THE MARTIANS HAVE LANDED!
A History of Media-Driven Panics and Hoaxes

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In 1938, a small group of actors and musicians in a tiny New York studio frightened the most powerful, educated society on earth. For a short time, over a million people thought that Earth was under attack by Martians. How was it done? We may be vulnerable to similar scares in the future.

It was arguably the greatest hoax of the twentieth century. Shortly after 8 o’clock on the evening of Sunday, October 30, 1938, many Americans became frightened after listening to a radio drama about a Martian landing in the New Jersey marshlands. The broadcast was heard live across the continental United States on 151 CBS affiliates. The play made references to real people and places, and used convincing sound effects and special bulletins to enhance its credibility. The drama was produced by Orson Welles and aired on CBS’s *Mercury Theatre of the Air* from the Manhattan studios of WABC. Remarkably, Welles was just 23 years old at the time. The actual play was written by an obscure scriptwriter named Howard Koch under Welles’ direction and was loosely based on the 1898 blockbuster *The War of the Worlds* by British science fiction writer H.G. Wells. (Koch soon became world famous, but not for helping to craft the Martian script. This man, who had a knack for realism and a flair for the dramatic, was a budding literary genius who soon penned the script to one of the greatest films of all time: *Casablanca.*)

Parts of New Jersey and New York City were the most seriously affected, since the drama described Martians attacking both states. The center of fear was tiny Grover’s Mill near Princeton, New Jersey, the “Martian landing site.” An eerie fog shrouded the region that evening, contributing to the anxiety. Upon hearing radio reports of the towering Martian machines operating nearby, several Grover’s Mill residents grabbed their guns and bravely ran out to fend off the invaders, opening fire on a huge outline barely visible through
the mist. When dawn broke, it became evident that the would-be heroes had punched several holes into the local water tower. In one Newark, New Jersey, block, over twenty families fled their homes, covering their faces with wet handkerchiefs and draping towels over their heads to protect themselves from the "poison gas." Fifteen people were treated for shock at St. Michael's Hospital. Phone lines jammed as police were swamped with calls from residents desperate for information on the "gas raids."

At the Port Norris station, one New Jersey police officer wrote in the blotter: "Between 8:30 P.M. and 10 P.M. received numerous phone calls as result of WABC broadcast this evening re: Mars attacking this country. Calls included papers, police departments including N.Y.C. and private persons. No record kept of some due to working teletype and all thru extensions ringing at same time. At least 50 calls were answered. Persons calling inquiring as to meteors, number of persons killed, gas attack, militia being called out, and fires. All were advised nothing unusual had occurred and that rumors were due to a radio dramatization of a play." At the New York Times offices, 875 phone calls were logged. At Manhattan police headquarters, the thirteen telephone switchboard operators were overwhelmed. Hearing the initial reports of a large meteor impact nearby, two Princeton University geologists rushed to ground zero, only to find others, like themselves, searching for the object.

The effects of the broadcast rippled across the country. In Indiana, a woman burst into a church shouting: "New York destroyed; it's the end of the world. You might as well go home and die. I just heard it on the radio." In the American heartland of Lincoln, Nebraska, hundreds of panicky residents jammed the police switchboard wanting to know if it was true and what they should do. St. Louis residents huddled in the streets of some neighborhoods to discuss a plan of action in the face of the impending war. A Pittsburgh man returned home during the broadcast only to find his wife clutching a bottle of poison, screaming: "I'd rather die this way than like that." North in Toronto, station CFRB was flooded with inquiries from worried Canadians. Anxious Washington State residents jammed the phone lines of police, fire and newspaper offices in Seattle. Most terror-stricken were residents in the tiny town of Concrete, sixty-five miles northeast of Seattle. When electricity failed at a critical point in the broadcast, some loaded their families into cars and headed into the mountains; others fainted. In Mason City, Iowa, there was confusion and fear as a man entered the bus station, shouting: "Tragedy in New York. Turn on your radio." People huddled around a radio to listen to the broadcast until it became evident that it was a drama. In New York, theater actor Caroline Cantlon broke her arm as she rushed downstairs after hearing that smoke was billowing from Times Square. In London, H.G. Wells expressed agitation upon hearing news of the reaction, remarking:
"I gave no permission whatever for alterations which might lead to the belief that it was real news."¹⁵

