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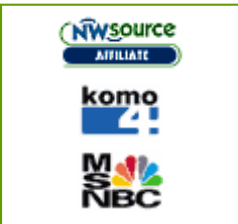
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OPINION

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Public isn't buying Bush's 'fake reality show'

By FRANK RICH
SYNDICATED COLUMNIST

To understand how the Bush administration has lost the public opinion war on Iraq, it may be helpful to travel in H.G. Wells' time machine back to Oct. 30, 1938.

That was the Sunday night that Orson Welles staged the mother of all fake news events: his legendary radio adaptation of another Wells fantasy, "The War of the Worlds." The audience was told four times during the hourlong show that it was fiction, but to no avail. A month after Munich, Americans afflicted with war jitters were determined to believe the broadcast's phony news flashes that Martians had invaded New Jersey.

Mobs fled their homes in a "wave of mass hysteria," as The New York Times described it on Page 1, clogging roads and communications systems. Two days later, in an editorial titled "Terror by Radio," the Times darkly observed that "what began as 'entertainment' might readily have ended in disaster" and warned radio officials to mind their "adult responsibilities" and think twice before again mingling "news technique with fiction so terrifying."

That's one Times editorial, it can be said without equivocation, that didn't make a dent. Nearly seven decades later the mingling of news and fiction has become the default setting of American infotainment, and Americans have become so inured to it that the innocent radio listeners bamboozled by Welles might as well belong to another civilization.

Nowhere is the distance between that America and our own more visible than in the hoopla about the latest

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adaptation of "The War of the Worlds," the Steven Spielberg movie opening Wednesday.

Like its broadcast predecessor, the new version has already proved to be a launching pad for an onslaught of suspect news bulletins. This time the headlines are less earthshaking than an invasion from outer space, but they are no less ubiquitous: In repeated public appearances, the Spielberg movie's star, 42-year-old Tom Cruise, has fallen to his knees and jumped on couches to declare his undying love for the 26-year-old Katie Holmes, the co-star of another summer spectacular, "Batman Begins."

Forget about those bygone Hollywood studio schemes to concoct publicity-generating off-screen romances for its stars-in-training. Here is a lavishly produced freak show, designed to play out in real time, enthusiastically enacted by the biggest star in the business. After popping the big question to Holmes at the Eiffel Tower, Cruise promptly dragged his intended to a news conference.

But though the audience for this drama is as large as, if not larger than, that for Welles', there's one big difference. The Cruise-Holmes romance is proving less credible to Americans in 2005 than a Martian invasion did to those of 1938. A People magazine poll found that 62 percent deem the story a stunt. To tabloid devotees, the reasons for Cruise's credibility gap are the perennial unsubstantiated questions about his sexuality and his very public affiliation with a church, Scientology, literally founded by a science-fiction writer. But something bigger is going on here. The subversion of reality that Welles slyly introduced into modern American media in 1938 has reached its culmination and a jaded public is at last in open revolt.

The boundary between reality and fiction has now been blurred to such an extent by show business, the news business and government alike that almost no shows produced by any of them are instantly accepted as truth. The market for fake news has become so oversaturated that a skeptical public is finally dismissing most of it as hokey until proven otherwise

(unless it is labeled as fake news from the get-go, as it is by Jon Stewart). We'll devour the supposedly real Cruise-Holmes liaison for laughs but give it no more credence than a subplot on "Desperate Housewives."

Welles unwittingly set us on the path toward the utter destabilization of reality with "War of the Worlds," and then compounded the syndrome with his subsequent film masterpiece "Citizen Kane," a fictional biography of a thinly disguised William Randolph Hearst that invented the pseudo-journalistic docudrama. But it's only in the past few years that Welles' ideas have been taken completely over the top by his trashy heirs. Not only do we have TV movies bastardizing the history of celebrities living and dead, but there is also a steady parade of "real" celebrities playing themselves in their own fictionalized "reality" shows.

The Cruise-Holmes antics, not to mention the concurrent shenanigans of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, add yet another variant to this mix, shrewdly identified by Patrick Goldstein of The Los Angeles Times as "a new rogue genre in which celebrities act out their own reality show, free from the constraints of a network time slot or a staged setting, like a boardroom or a desert island."

Politicians who dive into this game by putting on their own reality shows think they are being very clever. But like Cruise, they're being busted by a backlash. John Kerry was the first to feel it: His stagy military pageant, complete with salute, at the Democratic National Convention came off as so phony that the greater (but more subtle) fictions of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth struck many as relatively real by comparison.

George W. Bush proved a somewhat more accomplished performer -- in his first term. With the help of Colin Powell and some nifty props, he effortlessly sold the country on Saddam WMDs. He got away with using a stunt turkey as the photo-op centerpiece during his surprise Thanksgiving 2003 visit to the troops in Iraq. His canned "Ask the

President" campaign town-hall meetings -- at which any potentially hostile questioner was denied admittance or hustled out by goons -- were slick enough to be paraded before unsuspecting viewers as actual news on local TV outlets, in the tradition of Welles' "War of the Worlds" bulletins.

But the old magic is going kaput. Bush's 60-stop Social Security "presidential road show," his latest round of pre-scripted and heavily rehearsed faux town-hall meetings, hasn't repeated the success of "Ask the President." Support for private Social Security accounts actually declined as the tour played out and Bush increasingly sounded as if he were protesting too much. "See, in my line of work, you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda," the president said on May 24. He sounded as if he were channeling Cruise's desperate repetitions of his love for his "terrific lady."

The shelf life of the fakery that sold the war has also expired. On June 7, a Washington Post/ABC News poll found for the first time that a majority of Americans believe the war in Iraq has not made the United States safer. A week later Gallup found that a clear majority (59 percent) wants to withdraw some or all U.S. troops. Most Americans tell pollsters the war isn't "worth it," and the top reasons they cite, said USA Today, include "fraudulent claims and no weapons of mass destruction found" and "the belief that Iraq posed no threat to the United States." The administration can keep boasting of the Iraqi military's progress in taking over for Americans and keep maintaining that, as Dick Cheney put it, the insurgency is in its "last throes." But when even the conservative Republican congressman who pushed the House cafeteria to rename french fries "freedom fries" (Walter B. Jones of North Carolina) argues for withdrawal, it's fruitless. Once a story line becomes incredible, it's hard to get the audience to fall for it again.

This, too, echoes the history of the Welles hoax. Three years after his "War of the Worlds," the real nightmare that America feared did arrive. Yet some radio

listeners at first thought that the reports from Pearl Harbor were another ruse. Welles later recalled in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich that days after the Japanese attack, Franklin Roosevelt sent him a cable chiding him for having cried wolf with his faked war "news"

Such is the overload of faked reality for Americans at this point that it will be far more difficult for the Bush administration than it was for FDR to persuade the nation of an imminent threat without appearing to cry wolf. Nor can it easily get the country to believe that success in Iraq is just around the corner. Too many still remember that marvelous aircraft-carrier spectacle marking the end of "major combat operations" in Iraq - - a fake reality show adapted, no less, from a Tom Cruise classic, "Top Gun." Some 25 months and 1,700 American deaths later, nothing short of a collaboration by Orson Welles and Steven Spielberg could make this war fly in America now.

Frank Rich is an op-ed columnist for The New York Times. Copyright 2005 The New York Times.

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