Oprah's highly mediated celebrity persona and her audience as a means to understanding the particularity of this relationship. This, I argue, enables us to understand not only the Oprah persona but also the relationship between the nature of celebrity and the formation of trust within TV audiences more generally. To do this, I look how Oprah manages her celebrity status through the foregrounding of her 'ordinariness' that is facilitated through her adoption of a confessional mode of address.

The ritual of confession which, according to Foucault (1978, p. 58), operates as an ‘agency of truth and power in Western society’ and its link with emotional talk lie at the heart of *Oprah*. As Eva Illouz (1999) argues for TV talk shows, emotional talk is a way of framing embattled relations that threaten the integrity of the self. A structure for understanding the relationship between self and others, emotion in talk shows offers ways of talking about ‘a broken (or longed for) social solidarity’ (Illouz, 1999, p. 119). Further, emotion becomes the only reliable currency once moral prescriptions can no longer be relied on; it offers the framework with which to make sense of everyday life. This is akin to Ien Ang’s (1985) findings in her frequently-cited work *Watching Dallas* in which she identifies an emotional realism which, despite the non-realistic representation of life portrayed on the screen, enables viewers to relate to the characters’ experiences and dilemmas. So, in fiction and non-fiction TV, emotion-as-truth forms a recognisable point of reference for, and offers a connection with, the viewers.

The attachment to Oprah expressed online by Laura and Dixie Lady is a result of the para-social relationship that exists between celebrity and fan. This fosters what Schickel (2000, p. 311) calls ‘the illusion of intimacy’ but is premised on a gap between the famous personality and the unknown audience. However, at the heart of *Oprah* is the foregrounding of subjective experience that operates as a means of breaching the gap between private individual and public media celebrity.

In a culture characterised by consumption, by the endless play of images divorced from any inherent meaning, and by depthlessness, celebrity also indicates a

compulsive search for the 'real' (Moran 2000, p. 137-52) Of course, the terms 'truth', 'real' and 'authentic' have to be properly placed within qualifying apostrophes because all of these images are highly mediated and stage managed (see Grindstaff, 1997) However, Oprah conflates notions of the 'authentic' with a highly mediated construction that is the celebrity persona so that they become inextricably linked.

### **Celebrity and the Ordinary**

Oprah manages to contain the contradiction of being simultaneously ordinary *and* extraordinary through her knowledge and experience of the everyday. This is tricky enough. But the construct that is the Oprah persona is made more complex by the fact of being an African American woman, an aspect of her identity that she frequently foregrounds and which forms a significant feature of her life experiences recounted on her show.

Winfrey's 'racial' identity is further underpinned by her film roles in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1984), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and in the TV film of Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place* (1989). This not only works to confer star status, but explicitly indicates a connection with a body of black feminist writers whose work posits the possibility of self-recovery and self-realisation through the excavation of a personal and collective history and through the articulation of one's own story (Walker, 1983; Collins, 1991; hooks, 1990a; 1990b). What emerges from this is the empowering possibilities inherent in claiming one's own experiences as valid rather than seeking validation through the bourgeois expertise articulated by the various therapists that appear on the program. On her show Winfrey's relationship

with this black feminist tradition is signaled by references to, and admiration of, prominent writers such as Maya Angelou (1970; 1974; 1981), Walker (1983) and Morrison (1987; 1999).

Winfrey's identification with a culturally and historically marginalised group is ever present and represents a key aspect of the Oprah persona. However, she is addressing a mass and mixed audience. The financial viability of her programmes therefore necessitates that her mode of address works towards inclusion. This is facilitated by and through Oprah's confessional practice that not only signals intimacy, but also mirrors the position of many of her guests.

Oprah's particular form of celebrity arises from more than one medium however; she is both a TV celebrity and a film star. The two are qualitatively different but are, in her case, also mutually reinforcing. As Marshall (1997, p. 119) points out, 'the film celebrity plays with aura through distance [whereas] the television celebrity is configured around conceptions of familiarity ... [and] embodies the characteristics of ... mass acceptability'. The mass acceptability of Oprah derives from her TV persona which is predicated on ordinariness while her star status is shored up through her various film performances for which she has received acclaim<sup>8</sup>.

Drawing on the work of Max Weber, Dyer argues that the charismatic quality of a personality exists within a cultural or historical specificity that, in turn, determines his/her relationship with society. Of particular interest here is Dyer's (1979, p. 35) further assertions that the charismatic personality is particularly effective 'when the social order is uncertain, unstable, and ambiguous and when the charismatic figure or

group offers a value, order or stability to counterpoise this’.

