



**NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES**

Narrative and Treatment/Script

Sections of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and other selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Public Programs application guidelines (Notices of Funding Opportunities) and additional information on grant programs at <https://www.neh.gov/divisions/public>. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Public Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, such as the script or treatment, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Wincheldom: The World of Walter Winchell

Institution: International Documentary Foundation

Project Director: Ben Loeterman

Grant Program: Media Projects Development

3. NARRATIVE

A. Nature of the request

This is a request for a grant of \$75,000 to develop and write a 60-minute documentary film about the lasting cultural impact of gossip columnist cum political commentator Walter Winchell.

WINCHELLDOM: *The World of Walter Winchell (w.t.)* traces this flawed protagonist, who at the height of his career had a combined print and radio audience of fifty million, two out of three American adults. In addition, it explores the phenomenon Winchell pioneered: celebrity, gossip, politics and news all rolled into one. It was, concluded the *New Yorker* in a 1940 six-part profile, nothing less than a, “new form of journalism.” A friend eulogized him saying, “Winchell’s primary objective is to explain the 20th century to his millions of readers. The fact is, however, that historians will be unable to explain the 20th century without understanding Winchell.”

Our film will breathe new life into Winchell’s original newspaper columns and broadcast scripts, which comprise a special collection recently digitized by the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center (NYPL). Our film will draw on the roughly two-dozen broadcast recordings that have been preserved, including Winchell’s Pearl Harbor broadcast. In addition to the film, we will work with the NYPL to create a visually and aurally rich website to serve as a central, accessible portal to all things related to Winchell at the library and on the web.

B. Program synopsis

WINCHELLDOM explores the heady world of Walter Winchell, who stormed the gates of journalistic authority and created a new way for Americans to get their news from a new breed of mass communicators. At his height, Winchell commanded a combined newspaper and radio audience that topped fifty million—two thirds of American adults. His story prefigures today’s fast-paced, celebrity- and gossip-driven, politically charged media circus. His story could not be more timely.

Walter Winchell grew up poor in East Harlem, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants. He rose quickly from vaudeville hooper to backstage Broadway tattler by posting gossip about his acting troupe on backstage bulletin boards. In 1929, a New York tabloid offered him a job, which became a springboard to his position as a powerful syndicated columnist and news commentator. From the 1930’s through the 1950’s, Winchell was a household name. Fellow reporter Ralph Gardner remembers, “Winchell’s articles were loaded with snappy, acerbic banter. His broadcasts were slangy, narrated with machine-gun rapidity, a telegraph key clicking in the background. Each week he opened his radio show with “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!”

Winchell invented a new form of newspaper writing and radio delivery. He created slang and “Winchellisms,” indeed a whole language of Winchellese, where falling in love became “pashing it,” “sizzle for,” “that way,” “go for each other,” “Garbo-ing it,” or simply “uh-huh...” As a

reporter, he would string together partial phrases, thinly veiled rumors and allegations. He had a knack for spinning embarrassing tales about famous people, exploiting his contacts and trading gossip with friends, often in return for his silence. He did not hesitate to bury an enemy.

A plug in a Winchell column could guarantee any show a successful run or raise the stock of a performer. Equally, a dig in the column could tarnish or even destroy reputations, as aviator Charles Lindbergh and jazz singer Josephine Baker learned the hard way. Winchell blamed Lindbergh for advising Neville Chamberlain to acquiesce to the Germans at the Munich talks. He broadcast searing attacks on Baker after she publicly complained she had been snubbed at the Stork Club, his favorite haunt, because she was black. Some of his barbs became *cause célèbres*, stirring his rival Ed Sullivan to declare, “I despise Walter Winchell because he symbolizes to me evil and treacherous things in the American setup.”

Cultural critic Kurt Andersen writes, “Winchell was all about the grotty exercise of power, relentlessly and specifically, day after day doling out bits of patronage or punishment in response to the greedy murmur of little men. Studios would pay a press agent as much as \$5,000, the equivalent of \$25,000 today, for giving a movie an ‘orchid,’ Winchell’s maximum praise.”

Winchell was a larger-than-life figure who connected with the common man and woman by letting them in on the secrets of the rich and powerful. He became the most feared and admired man in America, who transformed entertainment journalism and aggressively used his daily columns and Sunday night radio program to champion “Mr. and Mrs. America.” He was the first to understand that gossip could be wielded as a weapon to empower his readers and listeners.

But Winchell used his position to address issues beyond gossip. In 1933, he gained the ear of the newly elected president, Franklin Roosevelt, and taught FDR how to talk to Americans directly, unfiltered by the news media. Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” reached his audience directly. And Winchell was the first major commentator to directly attack Adolf Hitler and American pro-fascist organizations like the German American Bund. His voice became a political asset, supporting Roosevelt’s effort to convince an isolationist-leaning America to join World War II.

In his personal life, Winchell faced successive tragedies (e.g., broken marriages and failed romantic relationships, the death of his young daughter and his son’s suicide). Professionally, he played all sides: He palled around with Al Capone even as he befriended J. Edgar Hoover. He served as Roosevelt’s mouthpiece, yet later took up the cause of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Herman Klurfeld, who worked beside Winchell for nearly 30 years and ghostwrote many columns for him, said, “He was an egomaniac, he was stubborn and in the end he was fooled by an evil devil named Roy Cohn.”

Winchell mastered newspapers and radio, but stumbled when he tried to make the jump to television. He was simply not telegenic. “The familiar hat and pulled down tie are a throwback to the old newspapering days,” one critic smirked. The energy Winchell projected on radio looked manic on television, bordering on the crazy.

Winchell eventually lost his relevance. “I died on October 16, 1963,” he said of the day of his last column. His final breath, nine years later, was just a formality. And yet, his legacy abounds.

“He was not only present at the creation of modern journalism,” concludes Neal Gabler, his biographer, “but in many respects he *was* the creation.”

C. Humanities content

During preliminary research, we have identified five major themes that run through the film and will benefit from further detailed research. They include:

Café Society set against the Depression

Gossip and Celebrity Culture

News for the Masses

Age of Sound

Political Messaging

1) Café Society set against the Depression

Café society, the most popular scene of New York City’s nightlife in the 1920’s and 30’s, was a culture that Walter Winchell actively nurtured and loved to promote. Featured in his syndicated columns, its following became national, even in the midst of the Great Depression. A slice of New York’s elite lived seemingly unaffected by the economic calamity facing the nation. They were artists, journalists, performers, intellectuals, gangsters, socialites, and nobodies aspiring to be somebodies. Their lives became the stuff of newspaper columns and magazine articles, eagerly read by millions of Americans who wanted to forget the Depression, even momentarily.

