Walter Winchell: The Power of Gossip dir. by Ben Loeterman (review)

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The documentary Walter Winchell: The Power of Gossip identifies the 1930s and 1940s gossip columnist and radio star as the “architect” of today’s media environment: of the blurring of information and entertainment, of the outsized power of key media providers, of the exploitation of audience attention by bad actors. A safer and more useful conclusion might have been that the manipulation of news and audience attention was common long before Twitter, the internet, and smart phones. Winchell himself was only one in a long line of master media manipulators; such people have been manipulating media since there were media to manipulate. Nonetheless, this one-hour documentary does provide some key insights into Winchell’s methods that also illuminate some similarities between different eras of American mass media.

Winchell’s origins in a New York family of struggling Jewish immigrants and his early career in vaudeville informed his media career. His performing talents were passable, but once he began circulating newsletters to vaudeville colleagues about who was doing what in the industry, he realized he had a talent for words. His ten years on the vaudeville circuits had given him a reliable sense of his audience. His newsletter led to work at New York tabloids, starting with the New York Evening Graphic in 1924, where his show business column fit in well with stories of celebrity vice and scandal. Winchell’s “slanguage”—invented phrases such as “making whoopee” and “infanticipating”—was key to his popularity. His clever wordplay transferred well to radio in 1930, where his weekly radio show was a top “information” program, opening with the rapidly spoken phrase, “Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. America, from border to border and coast to coast and all the ships at sea. Let’s go to press.” His style of direct address to his listeners built a strong parasocial connection with them, while sound effects such as telegraph keys conveyed urgency, exclusivity, and excitement. He used his newspaper column and radio show to make or break careers and
he soon ruled an information empire of stars, agents, and producers all paying him obeisance at Manhattan’s Stork Club. While Winchell had started by providing “inside dope” on the entertainment industry, politicians such as President Roosevelt, noting Winchell’s huge audience, began courting him as well. And Winchell was happy to promote the New Deal: he wanted to be considered a legitimate journalist. His close ties with the prosecutors of Bruno Hauptmann, the accused murderer of Charles Lindbergh’s baby, enabled him to broadcast exclusives during the 1935 trial. He became close to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, a fellow collector of secrets; and, most notably, before World War II he openly mocked Adolf Hitler and the Nazis (referring to “swastinkers”) at a time when American Nazis held rallies at Madison Square Garden (1939), and many Americans were eager to stay out of any European war. Speaking openly against antisemitism as a prominent Jew was risky; but it seemed to do Winchell no harm.

The filmmakers address the challenge of visualizing the work of a writer and radio broadcaster with several techniques. Actor Stanley Tucci impersonates Winchell’s style vocally; we see shots of Tucci’s mouth and lower part of his face while words in contrasting typeface appear across the screen timed to Tucci’s delivery. Extensive archival footage is edited together in a series of quick cuts, although most of it is merely generally illustrative rather than actual footage of Winchell (for example, we see some stock vaudeville performers but not Winchell himself). The filmmakers rapidly zoom in and out of a rich array of archival stills; some of which are also spun and whirled around, apparently to persuade us that the past was not boring. Though Tucci’s voice is substituted for recordings of the radio program (perhaps the audio quality of the few remaining recordings was too poor), a few clips from Winchell’s early 1950s television programs provide direct aural and visual evidence of Winchell’s performance style. The voiceover narration is provided by Whoopi Goldberg and a few eyewitnesses are interviewed; but much of the story comes from prominent historians: Neal Gabler (Winchell’s biographer), Daniel Czitrom, Thomas Doherty, Susan Douglas, Jane Rhodes, and Betty Winfield. The historians describe Winchell’s improbable path to fame and fortune with an apt mixture of humor and insight.

The filmmakers identify the beginning of Winchell’s decline with the rise of television and of Senator Joseph McCarthy, whom Winchell considered a fellow populist attacking elites. Winchell’s full-throated allegiance to the McCarthyite campaign to purge show business of the politically incorrect was, at the time, not unpopular, and the anticommunist movement itself did not vanish with McCarthy’s ignominious end. Winchell may not have been a good fit for television, any more
than fellow radio star Fred Allen was. But probably the best explanation for his fall was that his ability to harness exclusive information simply faded with the decline of the entertainment industries he knew—such as vaudeville, radio, and the Hollywood of the studios. New power brokers arose, audience tastes changed, and although he tried to stay relevant into the 1960s, he had lost his appeal.

The filmmaker’s insistence that Winchell was the originator of everything objectionable about today’s news media is simplistic. Winchell had developed a successful strategy for his era and applied it as long as he could, until he was replaced by outlets such as People magazine and the syndicated television program Entertainment Tonight, gossip purveyors better attuned to new platforms and shifting audience interests. His apparent political reversal, from New Deal supporter to McCarthyite, was likely due to his instinct for attacking elites and helping audiences enjoy a sense of being “in” on something rather than any particular political principles. His skill in shaping and directing audience attention, whether adulatory or enraged, through language, clever wordplay, and a stranglehold on exclusive information was what made him successful. And this documentary’s fast-moving visuals and clever sound bites provide a vivid account of this skill.