

Oprah's Final Season: How The Talk Show Icon Used Her Final Year to Influence America

After watching all 130 original episodes of Oprah Winfrey's final season, a communication professor with thirty years experience analyzing television content found:

- *The most covered topics during Winfrey's last year were television shows (particularly Oprah's productions and her new OWN network) and LGBT issues, while racism, politics, education and spirituality were almost never discussed.*
- *The typical guest was a 48-year-old white female, with a high percentage of African-American guests and almost no Latino or Asian guests. About 80% of the shows featured celebrities, which conflicted with Oprah's claim that she was "doing a show about everyday people." Functional non-celebrity couples or families were almost never seen at the main guests on the program.*
- *Only 16% of the episodes had giveaway elements, with major audience handouts on only five of the 130 programs. An estimated \$33 million in cash and merchandise was awarded, about half to the studio audience and half to guests. Over 80% of that amount was provided by sponsors. On only three occasions did Oprah state that she was personally doing some of the giving, and that was not to audience members but to individual guests in conjunction with other sponsors.*
- *Mature adult topics were covered without warning during daytime family viewing time. Two 30-year-old women were coached on how to lose their virginity, parents discussed abusing or killing their children, a woman was shown cleaning naked, graphic sexual advice was given for couples with intimacy issues and numerous detailed discussions took place about child molestation.*
- *Although Winfrey claimed she represented the average viewer, she often expressed perspectives that were outside the mainstream. She spent an hour with a polygamous family and said it was a "lifestyle choice." Oprah called a husband and wife that were raising their seven-year-old boy as a girl "highly evolved parents." She introduced Shirley MacLaine as "one of my greatest teachers" just before the actress said that when people die they can "decide to reincarnate on another planet...we probably have experiences there and it's in our memory system."*
- *Instead of fulfilling her promise to use the final year to "honor the viewer," Winfrey mostly used the opportunity to influence society's view of gender roles, promote her new OWN cable network and market her sponsor's products.*

By Stephen Winzenburg
Communication Professor
Grand View University
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Oprah Winfrey was recently called "the most influential TV personality of all time" by *TV Guide*, while *Forbes* named Oprah "the most influential woman in media." *Business Week* reported that publishers estimate Winfrey's power to sell a book to be "20 to 100 times that of any other media personality" and companies covet her endorsement of their products.

Even her competitors have nothing but praise. Jerry Springer said about Winfrey, "She's an enormous influence in the world and a positive one." Groundbreaking daytime television star Phil Donahue said, "There is no other single human being who has done with this medium what Oprah has done."

Comedian Chris Rock simply called her "the most powerful person in the world."

Winfrey is widely considered one of the most influential television personalities of all time. When she announced that 2010-2011 would be the last year of her syndicated show, the press wondered if anyone would ever be able to replace her and speculated about how she would use her final season.

Oprah herself set the bar high, claiming that she would “deliver show ideas that have never been done before” and that the final season would “knock your socks off.”

“You will see lots of surprises for people, dreams coming true for other people, really honoring the essence of what has made this show work for the past 25 years and that’s the viewer,” Winfrey told the audience. “It is about holding a place of reverence and honor for the people who made this possible for me: that would be the viewers.”

“We’re trying this year to, more than ever, raise the bar...to bring you unforgettable moments that you’ll never see anywhere else.”

Oprah claimed that this season she would stop doing “topics that bore me.” She told producers that everything on the program had to be something of interest to her and her perception of the audience. “For the 25th season I only want people in the (interview) seats who I want to talk to.”

So how successful has Winfrey been this season in reaching her goal of using her show to influence people positively and focusing on the average viewer?

To find out I conducted a content analysis of the 130 original episodes of The Oprah Winfrey Show during her final season. I presented preliminary findings to the annual conference of the Popular Culture Association. This report represents the final results and has three parts: the statistical data, a topic-by-topic summary and conclusions I have drawn from watching the entire season.

PART ONE – THE DATA

According to her new cable network series Season 25: Oprah Behind the Scenes, top producers pitched ideas to Oprah in August of 2010, she approved the topics and then producing teams went off to work on creating the episodes. The credits on one of Winfrey’s shows listed 74 producers.

Oprah had little else to do with the production of individual shows until the day before the taping, when producers would sit in her office and run through the script with her. On the day of the show they gave her one more quick briefing while she was in the makeup chair. The total amount of time Oprah herself spent preparing for a single episode appeared to range from one to two hours.

Shows were mostly taped ahead of time and Winfrey often recorded two or three a day. She stated on one show that she had done seven tapings in three days, flying in from California to Chicago on the morning of the first day of taping and flying back out two and a half days later. Producers had to arrange schedules so that Oprah would only have to spend a few days a week at the Chicago studios.

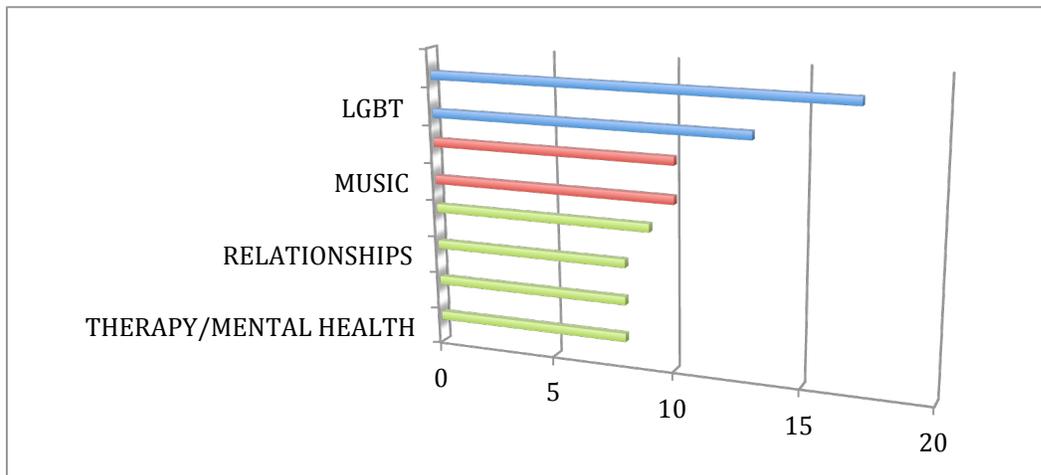
Even though Oprah claimed that no show got on the air without her approval, it was the producers that generated the topics, booked the guests and wrote the words Oprah said when she looked into the camera. When discussing the material that makes up the Oprah Winfrey Show, it may be that the topics and guests reflected the producers of

the program more than the star. But Winfrey took complete ownership of everything that got on the air.

I placed the major topics on the program into general categories. Some episodes covered multiple topics while others had a single focus.

MAJOR TOPICS COVERED (out of 130 episodes)

1. TV shows – 21 times
2. Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender issues (LGBT) – 14 times
3. Movies – 12 times
4. Music – 10 times
5. Crime – 9 times
- Relationships – 9 times
- Therapy/mental health – 9 times



It should be noted that of the 21 programs that included segments on television shows, 16 were either about Winfrey's show, a series on her new OWN cable network or programs on Discovery, which is her partner at OWN.

She also focused on sexuality eight times and child molestation on six episodes, although it was mentioned on a few others.

Five programs had segments on the late Michael Jackson, including interviews with his ex-wife Lisa Marie Pressley, his mother Katherine along with his children at their estate, a New Jersey family that Jackson would secretly stay with and brother Jackie Jackson, who took Oprah on a "date" after discovering he was her "teen heartthrob."

