

## Women's afternoon TV: RIP

The game shows went, then the soaps, and now even Oprah has left the building

By Jaime Weinman

“When you think of daytime TV,” says Wesley Hyatt, author of *The Encyclopedia of Daytime Television*, “do you think of anything else besides talk shows, soaps and game shows?” Well, you might have to. The big hit shows that defined afternoon viewing will soon be gone forever. Most game shows bit the dust years ago, and now the other pillars are falling: The Oprah Winfrey Show is airing its final episode on May 25, and soon after, ABC will cancel two of the last soap operas, *All My Children* and *One Life To Live*. Hyatt told *Maclean's* that shows like these “were dirt cheap to produce and generated enormous profits” in their heyday, but that heyday “ended around 20 years ago.” The afternoon show—providing emotional conversations or soap antics, aimed largely at stay-at-home women—has been huge since the beginning of TV, and on radio before that. Now it may be going the way of variety shows, VCRs and the Liberal party.

Of all the things threatening to tear the daytime world apart, the end of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is arguably the most damaging. It means not only the end of a successful show but the end of what Hyatt calls “a pop culture phenomenon, one of the biggest events not just of TV but mass media.” Advertisers on her finale are being charged \$1 million per 30-second commercial, the highest rate for a series finale since *Everybody Loves Raymond* in 2005. And Oprah has the kind of worshipful fan base that's usually more associated with pop stars than TV celebrities. Tanya Lee, a Toronto woman, got into the news last December by starting an unsuccessful Facebook campaign to bring Oprah to Canada, even trying to get in touch with President Barack Obama: “Canadian Oprah fans,” she says, “I worked very hard on your behalf. Even though it did not work out, at least you know that I failed miserably.”

The only person left who has that kind of power is Judy Sheindlin of *Judge Judy*, who recently beat Oprah for the title of most-watched daytime personality, and who



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just signed a new contract to continue through 2015. But *Judge Judy* was launched in 1996, and no one else has come along who can step in once she leaves. As Hyatt points out, “there have been people proclaimed to be ‘the next Oprah’ going back to the 1990s, such as Ricki Lake. They never turned out that way. As much as I admire Katie Couric,” who is considering doing a daytime talk show after stepping down from *CBS News*, “she’s not going to be that person.”

Soap operas used to have the same pop culture power that Oprah did, often influencing prime-time shows by pushing the boundaries of the subject matter that TV could deal with. But in the last 20 years, the average viewership of soaps has fallen by 80 per cent. Christine Fix, editor of *Soap Opera Fan*, told *Maclean's* that the cancellation of *One Life* and *All My Children* marks “an unfortunate beginning of the end of an era that has entertained viewers for generations. Hell, there hasn't been a new soap opera created since 1999, which doesn't bode well for the industry.” The few remaining soaps aren't safe either: TMZ floated a rumour that ABC might cancel its last soap, *General Hospital*, to make room for a show for Couric.

Why have there been so few big daytime hits since the launch of *The View* in 1997? There are some obvious culprits. Cox says that the death of the soap “dates back to the 1970s when women began working outside the

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home in greater numbers.” Even the people who are staying at home may not be watching television now, because they’ve been captured by that evil scourge of television, the Internet. In an article published by Business Insider in 2010, Tod Sacerdoti wrote that the true soap opera killer was Zynga, a company that provides interactive Facebook games and thereby “turned casual online gaming into social gaming.” Why would people follow the adventures of strangers when they could spend the day having adventures with people they know online?

Still, the stereotype of the Internet destroying TV doesn’t completely fit the facts. According to Ad Age magazine, the number of people watching television in the daytime hasn’t actually fallen. In fact, when DVR playback is taken into account, there are a few more people watching TV in the daytime than two years ago—if only because more people are unemployed. But few of them are watching any one program in the numbers that used to flock to the big soap operas.

Instead, they go to ad-supported basic cable. Some of these viewers prefer reality shows, which Fix calls “real-life soap operas that seem to fill the need for escape that soap operas once cornered the market on.” Others gravitate to people who give them useful advice, like the personalities on networks devoted to food or fashion. Dori Molitor, head of the consulting firm WomanWise, told Maclean’s that today’s woman wants “entertainment with meaning and purpose, that can contribute to what she cares about,” meaning that a show is more likely to catch on if it has “a piece of entertainment in it, but there’s also a piece of practicality.” Apparently today’s viewers get this sort of practicality from people who criticize bad makeovers and messy houses.

The big networks seem to understand this, because part of their new strategy is to compete with cable by offering shows with practical advice that stay-at-home people can use. Brian Frons, head of daytime TV for ABC, told the Los Angeles Times that the network is dropping the escapism of soap operas in favour of “information” that will allow viewers to “take an active role in changing their lives.” So ABC soaps will give way to *The Chew*, a food program that tells health-conscious viewers how to find food that won’t kill them, and *The Revolution*, where Tim Gunn (*Project Runway*) dispenses fashion and makeup tips. These shows may take a few viewers away from specialty channels—and they’re much cheaper to produce than soaps, or talk shows with big-name hosts.

But cheap, quickly produced shows can’t have the kind of cultural reach that the big talk shows, game shows and soaps did. Hyatt points out that while many cable daytime shows are doing well enough, few of them are huge hits, and he thinks that’s because “too many of them look cheap and have a limited scope. Laugh if you will, but even a game show like *The Price is Right* lavishes attention to every detail of each show, and that’s reflected in the ratings for the final product. This is another reason why cable hasn’t taken on doing daytime soaps—it requires an investment of time, care, consideration and money that most outlets are reluctant to allow on a daily schedule.”

One person who’s already discovered the limitations of cable is none other than Oprah Winfrey. She was supposed to be transferring much of her energy to her cable channel OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network), which recently launched in both the U.S. and Canada. But OWN has not done well since it began, and Winfrey has found herself trying to calm down advertisers who aren’t getting their money’s worth from her channel: first by assuring them in a press conference that things will get better once “I get to devote my full attention to OWN,” and then by removing the CEO of the entire network after only a few months. “Cable can have some power but not really rival the reach of the big daytime shows,” Hyatt says, and Winfrey’s self-imposed exile to cable could turn her into a niche product, similar to what happened to Conan O’Brien when he went from late night on NBC to late night on cable.

That might be why soap actress Cady McClain, who will reprise her old role on *All My Children* in one of its last story arcs, told Maclean’s there’s still a place for the simple, inexpensive option of regular daytime TV: “Not everyone can afford Internet, the rising costs of cable, or even a computer. But somehow, most people manage to get a TV. That factors into why daytime reached a mass cultural consciousness: the simple accessibility, five days a week.” But even if Oprah decides that cable is too small a world for her, it may be too late for her to go back to her mass audience, which is starting to drift away. Even her biggest fan: “I work a lot,” Lee says. “I do not have time to watch as much daytime television as I used to.”

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