

Mr Bartholomew, Global Studies (Basic Reading and Questions) Week 6

## The 1938 Martian Invasion Scare: A Lesson in Critical Thinking

### Would you have been Fooled?



This handout is about how a radio play airing in 1938, frightened many Americans into believing that the world was being invaded by Martians. It is a case study in critical thinking. There were several different actions that listeners could have done to quickly figure out that the broadcast was fake. How did it happen? Could it happen again? Could such a scare ever occur in New Zealand? This lesson will help to answer these and other questions.

**Success criteria:** Students will be able to critically evaluate information that is presented by media outlets.

**Activities:** 1. Reading. 2. Writing. 3. Listening.

**Task 1** (optional – which means you don't have to listen). If you would like to listen to the broadcast, you can find it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9q7tN7MhQ4I>

(or go to Youtube and type in 'original Martian panic broadcast.')

**The first 15-minutes** should be enough to get a feel for how the scare happened.

**The 10 questions appear at the end of the reading.**

## Task 2: The Reading and Questions.

On Sunday evening October 30, 1938, Orson Welles was with a small group of actors and musicians in a New York City studio of CBS Radio's 'Mercury Theatre of the Air.' They were getting ready to present a recreation of the famous 1898 book, *The War of the Worlds* by British science fiction writer H.G. Wells. The book told of a Martian invasion of earth.

After 20 seconds of live theme music from the in-studio orchestra, Welles was introduced: "Ladies and gentlemen: the director of the Mercury Theatre and star of these broadcasts, Orson Welles." Welles began in a distinct voice: "We know now that in the early years of the 20th century this world was being watched closely by intelligence's greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own." After about a minute, Welles finished reading his opening lines and the drama then gave the appearance of being a radio program of the 1930s. A weather forecast was read, then an announcer said: "We now take you to the Hotel Park Plaza in downtown New York, where you will be entertained by Ramon Raquello and his orchestra." Then, the first hint of trouble. "Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt our program of dance music to bring you a special bulletin. At twenty minutes before eight, central time, Professor Farrell of the Mount Jennings Observatory, reported observing several explosions of gas on the planet Mars."

The music continued to be interrupted at intervals with special bulletins describing what were at first, 'explosions' on Mars followed by a 'meteor' crashing near Grovers Mill, a tiny town in the state of New Jersey. As reporter 'Carl Phillips' filed a report from Princeton Observatory with a 'Professor Richard Pierson' who discussed the strange astronomical happenings, the Professor was handed a note from the New York Museum of Natural History which registered an earthquake near Princeton. After more regular programming, the announcer came on: "Ladies and gentlemen, here is the latest bulletin from the Intercontinental Radio News ... a special announcement from Trenton, New Jersey. It is reported that a 8:50 p.m., a huge flaming object, believed to be a meteorite, fell on a farm in Grover's Mill, New Jersey... The flash in the sky was visible within a radius of several hundred miles and the noise of the impact was heard as far north as the town of Elizabeth."

'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 beings from Mars who opened fire with "death rays".

Reporter: "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: "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 Grovers Mill, their bodies burned and distorted beyond all recognition." From this point on, the drama gradually grew more unrealistic, yet many people were no longer listening or not listening that closely as they were so frightened. Later the announcer describes a bleak scene as the Martian machines were marching towards New York City: "All communication with Jersey shore closed ... army wiped out..." 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..."

### **The Timing**

The drama appeared in newspaper schedules on the day of the broadcast, and was clearly identified as a play, but many listeners did not make the link. The brief opening announcement clearly states its fictional nature, but it was common for listeners to miss the first couple of minutes as they shifted dials from other programs. Also, in 1938, there were many live radio shows, and they always didn't end exactly on time.

Three other times during the play listeners were reminded that it was a play, but these came much deeper into the program, starting at the 42-minute mark, when it was too late as people were already frightened. A key point came at about eleven minutes and ten seconds into the drama. The most popular program on the air at that time was the *Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show*. The show had great ratings as each week Edgar Bergman would come on and tell jokes. They would open with about 12 minutes of comedy, followed by a singer. On this night it was Eddy Nelson performing "Neapolitan Love Song."

