

America under Attack I: A Reassessment of Orson Welles' 1938 *War of the Worlds* Broadcast

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Abstract: This article re-examines Orson Welles' 1938 *War of the Worlds* broadcast. Welles' ingenious use of radio is attributed to his innate "media sense"—an ability to understand the medium he worked with in order to push it to its artistic limits. Responses to the program on the part of print media and academe are examined along with more scholarly media sense of Marshall McLuhan, who comments on the so-called Panic Broadcast in *Understanding Media*. This paper features an on-line auditory component (www.cjc-online.ca) that includes excerpts from the author's 1998 radio documentary on *The War of the Worlds* for ABC (Australia).

Résumé : Cet article examine à nouveau *La Guerre des mondes*, le programme radiophonique réalisé par Orson Welles en 1938. On attribue l'utilisation ingénieuse de la radio par celui-ci à son « sens des médias » inné—sa compréhension du média où il oeuvrait qui lui permettait de le pousser jusqu'à ses limites artistiques. Les réactions suscitées par le programme de Welles dans la presse écrite et le monde universitaire sont examinées, ainsi que l'est le sens des médias à la lumière du sens des médias plus érudit développé par Marshall McLuhan, qui a commenté sur le prétendu « Panic Broadcast » (diffusion paniquante) dans *Pour comprendre les médias*. Cet article comporte une composante audio en ligne (www.cjc-online.ca) comprenant des extraits d'un documentaire radiophonique sur *La Guerre des mondes* réalisé par l'auteur pour ABC (Australie) en 1998.

Keywords: Communication History; Broadcasting; Mass media effects; Radio

All facts and personages in world history occur, as it were, twice—the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.

—Karl Marx

In the century following the one in which Marx penned these words, the fictions of film, radio, and television began to make possible a reversal of this dictum that opens the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Before the tragic attack on America of September 11, 2001, there was the farcical (yet unnerving) attack of October 30, 1938: Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast. It

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terrified an estimated two million people in Eastern North America,¹ with the epicentre of the panic located in the Greater New York area.

Orson Welles' use of fictional news reports as the narrative framework for what now seems an obviously hyperbolic radio drama uncannily anticipated the reportage of more recent tragedies such as the assassination of JFK, the death of Britain's Princess Diana, and the attacks of September 11. As the world stood on the threshold of the Second World War, so convincing was Welles' use of the medium that even some listeners who found the idea of a Martian invasion ridiculous nonetheless assumed the attack (which we would today unhesitatingly label *terrorist*) to be the result of German military aggression. They reacted to the broadcast with equal horror to those who took it at face value, believing that either the announcer had made an interpretive mistake or the invading German forces themselves were disguised as Martians! This ability to manipulate radio impressed no less an authority on mass communications than Marshall McLuhan, who in *Understanding Media* (1964), used Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast to help him explore the auditory conventions and power of broadcast radio.

Welles' "media sense"

The fact that Welles was able to push radio conventions to their limit in the Panic Broadcast—as his *War of the Worlds* dramatization came to be known—was no accident. He had been developing effective radio formats throughout the previous year and had emerged as one of the medium's reigning stars. Radio drama, however, was not the only art form in which Welles would distinguish himself. He is best known today for his work in motion pictures, as a director, actor, and writer. His *Citizen Kane* (1941) is widely regarded as the greatest movie ever made. Major creative outpourings also resulted from his work in theatre during the 1930s and forties. Noteworthy minor contributions mark his forays into sound recording and television. And all this from someone who seriously contemplated becoming a painter, co-wrote (with Roger Hill) *Everybody's Shakespeare* at age 18, and pursued a lifelong career as a stage magician.

Welles was able to do this because he had something that could be called "media sense." In other words, he always sought the most effective way of adapting a narrative, given the constraints and possibilities of his chosen medium. When he made his first film, *Citizen Kane*, his initial concern was not to be overly preoccupied with what other filmmakers had done, but to understand the resources available to him at RKO and determine how he could best harness them for his own storytelling purposes. This ability enabled him to achieve fame in a greater variety of the performing arts than perhaps any artist of the past century—and to achieve infamy in radio 65 years ago.

Two years before Welles unleashed his Martian mayhem, he had astounded the New York theatre world by directing an all-black production of *Macbeth* for the Federal Theater Project. He changed the setting from Scotland to early-nineteenth-century Haiti during the regime of the emperor Jean Christophe, supervised the design of exotic sets and lighting, and then brought in African drummers to detonate what became known as his *Voodoo Macbeth*. Welles believed that

theatre should be more than just dialogue and acting. He thought of it as a multi-sensory performance environment—and in the case of this *Macbeth*, something McLuhan might have called a “tribal happening.”

A year later, his Mercury Theatre began astounding Broadway with innovative productions of classic plays. The company did Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (calling it *Caesar*) and set it in a modern Fascist context using “Nuremberg lights” inspired by Hitler’s rallies—whereby the lights beam up from the stage directly under the actors. The production had an aura of film noir about it several years before that tradition emerged in cinema. Drama historian and critic Richard France (1990) recently declared Welles’ *Caesar* to be the single most important production of Shakespeare in the history of the American stage. No less spectacular was Welles’ staging of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* the same year—literally a tour de force of smoke and mirrors. In theatre, as well as later in radio and film, Welles drew upon his background in magic to conjure and beguile.

