

Oprah Winfrey: The Construction of Intimacy in the Talk Show Setting

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In *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippman argued that there is no single reality, but many ever-changing realities. New information added to old changes our opinions, presenting reality in a new and different light for each individual. With his mosaic model of communication, Sam Becker presents a similar argument when he suggests that each individual's reality is a multi-dimensional mosaic created over time. Tiny bits and pieces of information are constantly being added to our mosaic, as others fall away and still others remain or change slightly with time. The picture, like the moving dots on a video screen, is never quite complete, and certainly never static.

The mosaic model seems appropriate as we consider the media's construction of star personalities. The many ways that the audience may come to "know" and perhaps even like or respect a "star" are complex and involve a multitude of messages, bits of the mosaic, gathered over time to form the ever-changing picture. A prime example of this process is the evolution of Oprah Winfrey, possibly the most successful woman in the history of television. The evolution of Winfrey's star persona is the subject of analysis here; it will be argued that her success is attributable to the evolution of both her personal "legend" and her accessible communication style. The interaction of these two characteristics allows Winfrey's audience to not only respect her talent but to like and accept her as an individual as well, to feel "intimate" with her in spite of her incredible success and wealth, and the distance created by television as a mass medium.

It will be argued that this construction of intimacy is a function of the interaction of several factors. A primary concern will be the communication patterns which typify Winfrey's interaction. Research findings on communication in female friendships will be briefly discussed, and comparisons drawn with respect to Winfrey. As a corollary, the "star discourse" about Winfrey will be examined to see how she has used public interviews in the popular press to construct herself as an engaging, approachable, likeable person, sharing some very intimate details of her personal life in order that her audience may feel even closer to her than her talk show appearances normally allow. It is through a combination of these factors that audience members are allowed to enter into a relationship with Winfrey, a type of relationship that researchers of

mass communication effects have come to call para-social interaction, or the tendency television viewers have to feel that they have a one to one relationship with a television performer. This is the phenomenon that allows viewers to send marriage proposals to performers, or hate mail to soap opera characters, or perhaps remain loyal and feel close to one of the richest, most powerful women on television.

To briefly expand upon that final point, the star discourse is full of descriptions of people pounding on bus windows to get Winfrey's attention, stopping her on the street, yelling friendly comments. One woman interviewed for the purposes of this paper commented, "Oprah is me we're both black, we're the same age, we treat people the same way. That could be me." She then talked about how much she would like to meet Oprah, even suggesting that she might go "hang out" at her restaurant some time to try to run into her, to meet her face to face. It is the construction of that relationship quality that will be the focus here.

Girl Talk and the Women's Talk Show Traditions

While Oprah Winfrey is perhaps the most spectacular and certainly the most successful, she follows in a healthy tradition of female talk show hosts and interviewers in the women's talk show genre, and it is this tradition that has set the stage and provided the context for the construction of Winfrey's perceived intimacy. At least as early as the 1960s and into the 1970s, talk shows hosted by women took on the homey, folksy, friendly feel that is associated with Winfrey today. In the 1960s, Dinah Shore invited us each morning to *Dinah's Place*, complete with living room and kitchenette, perhaps because producers were not yet convinced that women were interested in anything that did not include cooking. Virginia Graham invited us over for *Girltalk*, a slightly more gossipy form of chat than offered by Shore, and Joan Rivers had her own "can-we-talk" format in 1969. In different genres, we have watched the increasingly more intimate interviews of Barbara Walters for many years, and more recently, Jane Pauley and Connie Chung. And while Phil Donahue is obviously not a woman, his was the first talk show to openly market "serious" girl-talk, and to concede the importance of the female voice. These programs, and others, paved the way for Oprah Winfrey. They established a recognizable place for women's talk and the female voice on television.

Gender Research on Female Friendship

Research in the area of gender and communication has examined the notion of "woman's talk," finding that women's talk has some unique characteristics.

According to much of the research on same-sex friendship, men and women exhibit notable different intimacy patterns in their friendships. This section will focus on those patterns commonly identified with female friendship, particularly those associated with self-disclosure, interaction norms and listening behaviors.

