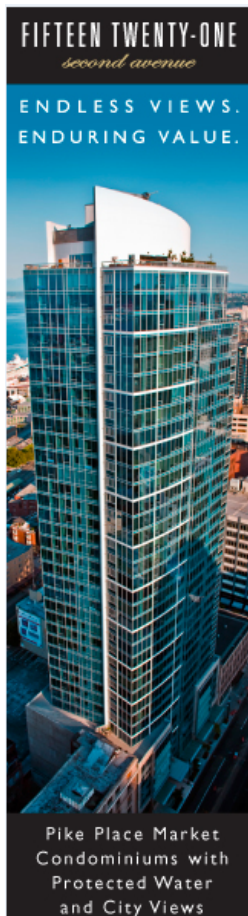


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OPRAH'S INFLUENCE // CULTURE of CONFESSION // Oprah forces Americans to face long-ignored social failings

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By CAROLINE HORN AND TOBY MILLER THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

{SOURCE:+}

Two decades ago this September, Oprah Winfrey became a regular presence on national TV, displacing Phil Donahue, the sovereign of daytime talk television.

Winfrey's blend of personality, audience participation, confession, individualism, therapy and faith has earned her unparalleled success. She has become an icon of business acumen, interpersonal skills and charisma.

So why is it so hard for some of us to celebrate her? Certainly, she has offered us more than entertainment. Winfrey has managed to surpass the typical talk show host status through her outreach to disparate groups, among them, impoverished children in South Africa and people in abusive relationships.

She talks a lot about gender and race, from both biographical and collective angles. As a consequence, she has made numerous key social issues part of her program, from rape and domestic violence to race and policing, and from women's struggles with their body images to the disgrace of Hurricane Katrina.

By bringing home questions of feminism and civil rights, she has had an impact on our culture at many levels - as a woman, as an African-American and as living proof of the ability to transcend suffering.

Nonetheless, some see her two-decade run and influence as signs of cultural decline because she works, however compassionately, in a genre that parades flawed individuals like circus animals across our TV screens.

These critics could fault her as the most visible harbinger of the empty narcissism of reality television - a media mogul hosting a program that embodies this country's avoidance of serious political coverage and its embrace of a self-centered and trivial view of the world.

Her show is part of a long-term trend toward cheaply produced television that is crowding out more costly high-end drama, sophisticated perspectives on international affairs and the whole raft of programming that could enhance our public culture and help us fulfill our responsibilities as citizens.

Perhaps it is more accurate, though, to place Winfrey on a trajectory that started with the Human Potential movement of the 1960s and '70s. It became part of the mainstream with Bill Clinton "feeling our pain," bookstores overflowing with self-help books and literary confessionals, and hip-hop artists emerging as modern troubadours reporting on life in the streets.

Most recently, the movement suggests that everyone can tell his or her story to the public via the blogosphere. All of this takes the ordinary and the extraordinary from people's lives and invests them with public significance. Is that so bad?

The truth is that Winfrey has enriched the public sphere. Many topics traditionally neglected by the mainstream media, such as sexual violence, sexual identity, eating disorders and everyday racism, have been put firmly on the public agenda thanks to her activism.

And she is not responsible for the inadequate nature of American TV. For that, we should turn to three decades of ill-advised deregulation and the subsequent foreclosure on the media as a public trust while Wall Street share valuations are viewed as the one true measure of media success.

Winfrey has contributed a great deal to discussions of everyday pain and joy, and that is part of what television should offer. She cannot be held accountable for a media infrastructure that fails us.

Meanwhile, let's celebrate Winfrey's two decades of giving voice to the silenced. Let us hope that she uses her considerable influence to push TV toward equally energetic and informed debates about foreign policy, the economy, welfare, urban renewal and other topics of importance, all of which have emotional resonance in everyday life.

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Art: ILLUSTRATION; PHOTO

Caption: (1) ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE DELBON/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE (2) Oprah Winfrey tackles topics often neglected by the mainstream media such as sexual violence, sexual identity and eating disorders.

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