

“War of the Worlds” (“The Mercury Theatre on the Air”) (October 30, 1938)

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Essay by Christopher Sterling (guest post)*



Perhaps the single most famous entertainment radio broadcast of all time, Orson Welles’ October 30, 1938 drama scared countless listeners and made the front page of the “New York Times”—and also underlined the growing importance of radio in America. In the decades since, it has been widely imitated around the world and also provided subject matter for numerous motion pictures and television broadcasts.

Network radio on Sunday nights in the fall of 1938 was dominated by a ventriloquist (a neat trick to imagine now). Edgar Bergen and his wooden dummy Charlie McCarthy plus a host of visiting guests tickled NBC listeners at 8:00 pm week after week. No program, it seemed, could compete with the Bergen/McCarthy appeal. Failing to dent the NBC ratings blockbuster, CBS gave their competing hour over to “The Mercury Theater on the Air,” a low-budget series that presented a different drama each week to the few non-Bergen fans who might listen. Many tuned in late after first listening to Bergen and McCarthy’s opening scene. And therein lay one of the secrets of the Orson Welles drama’s impact.

Another factor was timing. Only a month before, listeners stayed close to their radios for days as Europe appeared to heading into war during the Munich Crisis of September. They came to expect radio journalists to break into programming with the latest events. Listeners had grown to fully trust what they could hear. Welles played on this as he and his cast pretended to be something quite different than they initially seemed.

After an opening announcement (which few heard as they were tuned to Bergen/McCarthy), the Welles’ broadcast began with a weather forecast and then a hotel orchestra—both common programming staples. But, then, an announcer breaks in with a news bulletin about a cloud of gas on the planet Mars. After a bit more music, another announcer breaks in with further details—and an interview with a Princeton astronomer (played by Welles). From then on the program jumped from one reporter in New York’s

Jersey suburbs to another, each one describing a seeming alien invasion and each more alarming in tone. By the 40-minute mark, alien machines are described as attacking Manhattan with gas and rays. Thousands—millions—were seemingly at risk!

Not surprisingly, by this point, panic was gripping some listeners. Psychology professor Hadley Cantril sought to find out why and discovered that listeners presumed what they were hearing—cleverly disguised as real journalism—was real and imminent. Almost none tuned to another station where they would quickly have found life was completely normal. Nor did they listen carefully enough to discern the quirks in the script that were clearly fictional. Instead they made hurried plans to flee the danger, and in the process panicked many others. And the panic was evident not just in the New York area where the drama was taking place, but in places as far away as Colorado.

The few that stayed with the drama heard a very different final 20 minutes. Welles played what appears to be one of the last people alive in the New York area and goes into something of a quest for the meaning about what has been happening and its likely outcome. At the end, the alien invaders are done in by lowly bacteria. A brief announcement at the broadcast's conclusion made clear it had been but a drama, the 17th in the program series.

On being told of the panic after the live hour-long broadcast, Welles professed surprise, dismissing the drama as a mere Halloween Eve prank. Yet some 60 percent of stations that had carried the CBS program had to broadcast announcements to calm those who had panicked. The next day, the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission termed the broadcast and its widespread impact “regrettable.” But the drama virtually made Welles' career (the 23 year-old actor and producer would go on to make the classic “Citizen Kane” just three years later).

The program's evocative script was authored by Howard Koch, then in his first professional job; later, he became the Academy Award-winning scriptwriter of the motion picture “Casablanca.” He drew his radio story and its title from an 1898 novella by English writer H.G. Wells, shifting the story location from the London area to New York, and updating it for American listeners. His dramatic words combined with very effective sound effects made the pretend newsbreaks all too realistic.

The “War of the Worlds” experience had another effect—radio and later television broadcasts of this and similar stories made abundantly clear that these were dramatic stories and not real happenings. Broadcasters began to realize the power of their medium, and most acted accordingly.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.