Name

Name of Professor

Name of Class

Day Month Year

Title: The War of the Worlds Scare

“The War of the Worlds” is one episode of renowned American radio drama anthology series *The Mercury Theater on the Air.* The radio episode was directed by actor Orson Welles. It was an adoption of the novel by H. G. Wells of the same name published in 1898 which is the narrative of Martian invasion (Wells). The show was performed live which functioned as the Halloween episode on the prime time on Sunday, October 1938. The show was aired by Columbia Broadcasting System radio network and the show became very famous later. The episode created a panic among its listening audience. However, the scale of that panic is disputed as there were few listeners of this program. The performance followed the story of the novel about the Martian invasion of the earth. The most important change made by Welles was that it was written and played in the form of a news broadcast regarding an attack from Mars. This technique was adopted to create a dramatic effect.

The radio play was very realistic, and the sounds created by Welles and his actors were producing the terrifying impacts (Naremore). An announcer reported extensive panic broke out in the neighborhood of the landing sites and thousands of people tried to flee. In fact, it was not far from reality. The fact was that hundreds of listeners of the show supposed that real Martian invasion was on the go. Panic broke in the city, and hundreds of terrified civilians jammed the highway, in New Jersey, seeking escape from the alien marauders. Personnel started to beg police for the masks that could save them from toxic gas. Not only this, they requested the electric companies for the purpose of turning off the lights so to remain hidden from Martians. Frightened women went to an Indianapolis church and shouted “New York has been destroyed! It’s the end of the world! Go home and prepare to die!” When the news of real-life panic disclosed in CBS studio, Welles went on air to convey listeners that they are listening to a fiction based show.

There were also the rumors about the suicides. However, they were not confirmed. The producer received the call and interrupted the show for the announcement of its fictional content, but at that time it was just a moment away from its first break. Soon after the actor Stefan Schnabel finished his performance. The room filled with a policeman and a massive struggle started to stop the cops from stopping the show. The members of the show were locked into a small back office and cops started collecting the script of the show. The telephone switchboard at the building was only able to handle a few calls and Welles alone was busy in explaining and assuring the audience that they were safe. Welles got informed that the news was being fleshed I Times Squares with the bulletin “ORSON WELLES CAUSES PANIC." The team was aware of the panic that it would create, but they were not familiar with the fact that it would go to that extent. Within three weeks of the show broadcast, at least 12500 articles were published in the newspapers about it. However, it dropped from the front pages after a few days. The broadcast was also referenced by Adolf Hitler in a speech in Munich on 8th November 1938.

Numerous factors contributed to the panic, few listeners just heard the portion of news and mistook as the genuine broadcast due to the tension and anxiety preceding the World War II. Thousands of those people hurried to share the fake reports with others. In addition, they called CBS, police and the newspapers to ask about the truth of the news. Majority of the newspapers supposed that the huge number of calls and scattered reports of audience rushing about and even leaving their places proved that the presence of mass panic (Cantril), however, such behavior was never common. Welles used the real cities names in Europe to add to the reality of the play and make it more acceptable for the audience. American audience listening to the real names of cities were surrounded by the terror. Following the effect of the show, three affiliates of CBS have abandoned to air the delayed broadcast of the show which was already scheduled.

Many listeners missed the introduction of the show and found themselves listening live from New York’s Hotel Park Plaza to "The music of Ramon Raquello and his Orchestra." The music as soon interrupted by the news bulletins that explosions of gas had been, unfortunately, observed on planet Mars. People thinking that they have been invaded by Martians flooded radio and newspaper with calls and requests to save them. The show actually created the mass hysteria among the people. Mass hysteria is referred to as collective delusions (Blackman and Walkerdine). The kind of mass hysteria which occurred in the show is known as anxiety hysteria. Such situation is triggered by the personal perception of a frightening force and normally lasts for a day. The factors that contributed to mass hysteria in the show included extraordinary anxiety or excitement, rumors, mass media, political and social context and reinforcements from authorities like the police or military.

Another factor that contributed to the panic and hype was that the people were already on razor’s edge. The news bulletins a commentary of World War II was still in their head, and the way radio show covered the "Munich crisis," became the introduction to World War II. Welles and his company were successful in duplicating the style of those news bulletins in their program, as suggested by a journalist and broadcast historian. Some of the people heard that shells were falling and imagined that they were from Hitler. This created a panic, and they came out on roads, loaded their guns and hid in cellars. News also reveals that in one of the blocks of New Jersey, 2o families rushed out with a wet towel on their faces as a shield to protect them from poisonous gases. An article was published in the New York Times stating that the exaggeration of the show, The War of the Worlds may be interpreted as the revenge of print media as they were badly scooped in last months.

The radio show held a strong Power of imagination over its audience. Especially for the rural audience, it was the main point of contact with the outer world providing them with the news and entertainment. Welles knew how can use the imaginative possibilities of radio and blurred the line between reality and fiction. In addition, the power of mass communication was exercised (Hayes and Battles) to create the theatrical illusion and to manipulate the general public and audience. The outcome of that broadcast was never-ending; some people also said that they had lost their trust in media. Welles himself expressed great regret and repentance over his efforts of creating the dramatic effect in the show. After witnessing the after match of his show, which was close to reality and created fear and threat, Welles said that he would never choose something like this again in his career. His idea behind the show was that people might get bored of the unbelievable tale.

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