GUESTS

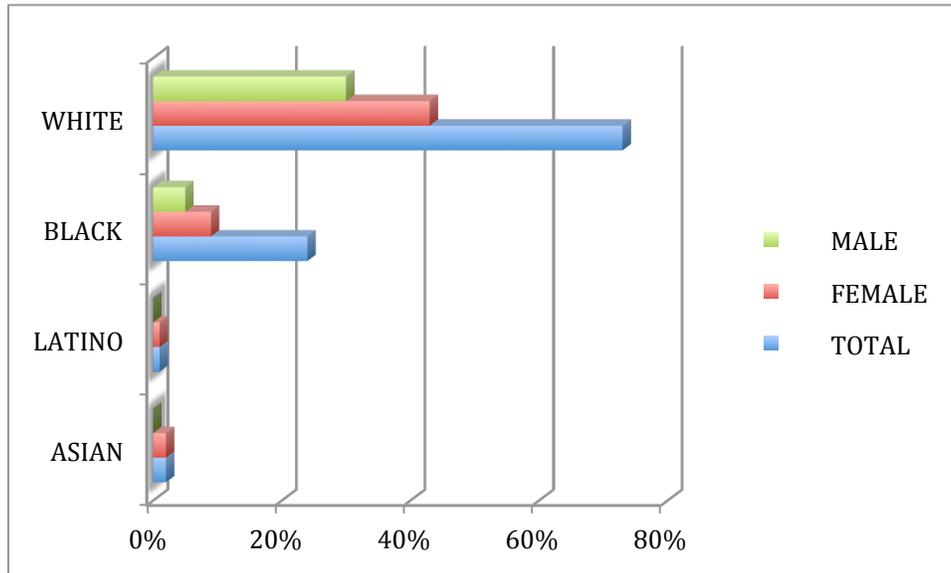
Total number of guests: 566

Average number of guests per show: 5

Average adult guest age: 47 female, 48 male

Guest gender: 60% female, 40% male

Adult guest ethnicity: White: 73%, Black 23%, Latino 2%, Asian 2%

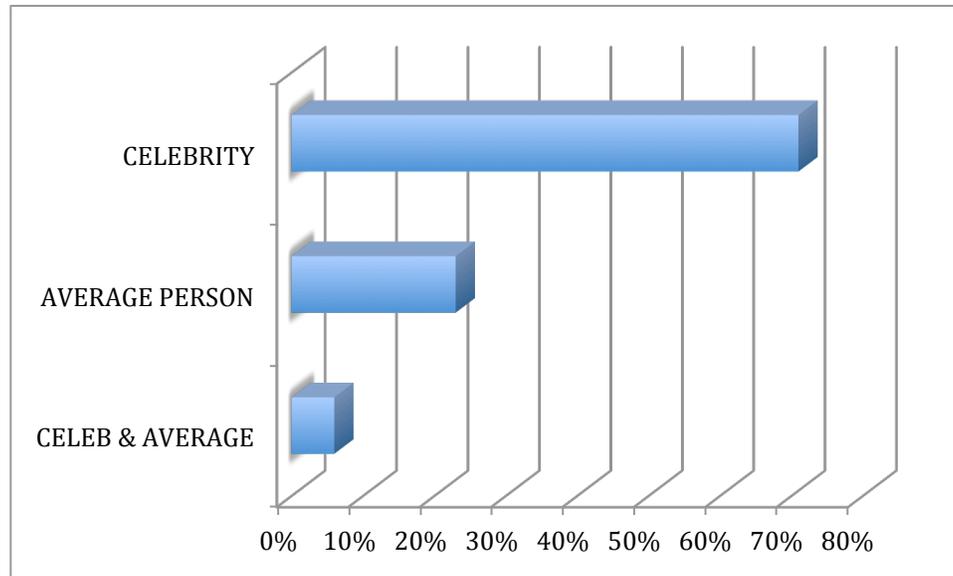


Of the adult guests, 43% were white female and 30% white male. The average number of black guests on the program is almost 50% higher than their percentage of the American population, with 14% black female and 9% black male. Asian females were 2% (many of those being Lisa Ling’s appearances) and so few Asian men appeared that it was statistically zero. Latinos were rarely seen on Winfrey’s show (one percent each for men and women) despite making up 18 percent of the U.S. population.

Oprah stated that her focus during the final season would be on the audience and that she would have average people on the show, yet the most often featured guests were celebrities.

TYPES OF MAJOR GUESTS PER SHOW

Celebrity – 67%
Average People – 20%
Celebrity & Average People – 13%



Despite the fact that Winfrey said on the season's first episode, "Doing a show about everyday people...is still what we do 25 years later," the fact was that the season mostly focused on celebrities and rich people. Over three-fourths of the shows had celebrity involvement and less than one-third had significant involvement with average people. On many episodes average people would only get a couple minutes to talk about how much Oprah or a celebrity impacted their lives.

Single hours were devoted to guests ranging from Jenny McCarthy promoting her sexually explicit book to Donald Trump appearing with his entire family just days before announcing that he was considering a presidential run. Jennifer Hudson's hour was essentially an infomercial for her new CD and Weight Watchers. Rob Lowe spent the hour pushing his tell-all book. And minor film actor David Arquette spent an hour discussing his addictions, his new movie and marriage break-up.

Aging stars included Ali McGraw and Ryan O'Neal (who has a new OWN series), Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford, Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer, Michael Douglas, Bo Derek, Shirley MacLaine, Diana Ross, MC Hammer and Christie Brinkley.

The two guests that appeared most were Carson Kressley and Gayle King. Each appeared five times on Oprah's syndicated series this year and each has a show on Oprah's OWN network. Lisa Ling was on four episodes and The Judds were part of four programs (three via tape)--and they, too, have OWN series. So her most-often seen guests were people whose shows she was promoting on her cable network.

Note that certain types of people rarely appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show during the final season, such as politicians, athletes, married couples, two-parent families or middle-income Americans. This will be discussed in more detail in part two.

GIVEAWAYS

The public impression is that Oprah is constantly giving away cars, trips and her favorite things. Media reports regarding the program tend to repeatedly show clips of screaming audience members. But only seven of the 130 shows contained those types of big audience giveaway segments: the trip to Australia, a wildest dreams show, two favorite things episodes and three mini-favorite things programs, where not only the studio audience received a Flip video camera and Kindle 3G but so did the people at home who attended the 2008 “favorite things show that never was.”

Only 21 of the episodes actually had any giveaway elements at all and most of those were only short segments. Half included audience giveaways, such as a \$25 McDonalds gift card. Four had giveaways just for the guests on the show, such as the \$250,000 Walmart gift card to the parents of sextuplets.

Based on price estimates, over \$33 million in cash and merchandise has been given away on the Oprah Winfrey Show so far this season.

SPONSOR GIVEAWAYS TO AUDIENCE	\$16,810,000
SPONSOR GIVEAWAYS TO GUESTS	\$8,030,000
VIEWER GIVEAWAYS TO GUESTS (ANGEL NETWORK)	\$6,000,000
SHOW GIVEAWAY TO GUESTS	\$25,000
OPRAH (WITH OTHERS) GIVEAWAY TO 3 GUESTS	\$2,038,000

Over 80% of the \$33 million total appears to have been donated by sponsors, based on broadcast statements by Winfrey. On only three occasions did Oprah claim that she was doing some of the giving: \$250,000 in conjunction with Xbox to a needy man in Australia; a new home with Nate Burkes, who was on her program to promote his new TV spin-off that’s produced by Winfrey; and during her final week she gave \$1.5 million to a woman to help build a new school in Africa with the help of Save the Children.

It’s difficult to determine how much Winfrey personally paid out of her own pocket. The behind-the-scenes program revealed that producers have a flexible production budget for the show, such as spending \$70,000 to fly in Danny Glover at the last minute for the Color Purple reunion. It’s possible then that the three times when Oprah said she was giving something away the money could have been taken from the production budget instead of her own bank account. Whatever the case, at least 80% of the prize expenses were said to be paid for by sponsors and not the host herself. And when Oprah did say she was giving, it was only to three individual guests, not the audience.

Winfrey received the credit for doing the giving, even when the gifts were provided by others. When the Angel Network handed out \$1 million each to six schools, that money came from viewer donations but the checks were signed by Oprah. Meijer's gave \$50,000 to a female janitor to help buy school supplies and in response to the woman's thanks, Oprah said, "I have a lot so I can give a lot," even though the store actually gave the money in exchange for a short ad aired in the program. Part two and part three will discuss other aspects of the giveaway segments.

Finally, the least important statistic of the study may be what Oprah wore for clothing each day. She definitely liked sweaters, wearing them almost half of the time, and she favored colorful cardigans. She would wear them with dresses, skirts and pant. Her least attractive look was probably a multi-colored fitted dress, which accentuated her body shape. There were a number of times when she looked like she was trying to hard to impress a celebrity guest, whereas her best looks were often her most casual.

DRESS	23%
SKIRT	22%
PANTS	55%
SWEATER	47%

PART TWO – TOPICAL SUMMARY

MARKETING

The most consistent thing done on the final season of Oprah's program was the marketing of a guest's product or the promotion of a paying sponsor, and often entire episodes became infomercials. Producers created programs that integrated merchandising with entertainment.

The best example of Oprah combining the two elements was the February 15 episode with Oscar-winning singer Jennifer Hudson. From the start of the program her new slim body was attributed to Weight Watchers (for which she is a paid endorser) and she was begged by Winfrey to reveal how much she lost. In the audience were members of Hudson's Weight Watchers support group and a company "team leader," who had a microphone on and was trying to keep Hudson from saying a specific weight-loss number.

