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Walter Winchell

Lead: From the mid-1930s to the 1950s, arguably the most powerful journalist in the United States was Walter Winchell.

Intro.: "A Moment in Time" with Dan Roberts.

Content: For nearly three decades Winchell helped set styles, shaped public opinion, passed on juicy gossip, boosted the careers of those he admired and occasionally ruined others. He came from a troubled home and early on sought the escape afforded by show business. Winchell spent his teenage years and

early twenties in the backwaters of America singing and dancing as a vaudeville performer. During the spring of 1920 Winchell began to put together a little gossip sheet for the members of the company with which he was touring. This led to a column in the "The Vaudeville News" and eventually employment on its staff. Ten years on the circuit had made Winchell into an entertainer and taught him how to reach and hold an audience, lessons he applied to great usefulness in the future.

His first major break was writing the Broadway news in a tabloid, the New York Evening Graphic. The column was a collection of jokes, gossip, some show business news and lots of slang. Winchell helped promote and define slang terms,

thus endearing himself to a whole generation of hip urban young people anxious to speak as well as live the liberated life of the 1920s. Winchell's people didn't get married, they Adam and Eved it. They didn't have fun, they made whoopie. More than any of his colleagues he specialized in gossip and his gossips separated in the column by three dots were very personal and more often than not embarrassing.

In the 1930s Winchell got into politics and became an enthusiastic booster of Franklin Roosevelt, of various liberal causes and helped forge American public opinion against the looming Nazi threat in Europe. He was an ardent supporter of the war effort and attacked isolationists as disloyal. Had his career ended with the

war, according to biographer Neil Gabler, his reputation would probably have survived intact, but it didn't. During the Cold War he shifted his attack from the Nazis to Communism and became a supporter of Senator Joseph McCarthy. His style became more strident and less attuned to a new generation which was turning its back on newspapers and radio in favor of television, a medium in which he did not excel. Gradually his popularity faded and he lost those media outlets which gave him prominence.

Walter Winchell died in 1972, a shrivelled memory of the cult of celebrity he helped create.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

**Gabler, Neil. *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity*.
New York, NY: Knopf Publishing Company, 1994.**

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