Welles’ adaptation of *Julius Caesar* also happened to be the first full-length play ever recorded on acetate disc (for Columbia Records). In listening to the recording and then examining the accompanying script for the theatrical production (now ensconced in the Orson Welles Manuscript Collection at Indiana University’s Lilly Library), notable differences are apparent. Welles’ media sense led him to eliminate some characters and speeches, change the order of others, and reposition the actors given the constraints of the microphone. He thereby made the recording more than a literal and inevitably limited transcription of the stage version. It is a media production complete unto itself, like the successful film adaptation of a novel or play. In the years to come, Welles would also excel in this latter area, making great films from high literature—*Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1952), and *Chimes at Midnight* (aka *Falstaff*, 1966), and a masterpiece from an undistinguished work of pulp fiction, *Touch of Evil* (1958; 1998).²

Radio days

Perhaps in no other art form was Welles to demonstrate his media sense as effectively as he did in radio. He often referred to radio as a theatre of the imagination. It is this aspect of his work that would so intrigue McLuhan in *Understanding Media*. Welles began in radio in 1934 in New York, not to explore the possibilities of this fledgling mass medium, but to supplement a meagre to non-existent theatre income. Three years later, when he attained stardom over the airwaves, the resultant earnings helped fund his theatrical ventures. He started his radio career by doing text readings and dramatic re-enactments for educational programs such as *American School of the Air* and *American Cavalcade*. This led to work in commercials and then a semi-regular spot on the popular *March of Time* program, which used anonymous actors to re-create news stories. All of his other radio work at this time was also uncredited. Many of his fellow performers were theatre people, unemployed or in low-paying productions, who did not mind anonymity in their radio work. Even when Welles earned the lead in the *Shadow* program in 1937, the network, Mutual, insisted on keeping their star’s name under wraps.

These early opportunities in broadcasting allowed Welles to conjure with his first magic wand, that extraordinary voice. On *March of Time* he learned to do a variety of character parts, including the baby babble of all five Dionne quintuplets. The Shadow character had special appeal. He was a trickster hero with a dual persona (anticipating and in part inspiring Superman and Batman): in one incarnation, he was a philanthropic and foppish playboy, Lamont Cranston, and in his other, “the relentless Shadow.” This crime fighter’s primary gimmick was the ability to become invisible when swinging into action, an inspired use of radio, a medium McLuhan would later describe as enveloped in “a cloak of invisibility” (1964, p. 263). Welles revelled in his role as the Shadow. Although he had no part in writing the rather formulaic scripts, his contract with the sponsor, Blue Coal, exempted him from rehearsals, which added excitement and occasional spontaneity to the broadcasts. The penchant of the *Shadow* program to shock may have also foreshadowed ideas Welles would incorporate into his *War of the Worlds* radio play.

(In Audio Clip #1 we hear the voice of Welles, first as Lamont Cranston, then as the Shadow.)

By 1937, in addition to his escalating theatrical notoriety, Welles was beginning to earn on-air credit for a number of his radio performances. The chance to have full creative control over his own project came that summer. The Mutual Network offered him a seven-week series. He elected to do what we would today call a mini-series, a multi-episode rendering of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. It became one of the most ambitious and successful literary adaptations in the history of radio. Today, the choice of material seems inspired. The content of few, if any other works of literature has shown such adaptability to so great a variety of media formats. In addition to the radio version, it has yielded nearly a dozen films, a stage play, a ballet, a musical, a television mini-series, and even an ice show.

Les Misérables brought together for the first time the elements that would become Welles’ signature style in doing radio drama. In it we find the compelling use of sound effects. In re-creating the heart-wrenching chase through the sewers of Paris, he had the actors perform in the washroom with the microphone just above floor level. Both here, as well as in the courtroom sequence—where we immediately sense the proceedings are transpiring in a cavernous and resonant hall—he put into practice his belief that sonority in the dialogue of a radioplay should suggest the location where it was supposed to be occurring. He later transferred this conception to cinema, particularly in the making of *Citizen Kane*. It is strikingly evident in scenes such as the Colorado cabin sequence, where a young Charlie Kane is being handed over to his guardian and we simultaneously hear the boy’s shouts from outside and the parents arguing inside; also, in Kane’s mansion/castle, Xanadu, in each scene of dialogue evidences a sonority that reflects the room where it is taking place. As a recent Welles biographer has noted, “There has never been a moviemaker who was more shaped and driven by radio—nor a

director who had so mined his own ambiguous soul in radio first” (Thomson, 1996, p. 76).

Welles viewed radio drama as an artistic medium different from theatre. For him it was not simply a stage play heard, but a form of storytelling complete with sound effects and music. When done right, radio should recall the power of an oral tradition, “hot” and “tribal,” to use McLuhan’s terms; in other words the story should seem to be taking place as it is being told.