Listeners commonly tuned back and forth between radio programs, especially near the beginning or during slow periods. The practice was so common that it even had a name – 'airplaning' – the modern-day equivalent of 'surfing' with a TV channel changer. In 1937, Welles and actor John Houseman founded the Mercury Theatre. His radio show by the same name began in September 1938, but it didn't have a lot of listeners. Each week Welles had a small window of opportunity to hook listeners. Historian Barbara Leaming writes: "Each week their one big chance to attract listeners came when Edgar Bergen introduced a guest performer. At that moment, if the performer was not especially good, people across America would quickly turn the dial to hear what else was on the radio before switching back..." Welles planned his script to include live dance music interrupted by special bulletins, in order to grab listeners, especially those switching channels. Leaming suggests that Welles had used the technique to scare some listeners but that it worked beyond his wildest dreams. Of those who began to surf the dial for more interesting fare, about 12 percent of Bergen's audience stopped at one of the over 150 stations that were broadcasting the Mercury Theatre. In fact, two separate surveys estimated that roughly 50% of listeners to the Welles drama, tuned in late, missing the opening disclaimer, many believing it was a live news report.

Immediately after the broadcast, Welles denied he had been trying to trick listeners. He noted that 'The Man From Mars' had often been the subject of radio fiction. Later he claimed to have done it one purpose. Which Welles are we to believe? It is likely that Welles, intent on boosting his small audience share, calculated that some listeners would panic, but underestimated reaction to the broadcast. This view is supported by earlier versions of the script which was toned down from the broadcast version. Prior to its airing, CBS censors deemed the script too realistic and made 28 changes. The working script had such phrases as "New Jersey National Guard," "Princeton University Observatory," "Langley Field," and "Magill University," which were changed to "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." While the realism of the drama may seem unbelievable to

radio listeners of today, Mars was the subject of frequent speculation about the existence of intelligent life, and news bulletins about the growing war in Europe were common. It is the modern equivalent of someone tuning into CNN and being riveted by a catastrophic story, and assuming it was on all channels. With the CBS switchboard flooded with calls, and policemen and reporters milling outside the studios, Welles stepped up to the microphone to issue an apology, which sounded as if it had been an intentional Halloween prank.

### **The Impact**

The center of fear was in Grovers Mill which became gridlocked with cars as thrill-seekers and rescuers were trying to reach the 'crash' site; others were trying to drive away. At Grovers Mill, hundreds of people arrived. Many searched in vain for the imaginary Wilmuth farm, and instead went to the Wilson farm, assuming the reporter was mistaken. Parts of New Jersey and New York City were most seriously affected, reflecting the content of the broadcast which described invading Martians attacking both states. A fog hung over the area and added to the fear. In one block of houses in 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.' Phone lines were jammed as police were swamped by frantic residents desperate for information on the 'gas raids from Mars.' At the New York Times newspaper offices, 875 phone inquiries were logged. At one New York City Police Headquarters, the 13 telephone switchboard operators could not keep up with calls. Upon hearing the early reports of a large meteor impact nearby, two Princeton University geologists (people who study rocks) even rushed to the impact site, only to find others like themselves, searching in vain for the object.

A New Jersey police officer wrote the following description of the panic in his police report: "Between 8:30pm and 10pm 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 play."

To a lesser extent, the effects of the broadcast were felt 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 Newark, 15 people were treated for shock and stress at St. Michael's Hospital. Two thousand miles away in Lincoln, Nebraska, hundreds of panicky residents jammed phone lines after calling police at the same time, wanting to know if it was true and what they should do. In St. Louis, people grouped together in the streets of some neighborhoods to discuss a plan of action in the face of the Martian threat.

Peoples' minds also played tricks on them. One person became convinced that they could smell the poison gas and feel the heat rays as described on the radio; another became distraught and felt a choking sensation from the imaginary gas. In Hamilton, New Jersey, a frantic woman told police she had stuffed wet papers and rags into all of the openings of her doors and windows but it was to no avail as the fumes were already seeping in. During the broadcast, several residents reported to police observations "of Martians on their giant machines near on the Jersey Palisades" (steep mountains). Upon hearing descriptions of

Martians operating their towering metallic machines on four insect-like legs, several Grovers Mill residents, opened fire at a huge outline barely visible through the fog—punching several holes in the community's water tower. A Boston woman said she could "see the fire" as described on the radio; other persons told of hearing machine gun fire or the "swish" sound of the Martians. One man climbed atop a roof and told Bronx police: "I could see the smoke from the bombs, drifting over toward New York. What shall I do?"