Then fashionista Tim Gunn popped out of the audience to talk about how great Weight Watchers is (he's a paid spokesman as well), some Weight Watcher makeovers were shown, Hudson sang a song from her album that was coming out in a couple weeks and Oprah's giveaway that day was three free one-year Weight Watchers memberships for each audience member! The closing credits included the words "promotional

consideration furnished by Weight Watchers” and “partial production funding by RCA/Jive Records.”

Namely, the entire show was a de facto infomercial.

Other episodes promoted new music from Liza Minnelli, Diana Ross’s son and Susan Boyle (a month before it came out, with Oprah saying, “I’m gonna go pre-order that”). Vegas stage productions were pushed for Celine Dion and Garth Brooks. There were movie tie-ins for guests like John Travolta, Jennifer Anniston and Adam Sandler. And there were numerous television series mentioned, such as *The View* and *American Idol*, with the television spotlight most often falling on the new OWN network or its sister Discovery channels.

By far the most marketed items on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* were books, with a new release plugged on about every third program, and many authors were given the entire hour. These were not Oprah book club selections but celebrity publications. Katherine Jackson appeared to promote a coffee table compilation of photos of her son Michael. New literary releases were featured from Jon Stewart, Barbra Streisand, Ricky Martin, Rob Lowe, Portia Di Rossi, Shirley MacLaine, Roseanne Barr, George W. Bush, fitness guru Bob Green, Meredith Baxter and even Jenny McCarthy.

Writer James Frey had a falling-out with Winfrey in 2006 when it was revealed that his memoir had been fabricated. He reappeared for two one-hour episodes, the second of which was used to promote his new book that was his take on spirituality. While Oprah didn’t endorse the book, she did allow him to discuss it and showed video of him signing it for fans.

Winfrey not only had author Jonathan Franzen on the show to make amends for his past rejection of her book club selection, but she then did a full-fledged endorsement of the author’s new book, calling it “a masterpiece” and “one of the best books you have ever read.” She told viewers, “You should get up out of your chair right now, go to the bookstore or download it on your iPad.”

It’s unclear if Apple paid to get Oprah’s numerous iPad mentions, but she regularly verbalized her love of the product as throw-away lines in the middle of unrelated discussions.

The biggest marketing event occurred on the first show of the final season with the announcement that she was taking an audience of ultimate viewers to Australia. The program’s set included a mock airplane cockpit and Qantas travel agents. It was later learned that the \$3 million cost of the trip was underwritten by Tourism Australia and the airline.

Once there, the January episodes from *Down Under* were produced like full-length commercials for the country and other companies that signed on to be part of the trip. Hewlett-Packard and Microsoft teamed to spend \$1 million to equip Australian students with laptops. Winfrey then “gave” \$250,000 to an Australia man with cancer, saying “We’re doing this...with our partners at Xbox...they are helping us with the \$250,000.”

Other examples of companies partnering with Winfrey during the year included:

- Walmart gave a \$250,000 gift card to the parents of sextuplets.
- Kroger provided two women who operate a soup kitchen a year’s worth of food and new appliances. Oprah said that when producers called Kroger, “They thanked us because they are so committed to relieving hunger.”
- Audience members received \$100 gift cards from the Container Store.

- Lowe's furnished the home of a new mom who caught a flesh-eating bacteria and Oprah gave "a huge shout out to our partners at Lowe's who helped us make so many really incredible dreams come true over the years."
- United and Marriott teamed to pay off \$78,000 in college loans for a single mom with three kids and paid for a year's salary so she could take time off.
- Vera Wang donated 50 wedding gowns on a show that included \$250 Kohl's gift cards, \$4,000 Marriott resort credits and pies from Harry & David.
- X-Box paid for airfare and hotel for audience members to attend the Jon Stewart Washington, D.C. rally.
- Nike founder Phil Knight's "rare interview" included pushing the new Nike GPF stopwatch and Lunar Glide shoes, which audience members received at a value of about \$218,000 total
- Michael's craft store gave a Martha Stewart kit and \$25 gift cards, plus "Oprah viewers get 50% off any Martha Stewart product" when they download the coupon on Winfrey's Website.
- There were \$25 McDonald's gift cards for one audience and Cover Girl makeup for another.
- Visa helped giveback.org provide \$1000 to studio audience members to put into their charitable account at the for-profit Website. Even though the creator of the site claimed there were no costs involved, a closer inspection at the Website reveals that participants are charged a fee for processing any credit card donation.
- Every audience member was given two tickets to see Celine Dion in Vegas and spend two nights at Caesars Palace.
- Chevrolet helped pay for a surprise road trip for six women to see the Oprah show.
- Winfrey said that the January 17 program about race over the past 25 years was "brought to you by Chevrolet, awakening the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in all of us."

Often the marketing connections were a stretch. Katy Perry had to be flown overnight from Austria in order to sing on the post-Oscar show, so Oprah thanked Sprint for getting her there without stating the connection between the business and the singer.

For their investments, businesses typically received only a few seconds of promotional mentions on the air. For example, Winfrey spent an hour reuniting the cast of "The Sound of Music" five days before the new Blu-Ray release of the movie. Only 20 seconds was devoted to mentioning the disc set.

When a company made a major financial commitment to Winfrey's show, it often received a mini-ad, voiced by Oprah herself. Meijer's got a 15 second ad within the show for its \$50,000 donation. After Walmart gave the \$250,000 gift card to the sextuplet parents, a quick commercial appeared with Oprah's voice telling viewers about the good that Walmart does in the community.

Other marketers that spent tens of thousands of dollars on an Oprah tie-in didn't get much more than a "thanks to our friends at Xbox 360 Kinect." Even the rare "wildest dreams" and "favorite things" episodes only provided giveaway partners a fleeting mention of the brands.

In December the first of two favorite things hours gave audience members 21 items worth over \$10,000. The second hour gave a new group of people 19 items worth

about \$25,000, including a Volkswagen Beetle. The audience screamed at the start of that show for one minute and fifty seconds, before they had yet been given anything. And headlines the next day reported, “Oprah Gives Away New 2012 Beetle.”

Yet she personally hadn’t given away anything. She exchanged her airtime for prize donations from businesses. As in most of the other cases, Winfrey received credit for her generosity but she was only a conduit for a company to market a product.

The OWN behind-the-scenes series showed that Oprah had decided to include her longtime hairdresser’s new shampoo as one of her favorite things. When they surprised him with the news, he cried, saying, “That was very generous of her.” Oprah then said, “to be able to give something back to him was very touching to me.” Yet all that she had given him was the opportunity to have a few seconds of her airtime and supply her with free bottles of his product to give to every person in Winfrey’s audience.

For one favorite things episode Winfrey wanted to give away the iPad but Apple wouldn’t donate them. She refused to buy them herself, insisting that everything be donated. On the behind-the-scenes show Winfrey said that she could have bought them for the audience but she refused because it “wouldn’t be fair” to other companies that donate prizes. Eventually Apple came through with the giveaways at the last minute.

PROMOTIONS

Winfrey took a lot of time in her final season to push her own productions, including *O* magazine, her Website, her movies, her satellite radio channel and particularly programs on the new Oprah Winfrey Network. One day she told viewers, “We have some big news.” What was it? That guest Suze Orman was going to co-host a show on OWN!

The week before the cable network started on January 1st, she did two full episodes previewing OWN (which made her affiliates unhappy that she was using their airwaves to promote the competition). She also did an episode that week about other Discovery shows (without telling the audience that she was promoting her cable partner). The Discovery episode was called “The Fresh New Faces of Reality TV” but the guests included Ben Bailey (who had been on the air for four years and won an Emmy Award for hosting!) and Dirty Jobs host Mike Rowe (whose series started in 2006!).

Oprah often failed to let viewers know that she was using her program as a commercial for her OWN partner Discovery. The *Sister Wives* cast was on for the whole hour and Winfrey said, “I don’t watch television as a rule, but I think I might be watching this, Sunday nights, 10 p.m.” She failed to say that she was promoting a show on a channel owned by a company that she financially partners with.

Later in the season Oprah really began pushing OWN, with clips from upcoming OWN series and entire episodes featuring the behind-the-scenes producers. She ended up having on almost every celebrity associated with her new network, including Sarah Ferguson, Shania Twain and documentary subject Chaz Bono.