Self-disclosure is one of the key areas where female same-sex friendships exhibit unique patterns. Self-disclosure is concerned with information about one's self which is not readily available or otherwise easily accessible to others and must be revealed by the communicator herself (Pearce and Sharp). For example, we would not know about Winfrey's sexual abuse if she had not chosen to talk, reveal it on various episodes of her television show and expand upon the incident in print articles (such as Harrison, Anderson, and Rubinstein). Use of self disclosure tends to facilitate communication and intimacy, and give a greater sense of being in a relationship. As Oprah Winfrey's popularity grew, she consistently disclosed more intimate details of her life—from childhood memories to incest to relationships with men to her struggles with weight. In a similar vein, the mostly female makeup of Winfrey's studio and home audience may facilitate a certain style of communication. Women in same-sex friendships tend to self-disclose more than the participants in mixed-sex or same-sex male relationships (Jones and Brunner). Women disclose more emotional, evaluative and in-depth messages (Morton), and are more likely to increase their self-disclosure as the relationship becomes more intimate (Lombardo and Berzonsky). Self-disclosure and intimate behaviors thus tend to encourage and facilitate more self-disclosure and a greater sense of intimacy. It is here where the evolution of the *Legend of Oprah*, as created on her television talk show and in the popular press star discourse, becomes important.

The Evolution of the Legend of Oprah

As Winfrey herself suggests in several articles, the legend of Oprah Winfrey as modern day Horatio Alger has been repeated so often that even she worries that it approaches the level of cliché. However, a few of the details bear repeating here. Interestingly, many of the clichés that Oprah fans have come to know and love do not really appear in the star discourse until the release of *The Color Purple*, the point at which she begins to achieve her greatest height of popularity. Early articles focus on Winfrey's childhood years on her grandmother's farm in Mississippi. In a 1985 *Ebony* article, she is described, during that period, as having no friends and only one corn cob doll (Noel). Winfrey's story gets more complex in a 1987 *Good Housekeeping* article, where we learn that while on the farm, she never had a store-bought dress or even a pair of shoes, and the farm had only an outhouse and an outdoor well from which the less than six-year-old Oprah had to draw the daily water supply for the family. Her stern grandmother also required her to cut the switches with which she was whipped on a daily basis. This harsh life, Winfrey stresses, gave her the strength to become what she is today (Anderson).

After age six, she moved in with her struggling mother in Milwaukee, where, according to the early articles, she kept roaches as pets because they could not afford a dog. Her rebelliousness, during this period, is a consistent theme, featuring several versions of the youthful Winfrey faking robberies to get what she wanted (like a new pair of glasses), but the focus on the incest and sexual abuse that has become common knowledge today does not become a major part of the legend until *The Color Purple* is released.

Following the struggling mother portion of the tale, we learn of Winfrey's move to Nashville in 1968, where her father's loving discipline and public speaking saved her life, how she won Miss Fire Prevention and Miss Black Tennessee, how one thing led to another, and so on. Scattered along the way are tales of doomed relationships, not quite suicide attempts, coping with her blackness in a white world, sexual abuse, and of course, the unending struggle with weight.

In addition, in the more recent articles we are treated to both discussions of her deep spirituality and descriptions of her incredible success, though, as Michelle Wallace pointed out, Winfrey believes that talking about the cost of things is the ultimate in bad taste. However we do know, in round millions, about how much she makes, and we do get to read about how she treats her staff and friends to wild shopping sprees (where dollar figures often are quoted). To a lesser extent we learn about her charities; in particular, the Big Sister program she and her best girlfriends started in inner-city Chicago's Cabrini Green housing project. And last but not least, we read about Stedman Graham, the idealized boyfriend she may or may not marry someday (see Edwards; *Jet*; King; Taylor; Warren; Walters and King; and Whitaker).

It is important to note that similar legends do not exist for Winfrey's contemporaries. The legend, as it has evolved, is a vital part of our relationship with Winfrey and a vital part of her incredible success, serving to let us feel intimate with her as well as making both her obvious ethnicity and her amazing success acceptable to a largely poor and largely white audience.

Female Communication Norms and Behaviors

To return to the female friendship findings, it has been summarized that "women traditionally talk to each other about personal and affiliative issues that reflect who they are; men traditionally talk about task and power issues that reflect what they do" (Stewart et al.). Self-disclosure topics for women typically include personal and family matters and are more emotionally oriented and intimate (possibly including confidences about worries or problems). Men tend to focus their talk on activities (such as sports, money and work) (Sherman and Haas). Finally, women generally talk more about people than men do (Stewart et al.) and see themselves as using disclosure more appropriately than men (Morton).

