Celebrity Culture and Politics

Dana Polan’s “Oprah: The Last Intellectual”

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Notes by Tim McKeon

Opening Comments

This paper springs from a larger project Professor Polan is working on which examines different forms of knowledge production, the wide variety of knowledge producers, as well as intellectuals as media figures. Professor Polan is especially interested in the media’s portrayal of academics and argues that professors ignore public and popular conceptions of themselves and their work. He believes it is wrong for professors to ignore representations of themselves as shams (“Those who can’t do, teach”) or as performers, and they run the risk of ignoring questions of pedagogy in today’s information age. They also run the risk of enabling mass media to constitute itself as a powerful source of knowledge production in America.

In examining different forms of knowledge production, Professor Polan chooses to look at Oprah Winfrey and an episode of her TV show, *Oprah!*, titled “How Dumb Are We?” In this episode, Winfrey identifies a series of facts she feels every American should know. She then proceeds to prove how ill-informed Americans are by asking her studio audience about those facts. Later on in the show she has two intellectuals, neoconservative Allan Bloom and liberal Gerald Graff, debate about knowledge in America. Professor Polan points out that Winfrey treats Bloom like a child and, at the end of the program, although the
academics have two very different points of view, they are lumped together by the audience and summarily dismissed. It is Winfrey, “the sensitive figure of common sense,” to whom the audience turns for a “real” education. Professor Polan argues there are potential pitfalls if people look to Winfrey as an intellectual. He points out that her TV shows encourage disconnected learning: each show is about one set of issues and there is no logical link to yesterday’s program or tomorrow’s. Despite the problems with academe and its artificial disciplinary boundaries, it does offer the possibility of thoughtful analysis, unconstrained by the sound-bite and the episodic structure of television.

**Respondent: Professor Alice Gambrell, English Department**

Professor Gambrell picked up on Polan’s point about academic pedagogy and argued that what has transformed higher education in the past ten years is not curriculum, not innovative teaching, but labor issues. More and more classes are taught by part-time professors and TA’s, and tenured professors are spending less time in the classroom. She brought up the point Professor Polan made in his paper, which is when professors are asked what they are working on, it is usually a reference to their research, rarely to their teaching.

In regards to Professor Polan’s examination of Winfrey, Professor Gambrell wondered how Valerie Smith’s “Black Feminist Theory” comes into play and what effect the fact that Winfrey is a black woman had on helping her achieve the status she enjoys today. Gambrell felt that when Polan started to examine Winfrey and other media intellectuals such as Tom Hanks (in the role of World War II expert), the paper became abstract. Gambrell agrees that Winfrey is
fertile ground for further analysis. For instance, Polan did not touch upon the way she interacts with her audience; Winfrey walks among them, shows affection to them and cries on camera.

Professor Gambrell agreed that Winfrey is viewed as an intellectual and mentioned that Winfrey co-taught a class at Northwestern University with her boyfriend Stedman Graham. In fact, Winfrey wears many hats in addition to intellectual, such as CEO (of her magazine, her production company, and the Oxygen Network), movie star (“The Color Purple,” “Beloved”) and spiritual leader. Gambrell sees Winfrey’s move towards spirituality as an integral part of her persona and guesses this helps her from becoming too “embodied.”

**Respondent: Professor Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology Department**

Professor Lutkehaus segued by saying that she found out, in addition to teaching a course at Northwestern, Winfrey is the subject of another course in the university’s history department.

Lutkehaus was most interested in the aspects of Polan’s paper that dealt with public intellectuals, especially since she is studying Margaret Mead, who was a successful public intellectual herself. She agreed that Tom Hanks, who she described as a present day John Wayne, is recognized as a World War II intellectual figure but wondered how detrimental that was to society. It is because of Tom Hanks that so many more people in the world are better educated about World War II.

Professor Lutkehaus was also interested in the shift in opinion by academics about the media. Margaret Mead was ridiculed for going on talk
shows, but now it is completely acceptable. Lutkehaus claimed that some anthropologists tune into Winfrey to see what the hot topics today are. While many professors appear on talk shows, only a few become media staples, and it is not always because they are disseminating useful knowledge. For example, Carl Sagan caught the public’s attention because he believed in the possibility of aliens, an idea that the masses found fascinating. Noam Chomsky was not a public figure because of his work, but because of his politics.