As a form of storytelling, Welles believed that radio drama required narration to bridge gaps in time and space, especially in a condensation such as *Les Misérables*. No radio artist would employ the technique as extensively. Certainly, a type of narration had been in use before Welles began working in the medium. We can find it as early as 1933 in *The Lone Ranger*, where one of the most famous clichés in radio history was first used: “Meanwhile, back at the ranch.” But this “Once upon a time” form of narration was not what Welles wanted. He eschewed the hackneyed device known to actors and writers as explication—relying on a disembodied voice from the present to contextualize the time, place, and even the significance of the story. Instead of using this literary convention, he chose one that was more steeped in orality and consonant with the evocative power of radio. Whenever possible the narration was to be done by a character or characters in the drama. Where this is not feasible, such as in parts of *Les Misérables*, the voice should then emerge from the world of the story, drawing us into it by speaking with the authority and emotions of an eyewitness.

(In Audio Clip #2 we hear a sequence from *Les Misérables*. Note the resonant sound of the Hall of Justice and Welles’ evocative and emotionally tinged narration. He is also playing the role of Jean Valjean.)

Nowhere would this mode of narration be more fully exploited than in the *The War of the Worlds*, where the reportage is passed from one eyewitness voice to another as the story is told in the form of a newscast gone awry. Welles may not have invented the idea of using narration in radio, as he later claimed (Welles & Bogdanovich, 1992), or techniques such as sonic fidelity to place and overlapping dialogue, any more than D. W. Griffith “invented” cinematic devices often attributed to him, such as the close-up, intercutting, and the reaction shot. But what Griffith did in film and Welles did in radio was to configure these techniques into a distinct and influential style of dramatic presentation that fully utilized their medium’s resources. Both artists were also, in effect, medium theorists.

In the summer of 1938, CBS offered Welles and his Mercury Theatre a regular series. It would debut on July 11 under the original title *First Person Singular*. The awkward title was subsequently changed to the now legendary *Mercury Theatre on the Air* with the program’s renewal in September. On August 15 of the same year the CBC, recognizing good radio drama when they heard it, began carrying the program. The first broadcast was Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*—again, a narrative that has lent itself to various media adaptations. Welles based his radio play on the original novel, rather than the Hamilton Deane and John Balderson stage play that would become the basis for most film versions. The

radio narrative effectively moves from one character's point of view to another's, with Welles playing several roles, including the sanguine Count himself.

(In Audio Clip #3 we hear Welles intoning the voice of Dracula. Note how different his rendering of the character is than the much imitated Bela Lugosi portrayal.)

The sound effects in Welles' *Dracula* are exceptionally well done: howling wolves, creaking carriages, and the resonant castle. Welles knew that a sound effect had to be convincing in terms of the listener's expectations. What is literally accurate might not seem real to the radio audience. This again is another example of his media sense. It is also an aspect of semiotic theory—the signifier does not have to be a perfect representation of the signified, only close enough to suggest it in the imagination of the viewer, reader, or, in this case, listener. Two weeks after Welles did *Dracula*, he broadcast *A Tale of Two Cities* and evoked the sound of the guillotine by using a sliding metal door followed by a meat cleaver slicing a cabbage, which then dropped into a wicker basket. Such auditory conjuring relates to McLuhan's discussion of media representations as reference points for our sense of the real. Despite what some postmodernist theorists might contend, this is not an idea recently discovered by Jean Baudrillard.

Mars attacks

All of Welles' techniques come together in the most famous *Mercury* broadcast, *The War of the Worlds*. To his usual magical mix he added something unprecedented. By partially telling this story through a series of late-breaking and convincing news bulletins, he made the *medium* of radio news the *message* in the content of a story presented through the medium of radio drama. In making some of these news reports live on the spot, he simulated what could be called *radio vérité*—complete with the familiar effects of microphone feedback, overlapping and awkward dialogue, and those chilling moments of dead air following the Martian attack.³

Much has been made over the years about the Martian hoax being a Halloween broadcast, in part because Welles ends the show by declaring it to be a trick-or-treat prank. The occasion was actually Halloween Eve, which hardly has the power of *segué* of, say, Christmas Eve in evoking a sense of the holiday to follow. To regular listeners of *Mercury Theatre on the Air* the broadcast was not a complete surprise, although the format might have been. *The War of the Worlds* had been announced at the end of the previous week's program, *Around the World in 80 Days*, and was listed in newspaper radio schedules. Much of the panic was the result of what we would today call "channel surfing." (Perhaps we should call the radio equivalent "station surfing.") The most popular program in that time slot—Sunday at 8:00 p.m.—was *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* on NBC, featuring ventriloquist Edgar Bergen. Immediately after the opening banter, which devotees of the program never missed, Nelson Eddy came on with a bland bit of crooning that led listeners to twirl their radio dials in search of something more interesting. The CBS network, always at the forefront of radio news, and Welles, provided it.

For those who did hear the beginning of the program, it opened in typical *Mercury* fashion. The by now familiar strains of Tchaikowsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor* was the background theme to the standard program announcement—that Orson Welles and “The Mercury Theatre on the Air” would present their rendering of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. Announcer Dan Seymour then introduced Welles as “the director and star of these broadcasts.” Welles, who normally introduced his radio plays in a relaxed and chatty style laced with humour, here intoned his prologue more ominously, almost in the manner of an incantation.

