

# 1 The News isn't Good

How does fake news start and spread?

## 1 The "Panic Broadcast"



- A. Listen to **MP3 n°66**. What type of document does it seem to be? Why?
- B. Listen again and find information about the two events. What is happening and where?
- C. Imagine how people in 1938 reacted when they heard this on the radio.
- D. Read the headlines to check your hypotheses.
- E. **Have your say.** What do you think about people's reactions? Do you think people would react this way today? Explain.

### HELP!

#### Words

- **turmoil** = panic
- **ominous** = scandalous
- **misleading** = deceitful: *trompeur*
- **unreliable** /ʌnri'laɪəbəl/ = that cannot be trusted
- **be accused of** + -ing
- **exaggerate** /ɪg'zædʒəreɪt/

## Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact

**Many Flee Homes to Escape 'Gas Raid From Mars'—Phone Calls Swamp Police at Broadcast of Wells Fantasy**

**RADIO PLAY TERRIFIES NATION**

*Mars Invasion Thought Real!*

**RADIO FAKE  
SCARES NATION**

### Cultural fact

**Orson Welles** (1915 - 1985) was an American actor, writer, director and producer. He recorded *The War of the Worlds*, a radio drama adapted from H.G. Wells's novel, in 1938. **Herbert George Wells** (H.G. Wells) (1866-1946) was an English writer famous for his science-fiction novels. He wrote *The War of the Worlds* in 1898.

## 2 The "War of the Worlds" panic was fake news

- A. Read the text and find general information: type of document, source, author, topic.
- B. Focus on lines 1 to 8. Who exaggerated this story and why?
- C. Rephrase this sentence: "from these initial newspaper items on Oct. 31, 1938, the apocryphal apocalypse only grew in the retelling". (l. 9-10)
- D. What does the last paragraph show?

**Orson Welles' infamous 1938 radio program did not touch off nationwide hysteria. [...]**

How did the story of panicked listeners begin? Blame America's newspapers. Radio had siphoned off advertising revenue from print during the Depression, badly damaging the newspaper industry. So the papers seized the opportunity presented by Welles' program to discredit radio as a source of news. The newspaper industry sensationalized the panic to prove to advertisers, and regulators, that radio management was irresponsible and not to be trusted. [...]

From these initial newspaper items on Oct. 31, 1938, the apocryphal<sup>1</sup> apocalypse only grew in the retelling. A curious (but predictable) phenomenon occurred: as the show receded in time and became more infamous, more and more people claimed to have heard it.

As weeks, months, and years passed, the audience's size swelled to such an extent that you might actually believe most of America

was tuned to CBS that night. But that was hardly the case.

[...] The night the program aired, the C.E. Hooper ratings service telephoned 5,000 households for its national ratings survey. "To what program are you listening?" the service asked respondents. Only 2 percent answered a radio "play" or "the Orson Welles program," or something similar indicating CBS. None said a "news broadcast," according to a summary published in *Broadcasting*. In other words, 98 percent of those surveyed were listening to something else, or nothing at all, on Oct. 30, 1938. This miniscule rating is not surprising. Welles' program was scheduled against one of the most popular national programs at the time – ventriloquist Edgar Bergen's Chase and Sanborn Hour, a comedy-variety show.

<sup>1</sup> untrue, uncertain

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