In terms of interaction *norms*, female same-sex friends are more likely to simply engage in talk which is unaccompanied by any other activity ("girl-talk") than are other dyads, which in turn facilitates higher levels of self-disclosure and intimacy. Women also tend to be more egalitarian in their approach to conversation than are other dyads. In terms of additional *behaviors*, they are also facilitators of disclosure rather than controllers, and tend to engage in supportive, non-critical listening behaviors (Coates).

It may be appropriate at this point to compare Winfrey with her male counterparts. Phil Donahue perhaps comes the closest, but even he is noticeably more distanced from his audience "not as physical, not as self-disclosing" and seems to be more powerful and authoritarian on the air, more in control of the

proceedings. The differences can be seen more readily with Geraldo Rivera, and in a slightly different genre, Morton Downey Jr. and Larry King, all of whom employ sometimes hostile and confrontational interview tactics, even occasionally provoking violence from their guests. While Winfrey may become impatient or even angry with addicted mothers or other unforgivably "bad" people, they are more likely to leave with their heads hung in shame than to break a chair over Winfrey's head.

Other important behaviors in Winfrey's interpersonal repertoire include her different voices "both in terms of what she says and how she says it" and her non-verbal behaviors. In terms of voices, Oprah has several that regular viewers have come to know and understand. Viewers recognize the serious Oprah, the playful Oprah, the empathic Oprah, the angry Oprah, the "just folks" Oprah. The vocal quality changes with each, as does the word choice. When she is playful or just folks, she liberally peppers her talk with slang and familiar references. According to her executive producer, she asks the questions "ordinary" people would ask (Harrison). Serious Oprah pronounces her words carefully, avoids slang. More so than with the other talk show hosts, the audience knows when she is talking *for* them, and it knows when she is talking *to* them, even when she is not employing direct address. She talks to her audience as if they are her friends, as they would talk to *their own* friends.

The nonverbal aspect is perhaps the strongest signifier of the audience's relationship with Winfrey. In a video montage used to open a televised salute to Oprah Winfrey, she is shown touching audience member after audience member, grabbing their arms as they ask their questions, even resting her chin on one woman's shoulder, virtually cuddling them. In an episode which aired in November, 1991, Winfrey focused on the fashion choices of her staff, and though she deemed that most of her employees were not "as cute as they could be," she touched their shoulders, their hair, invaded their personal space so much that secretary Coleen could not gesture herself without bumping into her boss. (Furthermore, the employees allowed and enthusiastically participated in this nationally televised, warm-hearted critique, a type of criticism one might normally reserve for one's closest friends.) [One woman I interviewed about her feelings about Winfrey pointed to this touching as what she thought was the most attractive thing about the program stating, "Oprah reaches out and touches people, [grabbing my own arm] and a lot of folks don't have touch in their lives. That's very comforting."]

In addition to touch, Winfrey utilizes other intimate nonverbal cues. While she enters the personal, intimate space of her guests and audience, she also makes meaningful, sustained eye contact with them, giving them the sense that she really is interested in what they have to say. And she reacts, no holds barred, laughing, screaming, even crying, at the appropriate times, and allows us to do the same. On a November, 1990 episode in which she united a father and son who had never met, Oprah broke down in tears herself, drawing attention to that fact just before cutting away to a commercial. In press interviews, she stresses that emotions and feelings are what she is "all about."

Conclusion

While this paper has focused on the role of Winfrey's communication patterns in the construction of her intimate relationship with her audience, other issues must also factor into the mosaic of that relationship. Lynn Spigel has demonstrated the connections between public and private space through the placement of the television in the home, certainly an important aspect here. Winfrey enters our private space via the television set placed in our living room, our kitchen, even our bedroom, on a regular daily basis, but she does not bring us larger than life pictures of public space. Rather she brings us the intimate, the private, making it public but with intimate trappings, sending it back to the private realm of the home, further blurring those already fuzzy distinctions. She is our mammy, our therapist, our cheerleader, our moral conscious, our role model, and our harshest critic when it is appropriate. Only a good friend could tell a friend when she is not as cute as she can be. Winfrey herself has legendary, larger than life proportions, yet she is everywoman. It is through the skillful application of the communication patterns we associate with friendship that she manages to overcome the basic conflict between Oprah as rich talk show host and Oprah as friend.

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