(In Audio Clip #4 we hear Welles' introduction, which would be followed by the unconventional program format.)

The radio drama then opens with a brief weather update, after which we are taken to the Meridian Room of the Park Plaza Hotel in New York City where Ramon Raquello (Welles' musical collaborator, Bernard Herrmann) leads his orchestra in a program of dance music. The first song, “La Comparisita,” is soon interrupted by a special bulletin from the fictitious Intercontinental Radio News reporting a series of hydrogen gas explosions on the planet Mars, which appear to be headed toward Earth. The information is delivered without urgency, by the voice and in the style of the previous weather bulletin.

(In Audio Clip #5 we hear the announcer describing this occurrence in the same manner a weather disturbance on Earth might be reported.)

Further updates follow. Again, the tone suggests that the program is not an exciting radio drama, but is music interspersed with matter-of-fact reporting. Nevertheless, it held the curiosity of listeners who might have tuned their radios to CBS. It was this kind of pacing—slow, ambiguous, and providing more questions than answers—which according to Welles' co-producer, John Houseman, made the opening of the radio play so effective.

(In Audio Clip #6 we hear a segment from a 1988 interview with Houseman as he reminisces about the staging of the broadcast.)

For almost 10 minutes updates on Mars-related events interrupt the music (deliberately played in a lethargic manner). Eventually the reportage yields an interview with astronomer Richard Pierson (Welles) conducted by Carl Phillips (Frank Readick), which takes place at Princeton Observatory. The facility is vividly described by Phillips, and Welles is totally convincing as he answers basic questions in an appropriately conservative scientific manner. The questions cover facts about Mars and the possibility of intelligent life there. The astronomer dismisses the popular conjecture surrounding Martian canals, but admits to being puzzled by the recent gas outbursts.

(In Audio Clip #7 we hear Welles as the astronomer giving his opinions in a measured and deliberate way. One can imagine him in a tweed jacket, pipe in hand.)

Before the interview concludes, Pierson is handed a message that Phillips in turn reads on the air. It reports seismic disturbances within 20 miles of Princeton. The astronomer denies this is linked to the gas explosions on Mars and suggests the cause is “probably a meteorite.” After a brief piano interlude comes news of

more gas explosions, augmented by a report that a flaming object has fallen to earth near Grovers Mill, NJ. (Welles used actual place names, such as Grovers Mill, during the broadcast, although the names of the buildings involved were changed.) Phillips announces that a mobile unit is being dispatched there, and as we wait with increasing anticipation, another musical interlude is offered: Bobby Millette (Herrmann again) and his orchestra playing at the Hotel Martinet in Brooklyn.

In half a minute we are transported to the Wilmuth Farm in Grovers Mill. Phillips, accompanied by Professor Pierson, claims to have made the 11-mile trip there in 10 minutes. In actual broadcast time it is considerably less, but the effective pacing of the various segments in the drama made it easy for listeners to suspend disbelief and assume that events in the radio play were transpiring in real time—another example of media blurring the line between one reality and another.

At this point Phillips launches into what he aptly calls “a word-picture of the scene before my eyes.” He describes what he apparently sees clearly: a metal cylinder, not a meteorite, along with the general pandemonium surrounding it. Meanwhile he elicits comments from the professor. The style is loose and realistic—*radio vérité*. It effectively captures the aura of an on-the-spot news report, to which listeners were becoming accustomed as a result of live radio updates covering the turmoil in Europe and the increased use of mobile units to cover domestic crises in progress, such as fires. The scenario also effectively employs a staple of radio drama, the establishment of context through sound effects and dialogue. In this case the dialogue and narration are one and the same, as the entire story is told through observations that pass from one first-person account to another.

For this segment of the broadcast Welles’ acute media sense yielded yet another conjuring trick. During rehearsals he had Readick, who plays Phillips, listen several times to a recording of Herbert Morrison’s heart-stopping description of the flaming crash of the *Hindenburg* in Lakehurst, NJ, on May 6 of the previous year (Houseman, 1989). Coverage of this tragedy had been immortalized on disc. It was played repeatedly over the air to the point where it became etched into the ears of listeners and eventually regarded as a defining moment in the history of radio. Readick captures Morrison’s emotional description perfectly. Welles then has him take the reportage one step further. As Martians emerge from the cylinder and unleash their laser-like heat ray, immolating people, buildings, and landscape, the weapon then points in Phillips’ direction, and . . . dead air . . . complete silence. Welles made the six seconds he cued the pause seem like an eternity, both for those in the studio and the audience. It is perhaps the most terrifying moment in the broadcast and the one most responsible for launching the exodus of people from New Jersey that clogged highways leading into New York and Pennsylvania.

(In Audio Clip #8 we hear Phillips’ frantic commentary and the unsettling consequences of the Martian heat ray.)