But Winchell’s column offered a special take. “Winchell saw himself as the champion of the Depression’s dispossessed and he harbored a class resentment, shared by his readers, of most of the celebrities and socialites he chronicled,” writes cultural critic Frank Rich. He broke the usual taboos to write openly about marital problems, illnesses and finances of the famous, regardless of whether he could verify the facts. One commentator wrote, “Winchell called the Stork Club ‘New York’s New Yorkiest place,’ a delicate ecosystem where fame, power and wealth coexisted according to a set of arbitrary yet magical rules. If one imagines the celebrities as gazelles, admiring their reflections in the ecosystem’s lagoon, then Winchell was the crocodile lurking under the surface waiting to feast.”

It may seem absurd that Americans racked by financial strife and widespread unemployment could find interest and release in socialites whose deepest concern was whether they rated a column mention. Yet people *did* care, and they consumed news of café society, says historian Ann Douglas, “as if it were an exciting new social drama to replace the now-shuttered bawdy face of twenties Broadway.” Along with Depression-era movies, national coverage of café society became a leading distraction for people suffering their own personal woes.

Café society was exotic and unprecedented—a blend of well-known Broadway personalities such as Irving Berlin, stylish socialites, people who derived power just for being fascinating, as

well as racial mixing on the dance floor. The movement's major outposts became the Colony, the El Morocco, and Winchell's personal favorite, the Stork Club. Gossip columnists would camp at these outposts, as Winchell did at the Stork Club's table 50, to gather information while the young, the wealthy and the outrageous vied for their attention. Young socialites strove to become notorious (think Paris Hilton), propelled by Winchell's column and others he spawned.

2) The Rise of Gossip and Celebrity

Walter Winchell invented the modern gossip column. Society pages had long existed and were referred to as "gossip," but their content was tame. They detailed which society people attended which events, but were constrained by a sense of propriety and fear of legal retribution. Winchell disregarded prevailing conventions in order to publish juicy tips he received without bothering to fact-check. He cleverly shielded himself from lawsuits by inventing slang— known as Winchellese — to convey information ambiguously. To say a man was "*that way about a woman*," gave a reader a clear impression of the situation but left Winchell with other defensible interpretations. Similarly, "*blessed event*" "*on the merge*" or "*on the verge*," "*sealed*," "*this-and-that-way*," "*uh-huh*," "*curdled*," "*Adam-and-Eveing it*" and "*on fire*"—all terms Winchell coined— conveyed and blurred his meaning at once. Slang became the secret sauce in his rise in popularity.

"Through the mid-1920's, most newspaper editors were reluctant to publish even something as inoffensive as the notice of an impending birth for fear of crossing the boundaries of good taste," says biographer Neal Gabler. "Winchell introduced a revolutionary column that reported who was romancing whom, who was cavorting with gangsters, who was ill or dying, who was suffering financial difficulties, which spouses were having affairs, which couples were about to divorce," and dozens of other secrets, peccadilloes and imbroglios that had previously been concealed from public view."

Today's celebrity culture and attendant media feeding frenzies are the direct descendants of Winchell's creation. In *Only Gossip* (New York Times magazine, 2002), cultural critic Kurt Andersen notes that even as Winchell the man faded from public view, the world was being Winchellized. "Two years after he died, Time Inc. started *People*, a weekly magazine devoted to the well-knowns from all divisions. It was the first major American magazine predicated on the basic Winchellian (and later Warholian) idea that fame—15-minute fame, Jay-Z fame, John Ashcroft fame, Kim Kardashian fame, whatever— differs only in magnitude, and that fame is *inherently* interesting and desirable."

3) News for the Masses

The business of print journalism was in upheaval. It had been slowly dividing into two camps: the respectable and the sensational. Winchell stoked the latter, developing it into a new form of journalism. The expensive, subscription-only model of most respectable papers was losing ground to cheaper, sensational papers that sold daily on the street. Upper-class subscribers still existed, but now the majority of readers included working and middle-class people who liked the tabloid format and preponderance of photos throughout.

Historian Charles Ponce de Leon writes in *Self-Exposure* that the “mass-circulation press’s commitment to revealing the truth and spreading knowledge coexisted with an equally compelling obligation to provide readers with good stories.” If working-class people were reading papers as a form of diversion, then it became more important for stories to entertain than inform. Tabloid publishers turned to sensationalism to provide entertainment, arguing, “The newspaper’s function is not to instruct, but to startle!”

American newspapers verged closer in form and content to the British tabloids, which had a deep tradition of sensationalism. British publishing magnate Alfred Harmsworth is credited with defining the characteristics of a true tabloid: the brevity of each news article (“No story of more than two hundred and fifty words!”), the multitude of photos per issue, even the use of the term “tabloid.” In 1919, at Harmsworth’s urging, US publisher Joseph Patterson introduced an American-born tabloid, *The New York Daily News*. Its circulation quickly skyrocketed.

Winchell got his first big break in 1924 with another tabloid, the *Evening Graphic*. That same year, William Randolph Hearst, launched the *Mirror*. He became obsessed with beating Patterson’s *Daily News* at its own game. The *Mirror* would print bigger headlines, feature more pictures, and raid the *Daily News*’ staff. Its content would be 90% features and entertainment, 10% news. The paper’s managing editor told new hires, “Forget about journalism as the term is usually used.” Instead, stories featuring sex, flappers, flaming youth, crime and celebrities would fill up the paper’s news hole.

In 1929, Hearst lured the *Evening Graphic*’s editor Emile Gavreau and, soon after, its star columnist, Winchell. At the *Mirror*, “Winchell not only provided his readers with sensationalistic stories, but also purveyed a cosmology, an attitude toward the world which was every bit as rich as the cosmology of the traditional press,” his biographer writes. “In place of cool reason, heated passion. In place of the primacy of world and national events, he provided one of trivial and salacious events, a drama of life which reflected a world gone mad.” A *New Yorker* profile observed that Walter Winchell’s new form of journalism “sent a quiver of vigor through the aging Hearst organization,” and by extension, the entire newspaper industry. Stanley Walk, then the *Herald Tribune*’s editor, said he thought Winchell deserved more credit than he ever received for, “making newspapers relevant and interesting to a mass readership.”

In hindsight, Kurt Andersen says, “It is hard to overstate Walter Winchell’s power. Aside from publishers like Greeley, Hearst, Pulitzer and Luce, no press figure before or since has been so celebrated. Thousands of daily newspapers carried his *New York Mirror* column.” An editorial in the *Louisville Herald-Post* proclaimed, “Winchell is the high man in the outlying districts,” making him the first newspaperman to claim a truly national audience. There are those who affect not to understand his daring flashes. But to understand Winchell is a test of Americanism, no less than to be able to explain the Constitution.”

4) The Age of Sound

With a single guest appearance on humorist Will Rogers’ radio show in 1928, Winchell received widespread praise as a natural talent for the new medium. Four years later, he signed with Jergens Lotion for *Jergens Journal*, a platform to deliver gossip in his high-pitched voice and

staccato delivery for a half-hour each Sunday evening. He took radio by storm, just as radio was taking off.