The Discussion

Building on Professor Lutkehaus’ comments, the group agreed there has been a shift in opinion in academia about the media. Professors are now encouraged to be on camera, as is demonstrated by the USC staff publication, which lists all media appearances by USC academics. There was some discussion about how important these media appearances are and how a professor’s appearance can be manipulated and her comments edited. There was also discussion about how the public does not view all professors in the same way. For example, professors in the sciences are given more credibility because the public presumes that there is either a right or a wrong answer in the sciences. History professors are less respected because there could be several correct answers to questions in their field. English professors have it the worst because the public believes that literary study is completely subjective.

Later on, the conversation turned toward why academics are considered to be so different from the general public. Professor Steven Ross from the History Department pointed to an off-hand comment made by a member of
Winfrey’s TV audience in the “How Dumb Are We?” episode. In this clip, the woman stands up, waves her hand at the two academics and says, “So what?” She asks why it’s important to have all the knowledge Bloom and Graff possess when people can live rich, fulfilling lives without it. The statement demonstrates the division between academics (Bloom and Graff) and the public (represented here by Winfrey’s audience). Professor Leo Braudy of the English Department discussed the hierarchy of knowledge and the valid question this woman is raising, which is: Why does the fact that Graff and Bloom are at a university and can speak in a specific jargon give them authority over other people? Steven Ross seconded the point Polan made in his paper that says jargon widens the gap between professors and the public. There was discussion on how effective a professor is if he or she cannot write in language accessible to non-academics. There was further discussion on how an academic environment encourages the use of specialized languages.

Professor Marty Kaplan of The Norman Lear Center argued that the staging of Oprah! reinforced the division between academics and the public. He pointed out that you have the “fake people” on stage and “real people,” whom Winfrey walks among, sitting above, watching them as they would watch any other kind of entertainment. Kaplan argued that the academics’ phoniness was emphasized when the Oprah! show cut away to a Vicks 44 Commercial, in which a businessman is endorsing a cough syrup. As Polan mentions in his paper, this businessman, wearing a similar outfit to Professor Bloom, is presented as an authority through his no-nonsense language, while Bloom struggles to get his
points across via academic jargon. The Vicks 44 businessman is such a different kind of authority, that when we come back from commercial, the “roly-poly” Bloom appears even less authentic and the TV audience is even less likely to pay attention to him.

There was much theorizing on how Winfrey rose to the stature of public intellectual. Professor David Roman of the English Department argued her rise parallels the rise of black women intellectuals in general, such as Angela Davis and the current President of Smith College, Ruth J. Simmons. In particular, he wondered what effect her celebrity had on other black women. Professor Richard Meyer from the Art History Department pointed out that Winfrey treats black women on her show differently than other audience members. In the “How Dumb Are We?” episode, Winfrey admonished a white woman for not knowing who the second President of the United States was, while she hugged and laughed with a black woman who couldn’t answer similar questions.

Professor Lois Banner of the History Department wondered if Winfrey presents herself not as an intellectual (no professor would dress the way she does on her show) but as an empowered woman. She is in a mediating position, helping other women act intelligently through such devices as her book club. Professor Braudy asked what kind of mediator she is and what distinguishes her from a figure like Johnny Carson. The group agreed that unlike Johnny Carson, Winfrey raises real-world issues on her show. While the learning is disconnected, her show still intends to educate. Professor Marita Sturken from the Communication Department suggested that Winfrey practices a therapeutic
pedagogy. For example, Winfrey encourages people to read, but the books she picks often share fundamental similarities, including a female protagonist and a story concerned with emotional truth. Professor Sturken wondered whether Oprah’s Book Club undermines other more serious book clubs.

The discussion ended with comments on the need for public intellectuals and the different ways the public can educate themselves. Professor Arnold Heidsieck from the German Department argued that intellectuals today look at other media and how much people depend on the Internet for information, despite its many factual inaccuracies. Professor Polan argued that, much like Oprah! viewers, Internet surfers run the risk of learning in a very disconnected, decontextualized fashion when they use search engines to do their research. English Professor Teresa McKenna mentioned how disconnected professors can be from their students and how universities have failed to develop tools to measure what students have learned.

Suggestions for the paper

- Explore Winfrey’s identity as a black woman and how she influences and was influenced by other black women.
- Define an intellectual more clearly. Make a distinction between American intellectuals and other types of intellectuals.
- Provide a historical perspective on public intellectuals. Show the change in opinion from Margaret Mead’s day to the present day.
- Examine Winfrey’s relationship with her audience and how it is different from the relationship between professor and student.
Participants

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Lois Banner, History
Geoff Baum, Communication
Leo Braudy, English
Alice Gambrell, English
Gerald Goodnight, Communication
Ed Guthman, Journalism
Arnold Heidsieck, German
Tom Hollihan, Communication
Selma Holo, University Galleries
Lanita Jacobs-Huey, Anthropology
Marty Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center
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