THE TV HOST

OPRAH WINFREY

She didn't create the talk-show format. But the compassion and intimacy she put into it have created a new way for us to talk to one another

By DEBORAH TANNEN

The Sudanese-born supermodel Alek Wek stands poised and insouciant as the talk-show host, admiring her classic African features, cradles Wek's cheek and says, "What a difference it would have made to my childhood if I had seen someone who looks like you on television." The host is Oprah Winfrey, and she has been making that difference for millions of viewers, young and old, black and white, for nearly a dozen years.

Winfrey stands as a beacon, not only in the worlds of media and entertainment but also in the larger realm of public discourse. At 44, she has a personal fortune estimated at more than half a billion dollars. She owns her own production company, which creates feature films, prime-time TV specials and home videos. An accomplished actress, she won an Academy Award nomination for her role in *The Color Purple,* and this fall will star in her own film production of Toni Morrison's *Beloved.*

But it is through her talk show that her influence has been greatest. When Winfrey talks, her viewers—an estimated 14 million daily in the U.S. and millions more in 132 other countries—listen. Any book she chooses for her on-air book club becomes an instant best seller. When she established the "world's largest piggy bank," people all over the country contributed spare change to raise more than $1 million (matched by Oprah) to send disadvantaged kids to college. When she blurted that hearing about the threat of mad-cow disease "just stopped me cold from eating another burger!", the perceived threat to the beef industry was enough to trigger a multimillion-dollar lawsuit (which she won).

Born in 1954 to unmarried parents, Winfrey was raised by her grandmother on a farm with no indoor plumbing in Kosciusko, Miss. By age 3 she was reading the Bible and reciting in church. At 6 she moved to her mother's home in Milwaukee, Wis.; later, to her father's in Nashville, Tenn. A lonely child, she found solace in books. When a seventh-grade teacher noticed the young girl reading during lunch, he got her a scholarship to a better school. Winfrey's talent for public performance and spontaneity in answering questions helped her win beauty contests—and get her first taste of public attention.

GORDON PARKS

MAKING HER FILM DEBUT IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Crowned Miss Fire Prevention in Nashville at 17, Winfrey visited a local radio station, where she was invited to read copy for a lark—and was hired to read news on the air. Two years later, while a sophomore at Tennessee State University, she was hired as Nashville's first female and first black TV-news anchor. After graduation, she took an anchor position in Baltimore, Md., but lacked the detach-

AT AGE 4, SHE WAS ALREADY A VETERAN PUBLIC SPEAKER

BORN Jan. 29, 1954, in Kosciusko, Miss.
1971 Competes in Miss Black America pageant
1973 First black and first woman hired to anchor TV news in Nashville, Tenn.
1977 Starts co-hosting *People Are Talking* morning show in Baltimore, Md.
1986 *The Oprah Winfrey Show* goes national; Oscar-nominated for *The Color Purple*
1996 Launches book club
1998 Produces, stars in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

> More than a great star, you are a 20th century political figure. Your good works have touched all of us.
>
> **PHIL DONAHUE,** when Oprah received an Emmy for Lifetime Achievement

ILLUSTRATION FOR TIME BY ROBERT RISKO

TERRY THOMPSON—SIPA PRESS

WOMEN RELATE TO HER BECAUSE THEY FEEL AS IF SHE'S A FRIEND

ment to be a reporter. She cried when a story was sad, laughed when she misread a word. Instead, she was given an early-morning talk show. She had found her medium. In 1984 she moved on to be the host of *A.M. Chicago*, which became *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. It was syndicated in 1986—when Winfrey was 32—and soon overtook *Donahue* as the nation's top-rated talk show.

Women, especially, listen to Winfrey because they feel as if she's a friend. Although Phil Donahue pioneered the format she uses (mike-holding host moves among an audience whose members question guests), his show was mostly what I call "report-talk," which often typifies men's conversation. The overt focus is on information. Winfrey transformed the format into what I call "rapport-talk," the back-and-forth conversation that is the basis of female friendship, with its emphasis on self-revealing intimacies. She turned the focus from experts to ordinary people talking about personal issues. Girls' and women's friendships are often built on trading secrets. Winfrey's power is that she tells her own, divulging that she once ate a package of hot-dog buns drenched in maple syrup, that she had smoked cocaine, even that she had been raped as a child. With Winfrey, the talk show became more immediate, more confessional, more personal. When a guest's story moves her, she cries and spreads her arms for a hug.

> "I used to speak in the church all the time, and the sisters in the front row would say to my grandmother, 'Hattie Mae, this child sure can talk.'"
>
> **OPRAH WINFREY**

When my book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* was published, I was lucky enough to appear on both *Donahue* and *Oprah*—and to glimpse the difference between them. Winfrey related my book to her own life: she began by saying she had read the book and "saw myself over and over" in it. She then told one of my examples, adding, "I've done that a thousand times"—and illustrated it by describing herself and Stedman. (Like close friends, viewers know her "steady beau" by first name.)

Winfrey saw television's power to blend public and private; while it links strangers and conveys information over public airwaves, TV is most often viewed in the privacy of our homes. Like a family member, it sits down to meals with us and talks to us in the lonely afternoons. Grasping this paradox, Oprah exhorts viewers to improve their lives and the world. She makes people care because she cares. That is Winfrey's genius, and will be her legacy, as the changes she has wrought in the talk show continue to permeate our culture and shape our lives. ■

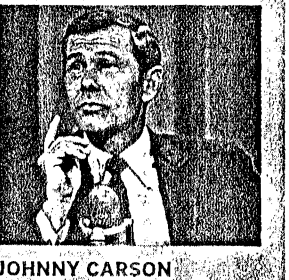
Deborah Tannen, a professor at Georgetown University, is author of The Argument Culture

AN INFLUENCE BEYOND WORDS

The best hosts are more than just entertainers—they are virtual power brokers.

EDWARD R. MURROW
A hard-edged war journalist on radio, he took on tough subjects, including Joseph McCarthy, on his TV show *See It Now*. But his popular *Person to Person* was the show celebrities angled to do long before anyone even knew of Barbara Walters.

ED SULLIVAN
For 23 years, the least telegenic man in America slumped and slurred through Sunday's "rilly big shew," a vaudevillian mix of high and low culture. When the Beatles and Elvis appeared on his stage, they instantly went mainstream.



JOHNNY CARSON
More than funny, Carson was likable and acutely aware of America's mood: when he backed young comics, the nation accepted them too. When he made jokes about Watergate, Nixon knew it was time to get out of town.

EVERETT COLLECTION (3)