“The term radio began circulating in the 1910’s but didn’t really take over until the 1920’s,” explains media historian Susan Douglas in *Listening In*. “It created a sensation, in part *because* it was so magical— communication with no connecting wires. Before 1924, radio was still a very personal experience where the listener put on headphones and entered another world, the world of sound.” That would all change by the decade’s end, when radio established itself as a dominant mass medium. “The rapidity with which the thing spread has possibly not been equaled in all the centuries,” gushed one commentator. The *New York Times* crowned radio “the most popular amusement in America.”

Radio’s very popularity, however, made its airwaves overcrowded and confusing to parse. In 1926, New York had 38 radio stations, Chicago had 40 and nationwide there were 620. By 1934, the newly formed Federal Communications Commission (FCC) addressed the problem by directing nascent radio networks to broadcast the same show nationwide at the same time (called “chain broadcasting”). Ball games, boxing matches and horse races were early favorites, but so too were serials like *Amos ‘n’ Andy*.

Radio quickly became habit-forming and created new cultural norms. Music— whether classical, jazz or popular— assumed a new importance. It was no longer “just for elites or the intelligentsia, but for people of all walks of life,” writes historian Daniel Czitrom in *Media and the American Mind*. The demand for musicians of color shot up. Fletcher Henderson’s band, joined by Louis Armstrong, began airing three times a week. By 1927, Duke Ellington’s ensemble appeared nightly coast-to-coast, live from the Cotton Club.

Some feared the ’29 Crash would take down radio with the rest of the economy. Instead, in addition to music, radio became highly valued for its storytelling. “Newspapers were devastated by the Crash, with advertising revenue plummeting,” writes Douglas, yet, “radio enjoyed a 90% increase in ad revenue during the Depression’s first two years.”

The thirties became the age of sound. Radio personalities began to eclipse movie stars in popularity. The sales of radio receivers skyrocketed from eight million in 1928 to eighteen million in 1932 (by comparison, daily newspaper circulation dipped 7 percent in the same period). As the country strove to bear the stresses of the Depression, radio provided a sense of shared experience that helped unify America in hard times.

Newspapers tried to muscle in on the action, with varying degrees of success. Print journalists and columnists also wanted in to the new medium. In 1928, the *Graphic* looked into finding airtime for Winchell, suggesting, “Mr. Winchell is very popular, and could talk on Broadway and New York plays, about which he is a unique authority.” His one guest shot on Will Rogers’ show had cemented his bona fides.

Merging newspaper and radio talent helped forge new conglomerates. “Newspapers used radio broadcasting to create a new kind of media corporation that utilized multiple media to circulate information to new audiences and generate more profits,” writes historian Michael Stamm in

Sound Business: Newspapers, Radio, and the Politics of New Media. Winchell was at the forefront and leveraged his popularity for ever-higher fees.

5) Political messaging

President Trump tweets. President Roosevelt chatted. What connects them, and Winchell's era to ours, is these politicians' ability to command a new technology for their own purpose. They bypass existing media filters to establish a direct line of communication with their constituents. Historians have long marveled at Roosevelt's ability to seize and communicate power so successfully, says Betty Winfield in *FDR and the News Media*. In doing so, Roosevelt established a new benchmark for the contemporary relationship between presidents and the press. "Presidents who dramatize and personalize issues and policies receive favorable news coverage," writes Winfield. "Roosevelt had been editor-in-chief of his college paper, *The Harvard Crimson*, and it showed."

While Walter Winchell was at the Stork Club trading gossip tips, Franklin Roosevelt was fighting an uphill battle to become his party's 1932 candidate for president. Fierce pushback to his nomination came from Winchell's rival, the political columnist Walter Lippmann, and Winchell's own boss, the media mogul William Randolph Hearst. Roosevelt countered by sending autographed photos and personalized messages recorded on phonograph records to each arriving convention delegate. He flew to Chicago to deliver his acceptance speech in person, the first time the acceptance was broadcast nationwide on radio. Two words in his final paragraph stuck—New Deal. Winfield writes, "Although not original, the magic ring that FDR gave the phrase caught the imagination of newspaper reporters and cartoonists alike."

Roosevelt realized that newspapers' power of persuasion was concentrated in a few widely syndicated columns, including Winchell's gossip column, Walter Lippmann's political column, and Drew Pearson and Robert Allen's insider's tip column. FDR became particularly adept at courting columnists, and just about everyone else when it came to managing his political image. "No pictures of me getting out of the car, boys," was all it took for him to cajole hordes of photographers to set their cameras down until he struck a more muscular pose. "News photographers voluntarily destroyed their own plates when they showed Roosevelt in poses that revealed his handicap," writes historian William Leuchtenberg. Roosevelt's power to control his message on radio became evident once he decided to hold intimate, hour-long chats directly with the American people.

In March 1933, facing the worst banking crisis in history, Americans tuned in to hear the president weigh in. "They heard a new FDR," says historian Erik Barnouw. "It was not an 'address.' It was a chat, a fireside chat. Quietly, without a hint of anxiety, and with utter clarity he outlined steps being taken to deal with the crisis. He discussed where 'we' were going, seeming to bring the nation into the thinking of the White House."

Roosevelt's challenges were great, and he readily turned to the press for help. After four dreary years of Herbert Hoover, twice-weekly lively exchanges with FDR enthralled the White House press corps. They willingly complied with whatever rules the president set: *no* quotes unless supplied in writing by the White House press secretary, *all* else was for background only, *no*

attributing said info. Information shared off-the-record was to be considered *strictly* confidential. Nonetheless, reporters ended their first meeting with FDR by breaking into spontaneous applause.

Roosevelt adapted his tactics and news management according to the challenge at hand, whether it be personal, the Depression or World War II. “FDR showed the importance of technological artistry for whatever mass media existed,” concludes Betty Winfield. “The balance between access and governing is still a delicate balance between frankness and caution. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency yielded American victories over the Great Depression, the Germans and the Japanese. Yet the question remains, was there also a legacy struck for the unbridled control of governmental information in a democracy?” Our script will explore this question in depth from today’s perspective.

D. Creative approach

The arc of Walter Winchell’s life story adapts easily to a classic three-act structure. A prologue will drop the audience into the middle of Winchell’s story at perhaps its most dramatic moment— when Winchell is being summoned to the White House— and reverberates throughout the film’s first act as the story reveals how Winchell rose from vaudeville hooper to that dramatic moment at the White House.

We will recreate settings that were key to Winchell’s story: a booth, table settings and telephone to evoke his famous table 50 at the Stork Club; a typewriter and newsroom corner to bring alive his perch at the Hearst papers; a radio microphone and telegraph key in a broadcast booth to recall his weekly shows for *Jergens Journal* (see 7. Images). Each will be paired with signature sound effects: frenetic rotary telephone dialing, clacking typewriter keys, wavy radio tuning and a rat-a-tat-tat telegraph key to give the film sonic momentum as the story builds.