At other times there were head-scratching tie-ins with Winfrey’s new network, such as having vegan Kathy Freston on as a guest. She is a little-known author who just happens to be the wife of OWN financial partner Tom Freston. Yet Winfrey built an entire “vegan challenge” episode around her.

Sometimes during the season there were printed announcements during the credits at the end of the show that noted a sponsor's involvement or a Winfrey connection, but even in those cases it flashed on screen for less than a second.

LGBT ISSUES

According to Oprah, her program has done 120 episodes about LGBT issues over the years (averaging 5 episodes per season) and has won 7 GLAAD awards. In the final year she did 8 shows on the subject in the first two months of the fall, then returned with 6 more LGBT episodes around the February and May ratings sweeps period. Next to talking about television shows, this topic was given the most airtime.

Oprah used her show to promote a pro-gay rights platform and she admits that this is the topic that gets the most negative response of any that she does. That's because she discusses LGBT issues without giving opposing viewpoints a voice on her program. Winfrey proudly stated, "We've helped ignite a national debate" and that she is proud that the anti-gay marriage "numbers have gone down but we still have a long way to go." After celebrating National Coming Out Day she said on the air, "Hopefully today we opened the door a little wider."

Episodes included Oprah revisiting a West Virginia town that condemned a man with AIDS in 1987, the cast members that play gay parents on ABC's *Modern Family*, a lesbian couple with children, a mother who fathered her own child because she used to be a man who froze his sperm, secretly gay husbands, Ellen DeGeneres's wife Portia de Rossi, gay father Ricky Martin, female-turned-male Chaz Bono, newly out actress Meredith Baxter, Fran Drescher with her gay ex-husband, author Terry McMillan with her gay ex-husband and a male fashion model of female clothing who wants to become a woman.

National Coming Out day included guest Greg Louganis and married men who came out to female spouses. One married male/female couple came out as a gay husband and a lesbian wife, saying, "It's a lot more common than you think." Winfrey even introduced the syndicated talk audience to her chief of staff, who Oprah called "a happy, successful gay woman."

Another episode featured a married couple that talked about their 7-year-old boy who is living as a girl. Oprah called them "highly evolved parents."

In at least three episodes Oprah commented that "everyone" she has talked to about LGBT issues says they "knew at a young age."

"By 4 or 5 years old they know they are gay," Oprah stated, but that wasn't true with the married husbands who later came out nor with Meredith Baxter, who was married three times to men and said she wasn't attracted to a woman until her 50s. In those cases Winfrey seemed baffled that the guests didn't fit her belief that people know they are gay from childhood.

THERAPY

Oprah is a big believer in therapy for others, but says she has never gone through it herself. She told Piers Morgan in January of 2011, "I've never had a day's therapy and God knows I could have used some." She didn't explain why a woman who employs Dr. Phil and has enough money to have a psychiatrist on staff would not utilize the services of a therapist when needed.

Winfrey has stated on the air that her show is her therapy. Although the topic was only the main focus of the show 8 times, it was mentioned in about one-fourth of the episodes.

Therapy on the Oprah Winfrey Show was usually tied to childhood trauma. Oprah has admitted to her own past problems, saying that she was molested by three people including a relative who fathered her child. She did six shows this season where the subject was raised, such as talking with Tyler Perry about his sexual abuse and then bringing on 200 men who were also molested as children. She said the point was “to release the guilt from yourself...it is truly never your fault.”

She praised celebrities who talked about their bad childhoods and the importance of rehab. Almost the entire hour with David Arquette focused on his wild upbringing and the counseling he used to get over his addictions. The hour with Fran Drescher included therapy talk about rape, cancer, a gay husband and controlling men. Rob Lowe said rehab saved his family and his career.

After Oprah praised reincarnation advocate Shirley MacLaine about her high sense of self-esteem, the Hollywood star confessed that it was because she went through therapy. Mother/daughter singing team The Judds, who employ a full-time therapist during their tours, used language they acquired from him to make it through the interview while disagreeing with each other much of the time.

Winfrey was allowed to privately interview a seven-year-old boy who is undergoing counseling and is on medication after trying to kill his mother. She told him that he seemed normal and praised him as being “fortunate” to be able to “see” his “negative energy.”

The talk host was quick to lecture average people who she thought needed therapy and openly criticized those who she didn’t feel were doing enough to heal themselves. She used phrases like, “Your life is always whispering to you.”

In the case of a 22-year-old mother who had been put in a cage as a child, Winfrey feared the woman would copy her parents and said, “You seem okay now but you can’t be.” Oprah told the woman to get to therapy, adding, “You owe it to yourself to heal yourself.” (By contrast, the 19-year-old boy who had been chained in a locked closet as a child did not get the same speech.)

During the episode on happiness, an invited audience member on microphone explained that she couldn’t figure out why she always had such a negative perspective on life, but Oprah cut her off with, “You need more than this show.” When the audience laughed, the host said, “We need to bring Dr. Phil in here for a minute” and never addressed the woman’s issues. Winfrey later blamed producers for not doing a better job screening the guest, saying, “This was a far more complicated story than could fit this lighthearted moment.”

EDUCATION

Winfrey’s audience has been trained to think of her as a teacher. One audience member said, “You truly are the ultimate educator.” A single mom teacher who got her loans paid off by a Winfrey sponsor told the talk host “how much I admire you for being the ultimate educator to all of us all these years. You’ve been my inspiration.”

Even actress Shirley MacLaine praised Oprah by saying, “She has taught me how to teach.”

Since Oprah says her program is educational in nature and that she is a big supporter of teachers, it was a surprise that the actual topic was raised only a few times, mostly in relation to the documentary “Waiting for Superman.” She supported the former Washington, D.C. school chancellor who was criticized for firing bad teachers.

“I love teachers. I consider myself to be one with this platform every day,” she said before condemning bad teachers and teacher unions. She said she knew she would be criticized by educators but warned, “Don’t waste your time writing me if you’re a good one.” Namely, her assumption was that if you disagree with her then you must be a bad teacher.

Instead of discussing the parental role in the education of children, Oprah said that “It’s our problem as a nation” and advocates for longer school days along with government intervention. She also wants to get rid of tenure and blames educators for the low test scores of students. “Today I’m using my show as a platform, as a call to action...to be an educated nation or not.”

Oprah’s version of “education” includes elements that could be considered propaganda, such as the “vegan challenge week,” where 378 of her staff members pledged to give up meat. Even though Oprah said things on the air like “the bathrooms have never been busier” and “everybody’s pooping more,” she claimed that after that week she is now “veganish” and the show’s director had converted completely.

The episode included an anti-egg, pro-PETA guest named Michael Pollan, who Oprah called “a rock star of the food world,” and little-known vegan author Kathy Freston. These guests stated opinions that went unchallenged and the entire episode appeared to be done because Freston just happens to be the wife of one of Winfrey’s OWN financial partners. It also included generous praise for Kashi and in the end a quick on screen credit said, “Partial production funding furnished by Kashi.”

Another episode that mentioned education was when actress Shirley MacLaine called for public schools in America to teach meditation and “spiritual education.” The actress believes in reincarnation and Oprah called her “one of my greatest teachers.”

WOMEN’S ISSUES

Rarely did the Oprah Winfrey Show focus on a specific women’s rights issue. But throughout the season there was an underlying message of female empowerment.

Oprah said to an abused female, “Nobody can complete you. You complete yourself.” Oprah also gave the advice to mothers that, “You do damage to your children when you stay in a relationship where the love is gone.”

Shows were built around the mistreatment of women. In one case a woman is still in jail for having her husband killed, although the guy who pulled the trigger is free. Oprah used the program to attempt to get the woman’s verdict overturned, even interviewing a former jury member who now thinks the woman should be released.

A similar program involved a woman who had been a fugitive for 32 years, escaping from prison after a drug conviction. She went on to change her identity and live a life as a “model citizen” before being caught and returned to prison. The guest said she used to be “weak” but escaped prison when she learned to “take control.” Her family members hid her secret and lied for her, and she continues to claim that it was her boyfriend who was guilty. Oprah seemed to say that the woman got a much harsher sentence than she should have.

There were also women in peril stories. Oprah interviewed the Craigslist rape victim, a mom whose seven-year-old son tried to kill her and a woman with 20 personalities who had been abused. Other guests included twin sisters who were raped by their father and brothers, a woman who had been released from male captivity after 6 and ½ years and a wife who got AIDS from a secretly gay husband.

Even on the “Where Are They Now?” episode in April, the focus was on a woman whose boyfriend shot her in the face and killed her mother, as well as a young woman who had gastric bypass surgery after her dad harassed her due to her weight.