The idea of a promise of stability held out by a charismatic figure is useful in thinking about the cultural significance of *Oprah* in the age of late capitalism, but further qualifications need to be made before we can apply it to Oprah. So far, I have been using the terms ‘star’ and ‘celebrity’ interchangeably. Dyer’s work looks at film stars whereas Marshall explores the specific ways in which celebrity is constructed through the various media of film, TV and popular music. Marshall (1997, pp. 14-15) argues that the concept of a film star holds a different construction of power from that of celebrity. Where the star is a ‘publicly organised identity that arises from fictional film’, the celebrity ‘is specifically an engagement with the external world... the celebrity element of the star is its transcendence of the text in whatever form’.

This notion of a transcendent quality that arises from an engagement with the material world is most useful in the consideration of the Oprah persona which is predicated on her ‘down homeness’ and is shored up by Oprah-as-film-star which emphasises the ambiguity of star-as-ordinary/star-as-exceptional discussed by Dyer. The suggestion of the presence of an aura that is created through the star’s engagement with the ordinary most profitably describes the power inherent in the Oprah persona which has evolved more through her position as talk show host than as a film star -- although she is that also. For this reason Oprah is more accurately described as a celebrity than as a star.

All of the voices heard on the program, and the form that their articulations take, are facilitated by and filtered through Oprah whose own authority resides in her struggles

to overcome difficulties. This discursive structure is underpinned by the ways in which Oprah works to apparently close the gap between her celebrity self, the guests and audience. An intimate and empathic relationship with her guests -- who are more often 'ordinary' people than famous individuals -- is constructed through confessional discourse. This constitutes the show's narrative glue, lending coherence to the disparate narratives supplied by her guests. Oprah's adoption of the confessional position reduces the otherness of others despite the acknowledged fact of her power, wealth and extraordinary success.

### **Oprah as Confessing Subject**

An old *Oprah* show broadcast in Britain in December 1995 ('Lose Weight, Lose Friends') reveals in close-up how Oprah works to engender an intimacy with her guests and audience. This particular program examines the repercussions of losing weight. Here we have a number of women guests who are invited to speak about their weight loss and how this has affected their self-image. The show's emphasis is on the way in which the move from a negative to a positive sense of self -- signified by and through weight reduction -- has adversely affected these women's relationships with those family and friends closest to them. During the course of the show Oprah places herself in a variety of positions, locating herself as host and star of *Oprah*, interlocutor, friend, interpreter, and fellow confessor. As each guest discloses her own experience relating to weight gain and/or loss and self perception, Oprah frequently interjects with examples of her own experience in this area; as regular viewers will know, Winfrey's fluctuating body weight is a recurring theme of the show. Apart from being the source of much of her own distress, the issue of weight works as one of the more powerful ways in which Oprah fosters an apparent

intimacy and parity with guests and audience. This particular program not only deals with problems experienced by the invited guests, but also articulates a shift, evidenced by some viewers, in their relationship with the Oprah persona. The issues explored on this particular program act as a frame for Oprah/Winfrey to explore her own relationship with her audience, a relationship that is defined through and by the fluctuations in her own weight. Large bodies constitute a range of issues too complex to explore here, but it should at least be noted. As Ellman states:

The fat woman, particularly if she is non-white and working class, has come to embody everything the prosperous must disavow: imperialism, exploitation, surplus value, maternity, mortality, abjection and unloveliness ... [S]he siphons off this guilt, desire, and denial, leaving her idolized counterpart behind: the kind of woman one sees on billboards, sleek and streamlined like the cars she is often used to advertise (cited in Russo, 1995, p. 24).

Introducing a number of letters ‘from people who think I have, quote, changed [after weight loss],’ Oprah seeks to demonstrate that she too has known the troubles faced by the guests appearing on this show. A sequence of letters is shown on the screen with sections highlighted and accompanied by images of the authors. All correspondents are female, and all are white. A Judy Marcum writes ‘I’m sick of hearing about your wonderful weight loss [aided by a specialist diet chef and a weight trainer] ... You do not live our lives, so quit pretending that you are just ordinary folk’. This is the final letter to be shown and is followed by Oprah announcing ‘And this is Judy who wrote that letter friends!’ The word ‘friends’ immediately places the audience on an intimate footing with the show's host, but at

the same time emphasises the fact that this is what Oprah actually is, celebrity and host. None of the correspondence is from personal friends, and the fact that viewers have been sufficiently moved to write to her in such familiar terms supports her status rather than detracts from it.

