It's Sunday night, October 30, 1938, 8pm—Do you know where your children are

Spielberg's eagerly awaited sci-fi actioner “War of the World” is a loose remake of the Oscar-winning 1953 movie, made by Byron Haskin during the height of the Cold War. But as far as socio-political impact is concerned, there's no match in American history to the radio broadcast of the famous H.G. Wells novel by enfant terrible Orson Welles, a prodigy who at 22 shocked the nation with his powerful dramatization. As the radio character “The Shadow,” Welles was used to giving “the creeps” to countless child listeners, but this time, it was adults who required medical treatment for shock and hysteria.

Sunday, October 30, 1938, will forever be remembered as a seminal event in the history of American mass media and their potential impact on our collective consciousness. Just one day before Halloween, an utterly unanticipated event occurred on the radio, then the primary medium of information and entertainment. An audacious and brilliant artist by the name of Orson Welles broadcast a radio dramatization of H. G. Wells' famous fantasy, “The War of the Worlds.” Produced by Welles' Mercury Theatre, the program was broadcast over WABC and the Columbia Broadcasting System Network.

A wave of mass hysteria seized thousands of listeners who were led to believe that an interplanetary conflict had started with invading Martians spreading wide death and destruction in New Jersey and New York. The broadcast disrupted households, interrupted religious services, created traffic jams, and clogged communications systems. Thousands of telephone calls reached CBS stations, city authorities, newspaper offices, and police headquarters in various cities testified to the mistaken belief. The broadcast became a rumor that spread throughout the country, with many people standing on street corners, hoping for a sight of the “battle” in the skies.

The radio industry viewed a hobgoblin more terrifying to it than any Halloween spook. The prospect of increasing federal control of broadcasts was discussed as an aftermath of a radio presentation of Wells' imaginative story, which caused many listeners to believe that men from Mars had invaded the U.S. with death rays.  
It's doubtful that such an event, with such outreaching consequences, would occur again.

However, in order to reassess its impact, we need to remember the socio-political context. In 1938, radio was king; it would take at least another decade before TV would assume its powerful position in American household. Furthermore, in late 1938, though the U.S. had not taken yet an overtly political stance, all the signs indicated to an impending war in Europe as a result of Hitler's conquests after joining forces with Mussolini. (The U.S. declared War in December 1941, two years after WWII broke out in Europe).

The play was to simulate a regular radio program with a “break-in” for the material of the play. But the radio listeners apparently missed, or did not listen to, the introduction, which stated: “The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air in `The War of the Worlds' by H. G. Wells.” They also failed to associate the program with newspapers ads that announced: “Today: 8:00-9:00–Play: H. G. Wells's `War of the Worlds'–WABC.” The listeners ignored three additional announcements made during the broadcast and emphasizing its fictional nature.

Orson Welles opened the program with a description of the series of which his show was a part. Then a weather report was given, and an announcer remarked that the program would be continued from a hotel, with dance music. For a few moments, a dance program was given in the usual manner. A “break-in” followed with a “flash” about a professor at an observatory, noting gas explosions on the planet Mars.  
News bulletins and scene broadcasts followed, reporting, with the technique in which the radio had reported actual events, the landing of a “meteor” near Princeton, New Jersey, killing 1,500 persons, and the discovery that the “meteor” was a “metal cylinder” containing strange creatures from Mars armed with “death rays” to open hostilities against the inhabitants of the earth.

Despite the fantasy nature of the reported “occurrences,” the program, coming after the recent war scare in Europe and a period in which the radio frequently had interrupted regularly scheduled programs to report developments in Czechoslovakia, caused fright and panic throughout the area of the broadcast.

H.G. Wells, whose “War of the Worlds” furnished the basis of the broadcast which spread alarm in the U.S. said that it was “implicit” in the agreement for selling the radio rights that any broadcast would clearly “be fiction and not news.” The novelist added that he gave no permission for alterations that might lead to the belief that the broadcast material was real news.