The drama appeared in newspaper schedules across the country on the day of the broadcast, clearly identified as a play, but many listeners did not make the association. An opening announcement clearly stated its fictional nature: "The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air in War of the Worlds by H.G. Wells."¹⁶ The trouble was, many people tuned in late. Radio ratings company C.E. Hooper estimated that at 8 o'clock, 3.6 percent of radio listeners across America had tuned in to hear Welles, compared to the popular Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show which captured nearly 35 percent of the audience.¹⁷ It was a David and Goliath battle, and each week Welles was being devoured in the ratings. How could he compete with the most popular show on radio? In 1938, listeners commonly tuned back and forth between radio programs, especially during the first few minutes. Known as airplaning, it was the modern equivalent of TV channel-surfing. Each week Welles had a small window of opportunity to hook listeners. The weakest part of the Edgar Bergen Show was after his opening comedy routine, when introducing a guest singer. If the performance was not outstanding, listeners would airplan for something better, before switching back.¹⁸ Welles likely planned his script with this in mind, using live dance music interrupted by special bulletins to grab listeners as they were switching stations.¹⁹ Two separate surveys after the broadcast estimated that roughly half of listeners to the Welles drama tuned in late, missing the opening disclaimer, leading many to believe it was a live news report.²⁰

After the opening announcement that listeners were hearing a drama, the show began as a typical radio program of the era. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. From the Meridian Room in the Park Plaza in New York City, we bring you the music of Ramon Raquello and his orchestra."²¹ The music was interrupted at intervals with special bulletins of increasing length and gravity, describing, at first, explosions on Mars followed by a meteor crashing near Grover's Mill. "Live" bulletins from the scene followed. The meteor was later identified as a "metal cylinder" that, before the announcer's eyes, sprouted legs and towered into the air. The cylinder contained hideous Martians who opened fire with "death rays," scorching onlookers.²² The reporter cried: "A humped shape is rising out of the pit. I can make out a small beam of light against a mirror. What's that? There's a jet of flame springing from that mirror, and it leaps right at the advancing men. It strikes them head on! Good Lord, they're turning into flame!" Shortly after, dead silence and a grave announcement followed: "Ladies and gentlemen, I have just been handed a message.... At least forty people, including six state troopers, lie dead in a field east of
the village of Grover’s Mill, their bodies burned and distorted beyond all possible recognition.”23 Later the announcer describes a bleak and devastating scene as the Martian machines are marching on New York City: “All communication with Jersey shore closed... army wiped out...”24 Soon a voice was heard saying: “I’ve just been handed a bulletin. Cylinders from Mars are falling all over the country. One outside Buffalo, one in Chicago, St. Louis....”25

The Federal Communications Commission immediately investigated the broadcast amid the subsequent public uproar. Just one day after the incident, Iowa senator Clyde Herring delivered a blistering attack on Welles, CBS, and the entire radio industry, which he intimated could not be trusted. He called on his fellow legislators to pass a law that would require the content of all radio programs to be reviewed by a board of censors. “Radio has no more right to present programs like that than someone has in knocking on our door and screaming,” Herring said.26 His censorship drive failed, and five weeks later the FCC announced that it would take no action against either Welles or CBS. Concerned with censorship, Commission members decided not to create more bureaucratic regulations, noting that the actions taken by CBS since the episode “were sufficient to protect the public interest.”27 In its ruling, the Commission cited a letter from CBS saying that they would refrain from using the technique of live news interruptions and bulletins in future dramas.28

**Was the Reaction Exaggerated?**

Of the estimated six million people who heard the drama, as many as 1.7 million believed they were hearing a news bulletin.29 While there are claims that hundreds of thousands panicked and tried pack belongings, flee in cars or arm themselves with weapons, such claims may be a media exaggeration.30 Mass fright? Yes. Panic? No. The mass panic claim was promoted in a 1940 study by Princeton University psychologist Hadley Cantril. Much of Cantril’s study was based on interviews with just 135 people. Sociologist William Bainbridge believes the extent of the panic has been exaggerated and is critical of Cantril for citing just a few colorful stories from a small number of people who panicked. Bainbridge contends that on any given night, out of a pool of over a million people, at least a thousand would have been driving excessively fast or engaging in rambunctious behavior. From this perspective, the notion of a Martian panic was primarily a news media creation.31

Sociologist David Miller notes that while many newspapers published accounts of suicides and heart attacks by frightened citizens, the day after they proved to have been unfounded and have passed into American folklore.32
Miller takes Cantril to task for failing to show substantial evidence of mass flight from the “attack,” citing just a few examples. Cantril quotes American Telephone Company figures indicating that local media and law enforcement agencies were inundated with up to 40 percent more phone calls than normal in parts of New Jersey during the broadcast, but no one knows what they were talking about. Miller says that some callers probably wanted information like which military units were being called up, where they could donate blood or if casualty lists were obtainable. “Some callers were simply angry that such a realistic show was allowed on the air, while others called CBS to congratulate Mercury Theater for the exciting Halloween program,” Miller writes. “It seems ... [likely] many callers just wanted to chat with their families and friends about the exciting show they had just listened to on the radio.”