Ben Loeterman, an accomplished documentary director, is known for his special attention to sound design and creating soundscapes that subtly and emotionally cue the audience. Loeterman invites his music composer and sound designer to create an interchangeable bag of sound tricks that can be arranged and re-arranged at the final mix. In his film on outlaw John Dillinger, for example, clattering typewriter keys, car pistons and popping machine gunfire blend indistinguishably as the protagonist’s exploits roil out of control. Similarly, his film about Leo Frank intertwined the driving, chugging clunks of a printing press and steam railroad engine— sometimes in harsh realistic tones, sometimes in a disorienting, abstract manner— to help speed up and slow down the story’s pace at key moments.

For visuals, we will employ feature film techniques, including shooting with prime lenses to create emphasis through differing focal lengths. For example, a radio announcer’s microphone in shallow focus would provide a number of efficient opportunities to shoot various radio bits from a variety of angles.

Loeterman looks forward to working with long-time photo-animation collaborator Bryan Papciak at Handcranked Studios to create a visual grammar for bringing Winchell’s words to life

onscreen. After all, words were the sharpshooter-of-Broadway's ammunition both in print and on the air. Everything about them, including Winchell's delivery, was unique. The sarcastic, slangy euphemisms he created to dodge the censors and potential lawsuits—a vernacular called "Winchellese"—and his rapid-fire delivery bring to mind today's best rap and hip-hop artists.

We will also revisit the Walter Winchell as film audiences know him best, portrayed by Burt Lancaster in the 1957 film *Sweet Smell of Success*. We will include clips from the film, whose protagonist is based directly on Winchell, to demonstrate the impact of his popular personae and to weave other perceptions of him from our interviewees.

For primary source material, we will excerpt archived recordings of Winchell broadcasts, hunt for others and draw on hundreds of annotated scripts that comprise the Winchell Papers at the New York Public Library's Billy Rose Collection at Lincoln Center. An actor, perhaps Stanley Tucci, will voice Winchell's columns and scripts help propel the story, channeling his signature style, a technique similar to *Letters From Baghdad*, where Tilda Swinton voiced Gertrude Bell's words.

E. Audience & distribution

Our target audience for *WINCHELLDOM: the World of Walter Winchell* begins with a mass broadcast audience and expands from there to include special screenings and possible exhibitions at museums and libraries around the country. A letter of support from AMERICAN MASTERS, attached regarding the PBS series' intent to promote, broadcast and stream the program, in item 5, guarantees the additional promotional/marketing arms of PBS International and PBS Digital; these will be employed to ensure exposure via international broadcast agreements and on new platforms including digital notebooks and phones.

WINCHELLDOM spans decades of American cultural history including the advent of several developments that fueled the rise of a vibrant media culture based on a mix of news, celebrity and gossip that thrives today. We will target specific institutions and build on their existing databases to promote special preview screenings around the country. Newspaper syndication, radio, motion pictures and television all came into popular use during Winchell's time.

Each of these institutions retain a distinct constituency dedicated to the development of each medium, including the Newseum in Washington DC, the Paley Center for Media with branches in New York and Los Angeles, and the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, scheduled to open in 2018 in Los Angeles. We will work with these institutions in addition to the New York Public Library's (NYPL) Billy Rose Collection at Lincoln Center, home to the Walter Winchell Papers, comprised of annotated radio scripts, newspaper columns and other written materials that span Winchell's lifetime. We intend to work with the Library to promote additional screenings and then, separate from this request, create an aurally and visually rich website to serve as a central, accessible portal to all things related to Winchell on the web and beyond.

F. Rights and permissions

Materials we anticipate using include annotated radio scripts, newspaper columns, stills, stock footage and period feature films as follows:

Annotated scripts and newspaper columns—

Winchell Papers, Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library, (Public Domain)

Stills—

Stock houses (Getty et al) and public domain sources (Library of Congress, National Archives)

Stock footage—

Stock footage houses (ITN et al) and public domain sources (Library of Congress, National Archives, Paley Center)

Period feature films—

Turner Classic Movies (we anticipate legal fees in order to secure fair use designation)

G. Humanities Advisers

Daniel Czitrom is a history professor at Mount Holyoke College and graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he received his PhD in History. He is a member of Columbia University's Society of American Historians, and has written such books as *New York Exposed: The Gilded Age Police Scandal That Launched the Progressive Era* (2016) and *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn of the Century New York* (2014). He has worked as an on-camera commentator and historical adviser on productions for both PBS and BBC America, most recently on 2014's *The Rise and Fall of Penn Station*, for PBS's *American Experience*. Czitrom's contributions to **Winchell** will span New York culture, the Depression and Prohibition, celebrity culture and history of journalism. Czitrom was a key contributor to Ric Burns' *New York*, episode 5.

Susan Douglas is the Catherine Neafie Kellogg Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan. She earned her PhD in American Civilization at Brown University, and is the author of such books as *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism's Work is Done* (2010); *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (1999); and *Where The Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (1994), among others. She currently serves on the board of the George Foster Peabody Awards, which recognizes excellence in media-based public service. Douglas's contributions to **Winchell** will focus on the rise of radio, new technology and the role of media in culture.

Jane Rhodes works at the University of Illinois in Chicago, where she is both a professor and the head of African American Studies. She received her PhD in Mass Communication Research from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and is the author of the books *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of A Black Power Icon* (2007) and *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (1998). Her work explores race, gender,

and mass media; the history of the black press; media and social movements; and African American women's history. Rhodes's contributions to **Winchell** will span New York, the Harlem Renaissance, the Black press and radio as a provider of opportunities but also a purveyor of racial stereotypes and reactions to Winchell in the Black press and communities of color. Rhodes will help us make sense of the controversy between Winchell and Josephine Baker in the context of racial discrimination experienced during the era of Jim Crow.

Andie Tucher works at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she is both a professor and the director of the Communications PhD program. She received her PhD in American Civilization from the New York University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and is the author of *Happily Sometimes After: Discovering Stories from Twelve Generations of an American Family* (2014). Her research interests include American cultural and social history, in particular the history of journalism and media, the history of photography, the history of the book, and the social uses of narrative; the evolution of conventions of truth-telling, documentary film; and the ethics of journalism. She was elected to the Society of American Historians in 2010. Tucher's contributions to **Winchell** will span tabloids, media culture, history of journalism and professional ethics in journalism.

Betty Houchin Winfield is the University of Missouri Curators' Distinguished Research Professor Emerita and Journalism Professor Emerita. She received her PhD from the University of Washington in Political Communication History, and her Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Joan Shorenstein's Center for Press, Politics & Public Policy from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Her published books include *Journalism, 1908: Birth of a Profession* (2008) and *FDR and the News Media* (1990). In 2012 she served as the Fulbright Distinguished Chair in American Studies, at University of Warsaw in Poland. Winfield's contributions to **Winchell** will span journalism, politicians use of the media, FDR specifically and professional ethics in journalism.