The other side of women’s issues covered on the show involved beauty, weight and aging. A number of episodes had older female stars or supermodels giving tips on how to take care of the body as it ages. Guests included Jane Fonda, Marie Osmond, Goldie Hawn, four supermodels past 40, Debbie Reynolds with daughter Carrie Fisher and “aging beauties” Linda Evans, Teri Hatcher and Cybill Shepherd.

Other strong women on for an hour included J.K. Rowling, Lisa Marie Pressley, Shirley MacLaine, Jennifer Hudson, Katherine Jackson, “Octomom” Nadya Suleman with Suze Orman and the hosts of The View.

In three cases female celebrity guests came on the show to apologize to Winfrey. Whoopi Goldberg appeared in order to settle a misunderstanding between the two that had been reported in the press for decades. Roseanne Barr came back on after 12 years to say she was sorry for condemning Winfrey for picking Barack Obama over Hilary Clinton as the 2008 Democratic presidential candidate. And former Oprah protégé Iyanla Vanzant was the lone guest for two hours, bringing Winfrey to tears with repeated apologies for leaving the talk queen for a better deal with Barbara Walters.

RACE

It may surprise some that the topic of race was rarely discussed. When race was raised Oprah often would go into a caricature voice. She would also make light of race, such as questioning a letter from the Yosemite Park ranger that asked her to come for a visit because so few African-Americans camp. The hour with Chris Rock contained little on the subject but when it did Winfrey would say things like, “I love little brown girls saying they’re loved by their daddy” and “What a beautiful thing to see black people skiing.”

Other than asking George Bush about the perception that he was racist due to his slow Hurricane Katrina actions, only three episodes directly tackled the topic. Guest Mark Fuhrman rehashed the O.J. Simpson trial and discussed his denial of saying the “n word” (without using the offending word on Oprah). Her Martin Luther King, Jr. show highlighted past guests and included repeated use of the actual “n word” without any viewer content warning. And in her final weeks she had an audience full of “freedom riders,” whites and blacks who chose to fight segregation in the early 1960s by sitting together on buses in the South.

SEX

Sexual topics ranged from a serious discussion with a therapist and a humorous quiz about American sexual beliefs to rape and child molestation. The problem was that a racy topic that seemed totally inappropriate for the afternoon viewing audience would

come out of nowhere without any warning. Oprah would talk sex, giving no thought to the fact that she is on during a time of day when children can watch.

On one episode she doesn't seem aware that children may be part of the viewing audience, saying, "What's a 12-year-old boy doing watching the Oprah show?" when a man told her that he learned he was gay after watching her at that age. However, on a different episode she awarded a car to a 17-year-old "ultimate viewer" (breaking her own rules about having to be 18 to attend the show) and saying he had been addicted to her program since he was five. Near the end of the run a number of people had told her they had been watching since childhood and she seemed unphased by the fact that her content was often inappropriate for children.

One episode filled with sex talk in October showed a woman cleaning naked, with some blurred body parts that left little to the imagination. It had a TV-14 rating posted in the upper corner at the start but no other warning that the material may be inappropriate.

On episodes about child molestation or gay sexual details or 30-year-old virgins trying to have sex, there were either no child warnings at all or they were done very late into the show. Even in the first episode from the trip to Australia, there was no warning when Oprah and Gayle laughed as the camera zoomed in on two koala bears having sex, with Gayle commenting, "We just saw some koala penis."

A few times there were content warnings. For the Craigslist rape victim interview, Oprah simply said at the start, "This is not a story for young children." For the all-male molestation show with graphic stories of childhood sexual abuse, it took 12 minutes before a sign appeared on the screen saying, "Today's show is a frank discussion about child molestation." Oprah then said, "This is very explicit and it is your choice as parents whether or not your children who are in the room should see this."

Another episode included OWN host Dr. Laura Berman giving detailed answers to sexual issues. At one point Oprah did alert the country by saying, "Alright America, here comes the vulva talk."

It's difficult to know if Winfrey is an old-fashioned prude or sexually liberated. When producers tried to get two 30-year-old women to lose their virginity, Oprah thought being a virgin before marriage was "not necessarily bad." But when the Utah man with four "sister wives" came on, Winfrey called polygamy a "lifestyle choice" and she didn't appear to have a problem with it.

The host uses sex to promote her program, increase her ratings and sell product. Clips from the shocking episode involving twin girls who were raped by their father and brothers were posted on Oprah's Website—but before you could watch them you had to sit through an ad for K-Y Intense sexual jelly. Then as you watch the video of the young women crying about being sexually abused, a picture to the right of the screen appears selling the sexual lubricant with a \$5 off coupon.

FAMILY

There was little on the Oprah Winfrey Show's final season about the traditional functional couple or two-parent family. They were only seen in 19 episodes and 12 of those included rich or famous people, such as Jessica and Jerry Seinfeld or Keith Urban and Nicole Kidman. Donald Trump was the show's rare example of a "family man" as he sat by his children from various marriages.

Of the seven episodes involving non-famous couples or families, three involved Oprah TV show connections. In the end the only four of the 130 episodes had traditional Middle American, non-TV families. Those included the overwhelmed parents of sextuplets, a couple who lost their three children in a car accident only later to give birth to triplets and the couple that raised their son as a girl.

Only one somewhat normal, happy, non-celebrity family appeared on the program the entire season and they were criticized by Winfrey. They first appeared in 2005 when the dad would verbally put down the daughter that weighed 300 pounds. Since then the daughter lost 170 pounds after gastric bypass surgery and Oprah said that now they are “one big happy family.” But that didn’t keep her from condemning the father, saying “You didn’t love her when she was fat but you now love her now that she’s thin and that seems very shallow.” In the end Winfrey said it was the reaction to the family’s previous Oprah appearance that turned the dad around and made them the functional family that they are today.

The focus of the Oprah Winfrey Show was more often on non-traditional families. A man with four wives. A single mother with 14 kids. A doctor whose family was killed by a murderer. Twin sisters who were raped by their father and brothers. A grandmother who gave birth to her daughter’s child. The divorced parents of a kidnapped boy. A mother with multiple personalities. Female war veterans who lost their children in custody battles with ex-husbands. A mother who shot her three kids. Another mother accused of killing her two boys. A woman who had her teen lover kill her husband.

Robyn Okrant wrote in her book *Living Oprah* that guests “are chosen to tell their stories because their cases are extreme, and Oprah and her producers feel that we can learn something from them.” Winfrey and her producers, however, almost never chose in the final season to teach audience members by using functional traditional families with compelling positive stories as the main guests.

The celebrities on the show also had non-traditional or dysfunctional family relationships, such as the Jackson family and the Judds. Marie Osmond lost a son to suicide. David Arquette wasn’t divorced but was no longer with his wife and couldn’t explain their relationship status. Debbie Reynolds and daughter Carrie Fisher laughed at their divorces, affairs and the fact that Fisher became friends with the famous woman who took her dad from her mother.

Most revealing was the “happiness” episode, where Oprah praised Goldie Hawn’s longtime non-marital relationship with Kurt Russell. Hawn was upheld as the epitome of joy and inner peace. But Goldie implied that not getting married was the way to happiness, saying, “Sometimes marriage can incarcerate you or enrage you.” The other celebrity on that episode was the second appearance this season by Jenny McCarthy, the former Playboy model who is a single divorced mother of an autistic son and had recently broken up with her live-in boyfriend Jim Carrey.

Oprah’s own dysfunctional family relationships came to the forefront on the shocking show that unveiled a new half-sister Winfrey never knew she had. The episode could be taken as Oprah’s response to the 2010 Kitty Kelley tell-all biography, where Winfrey’s relatives went on the record to condemn Oprah for what they said are her numerous lies about her background. Her mother, aunt, nieces and nephew appeared on the 2011 show, with Oprah putting to rest the bitterness she carried from her upbringing.

The talk host welcomed her new half-sister because the woman didn't "sell out" or "betray" Oprah to the tabloids. That led to a discussion about Oprah's bad past family relationships, in which she firmly placed the blame on her dead half-sister who sold the story of Oprah getting pregnant at age 14 to the tabloids in the early 1990s. Winfrey concluded the show saying that now she views what her sister did as "a gift to me" because it kept her from having the same shame Oprah's mother held for over 40 years in hiding the newly-revealed half-sister.

POLITICS

Although Winfrey is given credit in helping to get Barack Obama elected President of the United States in 2008, political topics are rarely discussed on her program. Oprah almost seemed uninterested in the subject, claiming in her behind-the-scenes program that even though people think she's a Democrat, she has voted "equally for Republicans," including for "a Bush" for president.

