



**Tearjerker
of the week:
Kate Muir
reviews *The Kid
with a Bike***

Has
America
fallen out
of love with
Oprah?

**Tim Teeman on
the story behind the
sackings at Winfrey's
TV channel**

This week on OWN, the Oprah Winfrey Network, on two different days you could have watched eight-hour marathons of *Disappeared*, the complicated tales of those who have vanished, or *I Escaped: Real Prison Breaks*, including the stories of how “a serial killer uses bed sheets to escape a 15-storey prison window” or how “a sociopath bomber uses a hand-made key to open a door to freedom”.

It isn't clear how these shows inspire the viewer “to live their best lives”, as Winfrey often advised on her chat show, which ended after a victorious 25-year reign last May. But on neither day would you have seen Winfrey herself: her on-screen absence, albeit not total, is widely held as the reason why OWN is doing so poorly. In less than a year Winfrey has gone from being the queen of daytime television and celebrity confessionals, who built a daytime chat show into a media empire, to the crisis-beset owner of a struggling cable TV station.

The performance of the 15-month-old network has been so lacklustre that earlier this week OWN, owned jointly by Winfrey's Harpo Productions and Discovery Communications, sacked 30 of its 150-strong workforce. In a statement Winfrey said: “It is difficult to make tough business decisions that affect people's lives, but the economics of a start-up cable network just don't work with the cost structure that was in place.” Winfrey also cancelled one of the station's mainstays, *The Rosie Show*, a chat-show hosted by Rosie O'Donnell that recorded its final edition on Tuesday, to be broadcast on March 30.

According to the celebrity news website TMZ, Winfrey called a “town hall” meeting for staff after the sackings, explaining that OWN had a duty to the board of directors to justify how much the network was spending “in light of anaemic ratings and problems with advertisers”. Winfrey added that OWN's fiscal year ends on March 31, “and she had to get OWN's financial house in order before April 1 — or else the entire network would be in jeopardy”. To date, Discovery has invested \$312 million (£197 million) in OWN and has just installed more of its executives there.

“Oprah and the network are in trouble,” Steve Lanzano, president of TVB, the not-for-profit trade association of America's commercial television industry, told *The Times*. “Discovery has put a lot of money into a network that hasn't gotten a following [the station averages 318,000 viewers in prime time]. Martha Stewart and Conan O'Brien found it hard enough to go from broadcast TV to cable, let alone build a 24-hour programming network in their name and image as Oprah has done. On broadcast TV Oprah had an ‘appointment viewing’ audience: they were interested in what she had to say and knew when and where to find her. She doesn't have that now.”

Discovery confirmed yesterday that Winfrey had not contributed any of her own considerable fortune to OWN.

In fact *Fortune* magazine reported that when Discovery's CEO David Zaslav approached her with the idea of setting up the network, he said: “I don't want your money, I want you.”

But that doesn't mean Winfrey won't fight hard for OWN to succeed. Whether or not you like her brand of



So, tell me, when did it start to go wrong?

For 25 years she was America's billionaire daytime queen. Now Oprah Winfrey is losing staff and fans as her cable station flounders. **Tim Teeman reports**



spiritual self-help and syrupy chat, her chutzpah and popularity with TV audiences propelled her from poverty to global fame and an estimated net worth of \$2.7 billion (£1.7 billion). Stuart Levine, TV editor of *Variety*, says that in recent months Winfrey has taken a more hands-on role at OWN and that her “stamp” was likely to become more evident. He believes she should have appeared

Oprah Winfrey with Whitney Houston's daughter Bobbi Kristina on the show, a ratings triumph

more on OWN at the station's outset. “The big question is, will Discovery just keep throwing good money after bad at OWN, and for how long, without results,” says Levine. “Even in the long term I can't see OWN becoming a History Channel-type success. There are too many reality-show-based channels like OWN doing similar things. I can't see how it will break out from the pack.”

One way is for Winfrey to increase her visibility. “Her audience has not followed her because it can't find her,” says Lanzano. “She has no presence. Since the end of her talk show her magazine has lost 25 per cent of its circulation. She should have stayed where she was, interviewing cultural icons, keeping it fresh. To try to do ‘Oprah’ 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year is a difficult task.”

Winfrey gave up her chat show to escape that hamster wheel, to extend her brand with a TV station as she had with *O, the Oprah Magazine*, but she has discovered that her TV station works best when she appears on it. OWN's ratings are topped by her show *Oprah's Next Chapter*, which recently featured an interview with Whitney Houston's daughter Bobbi Kristina that attracted 3.5 million viewers. But that ratings

boost was momentary: it was soon back to eight-hour marathons of prison breaks leavened with “inspirational” programming; at its outset Winfrey had promised viewers that OWN's programmes would embody “every hero who inspired me, every lesson that motivated me, every opportunity that was ever given to me”.

Winfrey's fans have expressed their frustration at the station's website: “Bad move cancelling Rosie! We love her show!” “Get some consistent programming and advertise on other stations... some edgy reality programming will help and it doesn't need to be crazy [notorious MTV reality show] *Jersey Shore* stuff.” “I have watched you for so many years and have learnt so much and took so many life lessons from your shows in the past... Now I can never remember what channel you are on and I don't have the time to see what is on and when. I would welcome the *Oprah* show back with open arms.”