When transmission returns after the dead air segment, the announcement only exacerbates the tension by declaring that due to “circumstances beyond our control” we have lost the signal from Grovers Mill; this is followed by a now seemingly irrelevant aside about the gas explosions on Mars being volcanic in origin. After a tension-building Chopin piano interlude, the announcer comes back on the air and acknowledges the mayhem that has occurred at Grovers Mill. General Montgomery Smith of the State Militia (the New Jersey National Guard in the original script) then informs listeners that martial law has been declared in several counties in the vicinity of the attack. We next hear an eyewitness description of the tragedy from Professor Pierson, who escaped Martian wrath by hiding in a nearby farmhouse. In a telephone linkup, he uses formal academic language to verify what listeners had already surmised.

The professor’s ominous report is followed by the voice of Harry MacDonald, “vice president in charge of operations.” Operations of *what* is never made clear, but we can probably assume it is supposed to be the network itself, since he declares that the entire broadcast facility will be turned over to the State Militia. The reason given seems so humorous after the fact that we can easily imagine Welles and his actors trying to restrain their laughter: MacDonald declares that the transference of the medium to the military is being made because of the belief “that radio has a definite responsibility to serve in the public interest at all times.” Thus radio itself would be not only an ear on events to come, but an active player in the story it was initially sent out to report.

The narration is then taken up by the voice of the military. We become privy to accounts of their several attempts to thwart the Martians. Each effort ends in failure and with the destruction of the individuals involved—but not with the explosive crescendo we would expect from a radio drama or a motion picture. Welles’ media sense led him to explore a starker realism: dead air again, followed by a pause and then a resumption of the narration through a radio transmission from another location.

In the midst of this chaos comes a moment of calm as unsettling and ominous as the eye of a hurricane. The “Secretary of the Interior” comes on the air and addresses the nation regarding the gravity of the situation. In sombre tones the titled but unnamed politician urges listeners to consolidate our faith and show courage in the face of an adversary who threatens “human supremacy on Earth.” If the words alone were not frightening enough, the actor, Kenneth Delmar (whether coached to do this by Welles or not is uncertain), gives a near perfect imitation of the voice of President Roosevelt doing one of his addresses to the nation known as “fireside chats.”

(In Audio Clip #9 we hear a voice, which although clearly announced as the “Secretary of the Interior,” was thought by many listeners to be President Roosevelt.)

Following further messages from the military we are taken to the next major scene, an announcer speaking from the roof of the “Broadcasting Building” (the Columbia Broadcasting Building in the original script) in New York. The city is

under attack. We hear bells ringing in the background. They toll for New Yorkers, warning them to evacuate the city as the Martian menace approaches. The harbour is full of boats and the streets jammed with fleeing residents. As the first Martian machine advances into Manhattan dispensing poison gas, we are told that Martian cylinders are falling all over the country; people in Lower Manhattan begin dropping by the thousands. This scenario of chaos, bathed in smoke, screams, and sirens, eerily evokes the haunting images that would emerge 63 years later on September 11.

As the announcer's quivering voice describes the Martian-induced horror, the deadly gas cloud drifts toward his position. He gasps, chokes, then drops to the floor with an unsettling thud.

But the medium outlives the messenger, since the radio microphone is still on. For 20 haunting seconds we hear a fugue of ship horns, sirens, and factory whistles, gradually fading to 10 seconds of silence. A lone ham radio operator finally breaks through the pall and our hearts sink further. The message is plaintive and repeated: "Calling CQ" (the general call to any receiving station), followed by "Isn't there anyone on the air?" No response. The end has come . . . and so does a station break. Finally!

(In Audio Clip #10 we hear this highly dramatic and media-savvy enactment, as the announcer chronicles the gas attack and perishes while his station remains on the air.)

At last the announcement is made identifying the broadcast as a dramatization. This was met with a combination of relief and outrage by those listeners still by their radios who assumed what they were hearing was the real thing. Following the station break, the format is completely changed. Since the Martians have destroyed most of civilization, including radio stations, the story is continued by Professor Pierson reading from his diary. His presentation recalls the original title of the series, *First Person Singular*, and the manner in which Welles often provided narration for large parts of his radio plays. In maddeningly slow, measured tones (was this live broadcast running ahead of schedule?), the professor surveys the post-apocalyptic devastation. He enters New York via Lower Manhattan, treks up to Central Park, and finds . . . hope. As in the H.G. Wells novel, the invaders have been undone by infectious bacteria, not military might. Humanity will recover, but with a newly acquired sense of its vulnerability.

Welles closed out the broadcast with his typical humour-laced patter by referring to the program as a Halloween prank, the Mercury Theatre's way of saying "Boo!" He must have felt some relief at having pulled off so smoothly what only days before had seemed an unwieldy idea for a radio play. He must have also suspected that the drama probably threw more than a few people into a tizzy. But he was probably as unprepared as residents of Grovers Mill had been for the bombshell that awaited him when he exited the studio.

Aftermath

Never before had the creative possibilities of radio been so effectively used, or abused. By the time the broadcast ended, the CBS Building was inundated with

police and the press. Welles and co-producer John Houseman were dragged to a back office and held for questioning. The newspaper reporters were especially voracious. Both men have described the experience as unnerving, since at that point the damage caused seemed like a worst-case scenario. Numerous deaths were implied, most allegedly occurring on the highways during the evacuation stampede. Fortunately for everyone at Mercury it would be later revealed that no deaths could be attributed to the program. In the post-broadcast confusion, however, it seemed as if the New Jersey Turnpike had claimed as many victims as the Martian heat ray.