Many newspaper reporters may have had a hidden agenda and were motivated to exaggerate the extent of the reaction. In 1938, the print media and upstart radio were at war with each other as radio was an emerging threat to their advertising coffers. This antagonistic relationship may have prompted journalists to consciously or subconsciously exaggerate the extent of the panic in their press reports. Radio historian Justin Levine is suspicious that with the exception of newspapers, there are no independent historical accounts describing the panic’s severity. Immediately after the scare, many newspaper editors took the opportunity to condemn radio. The Chicago Tribune took a brutal swipe at both listeners and the radio industry, noting that of those who became frightened, “it would do them a serious injustice to say they were frightened out of their wits; all evidence indicates they never had any wits to lose.” It was then noted that “the radio audience isn’t very bright ... many a program is prepared for their consumption.” The St. Louis Post-Dispatch said that radio is inherently flawed as listeners often hear bits and pieces of programs or tune in late—flaws not shared by newspapers.

Whether it was a scare or panic, the impact of the broadcast was undoubtedly serious in parts of ground zero. Trenton city manager Paul Morton was furious after the mass disruption to his city, warning that they were lucky no one was killed: “If there had been a three-alarm fire or other emergency during that interval, we would have been helpless.” Morton said the program “completely crippled communication facilities” for the city’s police department for three hours as concerned relatives from across the country tried to get through to loved ones. He also found it difficult to believe that the broadcast was not a deliberate attempt to scare the public. “I can conceive of no reason why the name of Trenton, and vicinity should have been used on this broadcast. The State Police were equally handicapped and it is indescribable the seriousness of the situation.”

The extent of the panic remains open to debate. The same is true for
Welles' intent. Immediately after the broadcast, Welles vehemently denied having any intention of deceiving listeners; years later he said otherwise.39 We get a clue as to what Welles may have been up to from reading the draft script. Prior to its airing, CBS censors deemed the script too realistic and made no fewer than twenty-eight changes. The working script had such phrases as “New Jersey National Guard,” “Princeton University Observatory,” “Langley Field,” and “Magill University.” While appeasing the censors, Welles and Koch managed to substitute similar, official-sounding names such as “state militia,” “Princeton Observatory,” “Langham Field,” and “Macmillian University.” “The United States Weather Bureau in Washington D.C.” became “The Government Weather Bureau” and “St. Patrick’s Cathedral” was shortened to “the cathedral.”40 It seems clear from this information alone that Welles was out to give listeners a fright in order to boost his sagging ratings — and it worked. The use of real-sounding place names was highly effective in fooling listeners. Typical was the experience of Louis Winkler who lived on Clay Avenue in the Bronx borough of New York City. Winkler said the broadcast was so realistic that he was certain the Martians were coming. “I didn’t tune it in until the program was half over, but when I heard the names and titles of federal, state and municipal officials and when the ‘Secretary of the Interior’ was introduced, I was convinced that it was the [real] McCoy.” Winkler then grew frightened and ran outside, where his suspicions were confirmed. “I ran out into the street with scores of others, and found people running in all directions. The whole thing came over as a news broadcast and in my mind it was a pretty crummy thing to do.”41

While the drama may seem implausible to listeners today, in 1938, Mars was the subject of frequent speculation about intelligent life, and news bulletins on the escalating war in Europe were common. It is the modern equivalent of someone tuning into CNN and being riveted by a catastrophic storyline, and assuming it was on all channels. After the initial uproar, Welles’ popularity soared and his radio ratings rose threefold,42 and the giant Campbell’s Soup Company signed on as a sponsor.43 But Welles paid a high price for his mischief-making and lived out his life lacking something that all journalists cherish: credibility. This is no more evident than in the events of December 6, 1941, when during a live reading on network radio, Welles was interrupted by a news flash: the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. Many listeners refused to believe the report, suspicious of the coincidence.44

Was Orson Welles a hero or a villain? Was he a malicious prankster or mischievous boy wonder? Regardless of his motives, Welles' actions sparked a healthy debate on the power of the media and its potential to control the masses. For most people, the scare lasted less than an hour, but that was enough to offer a glimpse of the power of radio. Today, changes in media
technology are occurring so fast that we have little time to assess their potential impact. With more syndicated programs, we may be more vulnerable than ever to future Welles-type scares that have the potential to race through our global village at the speed of light. One day soon we may experience a War of the Worlds–type scare on a global scare.