Thomas Doherty is Chairman of the American Studies at Brandeis University. He is a cultural historian with a special interest in Hollywood cinema and media culture. His 2013 book, *Hitler and Hollywood, 1933-1939*, sparked a research interest in Walter Winchell, one of the first American public figures to voice strong opposition to Hitler. Doherty's forthcoming book, *SHOW TRIAL: Hollywood, HUAC and the Birth of the Blacklist*, and his next book, about the media's role during the Lindbergh baby kidnapping case and subsequent trial, will each feature Winchell prominently. Doherty worked with Ben Loeterman previously on two films, about the influence of gangster movies on the desperado John Dillinger (for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE) and for an investigative biography of J. Edgar Hoover (for FRONTLINE). Unfortunately, book deadlines, Brandeis departmental obligations, family travel and holidays all conspired to keep Doherty from providing a letter of recommendation by the submission deadline. He has pledged to serve as a project adviser, contributing cultural and media context to **Winchell**, and has agreed to send his formal letter of support in coming weeks.

H. Media Team

Ben Loeterman (Writer/Producer/Director) is an accomplished writer/producer/director of public affairs and historical documentaries. He founded Ben Loeterman Productions, Inc. (BLPI) in 1996. *1913: Seeds of Conflict*, his NEH-funded film about the origins of today's Israeli/Palestinian conflict aired in the summer of 1915 on PBS. His previous NEH-funded film, *The People v. Leo Frank* broadcast nationally on PBS in 2009 to critical acclaim. Loeterman's work appeared on the first eighteen seasons of the PBS series *FRONTLINE*. He also contributed programs to the PBS history series *American Experience* including *Golden Gate Bridge*, *Public Enemy #1* and *Rescue at Sea*. He has received national Emmy awards for outstanding achievement in directing and investigative journalism, Amnesty International's Media Spotlight Award and two duPont-Columbia Journalism Awards.

Jennifer Pearce (Producer) has worked as a producer on a number of PBS documentaries. Her most recent work includes the NEH film *Edgar Allen Poe: Buried Alive* for PBS's *American Masters*, 2009's *The Great Famine* for PBS's *American Experience*, and 2008's *WE SHALL REMAIN: The Nation*, also for PBS's *American Experience*.

Neal Gabler (Principal Consultant) is a journalist, historian, and film critic, and the author of *Winchell: Gossip, Power, and the Culture of Celebrity* (1994). He holds advanced degrees from the University of Michigan in Film and American Culture, and is currently a Senior Fellow at the University of Southern California's Norman Lear Center. His most recent book, 2007's *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, was adapted in 2015 into a two-part, four-hour documentary for PBS's *American Experience*.

James Callanan (Director of Photography) has been the Director of Photography for many films on PBS, including Ben Loeterman's *The People v. Leo Frank*, and David Grubin's *Jews in America* and *The Buddha*. He also collaborated with Loeterman to shoot *The War that Made America*, *Public Enemy #1* and *Rescue at Sea*. Collaborating with director David Grubin, his work includes *Oppenheimer*, *RFK*, and *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided* (Emmy nominee for cinematography).

Peter Rhodes (Editor) has edited dozens of films for PBS and the BBC, as well as several independent documentary features. His extensive edit work with Ben Loeterman includes *The Prize: Oil, War and Strategy* (1992), *Frontline: Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?* (1993), *Frontline: Apocalypse!* (1999), *BBC/Frontline: Real Justice* (2000), *The American Experience: Public Enemy #1* (2000), *The War That Made America* (2004), and *John Portman: A Life of Building* (2011).

I. Progress

"History is a guide to navigation in perilous times."
— David McCullough

By any measure, these are perilous times. This proposal is being written at the end of two unprecedented political conventions. One punched out all traditions and protocol; the other

practiced them with precision. The media is scrutinizing current events with a microscope and simultaneously being scrutinized in what seems like unprecedented detail.

It's not the first time. Though we live with the pain and memory of the Great Recession, let's not forget the Great Depression. Though we're fighting an unconventional war against terrorists, let's not forget World War II and the terror it unleashed. Though during the last presidential campaign, one candidate was called a homegrown demagogue, let's not forget perhaps the country's most famous homegrown demagogue, Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Ben Loeterman's interest in the topic of Walter Winchell grew out of a yearning to better understand our present perilous times. Our modern media cycle is filled with social comics-cum-news commentators—Howard Stern, Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart (and all his “children”, Bill O'Reilly (until recently), and others. Yet none of them prove any match for Walter Winchell. He was the first, and created the mold for today's columnists and commentators. Neal Gabler's masterful biography, *Walter Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity*, provides rich insights into his development of this field. “Writing that Winchell was ‘arguably one of the principal architects’ of modern American culture,” says the *New York Times*, “Mr. Gabler turns the columnist's life into the springboard for a fascinating social history.”

Since it commenced preliminary research, Ben Loeterman Productions, Inc. (BLPI) has quickly expanded on Gabler's work in order to identify key historians whose own work builds out and sheds additional insights into the social history Winchell was at the center of. Our work to date includes:

- Conducting pre-interviews with numerous scholars. Their advice has helped us to compile an extensive bibliography of foundational works and unique takes on related topics, from the tabloid “composographs” of the 1920's to Paul Lazarsfeld's original study of radio listening that would beget the Nielson ratings.
- Identifying and targeting for further research an extensive collection of annotated radio scripts, first salvaged and donated by Gabler to the New York Public Library's Billy Rose Collection of the NY Public Library at Lincoln Center.
- Locating roughly two dozen actual recordings of Winchell's broadcasts (including one from December 7, 1941) and rare film footage in various collections, including Winchell's first-ever film appearance, in an 11-minute vignette from 1930 filmed at Vitaphone Studios in Queens that bears witness to his fully-formed Broadway persona.

Several historians have emphasized the centrality of Winchell as a cultural pillar of 20th century America. Our aim is to present their various perspectives, along with effective and stylish techniques including animating words on-screen, to convey that point.

We will use development funds to do necessary research in New York at the Winchell Papers and other New York collections, in addition to pursuing contacts at museums and finding additional affinity partners for the project. This research will provide the material needed to write and design a shooting script, which we plan to submit with an application for production funds.

J. Work plan

Work continues on several fronts, including: content research, contact with scholars and advisers, refining a funding strategy and submitting additional grant applications. The attached treatment serves as the basis for primary work under this Development Grant. Our plans during the grant period include:

- On-site archival research in New York, Washington D.C. and elsewhere
- Identify and pre-interview on-camera participants
- Possible on-camera interviews with elderly participants (Winchell's step-daughter)
- Prepare a shooting script with commensurate documents such as shooting schedules

Our anticipated schedule:

September

Distribute the most recent version of the treatment to scholars. Initial script drafting. Prepare databases of all identified archival material. Plan further research at NYPL Winchell Papers and Paley Center for Media in New York, the Newseum, National Archives and Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and conduct newspaper microfilm research in Boston. Meet with principal consultant Neal Gabler. Conduct phone interviews with key participants and Winchell family descendants. Identify new material that will add depth and complexity to the script.