Orson Welles issued the following statement: “In behalf of the Mercury theater of the air, it is deeply regretful to learn that the H. G. Wells fantasy, “War of the Worlds,” which was designed as entertainment, has caused some apprehension among listeners. Far from expecting the radio audience to take the program as fact rather than as a fictional presentation, we feared that the classic H. G. Wells story, which has served as inspiration for so many moving pictures, radio serials, and even comic strips might appear too old fashioned for modern consumption. We can only suppose that the special nature of radio, which is often heard in fragments, or in parts disconnected from the whole, has led to this misunderstanding.”

CBS issued a statement saying that the adaptation of Wells' novel “followed the original closely, but to make the imaginary details more interesting to American listeners the adapter, Orson Welles, substituted an American locale for the English scenes of the story.” Pointing out that the fictional character of the broadcast had been announced four times and had been previously publicized, the network said: “Nevertheless, the program apparently was produced with such vividness that some listeners who may have heard only fragments thought the broadcast was fact, not fiction. “Naturally, it was neither Columbia's nor the Mercury Theatre's intention to mislead any one, and when it became evident that a part of the audience had been disturbed by the performance five announcements were read over the network later in the evening to reassure those listeners.”

Expressing profound regret that his dramatic efforts should cause such consternation, Orson Welles said: “I don't think we will choose anything like this again.” Ironically, Welles had been hesitant about presenting the story, because he thought that, “People might be bored or annoyed at hearing a tale so improbable.”  
In Newark, in a single block at Heddon Terrace and Hawthorne Avenue, more than twenty families rushed out of their houses with wet towels over their faces to flee from what they believed was to be a gas raid. Throughout New York, families left their homes, some to flee to near-by parks.

Thousands of persons called the police, newspapers and radio stations, seeking advice on protective measures against the raids.  
Telephone lines were tied up with calls from thousands of listeners, who sought first to verify the reports. Obviously in a state of terror, many asked how they could follow the broadcast's advice and flee from the city, whether they would be safer in the cellar or on the roof, and how they could safeguard their children.

So many calls came to newspapers and so many newspapers found it advisable to check on the reports despite their fantastic content that the Associated Press sent out the following at 8:48: “Queries to newspapers from radio listeners throughout the U.S. tonight, regarding a reported meteor fall which killed a number of New Jerseyites, are the result of a studio dramatization.”

Police Teletype systems carried notices to all stationhouses, and police short-wave radio stations notified police radio cars that the event was imaginary. The New York police sent out the following: “Station WABC informs us that the broadcast just concluded over that station was a dramatization of a play. No cause for alarm.” Similarly, the New Jersey Police teletyped: “Note to all receivers–WABC broadcast as drama re this section being attacked by residents of Mars. Imaginary affair.”

A New York theatre manager reported that several playgoers had rushed from his theatre as a result of the broadcast. He said that the wives of two men in the audience, having heard the broadcast, called the theatre and insisted that their husbands be paged.

The switchboard of the N.Y. Times was overwhelmed by over one thousand calls. One caller from Dayton, Ohio, asked, “What time will it be the end of the world” Warren Dean, a member of the American Legion, telephoned to verify the “reports.” He expressed indignation that was typical of that of many callers: “I've heard a lot of radio programs, but I've never heard anything as rotten as that. It was too realistic for comfort. They broke into a dance program with a news flash. It went on just like press radio news.” At 9 o'clock, a woman walked into the West Forty-seventh Street police station dragging two children, all carrying extra clothing, ready to leave the city.

A garbled version of the reports reached the Dixie Bus terminal, causing officials there to prepare to change their schedule on their New Jersey route. Dorothy Brown at the terminal sought verification, however, when the caller refused to talk with the dispatcher, explaining to her that “the world is coming to an end and I have a lot to do.”

Harlem was shaken by the “news.” Thirty men and women rushed into the West 123d Street police station, saying they had their household goods packed and were all ready to leave Harlem if the police would tell them where to go to be “evacuated.” One man insisted he had heard “the President's voice” on the radio, advising all citizens to leave the cities.  
Churches and congregations took the “news” in stride as less faithful parishioners rushed in with it, seeking spiritual consolation. Evening services became “end of the world” prayer meetings in some.

