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## Oprah bows out with a Twitter, not a bang



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Times are changing in TV land and, as if to prove the point, Oprah Winfrey, the world's biggest TV star, chose Twitter to confirm she is calling it a day. "Big Day ... tune in my tweet friends," Winfrey told her 2.6m Twitter followers on Friday.

After two decades on the air, The Oprah Winfrey talk show has become a business phenomenon, a powerhouse promoter for the publishing industry and the launchpad for many businesses including her own media empire that stretches from magazines to radio and movies.

Now she is winding the show down to launch her own cable television network, OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network. But can the Oprah effect carry on without her daily show and national presence?

The talk show host, who is also an Oscar-nominated actress, film producer and publisher, wept on her show as she explained her decision: "You viewers have enriched my life ... you've invited me into your living rooms, your bedrooms and your kitchens ... some of you have grown up with me," she said to a standing ovation from the studio audience.

Winfrey will not be the only one weeping at the end. The decision to axe her daily show will be a big blow to television stations across America that have come to rely on her huge daytime audience. Ratings have slipped in recent years but the programme still averaged 6.6m viewers in the week ended November 8, according to Nielsen.

Book publishers, too, are already mourning her loss. Oprah's Book Club, copied in Britain by Richard and Judy, has created publishing sensations. A recommendation on her show all but guarantees that a book will become a bestseller. Alongside self-help titles and popular modern fiction, Winfrey has boosted the sales of classics by William Faulkner, Tolstoy and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Her taste-making abilities have made fortunes for those she backs, so much so that Forbes magazine dubbed her the most powerful celebrity in America. Kindle, Amazon's ebook reader, Ugg boots, Ciao Bella Sorbetto, the iPod — all have benefited from Winfrey's plugs.

"The reaction to her announcement has been crazy," said Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Centre for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University. "If you weren't paying attention, you'd swear Oprah had died. All these montages and highlights from her work. If I was Oprah I'd be both flattered and

worried.”

Oprah’s new channel will be on cable TV, meaning she will not have the same reach she now enjoys, said Thompson. “She’s making her way from downtown TV land to the cable suburbs,” he said. “But a lot of the action now is on cable.”

He points to shows like HBO’s Sopranos and Comedy Network’s Daily Show. “Jon Stewart probably gets 2m viewers a night — chump change in the ratings game — but his cultural value is enormous, far larger than the TV viewing figures would suggest.”

The internet gives the Daily Show a far greater reach, sometimes setting the news agenda on other sites and TV shows in a way that Oprah will no doubt seek to emulate.

“Oprah is more than a TV show, she’s a lifestyle. I don’t think she will ever achieve the sort of audiences she had in the 1990s. The 1990s were the Oprah decade but she’s still the head of a pretty big media empire,” said Thompson.

Lesser lights have trodden a similar path. Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan saw their viewership plummet after dropping Channel 4 for digital channel Watch. However, US media experts don’t expect Winfrey’s cultural impact to fall as sharply.

Elayne Rapping, professor of American studies at the University of Buffalo, said the move was typical Winfrey. “She has her finger on the pulse,” said Rapping, a pop culture expert who has followed Winfrey throughout her career.

“TV has changed dramatically. Niche channels like the Food Network are incredibly popular and her ratings have faltered. I think that’s what she understands. She’s doing what she had done throughout her career and following the trend.”

Winfrey has built the careers of other TV celebrities in recent years. Her new channel will feature fresh talent as well as her own shows. Her gamble is that a large enough proportion of people who have tuned in to watch Oprah once a day, five days a week, will be willing to watch a channel of her programming and that even with a smaller audience she will be able to use the channel to further her influence on the net and from her Twitter posts, magazine and other ventures.

“Oprah’s transformation has been amazing,” said Rapping. “She started off championing social issues, she became a self-help guru, now she’s a corporation, she’s a magazine, a national figure hanging out with the president. She just knows how to do the right thing at the right time in the right place.”

“I want you all to know my relationship with you is one that I hold very dear,” Winfrey told her audience last week. Come 2011 she will get to find out if the feeling is mutual.

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