

Radio 'Scare' Program Brings Censor Demands

FCC orders full investigation after thousands of listeners are terrified by 'news broadcast' of H. G. Wells' "The War of the Worlds," but dangers of censorship are listed.

By a Staff Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

WASHINGTON, Oct 31—The terrified reaction of thousands of Americans to a radio program struck official Washington this morning with provoking impact and raised more acutely than before the question of the desirability of some form of censorship over radio programs.

None of the members of the Federal Communications Commission appear to have heard the radio dramatization of "The War of the Worlds," by H. G. Wells. They read their morning papers to discover with amazement this graphic evidence of the power of radio.

Heretofore a few voices have been raised against programs which many parents felt were disturbing and harmful to their children. But no long steps have been taken to curb the broadcasting of dramatic stories which at the same time appear to fascinate and disturb children.

Challenge to Radio

This time the dramatization of Wellsian fiction disturbed not children, but thousands of adults. It scared them to the point where the situation is a challenge both to the radio industry and to the Government.

What is to be done about it?

As regards the particular incident in question the first step will be an investigation by the Federal Communications Commission. Frank R. McNinch, Chairman, issued the following statement immediately on learning of the incident:

"I have this morning requested the Columbia Broadcasting Company by telegraph to forward to the Commission at once a copy of the script and also an electrical transcription of the "War of the Worlds" which was broadcast last night and

which the press indicates caused widespread excitement, terror and fright. I shall request prompt consideration of this matter by the Commission.

Withholds Judgment

"I withhold final judgment until later, but any broadcast that creates such general panic and fear as this one is reported to have done is, to say the least, regrettable.

"The widespread public reaction to this broadcast, as indicated by the press, is another demonstration of the power and force of radio and points out again the serious public responsibility of those who are licensed to operate stations."

Mr. McNinch declined to indicate whether any effort might be made to penalize the station which broadcast the program. This is considered unlikely since the only power which the Government has to punish is the power to refuse to renew a license. All broadcasting licenses are renewable every six months. The Commission has the power to refuse to renew on grounds of "public convenience, interest, or necessity." But this would be drastic punishment indeed for a station which was in good faith reproducing a dramatic work by a noted author.

The Federal Communications Act specifically forbids any censorship over radio programs by the Government. The stations are the sole judge of their programs within the limitations of "public interest" and the prohibition against "obscene, indecent or profane language" and against lotteries.

Congress, in granting the Government regulatory powers over radio, was aware of the danger of giving

(Continued on Page 15 Column 3)

'Scare' Program On Radio Brings Censor Demands

(Continued from Page 1)

copyright powers over broadcasting into the hands of a political administration in Washington. It carefully denied powers of censorship over programs. Control can be exercised only through the power to review the record of any particular station when its license comes up for renewal.

What Congress had in mind when it drafted this limitation on Federal authority was the danger of radio channels being monopolized for a political purpose. As yet no one appears to have evolved a method whereby the political danger could be obviated while at the same time granting more control over the character of programs broadcast.

That the incident will cause some agitation for Government censorship was indicated by an announcement from Senator Clyde L. Herring (D) of Iowa, that he would present at the next Congress a bill authorizing the FCC to pass on every radio program before its delivery.

Dangers Are Cited

The alternative danger of censorship was expressed from within the Communications Commission itself where T. A. M. Craven, Commissioner, said he agreed "in principle" with the statement issued by Chairman McNinch, but added:

"I feel that the FCC should proceed with the utmost caution to avoid the danger of censoring what shall or shall not be broadcast over the radio. I also feel that in this case caution should be exercised so that any FCC action will not tend to handicap development of the dramatic arts in broadcasting."

Washington finds humor as well as trouble in the incident. It learns that the Sunday program of drama on which Mr. Wells' "War of the Worlds" appeared last night is the Columbia network competitor of Charlie McCarthy. The story, so it goes, is that for a long time Columbia was unable to devise any counter attraction to the nationally famous ventriloquist's dummy. As a last resort it planned an hour of drama. Its first presentation was the medieval English classic, "Everyman." Last night it got around to the future with Mr. Wells. For the moment at least it has stolen the headlines from Charlie McCarthy.

H. G. Wells Explains

LONDON, Oct. 31 (AP)—H. G. Wells, whose "War of the Worlds" furnished the basis of the radiocast which spread alarm in the United States last night, said today that it was "implicit" in the agreement for selling the radio rights that any broadcast would clearly "be fiction and not news."

The novelist added that he gave no permission whatever for alterations which might lead to the belief that the radiocast material was real news.