October

Travel to New York, Washington D.C. and elsewhere for principal research and pre-interviews. Intensive scriptwriting, transcribing pre-interview quotes of on-camera participants, integrating archival material and testing visual techniques.

November

New details, fresh insights and scholar comments to be worked into a refined script. Consult with scholars on accuracy and proper balance among competing perspectives. Circulate latest script to scholars for review. Convene a video-conference for consultants to review and discuss the script in detail.

December

Final rewrites based on scholar comments will then be re-circulated to scholars for final review. The resulting script with accompanying budget will be incorporated into our NEH production grant submission in January 2019.

K. Fundraising plan

We seek \$75,000 to research, write and develop the film project for production with ancillary activities; no other funds have been raised to date. We estimate the project to cost \$650,000, pending final script breakdowns to determine original shooting, animation, stock footage and stills rights costs. In addition to the NEH, we are seeking grants from the Knight Foundation, the Freedom Forum Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Democracy Fund, National Press

Foundation and others. A crowd-funding campaign will be considered at a later stage of fundraising after a trailer is edited. The balance of production funds will be raised from licensing broadcast, digital and foreign broadcast rights to American Masters, PBS Digital and PBS International. Additional funding may be sought from state humanities councils and other sources to support ancillary activities including the website once those plans and costs are more fully developed.

L. Organization profile

Ben Loeterman Productions, Inc.

Ben Loeterman Productions, Inc. (BLPI) has produced programs for the PBS flagship series *Frontline* and *American Experience*, for WQED Pittsburgh and PBS, Sundance Channel and the BBC in England. Primary funding for these films has come from NEH, CPB, PBS, major foundations (Sloan, Rockefeller, Park) and corporate sponsors (BNY Mellon). BLPI received an NEH grant to script and then produce *The People v. Leo Frank*, which aired on PBS to critical acclaim with glowing reviews in the NY Times, LA Times and Associated Press, which ran in the Washington Post, Boston Globe and elsewhere. With funding for development and production from the NEH Bridging Cultures initiative, *1913: Seeds of Conflict* held special screenings at an NEH symposium on World War I, film festivals and on college campuses. BLPI's most recent broadcast effort, *SEEDS*, aired on PBS and continues to be widely distributed by PBS International. [Its website](#) is a portal to the work of involved scholars.

International Documentary Association, Los Angeles, CA

Founded in 1982, the International Documentary Association (IDA) is a non-profit 501(c)(3) that promotes nonfiction filmmakers, and is dedicated to increasing public awareness for the documentary genre. IDA sponsors non-commercial documentary film projects with the belief that the power and artistry of the documentary art form are vital to cultures and societies globally. IDA works with films in all stages of production, including supporting filmmakers through the crucial phases of distribution and outreach. IDA has served as fiscal sponsor for such acclaimed films as *Spellbound*, *Trouble the Water* and *The Way We Get By*, as well as Ben Loeterman's recent NEH-funded film, *1913: Seeds of Conflict*.

M. List of collections of materials to be used

During preliminary research, we have identified a multitude of sources. Among them:

The Walter Winchell Papers, Billy Rose Collection, NY Public Library at Lincoln Center

The Walter Winchell papers span 1920-1967 and consist of annotated radio scripts, correspondence, miscellaneous scripts for stage and film, scrapbooks, news articles, clippings from his newspaper columns, and other items related to his journalism career. The largest portion of the collection is the radio scripts, usually typewritten and annotated, which date from 1930 to 1959. Films scripts include two to which Winchell contributed, *Broadway through a Keyhole* and *Wake Up and Live* (1937), in addition to *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) based on Winchell's character. Clippings cite Winchell's role in public controversies, such as the battle

over racism at New York's Stork Club, which pitted Winchell against entertainer Josephine Baker, and Winchell's accusations of Communist sympathies made against various public figures during the McCarthyist 1950's.

Scripts and Writings 1930-1959

The radio scripts span the years 1930-1959 and include typescripts of Winchell's weekly radio broadcasts. Winchell's reporting of world events is documented here along with his controversial style. Among the more important sponsors are Jergens Lotion, Gruen Watch Company, and American Tobacco Company. Fresh material will be pulled from the Truth Tobacco Industry Documents collection database at UC San Francisco, African-American Newspaper database and the newly digitized Variety Magazine archives database online.

Scripts/Sponsor:

1930-1932 annotated radio scripts / Lucky Strike cigarettes

***1932-1946** annotated radio scripts / Jergens Lotion

1952-1954 annotated radio scripts / Gruen Watchmakers

Misc. others, including Kaiser frozen foods, Hudnut, ABC and American Tobacco Company

Other Writings 1933-1941: Including miscellaneous scripts for stage and film and transcripts of thematic news articles, drafted for his newspaper column.

Script titles: Including *Broadway Thru a Keyhole* (1933); *The Excitement King* (1934) by Samuel Marx and Walter Winchell; *New York Story* (1941); *Wake Up and Live* (1936); and *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957).

Subjects of thematic articles: Including George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Christopher Columbus, New York City, theaters and critics, newspaper people, various seasons and holidays, crime, success, Communism, and "Things I Never Knew 'til Now."

Clippings and Columns 1920-1958

Winchell's newspaper **columns from 1923 to 1958**. These columns were published in *The Vaudeville News*, the *New York Evening Graphic*, and the *New York Daily Mirror*.

Clippings about Walter Winchell: 1926-1935

Library of Congress –

Bard of Broadway (1930) 11-minute Vitaphone short

Paley Center for Media—

Jergens Journal with Walter Winchell Radio: June 22, 1941; June 12, 1938; March 22, 1939; September 03, 1939; December 12, 1939; March 26, 1944; June 22, 1944; December 19, 1948

The Walter Winchell Show Television Series Premiere, October 5, 1956

The Walter Winchell Show Television Series Final, December 28, 1956

DesiLu Playhouse: The Untouchables Part I Narrated by Walter Winchell TV: April 20, 1959
DesiLu Playhouse: The Untouchables Part II Narrated by Walter Winchell TV: April 27, 1959

N. Preliminary interviews

Interviews to date include:

W. Joseph Campbell, historian of journalism, American U.
Clare Corbould, historian, African American studies, celebrity (Australia)
Daniel Czitrom, cultural historian of New York and the press, Mt. Holyoke U.

Christopher Daly, historian of journalism, Boston University
Thomas Doherty, historian of culture and film, Brandeis University
Susan Douglas, historian of radio, U. Mich

Kathryn Fuller-Seely, media historian, UT Austin
Neal Gabler, Winchell biographer, professor of creative writing, Stonybrook U.
Khalil Muhammad, historian of Harlem Renaissance, NYPL/Harvard U.

