# Television Hoaxes Ahead

From Herodotus and H.G. Wells to Reality TV, hoaxers have always captured large audiences.

**By Kenneth Harwood**

We can expect a television hoax or two soon. Halloween and April Fools' Day are good times to look for them, yet media hoaxes come in all seasons.

President George W. Bush on January 26, 2005, called upon Jeff Gannon to ask a question during a televised news conference. Mr. Gannon asked the President a seemingly partisan question, using a quotation that marked Democrats as "divorced from reality."

**The best-studied media hoax was Orson Welles's 1938 radio broadcast of "The War of the Worlds."**

Bloggers went to their Websites to point out Jeff Gannon as a pen name of Jeff Guckert, who worked for Talon News, which was identified as a conservative Website.

Was the exchange between Mr. Bush and Mr. Guckert a hoax? A debate continues to this day, for a hoax is defined in more than one way.

Hoax as a word appeared in English by 1796, some say as a variant of hocus, although evidence of that seems scant. Hoax is neither a recent word like blog (Weblog: A Website usually displaying both a log of thoughts and links to other Websites) nor a word come down from thousands of years ago like flora or fauna.

Often a hoax is defined as a deception by which an amusing or mischievous untruth comes to be believed. Sometimes a hoax is taken to be anything believed by fraud or deception. Yet other times a hoax is defined as something meant to trick or fool.

You might see a hoax in an intent of the hoaxer, or in an effect upon the hoaxee, or both.

Two kinds of media hoaxes are those originated and transmitted by the media and those transmitted but not originated by media.

Among well-known hoaxes both originated and transmitted by media is an April Fools' Day offering from BBC's *Panorama* in 1957. Richard Dimbleby narrated, as he did in 1953 for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, solemnly pronouncing the dangers of

harvesting Swiss spaghetti in March, when frost could damage the delicate flavor of the strands. Video depicted women taking strands of spaghetti from a tree.

Callers to BBC who asked about growing a spaghetti tree reportedly were advised to "place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best." Spaghetti then was an unusual dish to many in Britain.

Here was what seemed to be a hoax for amusement and not for social, economic, political or religious purpose.

Arguably the best studied of Halloween media hoaxes was behind a front-page story in *The New York Times* and other media on October 31st, 1938, describing the panic of perhaps thousands of radio listeners who heard a broadcast of "The War of the Worlds," the story of an invasion by creatures from space. The novel by H. G. Wells was directed for radio by Orson Welles, who offered the fiction as live news on the evening of October 30th, and placed the landing in New Jersey. Near the fictional landing place was Princeton University, where social psychologist Hadley Cantril took the opportunity to study panic behavior firsthand and present his findings in his book, *The Invasion from Mars* (1940). The study remains in print as a classic of its kind.

The invasion hoax resulted first in a self-regulatory rule of the broadcasting industry to ban the broadcasting of fiction as news, and then came a similar governmental rule of the Federal Communications Commission.

Swedish Television in 1962 presented a hoax as news. The sole channel in Sweden used black-and-white transmission. On April 1st Kjell Stensson in the news program suggested that a nylon stocking was all that the user of a television needed to create color television, because of the wonders of new technology. After stretching a nylon stocking over the screen, he commented on the color in the picture. Several hundred thousand viewers reportedly attempted the nylon stocking system of converting to color television. On April Fools' Day eight years later color television transmission began in Sweden.

Hoaxes pervade the World Wide Web and its companion Internet email. Often the alert for a supposed email virus is a hoax of widespread circulation by email.

Sometimes a digital message is a social or political hoax such as the Save NPR/PBS Petition. First offered in 1995 as plea to help the public broadcasting services which were under threat of a reduced budget from the federal government, the petition became a hoax by continuing to circulate by email long after the budget was in place. Then hoax became reality again when the same petition continued to circulate digitally in 2005, as reduction of the federal budget came to view again. Chances seem good that the hoax is to reappear through continuing Internet circulation of the petition in years when a federal budget for public broadcasting budget is not being considered.

Media hoaxes persist in print. George Plimpton created Sidd Finch for *Sports Illustrated* magazine of early April, 1985, in time for April Fools' Day. The rookie baseball pitcher pitched at the speed of 168 miles an hour when the fastest pitch then known was at 103. First letters of words in the subheadings of the article spelled the encrypted wish

for the reader's Happy April Fool's Day.

Janet Cooke, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, wrote the story of Jimmy, a child heroin addict. The story was published in the newspaper in 1980 and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1981. Investigation showed that the boy was nowhere to be found, and that some of Janet Cooke's credentials were untrue. She resigned from the *Post* and the prize went back to the awarding organization.

