

War of the Worlds: How the Media “Creates” News

Last Friday marked the anniversary of Orson Welles’ famous radio play [War of the Worlds](#), which used news bulletins to tell of an alien invasion on American soil. Like many Americans, I first heard this story as a little girl and was fascinated by the mass hysteria which supposedly broke out across the country when it was first aired.

But according to reports in recent years, the mass hysteria caused by the *War of the Worlds* broadcast was practically just as false as the invasion itself. As [Slate Magazine](#) relays, a ratings survey conducted the night the broadcast aired found that relatively few individuals were listening to it. Reports that streets and hospitals were filled with panicked and injured citizens because of the broadcast have also been called into question by actual data and eyewitness accounts to the contrary.

According to *Slate*, the legend of the hysteria over the *War of the Worlds* broadcast can be laid at the feet of the media:

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. In an editorial titled “Terror by Radio,” the New York Times reproached “radio officials” for approving the interweaving of “blood-curdling fiction” with news flashes “offered in exactly the manner that real news would have been given.”

Thus it seems that no matter how you slice it, the *War of the World's* broadcast demonstrates the powerful influence of the media and its ability to “create” news. Such a fact should be a sobering reminder to those of us living in such a media-saturated age.

Thomas Jefferson dealt with this same problem in the main media of his day. [He wrote](#), “Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle.” Jefferson’s advice to combat these messages the media feeds us? Know your facts by feeding your mind with true sources of wisdom and knowledge.

Image Credit: Media Factory