Daniel Okrent, cultural historian of New York, prohibition and the press, author
Jane Rhodes, historian, African American Studies, UIC
Michael Schudson, historian of journalism, Columbia

Karen Sternheimer, historian of gossip, celebrity and tabloids, USC
Andie Tucher, historian of journalism, Columbia
Betty Winfield, historian of politics and journalism, MU (Missouri), emeritus

Melvyn Patrick Ely, cultural historian, William & Mary
Ann Douglas, cultural historian of New York, Columbia U.

O. User-generated content

Not applicable.

4. TREATMENT

PROLOGUE

The film's prologue plunges into a dramatic moment in Winchell's story, just as he is soaring toward the peak of his popularity and power. It is March, 1933, and the phone at his famed perch, table 50 at New York's Stork Club, is ringing. Winchell answers, to learn that the newly elected president, Franklin Roosevelt, would like to meet with him first thing in the morning at the White House.

Stunned, Winchell takes the night train; the 9:00 a.m. meeting will last only 10 minutes. As the train barrels toward Washington, we learn from interviews that Winchell's is the origin story for today's celebrity-led and gossip-driven media culture and political discourse. From the '20's to the '50's, he would lead a cultural revolution in which control of the American agenda shifts from the elites of high culture to a new breed of mass communicators. The new order he established remains today.

The White House meeting's result: Roosevelt enlists the country's most popular media figure to his cause, Winchell recasts himself from Broadway gossip monger to populist political commentator, and America is forever changed.

ACT 1: The Steep Climb

Born to Jewish immigrants, Walter Winchell grows up on Harlem's poorest streets, dropping out of the sixth grade to help support his family in a vaudeville act with his boyhood friend George Jessel. He soon proves to be a better babbler than hooper, and starts posting bits of gossip about his troupe on backstage bulletin boards. At 22, he acquires a Corona typewriter and uses it to write for the *Vaudeville News* under the heading "Broadway Hearsay." That leads to a column at the tabloid *Evening Graphic* in 1924, and then another at the *Daily Mirror* in 1929. The tabloids are experiencing explosive growth, to the chagrin of seasoned journalists. The *Mirror's* formula—love and romance for women, sports and politics for men, and crime (especially sex crime) for all—gives Winchell a springboard to vault from Broadway gadfly to gossip magnate.

He has jumped into journalism as it faces rapid, dislocating changes. New York's first tabloid, the *Daily News*, arrives in 1919 and within five years has two major competitors: William Randolph Hearst's *Daily Mirror* and the even more sensational *Evening Graphic*. The tabloids are salacious and often silly, half the size of traditional newspapers, chock full of pictures and targeted toward immigrants and young women, who belong to no pre-existing newspaper subscriber base. It's an audience tailor-made for Walter Winchell. His column becomes wildly popular, and popularity brings him power. As Winchell's stature grows, he begins holding court nightly at the Stork Club's table 50.

Riding the new wave of syndication, his column begins running in more than 1,000 papers nationwide, generating an audience in the millions. Columnists, especially political columnists, begin shaping public opinion on a large scale. "A widely syndicated writer has far more political

power than any Senator,” notes the *New Republic* in 1938. At his height, Winchell is the most widely syndicated columnist in the country.

As the Depression deepens, radio provides a new kind of communal experience, linking Americans in a common purpose. Everybody is tuning into radio, and radio is becoming synonymous with Winchell. By 1932, Winchell’s Sunday night show, *Jergens Journal*, is drawing big nationwide audiences. His personal form of slang, dubbed Winchellese, provides a convenient shield against accusations of libel or slander from his detractors. In time, *Jergens Journal* regularly beats out *Jack Benny* and *Amos ‘n Andy* for the top spot on Sunday nights. To his readers, Winchell is the “Bard of Broadway,” the hero he portrayed himself as in an 11-minute short film for Vitaphone. Outside New York, Broadway becomes a world every bit as mythical as Hollywood and its stars.

Winchell is “more at home before the radio mike than any newspaperman we have ever heard,” writes one radio critic. His high-pitched, crackling delivery is a welcome change for listeners. Neither news nor entertainment, it is an odd amalgam of both. A later generation would call it “infotainment.” The program rundown is like a vaudeville act, beginning with a dramatic news story, followed by a series of international bulletins, adding a dash of Broadway gossip, sharing a few humorously quirky items, and finishing with a sentimental or humorous one-liner. “Get your audience, keep them interested, sell them an idea in the middle, finish with a great line and get off for the bows,” is how he described his weekly radio performances.

Tragically, three weeks after Winchell’s broadcast debut for *Jergens Journal* in December of 1932, his private world comes crashing down. Gloria, his nine-year-old daughter, takes ill with pneumonia and dies on Christmas Eve. Winchell sinks into depression. His personal life had been and would always be messy, littered with marriages, failed relationships and eventually, a son’s suicide. Now, he feels that Gloria has deserted him, just as his fame is beginning to soar.

ACT 2: On Top of the World

In March 1933, Winchell is unexpectedly summoned to the White House a week after the inauguration of President Franklin Roosevelt. He takes train from Penn Station to Washington, not knowing what to expect. It takes just ten minutes with the new president for Winchell to become a devout Roosevelt booster. Of course, Roosevelt wants something from Winchell: his audience. Winchell suggests a format that becomes known as “fireside chats.” In his next broadcast, Winchell tells Mr. and Mrs. America they have a new hero in FDR. Winchell channels his personal grief over losing Gloria into helping the nation grapple with the deepening Depression. He strikes an ever more populist note, speaking to and for Everyman and Everywoman. Winchell’s tone turns more political and he takes pride in being called “the most rabid anti-Hitlerite in America.”

“The Column,” as Winchell calls it, becomes a calling card for powerful friendships ranging from gangster Al Capone to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. In January 1935, Winchell carves out a starring role for himself at the trial of Bruno Hauptman—accused and convicted of the kidnapping and murder of famed aviator Charles Lindbergh’s baby. Winchell broadcasts the

circulation details of ten-dollar bills the FBI had linked to a ransom payment, hoping to take partial credit for Hauptmann's capture. At the trial, he claims a front row seat. One day, Hauptman takes notice and complains to the judge, "He [Winchell] should not be here. He is not a nice man." To which Winchell replies in his next day's column, "We are never nice to suspected murderers!"

Five years after his first visit with Roosevelt, Winchell returns to the White House. This time, unlike his quick brush with the President in 1933, he is welcomed as a valued member of FDR's team. Eight reporters from the White House press corps cover his visit. Winchell is no longer considered a reporter. He has himself become a celebrity. When he makes the cover of *Time* in July of 1938, the magazine notes, "He has never before been so fully seen, heard, read or paid."