Advertisers are becoming nervous, says Lanzano. “Say you've bought ten spots on the basis that the show you're advertising in gets 100 ratings points. If the show only gets 50, the network offers you ‘make goods’: free advertising spots. But these stop being

attractive when they are shown to be hitting the same old consumers all over again. Advertisers will be asking what fresh, new programming is coming that will turn this around and the answer seems to be: ‘Not that much.’”

A report by research and investment firm SNL Kagan this week — which Discovery claimed was “riddled with inaccuracies and bad information” — claimed OWN would lose an estimated

“She should have stayed where she was, interviewing cultural icons

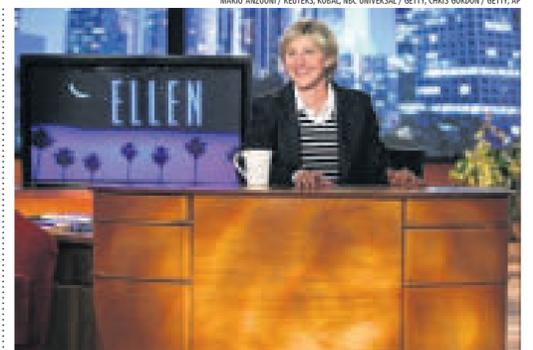
\$142.9 million this year. “There's excitement in the industry when Oprah does something special,” says Bill Carroll, president and director of programming at industry analysts Katz Television Group. “When she interviewed Whitney Houston's daughter it was everywhere. It underscores her celebrity and importance, that ability to get a unique interview that everyone wants. She can still get ‘the get’. But is there excitement about OWN day to day? Probably not.”

Carroll believes that Winfrey and OWN “may have been too optimistic believing that just by having her name it would be successful. It's good when Oprah is on camera, but when she is not part of the mix it's less successful. There is still a huge desire among those devoted to her to hear her, see her and know what she is thinking.”

The format originated by Winfrey has not grown stale; it survives in permutations across daytime television. Ellen DeGeneres's chat show remains phenomenally popular; ABC's *The View* and CBS's *The Talk* are both all-female panel talk shows, while stars who Oprah originated, such as Rachael Ray, Dr Phil McGraw and Dr Mehmet Oz have their own programmes. There are food shows such as *The Chew* and wellbeing shows such as *The Revolution*. In the autumn the former primetime news anchor Katie Couric arrives with her daytime chat show, *Katie* for ABC. Indeed, the cancellation of the soap operas, that used to be the backbone of the daytime schedules, to make way for all this chat has led many viewers to complain they want less gab and more drama. The *Oprah* show that was remains the foundation of this landscape.

“The supposition must have been that in the same way that the talk show and magazine were launched with Oprah at the centre, that this would have been enough to brand the channel,” says Carroll. “But it's more difficult than that in a multichannel universe with more than 400 stations. They need to take advantage of the best resource they have: Oprah herself. She needs to be on OWN more than once a week. By the end of her chat show she had perfected a mix of celebrity, information and lifestyle. They need to figure out the same mix for OWN.”

Earlier this week a Discovery spokesman said it was not about to pull the plug on OWN (“We're in it for the long term”) and Harpo Productions' co-president Erik Logan vowed that the station was “poised for some tremendous growth from a business and ratings point of view”. However



Ellen DeGeneres's chat show is hugely popular, above, but Rosie O'Donnell, right, has been dropped, while Martha Stewart, below, has struggled on cable TV



Lanzano believes that whatever new shows OWN is planning to unveil on April 5 might come too late.

Winfrey was not available for comment yesterday.

“Oprah is very competitive and doesn't like failure, so I'm sure she'll do anything to make it work,” says Lanzano. “But how much will she and Discovery commit to keeping OWN going before deciding the moment has come to throw their hats down? I believe that moment is getting closer. I wouldn't say the odds were good.”

OWN can “turn it around,” says Levine. “But it's tough sledding. It can take decades to build cable stations and I don't think OWN will ever be hugely profitable. I wouldn't say it's going to close next week, but I wouldn't bet a lot of money on it being around in ten years.” Levine thinks Winfrey could more beneficially embrace “a global ambassadorial role like Bill Clinton”. So no return to the chat-show sofa where most of her fans want her to be? “She didn't want to do it any more,” says Levine. “And everyone knows, once you're on top, there is only one way down.” But, Carroll cautions, “Never underestimate Oprah. With her talk show she proved she was ‘the little engine that could’ and given everything she has been able to accomplish I believe that she can be ‘the little engine that could’ again.”



Video exclusive inside the famous Abbey Road recording studio thetimes.co.uk/music





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PREVIEW SCREENING: THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

Sean Penn stars as Cheyenne, a jaded former goth rock star living off his royalties in Dublin with his wife (Frances McDormand). When he discovers the true extent of his father's humiliation in Auschwitz, Cheyenne sets off on a life-changing revenge mission — at his own pace — into the heartland of America.

The film is an oddball road movie with smart dialogue and images of real beauty, and new music from David Byrne and Will Oldham. It will be released nationwide on Friday, April 6, but Times+ members can attend one of 13 free preview screenings across the country at 6.30pm on Thursday, March 29. Doors open at 6pm. Book your tickets today at mytimesplus.co.uk

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