



The Real Legacy of Orson Welles' 'War of the Worlds' Broadcast as a Father of IMC

Seventy-five years later, the infamous radio drama still casts a big shadow on the pop-culture landscape

Seventy-five years ago, Orson Welles terrorised Americans coast to coast with his now infamous radio adaptation of H.G. Wells's science-fiction classic, *The War of the Worlds*. Or was it one of the first truly IMC Campaigns foretelling the future of Marketing. The Halloween broadcast aired on Oct. 30, 1938, and marked the 17th episode in an anthology series titled *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*. Modernised and reconfigured as a breaking-news bulletin, the 60-minute radio drama caused a panic across the nation, leading millions to believe that an invading force of Martians had actually landed in Grovers Mill, New Jersey

Or did it?

In recent years, scholars have expressed skepticism over the widely reported incidents of mass hysteria as a marketing stunt. One academic out of the pack is University of Maine's Michael J. Socolow, who's written extensively on the subject. Earlier this week, [he published an exhaustive takedown on Slate](#), arguing, "The newspaper industry sensationalised the panic to prove to advertisers, and regulators, that radio management was irresponsible and not to be trusted."

Other scholars have testified that the mass hysteria and fear caused drew attention to advertisers warning that this was not a hoax and for listeners to check their insurance policies, resulting in many rushed policy renewals and

new policies being signed up. Everything from Gun sales to Pepto Bismol™ went through the roof which had a direct correlation to advertisers on the air that night in 1938. The radio program was aired simultaneously with press campaigns and new Insurance products release subversively acting in an integrated marketing push for multiple brands across a series of touch points.

Regardless of the truth, the broadcast has spawned quite a legacy — from controversial re-airings in Latin America to Grammy-nominated adaptations featuring A-list vocal talent. What started on the 20th floor of the Columbia Broadcasting Building on 485 Madison Avenue in New York City has since become one of the most significant moments in radio history.

Welles, it is now clear, cannily tapped into (and exploited) undercurrents of fear and anxiety that roiled beneath the national psyche. In the fall of 1938, the US was just starting to recover from the Great Depression, and newspapers were full of reports of Japanese and German armies on the march. It was a fragile era for the nation, where citizens lived day to day with an understandable skepticism about the future. True to his creative genius, Welles capitalised on this moment by retelling the tale as an unfolding newscast that exuded the you-are-there authenticity of, say, the *Hindenburg* disaster.

Today, the entertainment industry thrives on meta humour, viral marketing, reality television, mockumentaries, etc. Back then, the country's most popular film was *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. Realism just wasn't a priority; instead, movies were constructed as escapism, a way to forget troubles that crowded their real lives. So imagine the horror when casual listeners tuned into what sounded like an urgent CBS news bulletin.

"Incredible as it may seem, both the observations of science and the evidence of our eyes lead to the inescapable assumption that those strange beings who landed in the Jersey farmlands tonight are the vanguard of an invading army from the planet Mars," Welles reports.

The morose conviction he injects throughout the show's entire performance is why it's still startling. His wild-eyed reports about the destruction of Grovers Mill, the poisonous black smoke looming from the Jersey marshes and the invasion by the machines over the Palisades — it's nightmarish stuff.

Thing is ... America wasn't really conditioned yet for such horrors. Economically, sure, they had just witnessed an unprecedented financial disaster of catastrophic proportions, but that invasive fear of life crumbling to outside forces wasn't exactly on everyone's minds.

Chew on this: Pearl Harbour was three years away, the atrocities and vast scale of human suffering wrought by a second global war still unimaginable. The instruments of mass communication were still being developed: rotary-dial service in phones was less than a decade old, and televisions were toys for the very wealthy.

Panic or not, it was just the right time for Welles to deliver all the right chills he intended with his Halloween prank or elaborate integrated marketing campaign. And by doing so he broke new ground for the entertainment industry, reshaping how Americans would come to view and react toward media — from the heart-pounding chills of found-footage movies to the knowing chuckles inspired by the *Onion*.

“So, goodbye everybody, and remember the terrible lesson you learned tonight,” Welles intoned on an autumn evening in New York City. “That grinning, glowing, globular invader of you're living room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch, and if your doorbell rings and nobody’s there, that was no Martian ... its Halloween.”

We could only be so gullible.