One man ran into the Wadsworth Avenue Police Station in Washington Heights, white with terror, crossing the Hudson River and asking what he should do. A man came in to the West 152d Street Station, seeking traffic directions. Samuel Tishman of 100 Riverside Drive was one of many that fled into the street after hearing part of the program. “I came home at 9:15 P.M. just in time to receive a call from my nephew who was frantic with fear. He told me the city was about to be bombed from the air and advised me to get out of the building at once. I turned on the radio and heard the broadcast, which corroborated what, my nephew had said, grabbed a few personal belongings and ran to the elevator. When I got to the street there were hundreds of people milling around in panic. Most of us ran toward Broadway and it was not until we stopped taxi drivers who had heard the entire broadcast on their radios that we knew what it was all about. It was the most asinine stunt I ever heard of.”

“I heard that broadcast and almost had a heart attack,” said Louis Winkler of 1,322 Clay Avenue, the Bronx. “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 it was the McCoy. 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.”

The Telegraph Bureau switchboard at police headquarters in Manhattan, operated by thirteen men, was so swamped with calls from apprehensive citizens inquiring about the broadcast that police business was seriously interfered with. Headquarters, unable to reach the radio station by telephone, sent a radio patrol car there to ascertain the reason for the reaction to the program. When the explanation was given, a police message was sent to all precincts in the five boroughs advising the commands of the cause.

Patrolman John Morrison was on duty at the switchboard in the Bronx Police Headquarters when all the lines became busy at once. One man informed him: “They're bombing New Jersey!” “How do you know” Morrison inquired. “I heard it on the radio,” the man said. “Then I went to the roof and I could see the smoke from the bombs, drifting over toward New York. What shall I do”  
The radio “war scare” shocked thousands of men, women and children in the big cities throughout the country, not just in New York or New Jersey. In San Francisco, some listeners thought that an overwhelming force had invaded the U.S. from the air, and was threatening to move westward. “My God,” roared an inquirer into a telephone, “where can I volunteer my services We've got to stop this awful thing.”  
Newspaper offices and radio stations in Chicago were swamped with telephone calls about the “meteor” that had fallen in New Jersey. Some said they had relatives in the “stricken area” and asked if the casualty list was available. Mass hysteria mounted so high that people told the police and newspapers they “saw” the invasion; a Bostonian woman claimed to have seen a “big fire.”

While the invading Martians were still a long way from California, one excited man called the Oakland police telephone operator and shouted: “My God! Where can I volunteer my services We've got to stop this awful thing!”  
When reports of terror that accompanied the fantastic drama reached the communications commission there was a growing feeling that “something should be done about it.” Commission officials explained that the law conferred upon it no general regulatory power over broadcasts. Certain specific offenses, such as obscenity, are forbidden, and the commission has the right to refuse license renewal to any station, which ahs not been operating “in the public interest.” All station licenses must be renewed every six months.

A day after the broadcast, on Monday, October 31, 1938, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) investigated the radio program, which caused thousands of persons in the country to believe that the Eastern part of the U.S. had been invaded by creatures from the planet Mars.  
Senator Herring (D, Iowa) said that the confusion caused by the radio dramatization of “War of the Worlds” was evidence that radio needs “control by the government.” He said he had prepared a bill for introduction at the next session of congress, which would give the FCC authority to pass on every radio program before its presentation.

Frank P. McNinch, chairman of the commission, asked the broadcasting company to furnish an electrical recording of the broadcast, as well as a copy of the script. “I shall request prompt consideration of this matter by the commission,” he said in Washington. “I withhold final judgment until later, but any broadcast that creates such general panic and fear as this one is reported to have done is, to say the least, regrettable. For McNinch, “The widespread public reaction to this broadcast, as indicated by the press, is another demonstration of the power and force of radio and points out again the serious public responsibility of those who are licensed to operate the station.”

Commissioner T. A. M. Craven said, “The commission should proceed with great caution so as not to take any action which would impede radio's being used for development of the dramatic arts.” Warning against any attempt at “censoring what shall or shall not be said of the radio,” he added: “I do not believe isolated instances of poor service necessarily constitute grounds for the revocation of the license of a station. This does not apply to criminal offenses.”