(In Audio Clip #11 we hear Houseman again reflecting on the broadcast by describing the fear he and Welles experienced regarding the consequences of their broadcast, consequences that in several instances would turn out to be unfounded.)

The press scrum ended without any arrests and much still to be learned. On the morrow, as details and consequences of the broadcast burned up wire services and filled front pages, Welles was called back to CBS for a formal press conference that was to be filmed. He read a prepared statement, one reprinted in newspapers nationwide, and fielded questions. He denied any malicious intent, noting that the broadcast had been announced in the papers and that its fictional nature—he refers to it as a “fantasy” and a “fairy tale”—was declared at the outset, and during the station break and conclusion. True enough, but what he failed to note is that the station break came 42 minutes into the broadcast, with nothing prior to it, save the introduction most people missed or ignored, indicating that the program was a dramatization. In the pre-audiotape and pre-videotape year of 1938, it must be remembered, nobody but CBS had access to an acetate recording of the program, and they were not about to release it to the press.

In retrospect, the press conference represents one of Welles’ greatest acting performances. He must have sensed that his future in radio and career in all media might be on the line. Unshaven, glassy-eyed, and feigning sincerity, he looked more like the victim of the Martian invasion than its perpetrator. Luckily for him nobody mentioned his use of dead air, microphone testing, sloppy eyewitness interviews, or any of the other remarkable devices his media sense led him to employ for the sake of realism. Not only the story format, but the techniques used to implement it had diverged considerably from those used in conventional radio dramas.

Throughout his subsequent career he would be asked often to discuss his true intentions in staging the broadcast. Did he really hope to precipitate a panic? He eventually admitted to a bit of sensationalism in a 1970s interview with Peter Bogdanovich: “The *kind* of response, yes—that was merrily anticipated by all of us. The *size* of it of course, was flabbergasting” (Welles & Bogdanovich, 1992, p. 18). Ironically, on the morning of December 7, 1941, Welles was on the air doing a literary reading when he was interrupted by a news bulletin declaring that Pearl Harbor was under attack. Some listeners no doubt experienced a moment of

radio déjà vu, and Welles later received a telegram from the president commenting on the coincidence (Welles & Bogdanovich, 1992, p. 20).

The Panic Broadcast was given major press coverage for days, and in some areas of the country for weeks after. The finger of culpability was pointed in turn at Welles, CBS, the American public, and radio itself. In some cases Welles was portrayed as a Svengali or Rasputin-like figure who had used his dramatic legerdemain to bewitch a nation. In less personal indictments, CBS was called to account for failing to monitor its programming more closely. Most newspapers regarded as totally justified the upcoming FCC (Federal Communications Commission) investigation of the broadcast. As a result of the investigation, radio dramas would be monitored more carefully—for their manner of presentation as well as their content. Regulations would be effected to prevent mixing news formats with fiction in the extreme way of the Panic Broadcast. Again, parallels can be drawn with the aftermath of September 11: telecommunications policy, especially with respect to cellular telephone usage, came under scrutiny; and airline security underwent a dramatic overhaul.

The Panic Broadcast prompted lawsuits. But it was CBS that was under the gun, not Welles himself. Whether it was a stroke of brilliance or just sound contract negotiations, his lawyer, Arnold Weissberger, had arranged it so the network would be held responsible for anything untoward caused by a Welles broadcast. Welles' only accountability was for personal libel and literary plagiarism. Each lawsuit was settled out of court. It is conceivable that CBS might have won every case, since the program had been announced as a dramatization both in newspaper radio schedules and in the opening credits. From the network's point of view, however, the money lost in settlements might have been well spent, since it minimized subsequent negative publicity. Not surprisingly, listenership to *Mercury Theatre on the Air* went up 100% the following week. The Campbell Soup Company took note and in December would offer the series its sponsorship. Up to now, *Mercury Theatre on the Air* had been a "sustaining," or network-sponsored, program. *The Campbell Playhouse*, as it became known, featured a much larger budget and big-name guest stars. It also placed restrictions on the kind of material Welles could adapt for broadcasting and made him engage in soup-sell.

The press responds

Not surprisingly, it was in the sober pages of the *New York Times* that the naïveté of the public, rather than Welles' nefarious intentions, became the primary issue relating to the Panic Broadcast. This is especially apparent in the November 1, 1938, edition, which reprinted parts of the script. When reproduced on the page in another medium, the words seem hardly a recipe to induce panic. It is not insignificant that the *Times* had been an astute follower of the Mercury Theatre Company since Day 1, occasionally serving as a voice for the announcements of Welles and Houseman. In this issue they again welcomed his comments. In Puckish fashion—one can imagine the glint in his eyes—he claimed to have received many telegrams from listeners telling him how much they enjoyed the show. Yes, but the archival evidence (from the Orson Welles Manuscript Collection at Indiana Uni-

versity's Lilly Library) also reveals a series of very hostile and sometimes threatening letters and telegrams.