But while she claims to be moderate and independent, the few times political issues were raised they were definitively done with a pro-liberal, pro-Obama administration slant. Michelle Obama appeared twice and the president himself came for an in-studio interview as he geared up for his reelection campaign.

Robyn Okrant, who spent a year watching Winfrey, wrote in *Living Oprah*: "I will go so far as to say I think Oprah's entire program is political. Every moment of it. From the topics she chooses, to the guests she invites on her stage, to the side she leans toward on a controversial issue: These all reflect her politics. We don't need to pretend that her show is some fantasy neutral zone. If we expect her to be entirely evenhanded, she'd have to erase herself, her award-winning personality, from the equation."

Winfrey justifies not presenting both sides of an issue, saying, "Sometimes the conversation gives voice to that which should not be heard." Referring to her 1988 skinheads show, she told viewers, "I'm no longer going to ever consciously use this platform for that which I think is from the dark side or evil."

Twice the topic of the Iraq war was included in the final season, in which she said she supports the troops even though she admits she doesn't know anyone who has fought in the war. During the show on veterans, Winfrey said, "This is not a partisan issue...it doesn't matter if you're Republican or Democrat." Yet the guests were Michelle Obama, Tom Brokaw and Bob Woodward—three self-professed liberals.

Her pro-troops stance came at a time when Barack Obama was being criticized by Democrats for not keeping his promise to reduce U.S. forces. As he prepared for his reelection campaign, his wife Michelle appeared on Winfrey's show at the start of the new campaign cycle in January of 2011. Michelle used the program to announce, "My husband just released a presidential study directive which will be the first time all of the government is being mobilized in support of the military veterans." Winfrey then promoted a new government Website that mentions Obama helping military families.

Oprah suggested that accountants, manicurists and others give services free to the military, saying that now that she had brought up the subject, "It's on your conscience." At no point did Winfrey say how she was personally participating or financially supporting the effort, nor if she were giving any services away for free the way she expected others to.

Another show featuring female troops had as a guest Obama's Assistant Secretary of Veteran Affairs, who made numerous pro-Obama comments, including that the President "wants to end homelessness." This was similar to an education-themed episode with Obama's Secretary of Education, who promoted the President's new education plan by saying "education is a civil right."

Other political statements were made by guests. During author Jonathan Franzen's appearance he called Obama his "hero." Roseanne Barr said she was originally mad that Oprah pushed for Obama's election instead of voting for Hilary Clinton but now Barr supports the President. And Winfrey helped comedian Jon Stewart promote his anti-conservative Washington D.C. rally by giving away tickets, hotel accommodations and airfare (paid for by Xbox).

Comedian Chris Rock used time during his hour to slam the conservative Tea Party, tying it to racism, and making fun of Donald Trump's possible presidential candidacy.

The only conservative political moment of the season was when Winfrey hosted former President George W. Bush for the hour as he released his new book. She was very nice to him two years after he was out of office but brought up the public perception that he was racist due to his mishandling of Hurricane Katrina.

RELIGION

The strangest episodes of the final season of the Oprah Winfrey Show involved spirituality. The subject of God or higher being was alluded to occasionally but little specifics were given. The talk show host admitted, "With all the interest in spirituality, every time I've tried to talk about it I get so criticized." That may be because her approach to religion took little specific form and the few times she had spiritual topics on the show it was with unconventional guests.

Oprah claims to pray often and listen to God in making decisions. She says she tries to meditate every morning in a quiet room in her Chicago home, which has symbols from the different religions of the world. In one behind-the-scenes episode Oprah is shown meditating in an elevator on the way to taping the show, saying, "It's my moment with God."

She claims to have a higher calling. Oprah said in her Piers Morgan CNN interview, "This isn't about me. I'm just the messenger to deliver the message of redemption, of hope, of forgiveness, of gratitude, of evolving people to the best of themselves."

Spirituality was only part of a few episodes. Once was in Australia where Oprah and some of her audience traveled to Uluru, a place called "spiritual sacred ground," and it was said that "only God could have put it there." She later announced to the audience members that flew with her, "302 of you are here by divine intervention. It's not me."

At Yosemite with Gayle King, Oprah commented that the mountains are "like seeing God in some of His best expressions."

During the conclusion of the somber episode involving the twin girls who were raped by their father and brothers, Winfrey's advice to the women was, "You let that go and you move forward with the grace that God has given you."

Another episode gave time to a group of nuns that Oprah admired who were looking for help in raising money for a new building. Winfrey plugged the cause but didn't offer a donation after praising the nuns for their vow of poverty.

A few guests would make spiritual comments. Suze Orman told Octomom to go to church and pray in order to survive financially. Kirstie Alley said she took Winfrey's advice and "I spent the last ten months working on myself spiritually." Oprah told Jane Fonda, "You've obviously done a lot of spiritual, emotional work on yourself." Iyanla said she went from rich to poor but "I don't need a check, I've got God," claiming that the ex-husband she used to be so bitter toward she now sees as "a character in God's divine play."

The most bizarre segment of the season was when a producer travelled to Brazil to do a story on "John of God," an alleged spiritual healer who cuts people. Though Winfrey warned viewers about graphic, bloody scenes, there was no on screen content warning until 51 minutes into the show. The segment seemed completely out of place with no Oprah connection, until she said it was a segment from a new OWN series where scientists argue over miracles.

Hollywood director Tom Shadyac, who quit the film business on a "spiritual quest for truth," filled the hour with vague New Age spirituality. The points in his new documentary on the subject, which Oprah "loves," include "the human race is connect," "we're all hard-wired to cooperate" and "if you don't follow your passion it can destroy you."

Oprah agreed adding, "If you don't do what you love, you die a little every day." After Shadyac turned God's "I am that I am" Bible statement to be a call for people to live the lives they are meant to live, Oprah added, "Be still and know that I am God."

The episode that revealed Oprah's personal spiritual beliefs was when she hosted reincarnation believer Shirley MacLaine for the entire hour. Winfrey told the Hollywood actress, "I do consider you one of my greatest teachers" because MacLaine's 1985 book "was an awakening for me and really allowed me to begin to see the whole world differently. It literally took God out of the box for me and I began to see God in all things."

MacLaine was selected to be a guest on one of Oprah's last episodes and told the audience that "two-thirds of the world believes" in reincarnation. "Nobody ever dies," MacLaine said. "It could be that you decide to reincarnate on another planet... we probably have experiences there and it's in our memory system."

She claimed that in 2012 for "the first time in 26,000 years... an alignment occurs" that will alter the world. She then encouraged public schools to have required "spiritual education" and meditation, adding, "We've all been so many people, we've all had so many lifetimes."

Winfrey used the episode to share her own beliefs. "My definition of spirituality is having an open heart, being able to openly receive the possibility of all that is... being open to see the world differently."

"The greatest spiritual law... my mantra for life," Oprah told viewers, is "what you put out, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. So if I was to say what is the foundation of my religious belief, that is it. Which is the same as do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But what it really means is what you do unto

others is already done unto you. Cause it's coming back whether you believe it or not. It doesn't require your belief."

The funniest religious moment came in the behind-the-scenes show, where Apple agreed to provide free iPads at the last minute for Oprah's favorite things episode. A producer called it a "Christmas miracle." Oprah responded, "Now, I don't mess with God for things like iPads. I don't go around praying for iPads but I think God must have known."

MONEY

One of the richest women in the country (admitting "I am the epitome of the American dream") had as guests some of the other richest people in the world. Bill Gates. Mark Zuckerberg. Donald Trump. Martha Stewart. Nike's Phil Knight. J.K. Rowling. Even in the replay of her interview with John F. Kennedy, Jr., she emphasized him being rich.

Author Robyn Okrant observes in *Living Oprah*, "Oprah appears laid back with her famous guests. The delineation of status is not quite as pronounced as it is with her average Jane and Joe visitors, and absent is my sense that she might be talking down to people or feel the necessity to act as their guide or teacher. The more famous the guest, the more level the playing field."

In an amusing exchange with Harry Potter author Rowling, the two said they both still can't believe they have so much financial success. Oprah said she's just learning to accept that "I'll always be rich."

While talking with Trump, she asked, "I often wonder, when you have a lot, do you..." failing to acknowledge that she has as much or more than Donald.

Her affluent lifestyle at times conflicted with Winfrey's on air comments. She said that money doesn't buy happiness. While praising the nuns for living without material things and saying, "That's a great message to the world right now," she didn't offer to give up any of her own to help them in their time of need.