Jacques Chambrun, literary representative for H. G. Wells, said that the British author was “deeply concerned” that the radio dramatization of his book should have spread alarm in the country. Chambrun held that “the CBS and Welles have far overstepped their rights in the matter and should make a full retraction.” He said that the dramatization was made “with a liberty that amounts to a complete rewriting,” making the famous novel into “an entirely different story.”

Within the Commission, there developed strong opposition to using the public interest clause to impose restrictions upon programs. Commissioner Craven was outspoken against anything resembling censorship. He repeated his warning that the commission should make no attempt at “censoring what shall or shall not be said over the radio. The public does not want a spineless radio.”

Commissioner George Henry Payne recalled that last November he had protested against broadcasts that “produced terrorism and nightmares among children” and said that for two years he had urged that there be a “standard of broadcasts.” Saying that radio is an entirely different medium from the theater or lecture platform, Payne added: “People who have material broadcast into their homes without warnings have a right to protection. Too many broadcasters have insisted that they could broadcast anything they liked, contending that they were protected by the prohibition of censorship. Certainly when people are injured morally, physically, spiritually and psychically, they have just as much right to complain as if the laws against obscenity and indecency were violated.”

The broadcasters themselves were quick to give assurances that the technique used in the program would not be repeated. The network issued a statement: “In order that this may not happen again, the program department hereafter will not use the technique of a stimulated news broadcast within a dramatization when the circumstances of the broadcast could cause immediate alarm to numbers of listeners.”

The National Association of Broadcasters, thru its president, Neville Miller, expressed formal regret for the misinterpretation of the program. “This instance emphasizes the responsibility we assume in the use of radio and renews our determination to fulfill to the highest degree our obligation to the public. I know that CBS and those of us in radio have only the most profound regret that the composure of many of our fellow citizens was disturbed by the vivid broadcast. CBS system has taken immediate steps to insure that such program technique will not be used again.”

Chairman Frank R. McNinch declared that he would withhold judgment of the program until later, said: “The widespread public reaction to this broadcast, as indicated by the press, is another demonstration of the power and force of radio and points out again the serious responsibility of those who are licensed to operate stations.”  
Urgent demands for federal investigation multiplied in the wake of the ultra-realistic radio drama that spread mars hysteria among listeners across the nation with its “news broadcast” fantasy of octopus-like monsters from Mars invading the U.S. and annihilating cities and populaces with a lethal “heat ray.”

While officials at the Harvard astronomical observatory calmed fears of such a conquest by space devouring hordes from another planet with the comment that there was no evidence of higher life existing on Mars–some 40,000,000 miles distant–local and federal officials acted to prevent a repetition of such a nightmarish episode.

Military experts in Washington said they could foresee in time of war radio loudspeakers in every public square in the U.S. and a system of voluntary self-regulation of radio. This is the lesson they draw from Sunday night's drama about an invasion by men from Mars armed with death rays.

What struck military leaders the most was the show's immediate emotional effect. Thousands of persons believed that a real invasion had been unleashed, and they exhibited all the symptoms of fear, panic, determination to resist, desperation, and fatalism that real war would have produced. Military men declared that such widespread reactions shows the government will have to insist on the close cooperation of radio in any future war.

Experts believed that this could be accomplished by voluntary agreement among the radio stations to refrain from overdramatizing war announcements. They recalled that the newspapers adopted voluntary self-regulation during the First World War and worked in close cooperation with the government.

Moreover, since radio admittedly had such an immediate effect, experts believed that every person in the U.S. should be given facilities for listening in if war ever comes. Consequently radios with loud speakers would have to be installed in all public squares, so that people who don't have radios in their homes could listen.

The 22-year-old Orson Welles, actor-manager prodigy, whose vivid dramatization “The War of the Worlds” jumped the pulse beat of radio listeners, declared that he was “just stunned” by the reaction, and that “everything seems like a dream.” In three years, Welles would shock the country again, this time with his stunning feature debut, “Citizen Kane,” one of the seminal movies in American history.