The November 1 *New York Times* also included a letter from *The War of the Worlds* author H.G. Wells' New York literary agent, Jacques Chambrun. He was worried about aspersions being cast on Wells as a result of the broadcast and demanded a retraction from CBS for the unfaithful adaptation. Most *Times* readers, however, were aware that a radio version of any novel requires wholesale changes, so were probably blasé regarding his concern. In any case, the original contract between CBS and H.G. Wells, now in the Welles archive, does not place any restrictions on how the work should be adapted for radio. H.G. Wells himself was initially perturbed when he heard about the broadcast, but soon breathed a sigh of relief—it was the other Welles who was held accountable for the panic. The original novel was, in fact, praised for its ingenuity and sales increased. H.G. began following Orson's career with fascination. The two finally met face-to-face during a radio interview in San Antonio, Texas, on October 28, 1940, at a time when Welles was working on *Citizen Kane*. Mutual admiration was much in evidence.

(In Audio Clip #12 we hear the two men bantering humorously with one another. The respect each has for the other is clearly evident.)

As print editorializing about the broadcast continued, it was conceded that people should not have been so taken in, but blame was now being placed as much on radio as on Welles. There was a hidden agenda here—a rivalry between the two media that went back at least a dozen years.⁴ As the new kid on the block, radio had challenged the monopoly of the press in presenting news. This was exacerbated during the Depression, when radio listenership grew at the expense of newspaper circulation and advertising revenue followed suit. Although newspapers had accepted radio as a viable entertainment medium, they argued that the medium's entertainment conventions were being extended to the way it presented news, leading to superficiality and emotionalism. In the case of the Panic Broadcast, they were now confronted with a situation *where radio entertainment had passed itself off as news*.

One way that newspapers had earlier protested radio's journalistic aspirations, although this was not done consistently or successfully, was to refrain from printing radio schedules. In a more direct action, they had either denied radio access to wire service news or placed strict limits on the amount of such news that could be broadcast. CBS, always the innovator, responded in 1933 by forming its own news division. When the network later presented the Welles drama using a news format, it was a moment for critique the press could not let pass.

The public, long weary of a press tradition of internecine rivalry, gravitated to radio. It had, in most people's minds, a higher credibility quotient. No one exploited this better than President Roosevelt, who, in addition to his fireside chats, often used radio to make general announcements. The anti-New Deal Republican newspapers lined up against him, but to no avail. He was re-elected by a landslide in 1936. In later years his campaigns would be bolstered by the elo-

quent voice of an ardent supporter: Orson Welles. There is even a pro-Roosevelt slant in *Citizen Kane*, which imaginatively deconstructs one of FDR's most unyielding antagonists, William Randolph Hearst.

Not all press commentary, however, blamed radio for the impact of the Panic Broadcast. A few papers followed the lead of the *New York Times* in expressing concern over a populace unable to separate fact from fiction. Better education was called for. The exact path to further enlightenment was not defined, but the implication was that it should include a greater reliance on print-based media and diminished time accessing the airwaves. To further protect people from themselves, greater regulation of radio on the part of the FCC was called for—not the kind of moralistic censorship that was invoked in 1934 under pressure from the Catholic Legion of Decency, but specific imperatives that would prevent any media shaman from again inciting mass delusion.

“Mass delusion” is the term noted journalist Dorothy Thompson used in her editorial on the Panic Broadcast in the November 2, 1938, edition of the *New York Tribune*. Of all the commentaries written about the event, her views were the most often cited and most influential. Although it was not the only one that defended the broadcast, Thompson's article cut through the various debates like a scythe and in so doing helped get Welles off the hook.

(See the on-line version of this paper for Dorothy Thompson's full commentary on the Panic Broadcast.)

The view from academe

With the popular press spilling so much ink over the incident, it was inevitable that academe would follow suit. Almost a year prior to the broadcast, the organization destined to put it under a microscope was founded. A grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to Princeton University helped create the Princeton Office of Radio Research. The director was Paul Lazarsfeld, an Austrian-Jewish emigré and social psychologist whose expertise in quantitative methods was tempered by a humanist leaning. He teamed with two associates, psychologist Hadley Cantril and CBS researcher Frank Stanton, a Ph.D. in psychology who would eventually become network president.⁵

The project was formed in response to the increasing influence of radio on public life. Although the agenda was fluid, the primary leaning was toward studying the content of radio programming, the type of audience it attracted, and their reactions to the medium. Polls were used as well as questionnaires and demographic data. Lazarsfeld was particularly interested in contrasting the radio audience with those who relied more on print media. In 1940 he published *Radio and the Printed Page*, one of the most significant publications to emerge from the research group, which by 1939 had moved to Columbia University in New York to be closer to the radio action. This media think-tank was highly influential in establishing the empirical study of mass communication as an academic field in the United States.⁶ The catchphrase often attributed to it is “Who says what to whom and with what effect.” Their emphasis on content and how radio is controlled had

little to say regarding the nature of the medium per se, and Lazarsfeld would be later chastised for this omission by McLuhan (1964).