During one giveaway show she said, "It's not really about all the stuff...it's about hope. It's about something really magical and joyful and wonderful can happen to you when you least expect it."

"Things don't make you happier. And even if you give to people it's better to give experiences (than money)." That philosophy may explain why she rarely uses her program to personally give to others.

PART THREE – CONCLUSIONS

Oprah's public statements about how she planned on using her final season, and the ensuing media coverage, created an expectation that did not match reality.

Using the criteria Oprah stated, there were not "lots of surprises for people, dreams coming true." There were a few significant giveaways but 85% of the episodes had no gift elements.

Very few shows delivered things that hadn't been seen many times before or that "knocked the socks off" anyone other than die-hard fans or Oprah producers, who bragged about how amazing each episode was in behind-the-scenes footage. The season

felt old, tired and often dull—focusing on outdated celebrities, repetitive topics and Oprah’s need to market her new OWN cable network.

Even the big celebrity episodes that should have been the best went mostly nowhere because the host was either ill prepared or she just didn’t know what to ask. Reunions of *The Sound of Music*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Streisand and Redford*, *All My Children*, *Love Story* and even *The View* were momentarily interesting, as was assembling all her former talk show host competitors. But the guests always appeared uncomfortably nervous in the presence of the talk queen and she asked nothing more than surface questions that kept the events from being significant.

The moments that were best either had new twists on familiar themes or packed an emotional punch that was difficult to forget. Oprah and Gayle acting like normal campers in Yosemite was a season highlight, despite the fact that Winfrey didn’t want to do it. Iyanla, Rosanne Barr and Whoopie Goldberg criticizing Winfrey to her face while they begged her forgiveness was another. The 200 men who had been sexually abused, with the camera panning their faces as they held pictures of themselves as children. Marie Osmond talking about her son’s suicide, then breaking down as she attempted to sing for him.

And, believe it or not, the most unforgettable moment may have been when Suze Orman and Oprah ganged up on Octomom Nadya Suleman, who finally snapped after being harassed for 50 minutes and shocked the audience as she screamed out that she hated herself. It was one of the few moments of raw reality in a season filled with preening celebrities and manipulative marketing.

Despite saying she was going to “honor the people who made this possible for me: that would be the viewers,” most programs were about the rich and famous. Average viewers were seen less than one-third of the time as major guests and many times they tended to occupy only a few minutes of a program.

She promised to “raise the bar,” yet many shows had a rather low threshold even though she claimed, “I only want people in the (interview) seats who I want to talk to.” Questionable final season guests ranged from a couple “supermodels” many people have never heard of to has-beens like Tony Danza, Linda Evans and Ryan O’Neal. Most of the big celebrities interviewed by Oprah had been seen by viewers many times before (Celine Dion made her 27th Oprah appearance!). Winfrey even questioned her producers the night before Mark Fuhrman came on (as seen on the behind-the-scenes program), saying that she saw no reason to revisit the police officer in the O.J. Simpson case.

She said she was going to “stop doing topics that bore me” and she certainly chose a narrow range of topics that would keep her engaged for the final season. She was gleeful about ending the series, anxiously counting it down and saying that while her staff was sad she was happy to be done with the burden.

The guests that she liked so much included celebrities, rich people and authors. She seemed the most engaged on the few shows that raise topics about education or spirituality. But those were also the programs where she stated her beliefs most clearly, and they were definitely not mainstream.

Her least self-aware episode was when Winfrey hosted Hollywood director Tom Shadyac, who she said, “Went from multimillionaire to mobile home.” Pushing a new documentary about his chosen “spiritual quest for truth,” Oprah said she chose to do this as one of her final episodes because, “Are we so celebrity, status and stuff-obsessed that

we have just literally lost our minds? It's like we are in this envious race to get more and more and more. And still feeling emptier.”

It was complete hypocrisy since the entire purpose of Winfrey's show is to promote celebrities and materialism. She personally seems obsessed with status and stuff, even though she takes every opportunity to claim that she is only interested in internal things. Namely, Oprah is condemning herself when she calls attention to a culture that is attracted to the stars and prizes that she so often promotes.

There were a few times where she looked disinterested. During the “Ultimate Amazing Animals” show it appeared that Winfrey had no idea why they were doing the topic, except that it was an opportunity to promote OWN star Lisa Ling. Her camping trip to Yosemite with Gayle was fun for the viewing audience but looked like the experience was tedious for the star who would rather have been in one of her expensive homes.

She also appeared disengaged at times with guests whose views she didn't share, such as Donald Trump, George W. Bush and military veterans. Oprah even seemed strangely remote during the interview with her newly discovered half-sister.

Because Oprah was tiring of the daily grind, she often did two-a-day tapings, which resulted in a less-professionally produced product. Entire hours with trashy Jenny McCarthy or ditzzy David Arquette could not have been what Winfrey meant when she said she was going to “raise the bar,” and two hours of Iyanla's babbling seemed to test the audience's patience. This was not the high-quality, surprise-packed TV that she promised.

Watching the behind-the-scenes show proved that producers could not differentiate between a great show and the mediocre material they were producing. They high-fived each other for making it through an hour with a dull guest like Fuhrman, while criticizing the fast-paced happiness episode for having too many guests.

The hour-long infomercial with Jennifer Hudson was easily one of the worst episodes, with a hesitant guest and constant product placement. Yet it resulted in the producer commenting, “You would have thought that that show would have been flat, but it was fantastic.” Oprah herself said of the Hudson hour, “I thought the interview went great.”

None of those involved, including Oprah, seemed to realize how dull some of the episodes were when watching objectively at home. They don't appear to know how to adapt to today's audience and instead were doing shows that felt 20 years old with the entire purpose being to market products.

Despite the fact that Oprah told *Newsweek*, “I'm always aiming for the truth,” there were times she misled her viewers by hyping her guests or show topics. In one case, when surprising a guest, she admitted, “My producers did tell you a little fib. They lie a lot.”

The *Sister Wives* were introduced with, “For the first time the Brown Family speaks out,” but the group had already done a number of national interviews. Lisa Marie Presley was supposedly doing “her one and only television interview,” but Michael Jackson's former wife had done others in the past. The Jane Fonda piece started with, “For the first time since her divorce, back together with Ted Turner”—but not only was that statement not true, Turner appeared for only a few moments in a taped piece and not in the studio with Fonda.

She proclaimed in November that she was doing her “final” favorite things episode—yet there were at least three after that in which she included favorite things segments.

Winfrey’s show wasn’t “number one for 25 years” as she claimed (Jerry Springer beat her during one national ratings period in the 1990s). And the behind-the-scenes cameras weren’t there for “the first time in 25 years” (she had allowed cameras behind-the-scenes at least twice before to show viewers how her program is produced).

Rarely did Oprah admit to making mistakes and instead took people to task who dared cross her. Former guests were brought on to genuflect in apology in front of her. Roseanne Barr, former white supremacists, Whoopi Goldberg, West Virginians who had been against gays and author Jonathan Franzen all looked appropriately demure when telling the talk queen they were sorry.

The only two people given two-part solo interviews during the final season—James Frey and Iyanla—had both had angered Winfrey and came back begging for her forgiveness. Although spending two hours with each seemed like overkill, the message was clear that Oprah wanted the world to know that others had hurt her and she was big enough to forgive them. Why didn’t she instead have people on who she felt she needed to apologize to?

The problem was that most of the apology shows didn’t make for very good television because they were mostly about Oprah. As much as the behind-the-scenes program airs clips of Winfrey saying she doesn’t want the talk show to be about her, it’s almost always about her. She approves the guests and her producers know that they must do topics that allow her to spout her inspirational philosophies while making her look like a forgiving benefactor. Rarely did it seem like they were truly doing a show for anyone other than Oprah and her perception of what her audience wanted.

This was nowhere more evident than in the final weeks of the program, where there were very unusual choices for guests. Instead of major audience-grabbers, the focus was on mostly minor names that would make Winfrey look good.

With only ten shows left she devoted six of them to clips of past guests. Five of her last eight shows were done outside the studio. Two of those were with author James Frey, who five years previously had been verbally flogged by Oprah for fabricating portions of a “memoir” that she endorsed. Another was with designer Ralph Lauren’s family, which was heralded as a “coup” to discuss his “empire.”

These were certainly not the most interesting programs of the season and in some cases decreased the momentum the show had tried to hype in counting down to her final episode. In the month before the finale she had on Shania Twain, Chaz Bono and Dutchess Sarah Furgeson, who may be have been interesting guests but the interviews ended up just being more plugs for their new shows on OWN. An interview with the Obamas was simply a campaign stop for his reelection and stars like Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts and Johnny Depp were merely there to plug new movies.

