OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Donahue Talked, Oprah Listened

By DEBORAH TANNEN

Washington

SINCE Oprah Winfrey decided to end her show, many people have praised her shrewd business sense. But there's another aspect to her genius that accounts for her phenomenal success: her gift for connecting personally with her audience. Phil Donahue may have pioneered the daytime TV format, but Ms. Winfrey transformed it from report-talk, focused on information, to rapport-talk — the telling of secrets and personal troubles that drives many women's friendships.

I experienced the difference firsthand when I appeared on both "The Phil Donahue Show" and "The Oprah Winfrey Show" to talk about differences in women's and men's conversational styles. Before my 1990 "Donahue" appearance, the producers asked me to devise two lists of statements, one more likely to be said by women, one more likely to be said by men. These were put on the screen in pairs periodically throughout the show. Also, a video I had made contrasting how boys and girls sit while talking to their friends (girls facing each other, boys at angles) was shown, and the experiment was replicated with members of the studio audience. Mr. Donahue took questions from audience members and telephone callers.

Several months later, when I was on "Oprah," the first segment was given over to two couples who talked about their problems communicating. Even after I joined them in the second segment, they continued to do a lot of the talking. When Ms. Winfrey introduced me, she began by saying she had read my book and "saw myself over and over" in it, then retold one of my examples, adding, "I've done that a thousand times."

Ms. Winfrey talked less than Mr. Donahue — and invited no distant callers. Instead, she got the women in the audience to interact with the couples and with one another. When a young woman rose to say that her boyfriend always listened to her, an older woman stood up and told her this was because they weren't married: "When you put that ring on your finger, it's going to be a whole different story!" It brought down the house.

By the topics she raised on her show and by telling her own secrets, Ms. Winfrey brought into the open previously hidden problems like rape and incest and exposed the vast underbelly of pain, loneliness and abuse that can be as much a part of family life as the love and cheer most people (and before her, most TV shows) present to the world. If her uncanny ability to be utterly herself before a large audience makes it seem as if she's been doing this her whole life, it may be because she has: she was reciting in her grandmother's church in Mississippi from the time she was 3.

It's no surprise that in announcing her show's end, in 2011, Ms. Winfrey choked up. Her career started that way. She'd been hired by a Baltimore TV station to co-anchor the nightly news, but lacked the emotional detachment that job required. If she flubbed a line, she laughed; if a story was sad, she cried. The station reassigned her to an early-morning talk show. With that, her career as a news anchor ended, but her future — and the transformation of daytime TV from report-talk to rapport-talk — began.

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