### **Was the Impact Exaggerated?**

Many experts now believe the extent of the panic as described by Princeton University psychologist Hadley Cantril in his best-selling book *The Invasion from Mars*, was exaggerated. But regardless of the extent of the panic, there is little doubt that many Americans were frightened and some did try to flee the Martian gas raids and heat rays, especially in the New Jersey-New York area. Based on various opinion polls and estimates, Dr Cantril calculated that at least 6 million people heard the drama, 1.7 million of which believed they were hearing a news bulletin, of which 1.2 million became excited to varying degrees. While there are some claims that hundreds of thousands panicked, there is not much evidence to suggest that many listeners actually took some action after hearing the broadcast, such as packing belongings, grabbing guns or fleeing in motor vehicles. In fact, much of Cantril's study was based on interviews with just 135 people. Scientist William Bainbridge is critical of Cantril for citing just a few colorful stories from a small number of people who panicked. According to Bainbridge, 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 routy behavior. From this view, the event was primarily a news media creation.

### **The News Media in 1938 America**

In 1938, the print media (newspapers and magazines) and upstart radio were highly competitive arch-rivals, with radio seen as a threat to the money they got from advertising. This may have motivated reporters to make the panic look worse than it was. The newspaper editors opinion columns were mostly negative of Welles. In an article entitled, 'Boo!,' *Time* magazine, conceded as much, noting that "in the U.S. the press, no friend to radio, treated it as a public outrage."

After the initial uproar, Welles' popularity soared; overnight he was world famous, his radio ratings rose by 3 times, and Campbell's Soup signed on as a sponsor. Yet, Welles would never be entirely trusted again because he was seen as the boy who cried 'wolf!.' On December 6, 1941, during a live poetry reading on network radio, Welles was interrupted by a bulletin reporting the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Many listeners refused to believe the report, suspicious of the coincidence.

The extent of the panic remains the subject of debate. The context of the broadcast was a key ingredient in triggering the scare. At the time of the broadcast, most Americans were heavily reliant on radio for news and entertainment. The global situation was tense with Adolf Hitler continuing his invasion of Europe. With each passing day, Europe was slipping closer to a Second World War which would soon involve the United States. Listeners had grown accustomed to news bulletins interrupting regular programming with live reports from European war reporters. At the time, rapid progress in airplane technology was quickly 'shrinking' the world. The US would soon no longer able to isolate itself, and it was well

known that there was no coherent civil defense system against an aerial attack. With each passing day Americans listened to bleak broadcasts of the widening war in Europe. It was within this context that the Welles drama, interspersed with a series of live field reports, would have appeared to be real. Dr Cantril concluded that another factor in the panic was the plausibility (believability) of the broadcast, as many listeners had assumed that the Martian "gas raids" were actually a German gas attack on the United States that the announcer had misinterpreted as a Martian invasion. One typical respondent said: "The announcer said a meteor had fallen from Mars and I was sure he thought that, but *in back of my head I had the idea that the meteor was just a camouflage*. It was really an airplane like a Zeppelin that looked like a meteor and *the Germans were attacking us* with gas bombs."

### Questions:

1. What were at least two ways that some listeners could have found out if the broadcast was a play?

**Answer:** By tuning into other channels; looking at the radio schedule in the paper.

2. How many times during the play were listeners warned it was fictional?

3. How did the *Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show* play a key part in triggering the broadcast?

4. Of those listening to the drama, how many tuned in late?

5. List at least two ways that people's minds played tricks on them?

6. How many people are thought to have heard the broadcast? Of these, how many thought it was real?

7. Why did newspapers likely exaggerate the extent of the scare?

8. How did the events going on in Europe at the time, lead many to think the broadcast was real?

9. Who did an estimated 20% of the listeners think were attacking?

10. Do you believe that a similar scare could take place today, or are people more sophisticated? Write a few sentences that support your position.