Foucault (1978) characterises confession as a process through which relations of power are formed. The speaking subject confesses in the presence of an authority who judges, punishes, consoles, forgives and reconciles, who offers salvation and liberation. Through the exchange between Oprah and the correspondents, it becomes evident that while she is the authority to whom confession is made, she also performs as confessional subject herself. This has the effect of effacing her own extraordinariness as she, in turn, confers authority on the guests -- and by extension, the audience -- to whom the confession is made, so that the locus of power *apparently* migrates.

Judy is positioned in the front row of the audience; Oprah joins her in order to discuss further the intention and meaning behind the letter. Judy and Oprah are now a part of and apart from the rest of the studio audience. Judy explains 'I just don't feel comfortable with you any more. You don't come across as the same person. When you were on TV you were just like down home folks to me before'. Judy continues to evaluate the difference in Oprah by locating an inner change which is attributed to a greater self confidence; before this shift, Oprah was someone that Judy would have invited into her home 'and offered a doughnut' to. Now she 'doesn't come across as that same person'. Oprah replies that she *feels* like the same person but 'lighter'. Judy refuses this evaluation: 'You're a different person, not like us any more'.

Pertinently, it is the *way* in which Oprah has achieved her goals that has alienated these viewers: the paid help and support of a chef and trainer. These are props that are beyond the scope of ordinary viewers, whereas the numerous diets that had been used in the past were those that all had access to. That Winfrey is a (very rich) black woman does not figure in the dialogue at any point in this show<sup>9</sup>. The Oprah who is met now is a usurper. Judy explains her reasons for coming onto the show:

Judy: I wanted to come here and see if you were the same person.

Oprah: But you didn't know me before.

Judy: But I saw you on TV all the time and I felt like you could come to my home. Like you were my cousin. Now I think 'she's forgot about us'. I feel this in my heart, like you forgot about all us people.

As Judy confesses her discomfort with Oprah, Oprah seeks to reassure that she still feels 'like down home folks. If anything I feel even more downer homer [sic]'. She is the authority to whom the confession is made, but she does not punish, judge or exclude. Rather, she uses Judy's confession as the platform from which to make her own disclosure. Oprah states that she used the weight gain/loss as a 'metaphor for all the other stuff that I was carrying ... pain, non-confrontation, not dealing with fears'. The specificity of this pain and fear is not referred to but has been disclosed in other shows and will be well known to regular viewers of *Oprah*. They include sexual abuse, teenage sexual promiscuity, poor self-image enabling Oprah to reiterate her claim that 'I feel like I'm Every Woman; I've had almost every problem!'

What is particularly noteworthy is the fact that although Oprah, through her own confessions, signals intimacy with Judy, she (Judy) disavows this by insisting on her preference for the down home Oprah of the past who she has come to know through

TV. The irony of the flesh and blood version of Oprah being insufficient to seduce Judy from her preference for the earlier TV version is left unexplored.

Interestingly, from this exchange and the others that follow, the issue of wealth is declared not to be of concern to the women who had written letters similar to that of Judy's. This is somewhat contradictory as wealth is the means through which Winfrey achieved weight loss this time, and that has worked to alienate these particular viewers. What this implies is that so long as wealth is not foregrounded, the myth that Oprah is like 'down home folks' can be sustained. Once this appearance is violated viewers' perception of the screen persona, and their relation to it, changes.

The boundaries between notions of friendship and family ties are continually blurred. The earlier guests -- Lisa and Sheila -- who are cousins, relate to each other as friends, while Judy regards Oprah as a friend who might also be a cousin. Oprah further seeks to efface differences between herself and audience by using the address 'friends'. This raises questions about what the word 'friend' signifies here. From the dialogues of Judy and the other guests, it would seem to refer to a person who is not likely to judge negatively, and a person who might be another family member. More importantly, 'friend' signifies a relationship premised on trust.

However, these relationships are problematised by and through their construction in an economic production: we know that Judy and the other letter writers/readers are viewers who represent ratings and the commercial viability of the *Oprah* show. The presence of these women -- and their relationship with the show's host -- represents

the commodification of familial networks and bonds of friendship that is articulated through confessional discourse and mediated by the means of commercial TV.

