

# Winfrey reigns atop media empire

With apologies to Howard Stern, it must be said that the reigning monarch of all media is actually Oprah Winfrey. So powerful is the talk show hostess that her influence extends beyond her daily one-hour gabfest into everything from the publishing industry to the agricultural commodity markets. Want proof? Winfrey plugs an unknown author on-air, and his book shoots to the top of the best-seller charts. She shrewdly renegotiates her syndication contract, and Forbes soon crowns her the world's highest-paid entertainer. She kicks off a new exercise program, and thousands of women immediately adopt her regimen. She establishes a television and film studio in West Chicago, and the formerly sketchy neighborhood undergoes an economic renaissance. She discusses mad cow disease on her show, and American cattle futures plummet. Yet, regardless of how high her authority climbs, good ol' Oprah remains the plain-speaking, empathetic best-girlfriend to the Betty Crocker set. Even casual viewers of The Oprah Winfrey Show are well-versed in its host's troubled childhood. Born to unwed teenage parents in rural Mississippi, Winfrey spent her childhood living in extreme poverty on her Bible-thumping grandmother's farm. (Incidentally, "Oprah" is an accidental misspelling of the biblical name Orpah.) She moved to Milwaukee as a pre-teen to live with her mother, Vernita Lee, under whose roof she was sexually molested several times by male relatives. Winfrey spent her early teens in and out of trouble. At age fourteen, she gave birth to a premature baby, who died shortly thereafter. Facing a dangled threat of being sent to a home for wayward youth, Winfrey went to live with her father in Nashville. Vernon Winfrey, a barber and businessman, provided the discipline that was sorely lacking in his daughter's life. He instituted a strict curfew and stressed the value of education, and under his iron fist, Oprah turned her life around in record time.

At age 19, Winfrey landed her first broadcasting job - as a reporter at radio station WVOL in Nashville - and enrolled at Tennessee State University to study speech and performing arts. In her sophomore year, 1972, Winfrey switched mediums and became the first African-American anchor at Nashville's WTVF-TV. She moved to Baltimore in 1976 and, after two years working as a reporter and co-anchor at WJZ-TV, she was hired to host the station's chat show, People Are Talking. At first, station management didn't quite know what to make of Winfrey - here was a black, overweight woman edging into a white man's appearance-obsessed world.

Viewers, however, responded exceedingly well to her, and Winfrey's healthy Nielsen ratings reflected their enthusiasm. In 1984, after eight years at WJZ, Winfrey accepted, with much trepidation, a job as host of A.M. Chicago, a morning show in the Windy City. She had reason to be nervous: the program was scheduled opposite Phil Donahue's top-rated national talk show - stiff competition indeed.

It turned out that her worries were all for naught.



Winfrey

Within months, Winfrey's A.M. Chicago was trouncing its rival. Rather than try to mimic Donahue's polished interview techniques and high-profile guest list, Winfrey simply offered herself. "The closest thing that Phil Donahue ever talked about was the fact that he was a wayward Catholic. Other than that, talk show hosts didn't talk about themselves," explained fellow tubetalker Maury Povich in an interview with Working Woman magazine. "Oprah opened up a lot of new windows because they could empathize with her." Winfrey, who had always wanted to be an actress but had no professional experience, then landed a plum movie assignment playing the world-weary Sofia in Steven Spielberg's 1985 cinematic adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. For her moving performance, Winfrey scored an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress. The enviable publicity that surrounded her Academy nod couldn't have come at a better time. Winfrey was scheduled to relaunch her program - now titled The Oprah Winfrey Show - as a nationally syndicated program, in 1986. The transfer to the far larger pond went off without a hitch, and the once-almighty Donahue now found himself competing with his Chicago nemesis on an even battlefield. During this period of quick expansion, Winfrey began cutting herself a hefty piece of her show's financial pie. She established Harpo Productions ("Harpo" is Oprah spelled backwards) and eventually purchased her program outright from Capital Cities/ABC. In 1988, Harpo shelled out \$20

million to buy and renovate a gigantic production facility in downtown Chicago to house her company headquarters. Each time Oprah Winfrey's syndication contract with King World Productions came up for renewal, Harpo negotiated ever-sweeter terms, including significant stock options in King World. The result: Oprah Winfrey, as the third woman in history - after Mary Pickford and Lucille Ball - to own a major studio, is well on her way to becoming America's first black billionaire (she will take down an estimated \$97 million in 1996 alone).

In 1994, eight years into her nationwide run, and with her 40th birthday fast approaching, Winfrey found herself at both a personal and professional crossroads. The daytime television arena had become a cacophony of chit-chat, and Winfrey and her by-now-competitors had spent years stooping well below the lowest common denominator.

Even though Winfrey remained the undisputed champ of the genre, talk-TV had turned terribly trashy. The thought of retiring from the daily show to devote her energies to acting and producing crossed Winfrey's mind more than once.

But instead of walking away, Winfrey pledged to refocus her show on uplifting, meaningful subjects. She believed that her connection with viewers was strong enough that the audience would stick with her even if her show's topics were less sensationalistic. Because of Winfrey's pledge, the past two years of The Oprah Winfrey Show have featured fewer pornographers, prostitutes, and psychopaths, and far more poetry, pop psychology, and pajama parties. (One such program, in January 1995, focused on overcoming drug abuse. It included a tearful confession from Winfrey that she herself had used cocaine during her 20s.) Despite an initial ratings dip, Winfrey's numbers have been as strong as ever. In 1995, she signed an unprecedented contract that extends through the year 2000, but which includes a clause that enables her to cancel the program without penalty, should she make that decision.

A discussion of Winfrey would be incomplete if it didn't mention her ongoing battle with the bulge. After hovering around 200 pounds from 1984 to 1987, the five-foot-seven hostess with the mostest lost 67 pounds on a liquid diet and flaunted her unburied figure on-air in 1989. Within a year, she had regained the weight, plus an additional three pounds. In 1991, Winfrey hired low-fat chef Rosie Daley as her cook. The following year, exercise guru Bob Greene joined Winfrey's entourage as her personal trainer. The pounds - almost 90 - gradually melted away

See Winfrey on page 16A

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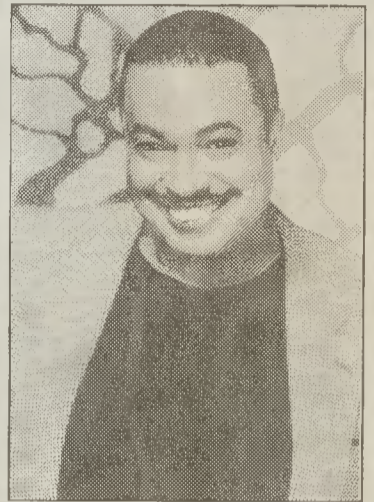


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