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Oprah Winfrey: saint or mindless consumerist?

Oprah Winfrey's announced departure from her daytime talk show has brought out her biggest fans and loudest critics.

By [Gloria Goodale](#) / *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

LOS ANGELES

Secular saint or nefarious consumerist? No matter your opinion of Oprah Winfrey, it's impossible to ignore the global uproar over her announcement earlier today that she will be winding down her daytime talk show on broadcast television and moving over to her very own cable channel, the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), in partnership with Discovery Communications. OWN will debut in January 2011 to approximately 80 million viewers on what is currently the Discovery Health Channel.

Popular culture professor at Syracuse University, Robert Thompson, who grew up in Chicago where Ms. Winfrey began her career, says he has received requests for comments from around the world. Media watchers, sociologists, and branding experts say the frenzied outpouring reveals much about the impact, legacy, and future of the media empire Winfrey has built over the past quarter century.

"I'm shocked," says Mr. Thompson, who explains that the syrupy accolades and montages playing in cities from London to Sydney are more akin to a memorial. "This reminds me of the sort of tributes that poured out after Michael Jackson's passing. More about someone whose time is past," he notes.

"Frankly, they don't bode well for the future of her projects in other areas."

But the passion of her fans also says something about her long-term commitment to them, Thompson adds. "This is an affection that was earned day by day, show by show, year by year," he says, a reign unprecedented in the daytime arena.

Over the two-and-a-half decades of her tenure in daytime TV, Winfrey came to fill a void for many of what is currently an audience of some 7 million viewers, says sociologist BJ Gallagher in an e-mail. Calling Winfrey, "Our Lady of Perpetual Self-Empowerment," Ms. Gallagher says that for tens of millions of woman (and more than a few men, too) Oprah offers what they often can't find in mainstream churches: "inspiring advice on how to live the good life, compassion, encouragement, and support, spirituality that is broadly inclusive, love and forgiveness, laughter, hugs, and acceptance."

The decision to move from broadcast to cable is strictly a business move, says Elayne Rapping, professor of American Studies at SUNY, Buffalo, noting that during Winfrey's time on ABC affiliates nationwide, the influence of broadcast television has been severely eroded by the rise of cable and the Internet. Her new venture with Discovery communications includes an Internet site, and she notes, "Oprah is just following audiences where they have demonstrably migrated, away from broadcast television."

When Winfrey entered the talk show game in the mid-1980s, shows such as Jenny Jones and Jerry Springer were already beginning to define the genre as a backwater of tabloid headlines. In the early 1990s, Winfrey made the decision to take the show in more positive directions, points out Susan Mackey-Kallis, associate professor of communication at Villanova University in Pennsylvania. It is the rise of Winfrey as a business brand that has truly driven her influence, she adds. "She often assured her viewers and later her readers that their greatest power for changing themselves and their world lay in their purchasing power. Supporting a cause meant buying a bracelet made by indigenous people; curing cancer meant attending a charity event, etc. This coupling of consumerism with social and political change made her the darling of advertisers whose clients were willing to pay top dollar to advertising on her show."

It is also this emphasis on consumerism that has drawn the most fire from such critics as international branding expert, Rob Frankel, who sees the talk show diva as a negative influence in the larger culture. "Nobody has contributed more to the dumbing down of America and its increase in mediocrity than Oprah Winfrey," he says. "If she has any leadership ability, it lies in her self-gratifying sustenance via mindless consumerism."

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