Winchell leverages his celebrity and friendship with J. Edgar Hoover to play a key part in the surrender of mobster Louis Lepke, the Mafia's head of Murder Inc. and the FBI's most-wanted man. After a call from Lepke, Winchell tells his radio audience, "Your reporter is reliably informed that the fugitive is on the verge of surrender. If Lepke can find someone he can trust, I am told, he will come in. I am authorized by the G-Men to state that Lepke is assured of safe delivery. He may contact me at the *New York Daily Mirror*. No part of the \$36,000 reward will be claimed by me."

After weeks of playing cat and mouse, Lepke tells Winchell one night to drive to Madison Square and park on 24th Street. Out of the darkness, Lepke walks up to his car and gets in. Winchell casually chats him up as he drives a few blocks, parking behind a car with J. Edgar Hoover waiting inside. After a brief introduction from Winchell, Lepke slides into the FBI director's car.

Counting on a banner headline for his huge exclusive, Winchell is livid when the front-page editor bumps his scoop in favor of more worldly news: Hitler is about to invade Poland. Winchell feels demeaned and still gives his editors hell many weeks afterward for the decision.

Walter Lippmann and other serious journalists deplore Winchell's lack of authoritative sources and sometime sketchy ethics. But Americans in the Depression had grown distrustful of traditional authority. Winchell's column and broadcasts directly challenge prevailing conventions. He connects with growing audiences as an increasingly political populist. The bigger Winchell gets, the less Broadway matters to him. "I don't care who phffts on Broadway, but if Hitler and Mussolini phfft, *that's* news."

In 1940, France falls to Hitler. Americans lean into their radios and listen closely as Winchell argues strenuously for Roosevelt to intervene in Europe. They do not realize he is really acting as the president's mouthpiece, and reactions to his new focus on policy and politics are mixed. One senator accuses him of "blitzkrieging" the American people into war, while Broadway press agents bemoan the lack of his usual juicy mix of show business news and tips. But Winchell sells the war just as effectively as he had previously sold celebrity gossip, and his audience keeps growing.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Winchell claims a sort of personal victory. He tells his radio listeners, “Good evening Mr. and Mrs. America. The American population is electrified tonight with the knowledge that every quarter of the globe will be at war tomorrow night. President Roosevelt will ask a war declaration... This will mobilize the efforts of the whole American people. The National Emergency is no longer [just] a phrase.”

Winchell cannot, however, completely ignore the views of his ultimate boss, William Randolph Hearst. Hearst opposes FDR and any hint of intervention in Europe, and he has never liked Winchell. But because of his value to the *Mirror* and his whole syndicate, Hearst had allowed Winchell to mix politics into his column.

Winchell has been testing the publisher’s patience for over a year. Hearst’s son, acting as assistant publisher, tells his father, “We may as well face it, we no longer have a first-rate Broadway columnist in Winchell. His main interests apparently lie in international, social and religious problems. He is, so I am told, getting increasingly harder to handle, and continually threatening to quit.” To which the father replies, “I agree with you entirely about Winchell. In fact, the next time he wants to quit, please let me know so you can accept his resignation.”

Winchell is clever enough never to mention quitting again. Still, he continues to lash out at his editors, and even his radio sponsor, Jergens. “My opinions are not for sale. I mean that I do not repeat, echo, or parrot the opinions of my employers.” And he keeps ratcheting up his political views on the air. He becomes increasingly unsparing of domestic Communists, along with fascists and isolationists. “We are less in danger today from Hitler’s army in Paris than we are from Stalin’s agents in America,” he announces on air. “Hitler has stormed the French forts, but Stalin is assaulting American factories.” As the war grinds to an end, Winchell has reason to feel good and confident about the future. Then his world comes crashing down again, this time in slow motion.

ACT 3: The Long Goodbye

Winchell’s column of April 13, 1945 has none of his usual pithy humor. “The President is dead,” he writes. America had lost its leader, but Walter Winchell had lost his friend, his father figure and his benefactor. Damon Runyon, his longtime friend and co-conspirator in Broadway gossip, succumbs to cancer soon after. His relationships with the *Mirror* and with Jergens Lotion grow increasingly testy. As he ages, the master of good timing is seen as increasingly out of step. Determined to prove he hasn’t lost his currency, in 1949 he jumps to ABC for \$650,000, making him the highest paid single act in show business. When the British journalist, Alistair Cooke, visits America, he describes Winchell as “some freak of climate— a tornado, say, or an electric storm.”

The first biting public attack on Winchell comes on October 16, 1951, when Josephine Baker walks into the Stork Club. Baker, a great entertainer and source of racial pride, is just back from France, where she has traded her U.S. passport for French citizenship. The Stork Club serves her guests, who are white, but not her— a clear affront and confirmation of her fears that she would face retribution upon returning to America. She blames Winchell, a long-time friend of the

club's owner, for the insult. Ed Sullivan then piles on, saying in a radio interview that Winchell symbolized evil and treacherous things in the American setup. "Suddenly, the Stork Club's slight toward Baker blows up into a national question of Walter Winchell's patriotism and accusations of megalomania," says biographer Neal Gabler.

His downward spiral continues. In January 1952, the *New York Post* prints an unflattering 24-part series about him. By March of that year, he suspends broadcasting, claiming a viral infection. In fact, he has succumbed to clinical depression.

Sulking one night at the Stork Club, Winchell befriends Roy Cohn, whose boss, Senator Joe McCarthy, soon becomes a regular at Winchell's table 50. Cohn and McCarthy dangle Winchell a kind of status he has missed ever since FDR's death. He becomes McCarthy's mouthpiece. "Senator McCarthy will give the nation another big shudder," he alerts readers in one column. He remains loyal to McCarthy even as the senator is publicly brought down. Winchell fears that he will be next. The Stork Club folds. A dispute with ABC in 1963 virtually ends his broadcast career. Times have changed.

EPILOGUE

"What would happen if I lost the column?" is the underlying question that plagued Winchell for decades. "One day they will say to me, 'Mr. Winchell, we are sorry, but it's this way,'" Winchell had said as far back as 1934. "I'm all set for that line. It will only get that far and I'll reach for my hat with a smile." Instead, when the day finally comes, he writes, "I died on October 16, 1963." His last breath, nine years later, is just a formality. His daughter Walda is the sole mourner in attendance at his funeral. Winchellism had simply abandoned him.

Walter Winchell was the people's champion, fighting for Roosevelt and against Hitler in the '30's and '40's, then becoming a vengeful rumormonger and McCarthy's henchman in the '50's. He whetted Americans' insatiable appetite for gossip, elevated fame and celebrity to an essential part of people's everyday lives, and affirmed our right to know the most intimate details of public figures. Although his influence is still keenly felt today, his story has never before been told onscreen. However, his legacy is very much alive. Long after Winchell's column ceased publication and the man was forgotten, America is awash in a culture of gossip and celebrity, where entertainment seemingly takes primacy over every other value.