The Hitler diaries were a hoax in a German news magazine, *Der Stern*, in 1983. The diaries also were to appear in *The Sunday Times* in London, until they were identified as forgeries and their publication was cancelled. The diaries were offered as an intimate record of the daily thoughts of Adolf Hitler, leader of Germany in World War II.

**Herodotus is known as both the father of lies and the father of history.**

Mark Twain wrote for the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City, Nevada. The American West in gold rush days was a place of exaggerations of man and nature, offering tall tales and big works of nature such as rich mines. The *Enterprise* depended upon the arrival of other newspapers by coach or rider for news from elsewhere to fill some of its columns. When news was scarce a tall tale might do. Twain's hoax of the petrified man appeared in 1861, soon after he joined the staff. Twain wrote that a petrified man was found nearby, every detail of his body turned to stone, including the man's wooden leg. Although Twain said that he intended the story to be a parody of such newspaper stories, numbers of his readers took his tale to be true.

Today's most-used engine for searching the World Wide Web is Yahoo, which was invented as a name by Lemuel Gulliver, who is known also as Jonathan Swift, satirist, parodist and hoaxer of the early eighteenth century. Part IV in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* reveals a brutish humanoid beast, the Yahoo. This creature illustrates a sub-human condition, suggesting that the Yahoo search engine is almost human, but not quite human, and less than fully intelligent.

Jonathan Swift in the guise of almanac publisher Isaac Bickerstaff kept Londoners in suspense as April 1, 1708, came near by forecasting the death on March 29th of a noted astrologer, John Partridge, whose predictions Swift took to be rubbish. Londoners waited to see. Late in March Swift published an elegy saying that Partridge died. When Partridge walked into the street on April 1st, many stared at what they took to be a dead man. The angry Partridge wrote a pamphlet denouncing Bickerstaff, to which Bickerstaff replied in print that no living person could write the nonsense in Partridge's predictions. A result of Swift's April Fools' Day hoax was to cast a shadow over Partridge's predictions and lead to the end of their publication.

Hoaxers predate by many centuries the earliest days of printed media. Ancient manuscripts offer hoaxes such as those of the Greek historian Herodotus, who died in 425 B. C. The Histories of Herodotus are hailed as the first great work of prose in the West, where he is known as both the father of lies and the father of history. Herodotus wrote of unicorns as the horned asses

of eastern Libya. There, too, were "dog-headed men and headless men with eyes in their breasts," for which he did not vouch, and the verity of which he did not deny.

Herodotus found his evidence of flying snakes near a mountain pass between Arabia and Egypt. He reported seeing heaps of their skeletons—large ones, small ones, and smaller still—at this place where winged snakes were said to fly to Egypt from Arabia in spring time. Flocks of black ibis birds met the featherless bat-like winged snakes at the pass and killed them there. Herodotus told that Egyptians held the black ibises in reverence because the ibises kept the winged snakes from entering Egypt.

Another sacred bird in Egypt was the phoenix. "I myself have not seen a phoenix," wrote Herodotus, "except in paintings, for it is quite rare; and it visits the country, as is said in Heliopolis, once in 500 years, when the parent bird dies." Then the red-and-gold, eagle-sized bird dies and is born anew, according to the story. Herodotus once more reported without separating fact from fiction. Some people today believe in the unicorn, and some in the phoenix.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English Romantic poet, named as poetic faith our willingness to believe hoaxes and other improbabilities for the sake of finding pleasure in them. Willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, wrote Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), offers charm and novelty.

Dramatists and other poets ask for imagination to crowd out reality, as William Shakespeare did long before the era of Coleridge in the prolog to *Henry V*. Shakespeare's narrator asked the audience to "think when we talk of horses that you see them." Some hoaxes are so gripping that we believe them at least for now, knowing that they are deceptions.

Unlike the usual poetic hoax the newsworthy hoax often takes us unawares, because the newsworthy hoax does not have our informed consent to be fooled. A hoax we like or favor because its intent or effect seems to be one that might have had our informed consent, if our consent had been asked. A hoax to which we would not have given prior informed consent because we know after the fact its disliked intent or effect is a kind of hoax we usually do not favor. Harmless hoaxes appear to be most likely to be admired.

Willing hoaxes, like unwilling ones, appear to be free of time, place and medium of communication; instead they seem to be fused with the human condition. Television reality programs, for example, offer tours through some of the wide border between fact and fiction. Here non-professional actors confront competition and conflict under conditions specified by television professionals. Large audiences seem to recognize, accept and enjoy the hoaxing. The best reality programs win Emmys. Perhaps near the path to our future is a sign reading, "Caution: Television hoaxes ahead."

---

**Founding dean of the School of Communication and Theater at Temple University and founding director of the School of Communication at the University of Houston, Kenneth Harwood is a retired broadcaster who serves as an adjunct professor of communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is a contributing editor of *Media Ethics* magazine.**