

When Historians Traffic in Fake News | The Washington Post

By Jefferson Pooley & Michael J Socolow

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We know today that the popular story of the mass panic sparked by “War of the Worlds,” a radio drama staged as a normal news broadcast interrupted by breaking reports of an alien invasion, was far overblown. In a nation of about 130 million people, a generous reading would conclude that fewer than 50 Americans were panicked enough by the broadcast to flee outside. That number emerges from recent scholarship by historian A. Brad Schwartz and others who’ve explored the scope of the panic in the past decade. And of that small number, nobody can be certain how many people were spooked by anxious telephone calls from friends and family rather than the broadcast.

But the myth that thousands — and as many as 1 million — mobbed the streets remains powerful. Sensationalist journalism at the time was later validated by social scientists and relayed by historians, creating a well-sourced myth that just won’t die. Efforts to debunk this myth reveal that fake news doesn’t just distort the historical record but also often spreads damaging racial and gendered stereotypes.

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Source: [When historians traffic in fake news - The Washington Post](#)