Oprah's exemplification of individualism and success along with the trust that she subsequently engenders does indeed mark her as exceptional. But her authority resides in experiencing the same problems articulated by her guests. This enables her to make such declarations as 'I feel like I am every woman'. However, paradoxically, the more Oprah insists that she is 'down home', the more her celebrity position is confirmed. On the one hand, the confessional nature of her speech intimates a reconfiguration of the power relations produced through confessional discourse. On the other, her practice of frequent interjection signals her license to assert control over what is spoken, when and by whom. The gap between herself as celebrity and the audience is thus reinforced whilst acts of confession imply an equality of relations.

There are occasions when this contradiction is flagged however. In 'Oprah's Diets' the entire first segment is devoted to a reading of Oprah's journal entries written over a period of two and a half years; what we hear is a catalogue of the food eaten and not eaten, expressions of anguish and self-loathing as the lost weight returns: 'Control ... Trying to regain the control God gave me... Sometimes I can feel the connection between my own fears and my weight. So what are my fears?' We are also shown a series of images that have appeared (and been derided) in the press along with footage of Oprah at TV award ceremonies. The contradiction that exists within the person and the persona is made manifest through the visual images of a successful woman collecting an award juxtaposed with a contemporaneous diary

extract proclaiming shame and self-hatred for becoming so large. Her decision to display extracts from her journals works towards creating a sense of authenticity through which we develop a sense of knowing who she is; trust in Oprah is engendered through the act of self-revelation. It is this quality that Moore identifies when he states that 'I have been on *Oprah* three times. I saw grown adults break down and sob after shaking her hand. Why? I think it's because Oprah is a real person ... She's one of us who somehow made it' (2003, p. 27).

### **Celebrity and the Engendering of Trust**

The voices that speak on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* are mobilised through the system of celebrity -- embodied by Oprah -- that itself acts as an avowal of the cultural ideals of individualism and success that are in turn enmeshed with notions of commodity and consumption. And the show itself would not exist without them. However, the process of commodification is undercut through the sharing and rehearsal of everyday problems and experiences. The African American model of selfhood referred to earlier that informs the Oprah persona also infuses the narratives of self that are presented on the show. This is a self that is tied to community, familial and social networks and which is capable of overcoming oppressive forces. In this way, Oprah manages to appeal to a mass and mixed audience. Trust is produced through the charismatic persona that offers the possibility of thinking through the fragility of self-formation within the postmodern context with its attendant uncertainty, social fragmentation and mass mediation, and accounts for her popularity *at this particular moment in time*.

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> M. Moore, 'How to Talk to your Conservative Brother-in-Law', *Guardian Weekend*, 4 October (2003) pp. 22-30.

<sup>2</sup> M. Collins, 'Tears 'R' Us', *The Guardian*, 15 January (1998) pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> N. Fraser, 'The Cheap Triumph of Trash TV', *The Guardian*, 31 January (1998) pp.

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<sup>4</sup> I use the name ‘Oprah’ to signal the screen persona as distinct from the person who is Oprah Winfrey.

<sup>5</sup> *O, The Oprah Magazine* was launched in May/June 2000 as a personal growth guide with a target audience of women between the ages of 25 – 49. Winfrey is a co-founder of *Oxygen Media* which operates a 24-hour cable TV network for women and launched in 1998 (see <http://www.oxygen.com/>).

<sup>6</sup> This ‘ordinariness’ is not a phenomenon peculiar to, or invented by, Oprah. As Murray (2001, p. 187) points out, in the 1940s and early 50s it was recognised that TV stars had to ‘exude an honesty or naturalness that would engender trust in the audience’ – especially when endorsing a product. Holmes (2004) also explores the apparent contradiction between stardom and an authenticity that is premised on ordinariness in relation to the reality TV program *Pop Idol* (broadcast in the UK on ITV1, from 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Whilst the popularity of TV talk shows is in decline – at least, they occupy less space within British TV schedules and generate far fewer column inches in newspapers -- I would argue that they have left an indelible trace made manifest through the plethora of reality TV programming that can be characterised through their placement of subjectivity at the core of the shows’ narratives and which is often accessed through the process of confession.

<sup>8</sup> The examples used to support the arguments presented in this paper come from a number of *Oprah Winfrey Shows* that precede Winfrey’s acquisition of *O* and *Oxygen*. However, the tone and content of her current work mirrors that of her earlier TV talk shows in which her celebrity persona was formed. The mode of address,

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range of concerns and the emphasis on the everyday remain consistent. See Illouz (2003) for a discussion of the ways in which Oprah performs across the full range of media platforms.

<sup>9</sup> Winfrey has been criticised for her accommodation of white normative codes in the pursuit of her celebrity status (Peck, 1994; Ferguson, 1998).