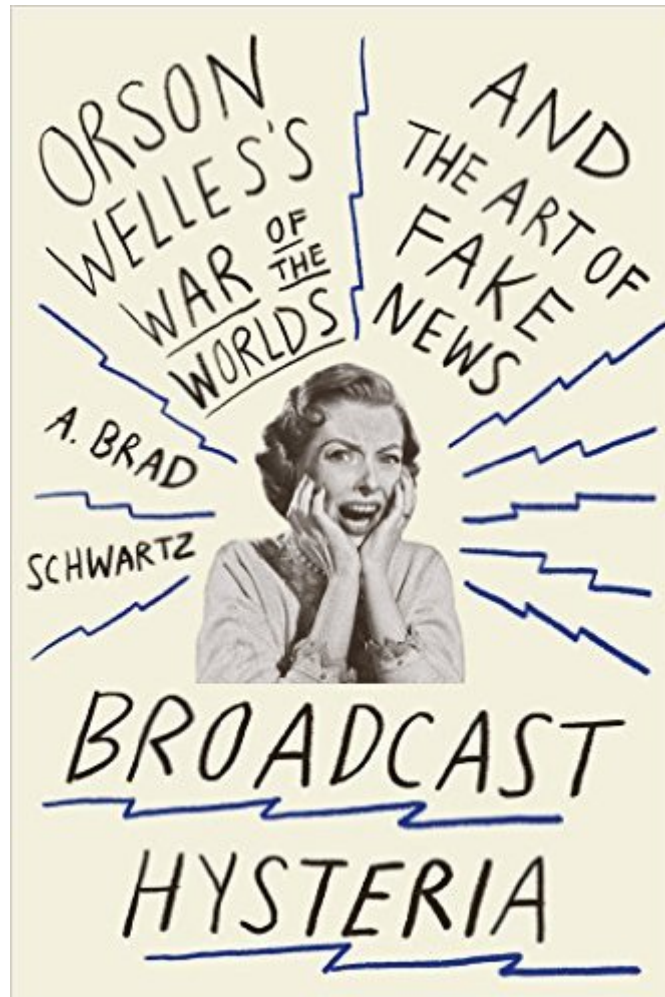


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Broadcast Hysteria: Orson Welles's War Of The Worlds And The Art Of Fake News



Synopsis

On the evening of October 30, 1938, radio listeners across the United States heard a startling report of a meteor strike in the New Jersey countryside. With sirens blaring in the background, announcers in the field described mysterious creatures, terrifying war machines, and thick clouds of poison gas moving toward New York City. As the invading force approached Manhattan, some listeners sat transfixed, while others ran to alert neighbors or to call the police. Some even fled their homes. But the hair-raising broadcast was not a real news bulletin—it was Orson Welles's adaptation of the H. G. Wells classic *The War of the Worlds*. In *Broadcast Hysteria*, A. Brad Schwartz boldly retells the story of Welles's famed radio play and its impact. Did it really spawn a "wave of mass hysteria," as *The New York Times* reported? Schwartz is the first to examine the hundreds of letters sent to Orson Welles himself in the days after the broadcast, and his findings challenge the conventional wisdom. Few listeners believed an actual attack was under way. But even so, Schwartz shows that Welles's broadcast became a major scandal, prompting a different kind of mass panic as Americans debated the bewitching power of the radio and the country's vulnerability in a time of crisis. When the debate was over, American broadcasting had changed for good, but not for the better. As Schwartz tells this story, we observe how an atmosphere of natural disaster and impending war permitted broadcasters to create shared live national experiences for the first time. We follow Orson Welles's rise to fame and watch his manic energy and artistic genius at work in the play's hurried yet innovative production. And we trace the present-day popularity of "fake news" back to its source in Welles's show and its many imitators. Schwartz's original research, gifted storytelling, and thoughtful analysis make *Broadcast Hysteria* a groundbreaking new look at a crucial but little-understood episode in American history.

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Customer Reviews

The radio broadcast on Halloween Eve 1938 of _War of the Worlds_ is the stuff of legend; it was, according to the title of one of several dramatizations of the event, _The Night That Panicked America_. The fake newscast about invading Martians, the stories go, led thousands of Americans to flee their homes, some heading to safer territory, some grabbing their guns to do battle. These are good stories, and in some cases they are close to truth, but they do not at all represent what actually happened. A. Brad Schwartz has studied the broadcast and its aftermath for years, doing his senior honors thesis on it and writing about it for PBS. Now his entertaining _Broadcast Hysteria: Orson Welles's War of the Worlds and the Art of Fake News_ (Hill and Wang) gives fresh documentation of what really happened. The story isn't as dramatic as the "panic" versions, but it is more interesting with its new details, and with some lessons for us residents of the twentieth century who get our fake news from sources more modern than radio plays. The Mercury Theater radio shows were serious dramas broadcast by CBS, and serious listeners enjoyed them. Schwartz has drawn on letters listeners wrote to the FCC, CBS, and to Welles himself (some of these letters only recently resurfaced) to analyze what really happened as the broadcast progressed. There were people who panicked, but Schwartz explains, "These panicked scenes of flight and near flight, which turned _War of the Worlds_ into the stuff of American legend, did happen, but they were very, very rare." There was no mass hysteria, no suicides, no potshots at a water tower that was mistaken for a towering Martian machine, and no highways clogged with cars. What did happen?

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