In the aftermath of the Martian visit, Cantril organized a study of its impact. The result is a revealing book, *Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (1940). With help from researchers Hazel Gaudet and Herta Herzog, and the co-operation of Welles and Howard Koch, who co-wrote the radio play, Cantril examined numerous aspects of the broadcast. If we use the above catchphrase to describe his project, the “who says what” part is covered by a reprint of the radio play along with a brief discussion of the circumstances surrounding its production; “to whom” is dealt with by using demographic data on the broadcast’s audience; and “with what effect” is gleaned from a 10-page interview questionnaire given to 135 people, supplemented by press data. The book has become an important case study for scholars of mass media and its history.

Enter Marshall McLuhan in 1964. As alluded to earlier, he was fascinated by the Panic Broadcast and what it revealed about the nature of radio. In *Understanding Media* he observes how Welles used the auditory involving power of radio to tap primal fears and emotions—anticipating what Hitler was about to do in reality. He also perceived Welles’ approach as one that recognized how the “subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums” (1964, p. 261), serving as “an echo chamber” for the evocation of “long and forgotten chords” (p. 264). Welles’ many radio plays, especially the aforementioned *Dracula*, provide ample evidence for such an observation.

That McLuhan would be interested in Welles makes perfect sense, although we have no idea how familiar Welles was with the Canadian media guru’s ideas.⁷ Just as McLuhan, a polymath intellectual and acclaimed “Oracle of the Electronic Media,” understood media perhaps better than any intellectual of the twentieth century, so the multitalented Welles seemed to grasp better than any of his contemporaries how the properties of various media could be used to further artistic ends. In McLuhan’s case, his scholarly media sense yielded insights into communication and culture that continue to inspire both academic researchers and artists working in a variety of disciplines. With respect to Welles, his reputation as one of the twentieth century’s most important and influential artists seems to grow with each passing year.

Epilogue

What made the *War of the Worlds* broadcast so devastatingly effective? The most frequently cited reason is that Welles’ clever use of late-breaking news bulletins capitalized on the radio audience’s familiarity with similar updates regarding Nazi aggression in Europe. With the world on the threshold of war, anxiety regarding such bulletins was laced with a fear that the next one might indicate the start of hostilities.

But Hitler was one thing, Martians another. Little more was known about the Red Planet in 1938 than in 1897-98 when H.G. Wells first serialized *The War of the Worlds*. Mars then, and in the year of the Panic Broadcast, seemed very Earth-like and a reasonable abode for life. Several decades earlier the famous astron-

omer Percival Lowell, in a series of books—*Mars* (1895); *Mars and its Canals* (1906); and *Mars as an Abode for Life* (1910)—argued that Mars was a drying, dying world whose inhabitants had built a vast network of irrigation canals to tap water from their polar ice caps. Few scientists subscribed to the notion, but the public was fascinated. H.G. Wells, inspired by Lowell's first book, speculated that the canal-building Martians also had designs on Earth, and that it was not just water they were after. One newspaper even ran a full-page story with the headline "Martians Build Immense Canals in Two Years." This story did not appear in the yellow press or a precursor of the *National Inquirer*, but in the August 27, 1911, edition of the venerable *New York Times*. The article, replete with Lowell's drawings, reported the contention that Martian engineers might still be at work.

During the 1920s electrical experts such as Guglielmo Marconi and Nicholas Tesla speculated that intelligent life on Mars might be a possibility, and that if so, we might be able to pick up their radio transmissions (Douglas, 1987). We can surmise that in 1938 belief in the likelihood of intelligent life on Mars perhaps equalled today's belief that there is intelligent life on other solar systems in our vast universe—a reasonable though far from proven conjecture. However, there is one fundamental difference: Mars is not thousands of light-years distant, but a cosmic stone's throw away, even by that decade's standards.

Welles' masterful conjuring job with the Panic Broadcast and the resulting notoriety—he was already famous enough to have earned the cover of the May 9, 1938, edition of *Time* magazine—would win him the Hollywood contract that led to *Citizen Kane*, his first film and arguably one of the great works of art of the twentieth century. When he walked onto the RKO soundstage to make *Kane*, he wondered why movies were not as creative as radio had been under his reign. He soon made it so by applying the same media sense to celluloid that he had used to mesmerize a generation of radio listeners.

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Notes

1. Cantril (1940) provides several estimates. Two million seems the most plausible.
2. The 1998 date indicates the restored print of the film done by movie sound editor Walter Murch. It was based on a 58-page memo Welles sent to the studio (Universal) protesting their post-produc-

tion cutting. The most notable feature of the restoration is the elimination of the credits and music the studio put over the famous opening tracking shot. In the new version, only source music is heard here—cabarets and car radios—as Welles intended, and as he might have done it on radio.

3. In M. Night Shyamalan's extraordinarily evocative recent film *Signs* (2002), which acknowledges a debt to all previous incarnations of *The War of the Worlds*, the progress of the invasion is followed on live TV via global television news relays.
4. Although she does not discuss the Panic Broadcast, Jackaway (1995) thoroughly explores the press/radio rivalry leading up to it.
5. Buxton & Acland (2001) conduct a revealing interview with Frank Stanton in which he discusses the formation of the Office of Radio Research and also reflects on the Panic Broadcast.
6. For a history of this tradition, see Czitrom (1982).
7. According to McLuhan's son, Eric (personal communication with author), his father had an ongoing interest in the work of Orson Welles.

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