Namely, the last few weeks were not filled with highly anticipated major guests in hard-hitting discussions that would have left the audience in awe. O.J. Simpson would have truly been a “coup.” Prince William and his new bride Katherine would have been bigger royalty. There could have been episodes with major politicians like John Edwards who destroyed their careers through sex scandals or ailing black athletes with controversial pasts, such as Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson. Instead Winfrey served up

Rob Lowe plugging his new book and Nike founder Phil Knight, who sat red-faced saying barely anything while Oprah plugged his new products.

Even the penultimate episodes shot with 20,000 adoring fans at the Chicago arena was a rather shallow love-fest. Celebrities we had seen many times before on the show, like Simon Cowell and Tom Cruise, came out to again tell her how great she was. Almost every episode of the final few weeks ended up being ways to prove how great an impact Oprah had on the world or a pitch for one of her new OWN productions.

In many ways the entire year could be classified as a wasted season. There were very few episodes that seemed to have a purpose other than praising Oprah, promoting Winfrey's new cable network or marketing products. Instead of using her program and her money to truly put forth an attempt to impact America or have robust discussions of important issues, she did light-hearted celebrity interviews that could have been seen elsewhere and often felt outdated.

When conducting a content analysis like this it's important to not only report what was done on the air but to note what was missing. There were wasted opportunities where a guest or topic could have been handled in a much more effective way. And since every person who appeared had to stand in awe of the host or agree with her philosophies, she failed to provide depth to discussions that come from listening to opposing viewpoints.

Winfrey admitted that she did not believe in bringing on people who differed from her beliefs, saying she would never "give voice to that which should not be heard." She calls opinions that differ from her perspective "the dark side or evil."

So there was never anyone on the show to challenge her distorted view of the world. As seen on the behind-the-scenes program, her own staff lived in fear of crossing her and they made sure to cater to her every whim while she loudly rejected even the hint of anything she didn't agree with. In the end, failing to have on people who disagree with her made the program much less interesting.

Oprah stated at the beginning of the season that her goal was to do programming that "doesn't tear people down" and encourages viewers to "live your best life." Yet a number of episodes were negative discussions that had few positive moments. There were programs about female criminals, child molestation and abuse that dwelt on the darker elements.

Winfrey also liked to bring on critical people like Suze Orman or Dr. Phil. She admitted on the air that she admires successful people like Simon Cowell who can put average persons in their place. So she welcomed no-nonsense guests like Roseanne Barr, Whoopi Goldberg, Martha Stewart, Shirley MacLaine, Donald Trump, Jon Stewart and Cybill Shepherd—all who could come across at times as being very negative. That included her close friend Gayle King, who made a few snide remarks during their Yosemite and Australia trips.

Winfrey herself bluntly challenged some guests with negative feedback. Octomom Nadya Suleman looked dazed as Oprah rejected her responses. With former TV host Iyanla, Oprah bickered over details of their break-up and at one point said, "I'm not going to accept that." A man who had been molested as a child by his dad received a lecture from Winfrey for allowing his mother to take care of his children, with Oprah saying, "How could you possibly trust your mother with your children...when your mother did not do the right thing by you?" And that poor girl stuck in a cage as a child

was looking for love but instead got condemnation from Winfrey for having a baby and not being in therapy.

Overall the series attempted to be lighthearted or positive, and statistically almost half of the programs were focused on entertainment subjects like movies, music and TV shows. Oprah ended up using her final season to impact culture in two significant ways: gender roles and marketing.

CULTURAL IMPACT ONE: GENDER ROLES

Oprah has stated on her program that it's her desire that society accept non-traditional sexual roles. When she talks about being a "teacher," it appears that the main thing she wanted to teach people during her final season was that it's okay to be different from society's norms. She promoted LGBT acceptance and attempted to empower women to break free from traditional roles as wives or mothers.

Oprah wants to "teach" traditional Americans to accept those who are different. During "Coming Out on the Oprah Show" on January 25, the host stated, "Our intention is and has always been to help people see things differently by giving a voice to those who might not otherwise be heard."

Women are told to think of themselves as "warriors" who should fight back and to stop thinking they need men to be fulfilled. Oprah said, "Nobody can complete you. You complete yourself."

One of the major observations of this study is what was missing from the program. Almost no traditional middle class couples or families ever appeared as major guests on the final season of The Oprah Winfrey Show. Even though this group makes up a large portion of America (and her viewing audience) Oprah instead chose to focus on a much smaller part of society.

Winfrey's guests, whether celebrity or unknown, were (as Robyn Okrant wrote) "extreme" examples that may make for intriguing television but do not represent the entirety of society. Despite Oprah's claim that she is "doing a show about everyday people," the fact is that many aspects of mainline society are not fully represented on the program. This seemed to be a continuation of the talk show model started by Phil Donahue and made popular 20 years ago by Geraldo Rivera, Sally Jessy and Oprah, where most guests are those outside the mainstream looking for acceptance.

That's not to conclude that there is anything wrong with how Oprah chose to use her airtime. It just needs to be pointed out that she is not as audience-focused or as representative of society as she claims, and that there are some major elements of culture missing from her program.

If Winfrey truly wanted to use her program to help all people "live your best life," then there were ways she could have broadened her topics and guests. The program could have chosen to involve more functional families or traditional relationships and do it in an entertaining way. But that would have detracted from Oprah's goal of making every episode of her final season about something she is interested in.

CULTURAL IMPACT TWO: MARKETING

By far the greatest impact of the final season of the Winfrey show is as a marketing tool to push her own ventures and others' products. Celebrity biographer Kitty Kelley said it best: "Oprah is the gold standard for marketing."

As much as Winfrey wants to claim that she is an educator and that she uses her show to teach people, a better description would be that she is a master marketer who understands how to influence her audience to buy products that she promotes.

Chicago Sun Times writer Lewis Lazare put it a bit more bluntly, saying that Oprah has “become an unabashed shill for a slew of market-savvy companies salivating at the prospect of getting her to back their products in the hope big sales will ensue.”

The things she seemed most interested in promoting were those that she could personally gain from financially. There were numerous mentions of her magazine, other programs she is producing like *Dr. Phil* and *Dr. Oz*, her friend Gayle King on the Oprah satellite radio channel and the new OWN cable network.

Some would say Oprah was wisely using the final year of her syndicated platform to promote her other profit-making ventures. But it can be somewhat deceptive when guests like Ryan O’Neal, Lisa Ling, Carson Kressley, Rosie O’Donnell, Dr. Laura Berman and The Judds get over-hyped praise from Winfrey without it always being mentioned that they are soon going to be part of the Oprah Winfrey Network.

Hardcore fans don’t seem to mind that she uses the program for her own personal gain. Winfrey gets credit as a generous benefactor even though most of what was given away on the show this year came from others. In the end everyone seems to have benefited from the relationship between Winfrey, advertisers and the audience.

Oprah is one shrewd businesswoman who knows how to profit from the generosity of others. Winfrey has discovered that merely being a promotional conduit can bring great fame and riches. It will be interesting to see if her legacy will change once she focuses solely on her cable network, where marketers may be less enthralled with her smaller audience. OWN has already had such a weak following (averaging less than 300,000 viewers in prime time) that within three months of starting the network’s schedule was revamped.

Despite the claims by *TV Guide* and *Forbes* that she is the “most influential” media person of all time, Winfrey may not have the same long-term impact on television as pioneers like Lucille Ball or Walt Disney, other star-producers who owned their own studios. She isn’t even the longest-running or most highly regarded talk show host in history (Johnny Carson has her beat at that).

What Winfrey has done is create a successful daytime brand that had a great amount of influence on the spending decisions of a dedicated core audience. Her brand will most likely continue to influence people in a way that is similar to some of the guests she had on her final season. Like Donald Trump and Vera Wang, the Oprah name will continue to sway followers long after she stops doing her daily talk show.

The brand icon she is probably most similar to is Martha Stewart. Oprah brought Martha on as a final season guest, introducing her with, “There are just a handful of people who have literally changed the way we live in our culture. What we buy, what we think about. She is one of them.”

Oprah is another. She definitely has had an impact on her viewing audience and knows how to utilize the medium to benefit from partnering with others. As she transitions from broadcast syndication to cable network, it remains to be seen if the Oprah name will stay synonymous with inspirational women’s programming or end up in the history books as merely a once-successful master marketer.