

Learning How to Plug In

Eddie Jaffe was earning \$12.50 a week picking up ad copy for Scripps Howard's *New York World-Telegram* when he was told that his pay would be cut by 10 per cent. He squawked to his bosses; they told him he was an ingrate. Look at the chief, they said. Why, Mr. Howard cut his own salary to \$40 from \$400.

It was 1931, and with the Depression taking hold Jaffe had little option but to mutter to anyone who'd listen. He was still beefing when his messenger rounds landed him in the composing room at the *New York Mirror*. It wouldn't be the first time that a compositor's advice changed a life.

"Whya tellin' me?" a printer told Jaffe. "Tell Winchell."

The printer dialed Walter Winchell's third-floor office and put Jaffe on the line. He told his tale; the next day a blind item about Scripps Howard's penury led Winchell's column. *World-Telegram* management never found out who had fed Winchell—although they hired a private eye to do so—but Jaffe became a hero in the city room.

Figuring the boy had a discreet pipeline into Winchell, reporters handed off juicy items that they couldn't get into print themselves. "Then one day a sportswriter says to me: 'I gave you four items Winchell used,'" Jaffe recalls. "When do we get a plug?"

"I said, 'What's a plug?'"

In the city rooms of the '30s you were only naive once. Jaffe was soon handling burlesque stripper Maggie Hart—"the Poor Man's Garbo," obliged Winchell in his column—for half of anything she earned over \$250 a week. He went on to handle clients ranging from the shah of Iran to Jackie Gleason to Rosie the Elephant, joining a few dozen other journalists manqué with one hand in the newsroom and the other in the publicity till.

Press agents' incomes depended on their abilities to feed the columnists clever lines and titillating gossip in return for plugs for their clients. But collectively they were as vital to Winchell and the Broadway and Hollywood columnists who imitated him—Ed Sullivan, Dorothy Kilgallen, Leonard Lyons, Earl Wilson, Louella Parsons, Hedda Hopper—as the column inches were to their livelihoods. When the bulldog editions came up at the



corner of Broadway and Fiftieth a couple of generations ago, you'd invariably find a dozen or two flacks frantically turning to page 10 of the *Mirror* to see if they'd made Winchell. Anyone else was second best.

In his heyday, which ran from the mid-'30s through the mid-'50s, Winchell was syndicated in about 1,000 papers. His Sunday night radio show was often the top-rated program in the nation. He had sources so well wired—FDR, J. Edgar Hoover, mobster Frank Costello—that his column often served as a direct line from the highest levels of power and influence to Mr. and Mrs. America (and all the ships at sea). His lair in the Stork Club's Cub Room—table 50—was a magnet for dignitaries and movie stars ready to drop a bombshell. But one of the worst-kept secrets in newspaperdom was that Winchell needed a lot of help from press agents to put together 1,500 words worth

of one-liners, verses, and vignettes every day. It was a bit of inside gossip that was particularly nettling to Winchell.

"Once his byline was on the column, he saw the entire creation as his," wrote Herman Klurfeld, who served as Winchell's chief in-house ghostwriter from 1938 to 1965. "Winchell never was able to tolerate any suggestion that others helped him to compose his pieces."

The best of the press agents got to be quite proficient at mimicking Winchell's unique rat-a-tat "slanguage." But not so good that they could outdo the master. "He never failed to improve something that I thought couldn't be improved on," says publicist Al Davis. "He was a better Winchell man than any of us."

Davis spins a story about the time that Winchell ran a purported interview of General Douglas MacArthur's son by Winchell's own son. Ghostwriter Klurfeld's quip, according to Davis, was "my kid wrote it." Apocryphal? Perhaps. But as Winchell once told Klurfeld, "Never spoil a good story by trying to verify it." ■



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